

# People of the Book

— Volume 2 —

Nathan Mary/Martha  
Daniel Esther

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Plain Truth Ministries  
Pasadena, California 91129  
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[www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org)

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## Introduction

Volume 1 of *People of the Book* proved to be popular—a helpful tool providing a fresh and unique look at the personalities of the Bible. Due to its success we have decided to continue the series.

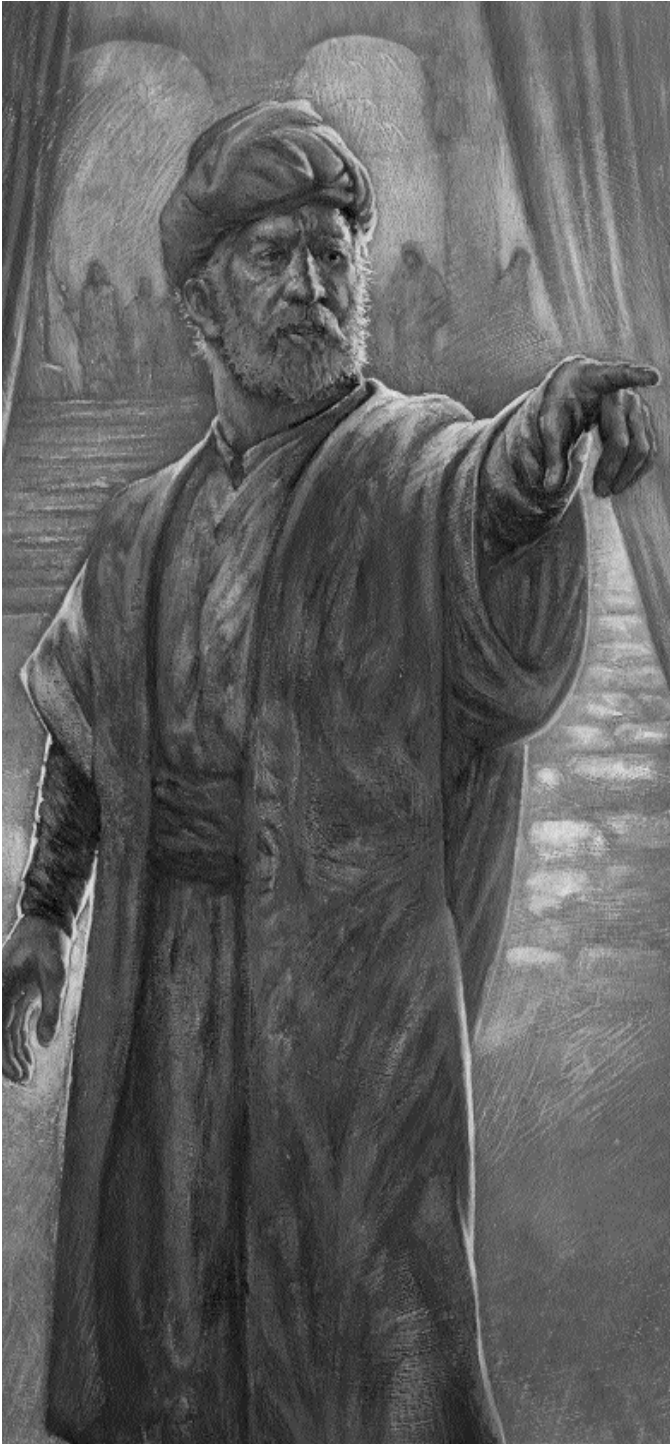
We have not selected the most famous or well-known personalities of the Bible for this series, but rather individuals whose examples offer contemporary insight and lessons. Volume 2 will continue that focus, with Nathan, Mary and Martha, Daniel and Esther.

We've been particularly pleased to hear that this series and the style in which it is written has broad appeal to differing age groups and cultures.

Once again we thank our Partners and donors whose support helps us provide materials such as these free of charge.



