
Esther
A Star Is Born

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Esther
A Star Is Born

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my sisters—Barbara, Sandy, Linda, and Janet. I admire them for standing true to the values our parents taught us as children. Today, more than ever before, Jesus needs young women like my sisters. Like Esther in ancient Persia, they have been called for just such a time as this.

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CHAPTER 1

Hadassah shifted the large basket on her hip and continued looking over the food items in the stalls of the Jewish marketplace. It was late afternoon, so the selection was not as good as it would have been earlier that morning. The piles of squash had been picked over, but she managed to find two dark yellow squash that still looked firm and meaty. The rainy season was coming on and the weather was turning cooler, so the season's supply was nearly gone. The cucumbers had all been gone for weeks now, but there were plenty of leeks and garlic to choose from.

After finishing her business at that stall, the girl moved to another. She measured out lentils and chickpeas and asked the vendor to tie them in white muslin cloths. She wrapped up an omer of raisins too and then picked over the dates and found exactly what she wanted—nice sweet ones without any of the bugs that some vendors allowed to crawl over the sticky fruit.

Hadassah pulled her flowing tunic tighter around her slim waist and turned to pay the vendor for the raisins and dates, when she heard a commotion from across the marketplace.

"The war is over!" a voice shouted. "Hear ye! Hear ye! The war with the Spartans is over!"

Hadassah's heart beat faster. *The war is over! This is good news!* She knew she should be heading for home and the evening meal preparations, but she wanted to hear more about the war with the

Greeks. The Sabbath would soon be here, but maybe there was still time to hear what the messenger had to say.

She quickly counted out several copper coins and handed them to the old man selling dried fruit. His scraggly beard waggled as he bowed his thanks to her and handed her a parting gift—a small package of figs, two or three in number, but the best to be found in Susa this time of year.

"Shalom!" She nodded at the old man before crossing to the other side of the busy marketplace.

The Persians had been away on a military campaign in the west for more than two years. Good reports had come back from time to time about the successes of the Persian army, and that had encouraged everyone. Often Hadassah would see the people dancing in the streets when they heard such reports, but she found it strange that bad news seldom found its way back to the royal city of Susa. *Don't armies lose battles too?* she wondered.

But now the messenger was telling the crowd it was finally over! *Thank You, Lord!* Hadassah raised her eyes to heaven in gratefulness. The crowd was growing by the minute, but she got as close as she could and stood on her tiptoes to peer over the tops of the heads in front of her.

She was glad to hear the good news—not that she really cared who won these awful battles. To her, all wars were horrible no matter who the victor was. Both the Persians and the Spartans could be brutal, refusing to go home until they had forced the enemy to surrender or else had totally destroyed them. The Persian soldiers were especially cruel, she knew, but all the stories she had heard said the Greeks were better at military strategy. She cringed as she thought of all the men who had to die in such a war. Neither side was known for mercy.

But the thing that worried her most about this most recent war was that some of her own people had been forced to serve in the

war. Several young men from the Jewish congregation where she worshiped had been conscripted by the Persian army to fight in the war against the Greeks. She cared about them and their safety, and to be honest, there were one or two of them that she really liked.

But will these young men still be alive after two years of fighting? Will they come home crippled from the war, with missing arms or legs? She cringed when she thought of such a thing. In some ways, coming home with missing limbs was worse than not coming home at all. The Greeks themselves had a saying they used when sending their young men out to battle: "Come back home carrying your shield or carried on it."

That was a horrible thing to say, but Hadassah had heard that even the mothers of these young soldiers used such expressions! *Come back victorious, carrying your shield in triumph, or don't come home at all.* That's what they were saying, even if they didn't say it directly. *If you come home the loser, we'd rather you be dead, being carried on your shield by your comrades.* To lose a battle could only mean shame for everyone.

The shields the Persian soldiers used were large enough to protect their entire bodies, but, even so, men were often wounded and maimed. A man coming home with permanent injuries could not support a family or even start one. What father would want to give his daughter to someone with a missing foot or hand? Such a cripple would be an embarrassment to his family and society and would probably have to make a living by begging.

Hadassah craned her neck to get a better view of the man giving the news. The simple gray tunic he wore was torn and dirty. His black hair and beard were uncombed, he wore no sandals, and his eyes were bloodshot as though he had been without sleep for days. There was no doubt he was in mourning—and that was bad news. It could only mean one thing for anyone awaiting news from the front lines of the war. Tragedy!