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The Story: The Queen of Beauty and Courage Esther 1-9

We continue our journey through the Story and believe it or not, we have just one more chapter in the Old Testament! Next week, we conclude with Nehemiah, one of my favorite books. If you missed last week's message, I would urge you to download it. I think it was one of the most important I've preached in a while. I shared some pretty vulnerable things about my struggles as your pastor and I think you might find it helpful.

Last week we saw God call 50,000 of his people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. But he called others to remain behind as a witness to Yahweh in a pagan land. One of the most remarkable witnesses was an orphaned Jewish girl named Hadassah. Do you know her Persian name? Esther.

Here's a little history quiz for you. There once lived a man who hated the Jews. When he rose to a position of power, he decided to use that power to rid the world of Jews once and for all. Who was that? Actually, I'm speaking of a man named Haman who lived 2,400 years before Adolf Hitler. This week's chapter of *The Story* is the account of how this wicked man laid plans to exterminate the Jews and how he was thwarted by a reluctant but courageous young Jewish woman named Esther.

Remember, we are studying the *Story*—and abridged version of the entire Bible—in order to grasp the scope of God's history; the big themes and the main characters. So here's the big theme of Esther: if Haman had succeeded in his plan there would be no Jewish nation, there would be no chosen people, there would be no Messiah. We've spoken about the Scarlet Thread... the glimpses of Jesus found throughout the Old Testament. Well, the Scarlet Thread almost got cut right here, save for the courage of one young woman. And one of the most amazing things about the book of Esther is this: never once is the name of God mentioned. But the hand of God is clearly at work throughout the entire story.

Esther is set during the reign of King Xerxes, about 100 years after Daniel and 30 years after the temple had been rebuilt. I'll bet you know King Xerxes from another story. Do you remember the movie "300", the account of 300 Spartan soldiers who died holding back the entire Persian army at a narrow mountain pass called Thermopylae? Who was the Persian king at the time? Xerxes! Same guy as our story!

Xerxes had a temper, and it shows up early in chapter one. He wanted to parade his beautiful Queen Vashti for his dinner guests, and she did something unheard of. She said “No!” Xerxes got so mad he divorced and deposed her. Then he sponsored a beauty contest to pick her replacement. He sent out his minions to look for the most beautiful virgins in the kingdom. Of course, the virgins had no say in the matter. After a pool of candidates was collected, they were subjected to a year of spa treatments to make them even more beautiful. Then the King began to sample the wares, one at a time, until he found his new favorite: Esther. And he made her his queen.

But Esther had a secret. She was a Jew... a descendant of the exiles captured by Nebuchadnezzar. Her older cousin Mordecai raised her as his own daughter because both her parents had died. Mordecai made a name for himself when he overheard two men plotting to assassinate the king and reported them. The would-be assassins were executed by the favorite Persian method: impalement. Essentially a human shish kebab planted in the ground for all to see. It was a hideous way to die, and a haunting reminder of what happened to the enemies of the king. So, the king's life was saved thanks to the actions of Mordecai the Jew.

One of Xerxes's top advisors was a wicked man named Haman. The more power Haman got, the more it went to his head. One of the things he liked most was when people groveled in front of him as he walked by. But one man refused to grovel—Mordecai. Listen:

Esther 3:

⁵When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. ⁶Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes...

⁸Then Haman said to King Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. ⁹If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them...

¹³Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

“Destroy, kill and annihilate...” That pretty much covers it! Haman was a founding father of anti-Semitism! When Mordecai heard this news, he sent a message to Esther, begging her to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. Here is Esther's response:

Esther 4

¹¹ "...for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

Do you get the picture? If Esther presumes to approach the king without being summoned, she risks being executed. But listen to Mordecai's powerful reply:

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

¹⁵Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

It is a very brave thing that Esther did. At great risk, she did approach the king, and he did raise his golden scepter to receive her. Esther then invites the king and Haman to a banquet. And at the perfect moment, she springs the news on the king: "I, your queen, am a Jew... and this plan Haman has talked you into will mean the death of me along with all my people." The king then realizes that he has been manipulated by Haman and orders him impaled—ironically, on the very 75-foot tall pole that Haman had erected in order to execute Mordecai.

There is a lot more to the story, and it is a good read. But the upshot is, God uses Esther, a very reluctant hero, to overcome a terrible abuse of political power by an evil man... and to save her people.

Michael Morton knows something about the abuse of power and what it means to be drawn reluctantly into God's greater plan. In 1987 Michael was falsely convicted of murdering his wife when evidence that would have exonerated him was buried by the D.A. He was sentenced to life in prison the same year I began my ministry here at Chapel Hill... to set it in perspective! But after serving 25 years, DNA evidence proved conclusively what Michael had claimed all along: he was innocent. Christine had been killed by a known, violent criminal who went on to murder another woman in the same fashion. It is our privilege to welcome Michael and his wife Cynthia to our church this weekend. Would you greet him please?

Questions:

The name "God" doesn't even appear in Esther. He is invisible and yet, his hand is clearly evident as he works to save his people. God must have seemed invisible in your experience. But as you look back now, how do you see that God was at work?

Esther was a reluctant hero, but she rose to the calling placed upon her life. Do you relate to Esther in that regard? How?

Esther reached a point where she could no longer hide who she really was. You were offered a chance at parole if you would only "admit" your guilt and show remorse. You declined the offer that would have freed you from prison. Why?

Haman was a wicked man; arrogant, drunk with power, dangerous. What have you learned about how to deal with the Hamans of this world? And as a Christian, how do you balance a desire for justice that doesn't degenerate into vengeance?

The most well-known verse in Esther is 4:14: "...who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" "For such a time as this..." Mordecai's message to Esther was essentially this: "This is your moment of destiny. God has raised you up for this. If you let it pass, God will use others to accomplish His purposes. But you will have squandered the chance to be a player in God's salvation story."

I have reflected deeply on those words at different times in my life. I don't think these words were just for Esther. I think they speak to us, too. Every one of us has moments of destiny in our lives. Pivot points where, if we act or speak with courage, we will participate in God's work in a way that changes the course of history—maybe not the history of an entire people, maybe just the history of one person... one friend, one family, one church, one community—fleeting moments of destiny.

Does that seem fantastical to you? You look at yourself and say, "Who am I that God would use me in such a way? I am a nobody." But think of Esther: an orphaned Jewish girl in a foreign land, yet God raised her to a place of influence and used her to save many lives. He did the same thing with Michael—by his own account, just an average guy.

Every single day, it seems to me, is a battle between the Mordecais and the Hamans in our lives. Those who speak life-giving, courageous counsel in one ear and those who seek to bend us to evil speaking in the other. Kind of like the angel and the devil on each shoulder. But beyond everyday life, we have particular moments of destiny assigned to us—moments when God prompts us to speak, or

act in such a way that could make a monumental... even eternal difference. And our response in that moment determines whether we will be a player in God's story or whether we will squander the opportunity and pass it on to someone else.

The thing I love about Esther is she was so reluctant—she was afraid, hesitant—and yet, she fasted, prayed, listened to the good advice, and in the end, God used her in an astounding way. I wonder how many reluctant heroes we have here who feel unworthy, unqualified, uneducated, unsituated... and yet you sense God is calling you to do something significant. Who knows, but that you have come to this position for such a time as this?