Greg Albrecht  
Executive Director, PTM



## Nathan: God's Gift of Friendship and Accountability

**W**hen looking for a biblical role model to guide us in confronting sin, we need look no further than Nathan. He was King David's trusted advisor, and a man of particular courage, tact and skill. Nathan is best known for caring enough to confront David's sin of adultery and murder. That most shameful episode in King David's life is reported in chapters 11-12 of Second Samuel. In the retelling of this episode, we see the classic causes and effects, the ugly aspects and deadly consequences of sin.

The episode is reported matter-of-factly, without moral overtones, until Nathan comes on the scene (2 Samuel 11:27). That fateful day in David's life began innocently enough with the decision to stay home from war. This particular Spring day was warm, fit for a king's nap and afternoon stroll. From his rooftop perch, David caught a glimpse of the beautiful Bathsheba (11:1-2).

There's nothing wrong with pursuing leisure or observing beauty—except that David went further. Instead of fleeing temptation then and there, he yielded to that temptation by satisfying his curiosity and focusing on his own selfish desires. He began coveting Bathsheba, whom he learned was another man's wife. David then indulged his fantasy by sending for her and sleeping with her, which resulted in a surprise, “David, guess what? I'm pregnant!” (11:3-5).

David compounded this deliberate sin and its consequence by attempting to deceive others



with an elaborate cover-up scheme (11:6-15). But Uriah, a good man of strong spiritual character, refused to indulge himself with what David had hoped would be a conjugal visit on a home leave, while his men were on the battlefield (where David should have been in the first place). Uriah's refusal forced David to arrange for Uriah's death in battle (11:14-25). David's adultery with the beautiful Bathsheba was now effectively and callously covered up with the murder of Uriah.

### **Nathan Confronts David's Sin**

No one would have found out, were it not for Nathan, whose assignment was to confront blatant sin (a prophet was often called upon by God to confront the sin of others, especially sin perpetrated by kings, court officials and others who flaunted the rules and crushed the poor).

Knowing that the normally righteous and regal David would hate these same actions in others, but was blind to them in himself, Nathan resorted to a parable-like story. A parable places one truism or observation beside another in order to teach a spiritual lesson. The point is driven home for the hearer by way of comparison or analogy to a story drawn from similar circumstances. This favorite way of teaching family values is practiced by most parents and spouses, without even knowing it. Recall a time when you heard of something bad befalling someone else, due to a sinful choice or youthful indiscretion. At the dinner table, or over the telephone, did you retell what happened with implied warning for those who "have ears to hear"?

### **"Are You Talking about Me?"**

With teaching that avoids preaching and allows for self-discovery, the point is not always self-evident, but usually long-lasting. For the parable to have its intended effect, the hearer must catch the analogy and be instructed by it. This indirect approach by Nathan proved ingenious and convicting in David's case:

"The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, 'There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.' David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.' Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'" (2 Samuel 12:1-7).

The "man after God's own heart" hung on every word God was saying through Nathan's parable. King David wanted to execute the man in the story for outrageous wrongdoing. Yet when Nathan revealed the parallel point ("David, you are that man!"), David realized that the very things he detested in that rich man—stealing, dishonesty, selfishness—he was guilty of himself. He was then moved to tears of repentance and words of remorse.

### **Nathan is God's "Gift" to David**

It takes courage to confront sin in high places. Not everyone is up to it, but the Hebrew and Christian prophets are required to. So are courtroom prosecutors. And the Independent Counsel. Those who venture to go where angels fear to tread are often despised, defrocked or worse. If the king or president did not like the message, he could exile, even execute the messenger. John the Baptist, for one, was beheaded for confronting a king in his sin (see Mark 6:14-29). We still turn on the unpopular

messenger, don't we? The accused often turns on the accuser, or deflects attention with talk of conspiracy theories or childhood trauma.

No one likes to receive a complaint or criticism, much less a conviction of guilt, unless that message is delivered by a trusted friend or advisor like Nathan. Nathan does not pull his punches, even with a king who could have beheaded him had the confrontation backfired. But David catches the point, repents of his sin and pays the consequences (the child of adultery died in infancy).

In proving himself as a fearless friend and counselor of David's, Nathan lives up to his name, which means (in Hebrew) "gift." By not pulling any punches, but always telling the truth in love, Nathan is God's gift "sent to David." This Nathan was a prophet in David's court, and a recorder of David's and Solomon's acts in the "Book of Nathan" (1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 9:29). This Nathan is not to be confused with several other Nathans in the Bible, including David's son born by Bathsheba and listed as an heir of Christ (2 Samuel 5:14; 1 Chronicles 3:5; Luke 3:31).

God sent Nathan to correct David at three important junctures in David's life. When we are first introduced to Nathan (see 2 Samuel 7:1-17), David is about to build a temple for God in Jerusalem. Nathan initially urged him to go for it. But before David could follow this natural ambition, God's will for David and the temple was revealed to Nathan in a dream. God stipulated that this temple-building task was to be left not for David but for Solomon.

That's not what David wanted to hear, but Nathan helped David to accept God's "No" or "Not yet." In accepting God's correction, David was led to thank God, humbly, for doing something in Solomon's lifetime that would be even greater than what David would do. Later, when David appeared too weak and feeble to assure an orderly transition of power to Solomon, Nathan again intervened to make sure God's will was known and obeyed (see 1 Kings 1:10-45).

The gift of Nathan to David's kingdom, and the truth of his convicting prophecy, also bore fruit in later generations. Although Nathan dealt mercifully with David, pronouncing God's forgiveness and sparing his life (2 Samuel 12:13), Nathan prophesied severe consequences of sin for his friend (12:10-12). His prophecy came true in Amnon's rape of Tamar (13:1-20), Absalom's murder of Amnon (13:21-29), and Absalom's rebellion against his father David (16:20-23).

### **When You Need a "Nathan"**

If more "Nathans" were willing to take up this calling, we'd assign them the unenviable task of safeguarding the conscience and conduct of all elected officials, all company CEOs, all club presidents, all heads of household, even our children. Then all affairs of state and all affairs of the heart would be exposed.

Would that everyone had a trusted advisor like Nathan in their life. We do, if only we would cultivate an informed conscience or listen to our closest friend. Only true, God-given friends will tell us the truth, even when that truth causes great pain.

Such friends will also be at our side to comfort and console us in our pain, and help pick up the pieces. Just as a true friend won't let us drive drunk, so also a trustworthy companion will steer us back onto the path of God's will when we veer off course.

So also, we who are called according to God's purpose and Nathan's example, will be that kind of friend for someone else. The friend God sends into our lives at crucial junctures will help us take responsibility, be submissive to truth and open to change. Would that such biblical prophets were available to us today for similar hazardous duty.

Where is "Nathan" when you need him? How do you respond when God sends a Nathan into your life to correct you? Are you ever that kind of Nathan for others? *(Originally published January 2000)*



## Mary & Martha: When Doing More is Less

**T**he sisters, both beloved friends and close followers of Jesus, could not have been more opposite in their approach to work and worship. Martha was easily distracted and upset by to-do lists a mile long. Mary was the contemplative one, noted for her single-minded devotion to the Lord. Martha was one of those busy people who loved housework and was good at it. Want something done on time? Just ask Martha. Mary, by comparison, seemed to skirt her household duties, preferring instead to study and learn.

Martha was evidently the older, more responsible sister; she acted as head of the household, frequently opening “her” home and serving meals to Jesus and his disciples. Mary was irresponsible and wasteful in her ways—at least in the eyes of Judas Iscariot, who objected on one memorable occasion to her anointing Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume.

Martha and Mary, together with their brother Lazarus, lived in Bethany, a village two miles outside Jerusalem. Their home served as an overnight stopover for Jesus on at least three occasions recorded in the Gospels (Luke 10:38; John 11:1-44; 12:1-8). Let’s take a closer look at the stories which give rise to these stereotypes, to see if the traditional reputations of Martha and Mary of Bethany are deserved and worth emulating or avoiding.

Martha and Mary, when their stories are re-examined in context, are both seen learning at the feet of the Master. Both women will instruct us and spur us to a life of prayer and witness to the Risen Lord.

## Martha Rebuked

Housework and meal preparation are unglamorous duties, but someone has to do them. Whenever Jesus visited his “home away from home,” Martha usually took these duties upon herself. Either by zealous temperament or by cultural tradition, Martha practiced Near Eastern lavish hospitality. Evidently she rose to the occasion, while others sat around visiting with guests. Her gift of hospitality and practical service befit her name, Martha, which in Aramaic means “lady” or “mistress [of the house].”

Usually, hosting in the Martha tradition is praiseworthy. One modern-day Martha, renowned for her giftedness in making decorative things for the home, is the talk of TV, books and popular magazines. If not for all the table work our “Marthas” do before, during and after any big holiday event, the rest of us would not be free to indulge our leisurely pastimes. The Marthas of the world are over-busy not only on the home front, but in the marketplace and at church. There is always a Martha behind the scenes doing more for the Lord to make other people feel right at home.

Such busy-ness often passes for godliness. But the busy-ness of Martha was not godly. As noted in Luke 10:38-42, Jesus turned the tables and rebuked Martha for being so busy doing good that she neglected the “one thing” that was needed. Losing sight of why she was serving, and feeling a bit overwhelmed, she expected others to bail her out. She wanted assistance from her sister Mary and expected Jesus to reinforce that request. No doubt she was surprised to find Jesus siding with Mary for dropping her chores at one point and single-mindedly devoting herself to his teaching and fellowship.

## Commune with The Lord

If you listened only to the anxious and over-zealous Martha at this point, you’d think Mary had totally shirked her share of the kitchen duties. But if all Mary did was to sit down, avoid

kitchen work and visit with guests, would Jesus have commended her? Evidently, Mary knew the highest form of service is to commune directly with the Lord. The first disciples understood this as well. In the very next chapter of Luke’s Gospel, they asked for a teaching on prayer (11:1-13).

For us, conversations with Jesus take place through Bible study and prayer. Such worship can certainly take place during work, as evidenced by Brother Lawrence, the 17th century lay brother who “practiced the presence of God” while washing dishes for fifteen years in the monastery (a work for which he had a natural aversion).

However, Martha’s serving meant she could not serve her Lord with undivided attention. She was overly distracted with the meal. She allowed her mind to wander from his teaching and fellowship. She could not concentrate both on what Jesus was saying and food preparation. She was not unlike some of us during morning church services, distracted by the noon meal or the afternoon errands that await us.

From this story we are not to conclude that a life of contemplation is the preferred Christian lifestyle, nor that a life of actively serving others is wrong. Jesus’ point is that doing more can be less, if our work detracts from our worship. Yet, this is not the full picture of Martha. In the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11), we see Martha emerging as a devoted follower of Jesus and witness to the Resurrection. After Lazarus had been dead four days and already entombed, it was Martha who went out to greet Jesus when he arrived at Bethany, while Mary stayed home (11:20).

At first, Martha complained that Jesus had not arrived in time to prevent the death of Lazarus, her brother. But she also professed her faith that God would do whatever Jesus asked. When Jesus stated his conviction that “your brother will rise again,” Martha concurred that nothing was too difficult for God to do, even resurrecting her brother from the dead (11:21-24).



Jesus pressed the point further when he identified himself, “I am the resurrection and the life.... Do you believe this?” Martha’s magnificent declaration is equal to that of Peter’s famous confession (Matthew 16:16), when she said, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world” (John 11:25-27).



## ***Martha’s serving meant she could not serve her Lord with undivided attention.***

Mary and Martha also knew Jesus as “the Teacher” (11:28). This was remarkable, considering that Jewish rabbis did not teach women. But this Rabbi knew no such cultural restrictions. In the hour immediately following her great confession of faith, she needed reassurance that Jesus would indeed raise Lazarus from the dead. Even as Martha feared the odor from a man four days dead, Jesus acted decisively to raise her dead brother just as he said he would (11:38-44). Martha proved to be human, just like

the rest of us who profess faith in moments of high drama, but do not always act on it when confronted with the realities of death and dying. How like Jesus to act despite our fears.

### **Jesus Commends Mary**

In the third story of Martha and Mary, they remain full of service and faith. The realities of death and dying may not have been uppermost on their minds. Martha was back to serving her Lord a meal, Lazarus was reclining at the table with Jesus, while Mary once again related to Jesus in a remarkable way (John 12:1-8). As an act of loving worship, and as an unwitting witness to Jesus’ imminent death, Mary broke open an expensive pint of perfume, poured it over Jesus’ feet and proceeded to wipe them with her hair.

Several aspects of this act of devotion were unusual. This act of devotion was quite costly, as pointed out by Judas Iscariot, who knew that perfume made of pure nard was worth 300 denarii—a year’s wages. He had better uses for that money. The washing of Jesus’ feet was an act of service that no disciple was ever recorded as doing, but one that Jesus would later do for his disciples (13:5). That she used her hair to wipe his feet (respectable women never let down their hair in public), showed her willingness to do work reserved for a lowly servant.

What visible act of service are you willing to do that shows how much you love the Lord? Let your sanctified imagination guide you into fulfilling the Martha and Mary tradition.

But merely doing more for the Lord is not “the one thing” that is needed. In the first story of Martha and Mary, we see that doing more can actually be less, if it takes attention from the One we are serving. In the second and third stories, Martha and Mary embrace Jesus as Teacher and Lord and bear witness to the Resurrection. May you, too, learn “at his feet,” as did Mary and Martha, and practice that one needful thing. *(Originally published March 1999)*





## Daniel: Advisor to Kings

**M**ost of us think we know Daniel. He was a disciplined and talented student, a courageous statesman, a visionary prophet, a prayer warrior. But there is more to Daniel than first meets the eye.

### Beloved by Children

From early on, children read Daniel. They love to re-tell and live out the story. He was the courageous guy who was thrown into a lions' den and lived to tell about it! Here's how that story goes, according to Daniel 6.

When Darius the Mede made Daniel one of the most powerful men in the kingdom, others became jealous and sought ways to discredit Daniel—particularly by attacking his religion. They convinced Darius to pass an edict ordering everyone to worship the king alone for a month, on penalty of being tossed to the lions. Daniel ignored the order by openly praying to the God of the Hebrews three times a day, as was his custom.

When the king was told about Daniel's defiance, the king was trapped by his own edict. Cast into the pit with the lions, Daniel was kept safe by an angel who shut the lions' mouths.

Upon discovering that Daniel was delivered unscathed, the king was greatly relieved and had Daniel's accusers thrown to the lions instead. After this, Darius called for his people to honor the God of Daniel.

Imagine yourself thrown into a lions' den of critics or mortal enemies. Comforted by angels and confronting your accusers, you

emerge triumphant So far, so good. But we are jumping right into the middle of Daniel's life story, getting well ahead of ourselves. Let's back up:

### **Disciplined and Talented Student**

A gifted, bright student from a distinguished Hebrew family, Daniel was the kind of child most parents and teachers would brag about. In his teen years, Daniel stood out as the cream of the crop among thousands of Hebrews taken captive to pagan Babylon (modern-day Iraq).

In the context of our modern college-prep schools, he might have attained two perfect 800 scores on his Scholastic Aptitude Tests, or might have been a Rhodes scholar. It's no wonder King Nebuchadnezzar wanted this precocious youth for his royal court in Babylon.

Daniel was probably no more than 15 or 16 years of age when he was taken captive (around 605 B.C.). He would serve two Babylonian kings and two Medo-Persian kings in a diplomatic career that spanned 70 years.

While exiled to Babylon from Judah, young Daniel and his Hebrew companions Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were enrolled in a three-year program for courtiers.

Their training was directed by Ashpenaz, the king's chief eunuch, who gave them each a Babylonian name: Daniel became Belteshazzar; the others became Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, respectively (Daniel 1:6-7).

Their food was the best in the land—wine and rich fare from the royal table. This would have posed a significant temptation for someone as young as Daniel.

But he showed discipline and wisdom beyond his years when he persuaded the palace officials to give them a simple vegetarian diet instead of the king's fancy rations. After a trial period, the boys demonstrated how healthy they were. By their tough-minded resolve, they were allowed to keep their strict Jewish diet.

At the end of their training, the young men were found to be superior to the other students and wiser than all the king's magicians and enchanters.

For the next 70 years, Daniel lived and worked at the royal court until the fall of the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C. All the while he maintained his integrity, both as a public servant in a hostile society and as a servant of the Most High God of Israel.

### **Visionary Prophet**

You may also read Daniel out of curiosity for its many end-time prophecies. You may be fascinated by the four kingdoms envisioned in the awesome statue and the four beasts from the sea (see Daniel 2, 7 and 8).

With 20/20 hindsight, scholars have identified these kingdoms historically:

Most agree that the four beasts symbolize the Neo-Babylonian Empire (626—539 B.C.), the Medo-Persian Empire (539—330 B.C.), the Seleucid Greek Empire (330—63 B.C.), and the Roman Empire which took control of Syro-Palestine in 63 B.C.

From this fourth kingdom, depicted with ten horns, devouring its victims in a most terrifying manner, would stem ten more kingdoms.

As if writing history ahead of time, Daniel (chapter 11) envisioned kings of the South and the North, which historically have been identified with Alexander the Great (who ruled 336-323 B.C.), the Ptolemies of Egypt to the South (323-198 B.C.), and the Seleucids of Syria to the North (198-142 B.C.).

In the end, after “seventy ‘sevens’” (9:24), one king “like a son of man” was given sovereign power over all nations.

He was/will be the object of universal worship, for his is “an everlasting dominion that will not pass away,” whether on earth or in heaven, and “all rulers will worship and obey him” (Daniel 7:13, 14, 27).

It is no wonder prophecy buffs enjoy having a field day with Daniel. The terrifying ten-horned beast (Daniel 7:7, 19-26), the mysterious handwriting on the wall (5:5), the obscure references to “seventy ‘sevens’” and the “abomination that causes desolation” (9:27; 11:31; 12:11).

These are but a few of the many riddles about end-time realities that heighten our fascination with Daniel the prophet.

Despite reading biblical prophecy well after the fact, there is enough ambiguity to the original vivid images, enough elasticity to biblical numerology and enough candidates on the horizon for the beastly Antichrist to allow for wild and speculative interpretations of Daniel’s visions.

However, all commentaries and prophecy buffs should agree on this much:

Daniel received his apocalyptic vision from God and relayed it to others for one simple reason—to encourage the people of God to hang in there, confident that good triumphs over moral evil.

Are you hanging in there, or are you hung up on the prophetic details? Are you strengthening your grip for service in God’s name, or are you losing your grip on reality?

### **Advisor to Kings, Faithful to God**

Beyond its exemplary entertainment value—providing the stuff of children’s stories and prophecy conferences—Daniel teaches us two important aspects of God’s being:

- (1) His unique sovereign greatness in dealing with nations as no other ruler could.
- (2) God’s personal goodness in dealing mercifully with individuals.

Daniel’s hymn of praise (2:20-23), for example, celebrates God’s creativity, wisdom, power and mercy. God the Creator knows “what lies in darkness” (deceit and destruction), yet “light dwells with him.”

Because only God can reveal what is in the

mind of man, Daniel is given supernatural wisdom to help him interpret the wildest of dreams for pagan kings. Advising kings about God’s will can place one in clear and present danger, especially when you must deliver bad news.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had a disturbing dream of an immense, frightening statue, which Daniel interpreted for him, by the mercy of God (Daniel 2). The golden head of the image represented Nebuchadnezzar himself, and the other parts of the image stood for lesser kingdoms that would eventually succeed the Babylonian kingdom. Finally, all of these kingdoms would be swept aside by God, who would carve out his own universal, everlasting kingdom.

The king was so surprised at the revelation that he credited Daniel’s God, heaped honors and riches on Daniel, making him prefect over all the wise men of the region and governor of the province of Babylon.

Another time during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, he had a dream of a tall, fruitful tree at the center of the earth (see Daniel 4). The tree provided food, shade and shelter for all living creatures. A celestial being came along and had the tree cut down, leaving only the stump.

Daniel, relying on the Spirit of God, explained its prophetic meaning. The tree represented Nebuchadnezzar in all his power and majesty. But to humble him and teach the powerful king that the Lord ruled over everything, Nebuchadnezzar would become like a crazed animal put out to pasture.

Daniel advised the king to atone for his sins and show compassion to the needy. Later on—while serving a different pagan king (Darius the Mede) and praying, as always, to God Most High—Daniel interceded for all Israel.

Daniel was prompted to pray along these lines after reading Jeremiah’s prophecy of the 70-year “desolation of Jerusalem” (Daniel 9:2; see Jeremiah 25:11-12). Daniel was himself a “person of the Book” or student of Scripture.

How big is your view of God? Are you growing in your faith by reading God's Word every day? Do you pray to him sincerely and boldly, as Daniel did, addressing him as Lord God (9:3)? Do



***“He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells in him.”***

you pray for the unfaithful to heed God's truth? Do you expect, as Daniel did, a just and merciful God to pardon sin with his abundant forgiveness (9:9,19)?

In your case, how has the Lord God impressed upon you his greatness? Perhaps he has shown you the importance of remaining loyal to the truth, no matter what values prevail in the culture.

In the '60s, being involved in sex, drugs and rock-n-roll was the counter-cultural thing to do. So that's what many teenagers did to be different. Now, “sex, drugs and rock-n-roll” seems to be the dominant culture. So, today's teenagers are being “counter-cultural” when they embrace Christianity. But adherence to prayer meetings and Bible study is what made Daniel and his teenage companions stand out from the crowd.

Perhaps God has shown you his greatness or goodness in a way that makes you want to show compassion for the needy. If you have shown little mercy for the poor so far, or if your heart is particularly hardened toward the needy, you can do something about that. You can ask God to rekindle his heart of compassion for the poor in you. This is what happened to Nebuchadnezzar.

A year after Daniel's prophecy, while Nebuchadnezzar was strutting about and recounting his many accomplishments, he was attacked with a form of insanity that drove him to behave like an animal. Just as Daniel predicted, the king ate grass and lived in the fields.

When the monarch Nebuchadnezzar eventually recovered his sanity, he worshiped God and was restored to his former greatness. He then issued a royal decree, calling everyone to worship the God of Daniel.

Don't wait for a government proclamation. You can make and maintain a personal declaration of faith in the God of Daniel. (*Originally published July 1999*)





## Esther: Called to Deliver Her People

**E**sther is the heroine of the Bible book that bears her name. The Jewish celebration of “Purim” that she helped institute (Esther 9:18-32) is a national festival still practiced by Jews today. Esther’s relationship with Mordecai, who adopted her and raised her, lifts up issues all parents and guardians contend with.

We see in Esther an orphan child who fared well under difficult circumstances, thanks to an adoptive “dad” (actually, her older cousin) and the heavenly Father who protected her. The story of Esther is fraught with faith-shattering questions and far-reaching precedents that raise scandalous implications. For openers:

- *How could God allow a beautiful Jewish girl to enter into holy matrimony with a divorced pagan?*
- *How could Mordecai allow his adopted daughter to marry an abusive, drunken male supremacist renown for oppressing women and Jews?*

King Xerxes was an angry, brutish man. His shameful divorce from Queen Vashti diminishes the luster and chance for success in a second marriage. Who of us would give our daughters in marriage to such a man? (While King Xerxes fares poorly in most re-tellings of the Esther story, there’s some evidence that his second wife made him a better husband and ruler than he was when married to Queen Vashti.) This unusual story underscores our belief that God uses flawed human instruments to accomplish his just and redemptive purposes.

### Esther: An Adopted Daughter

Esther was fortunate to be adopted by Mordecai. Mosaic Law made no provision for adop-

tion, yet he took Esther as his own child. Even Greek and Roman law provided only for adoptions of boys and citizens of the realm. Esther was neither. The exceptional adoption of Esther by Mordecai probably fell under a provision of the law that granted the right if the adoptive father was moved by a “deep affection,” special



***Together, Mordecai and Esther seized the God-given opportunity to uproot evil and make their world a better place.***

loyalty or kinship ties. The two were cousins (2:7), and the ties of blood and loyal affection are central to the subsequent narrative.

Orphaned at a young age, Esther would not have had the benefit of an older man’s wisdom, guidance or affirmation. Yet Mordecai believed in her, attached high value to her and instilled in her an indestructible pride in her ethnic roots.

She kept her Jewish identity a secret (2:10, 20) not out of timidity or shame, but out of obedience.

Evidently, there was no way to hide Esther’s attractive qualities from King Xerxes’ talent scouts. She stood out and was taken into the harem. Mordecai might have been pushing Esther’s candidacy, but Scripture indicates that the selection process was by king’s edict and totally out of their hands.

Yet Esther, following the precedent of Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 1), may have had a choice in whether to resist the king’s beauty treatments and special foods. Unlike Daniel, Esther seemed to accept what was prescribed for her. Mordecai could not have foreseen exactly how fortunate the selection of Esther was. By becoming as wise, gracious and attractive as she could be, Esther was in a position to make the best of a bad situation. It was amazing enough that she won the national beauty contest and the king’s hand in marriage. But God had other, more fantastic plans. As Queen of Persia, Esther would eventually liberate the Jews.

Thanks to Mordecai’s good fathering, Esther grew up to fear God—to be obedient, wise and gracious. When the world of politics and diplomacy tested those virtues, she proved a winner. Somewhere along the way, Esther learned that proper deference, perfect timing and national fasting (4:1-17) were necessary if she was ever to gain an audience with the king (5:1-7; 7:1-3).

### **Haman: Enemy of God’s People**

While Mordecai did right by his daughter and her husband the king, he could do no right in the eyes of Haman, “the enemy of the Jews” (8:1; 9:10, 24). In a courageous stand for Jewish solidarity, Mordecai repeatedly refused to bow down and pay homage to the Persian prime minister. That sustained act of defiance earned him a spot on Haman’s hate list, a list which extended to all Jews (3:1-6). Haman’s evil plot to hang Mordecai and annihilate the Jews (3:1-15) was foiled when Queen Esther exposed Haman to the king (7:3-6). Thanks

to encouragement from Mordecai (4:4-14), and the three days of fasting and prayer by other people (4:15-17), Esther was persuaded to risk initiating a meeting with the king.

Together, Mordecai and Esther seized the God-given opportunity to uproot evil and make their world a better place. They reversed Haman's fatal decree (8:7-14), redeemed the Jews, and worked for their welfare (10:3). The very act of celebrating the Jews' deliverance gave many non-Jews reason to convert (8:15-17).

### **Good News**

The story of Esther and Mordecai shows that sin is not only personal, but deeply incorporated into family histories and public policy. Such institutionalized sin is present today. Conscientious parents want to break this cycle in their children's lives.

Haman (7:1-10) was like a token Washington bureaucrat left to "twist in the wind" for problems that are embedded in the whole fabric of administration policy and power. Getting rid of an immoral politician may appease the voter's wrath momentarily, but it is still necessary to undo the bad public policy left in place (8:7-14).

With Esther, we must be pro-active (as instruments of God's grace) to break the cycle, undo the damage and restore the well-being of our families. We can also take a public stand for faith, believing God "for such a time as this" (4:14). God can use us—whatever our positions in life—to make something good of our lives, to do good to others and to repeal bad laws affecting the well-being of our children and their children.

Esther encourages us to believe that good-faith efforts and righteousness will not always go unrewarded by God. In God's economy, "what goes around comes around."

God oversees the plot twists and "chance coincidences" in our lives, as he did with Esther. God does this to accomplish his just and redemptive purposes through us. (*Originally published September 1998*)