

Esther becomes Queen

**Would you have come to Church this morning** if I had advertised that we are going to be reading from a book that has no direct mention of God in it? You might think that this is **some other book outside of the Bible** because, clearly, the Bible is all about God; there wouldn't be a book in the Bible that didn't speak directly about God. **But then, there is the book of Esther**, this strange **outlier**, different from all the rest. **This book has everything in it except for direct mention of God.** There is a **villain, a heroine, and a hero.** And of course, any good story comes from a circumstance where **the stakes are high. There is danger**, there is so much on the line. **You get to see how people respond under duress, under extreme pressure. Will they be brave, or will they be cowardly, will they stand firm or will they compromise who they are?** And still no mention of God.

**That brings us to one of the most important and useful skills that any Christ follower can acquire.** This skill could be the difference **between standing firm or compromising**, it could be the difference **between remaining resolute or throwing up one's hands** and giving up.

**This skill I am referring to is demanded of those who read the book of Esther.** The book of **Esther is practice** for learning this spiritual skill that will be a **big part of you making it through the toughest times** and not giving up. **This skill is bound up in the very simple word, faith.** Faith, in the simplest terms, is believing **in what you haven't seen yet, but you're confident is true.**

This ability that we are **going to practice as we investigate** the story of Esther is found in **the ability to see circumstances as God sees them**, outside of fear. Esther brings...The challenge to see God working when it appears he's not.

**It takes very little faith** to see God working when things are going as planned, just how I thought it would go. **Faith comes into play when we can see beyond the obvious where God is directly mentioned to those places** where he is accomplishing something, and it doesn't seem like he is. **When things are going well for me as planned, I tend to believe** that God is working, that his Holy Spirit is moving in our midst. **That's easy and even sometimes lazy.** It takes real faith to be able to **peel back the veneer of difficulty, suffering, and an unsure future** and be able to see that, yes, God is doing something here.

**So, let's practice this together** by going through the story of Esther. **Here's the cliff notes or spark notes version** of the story. If you are reading through the Bible Chronologically with us the book of **Esther is near the end of this past week** so you would have read it already. If not, I'm going to give you an idea of what is happening. **It is your job to try to see how God is working on behalf of his people during a time when it doesn't appear that he is.**

Our story begins in a **city called Sousa**, the capital city of the Persian Empire, where some of the exiled Jews are living and have made their home. At this point in the Bible as we are going through it, **many have already returned home to begin rebuilding** Jerusalem and the temple, but others have not. They've stayed where they have put down roots. But in this case, even though these people have **been there about 100 years, they are still viewed as outsiders** and, to some level, not to be trusted. Their way of **worshipping sometimes clashes** with the way things are done in these other cultures and other countries.

At the beginning of the story, **the king, who is fond of drinking too much, enjoying banquets** where people can soak in his splendor and majesty. It's in one of these settings. **He is drunk and decides that the best way to impress people** next is to demonstrate how beautiful his wife is. **Only a man of great majesty could have a wife this beautiful.** So, the king invites his wife to come to the party, she **knowing what's going on, decides to refuse him**, she will not come and be **his trophy wife** to impress his friends during his **drunken frat party**.

**As king he can't stand for this**, so he gets together with his assistants and they decide to **depose her as queen** and have a **beauty pageant in order to pick** her replacement as queen. **Don't throw stones at the man who's bringing the message**, this is just the way they did it back then. I know it's **not very enlightening**, but there you have it. **Still no excuse for not looking for how God is working in this story.**

I don't know if they had **billboards advertising** this beauty pageant where the winner gets to be queen, **but somehow Esther found out about it.** Esther is **a Jew** who has been cared for by her **Uncle Mordecai**. She enters the pageant, **hiding the fact that she is a Jew.** She signed up for this bazaar sexist election. **In the end, because she is ravishingly beautiful, she wins.**

**About that same time her Uncle Mordecai** happens to overhear guards talking about **assassinating the king.** He tells Esther, who tells the king, and **Mordecai gets credit for saving the King's life.** Tuck that side story away for later.

**Now we meet another key character, Haman.** He is **elevated** to just below the king in power. I know it's hard to believe, but **powerful politicians back then also had huge egos.** He demands that **everyone bow** when he passes them. **Mordecai refuses, therefore Haman hates him** with a burning passion. So, when he **finds out that he is a Jew**, this foreign subculture, he **gets the king to sign a decree** to have all the Jews killed. Talk about over kill. **They roll a die to decide** what the date of this massacre will be. **Everything is set so they go have a banquet and get drunk.**

**The hope of the Jewish people rests on Esther and Mordecai.** They **hatch a plan to have Esther tell the king** what is happening. The problem with this is that in **Persian law, you cannot approach the king** without being summoned. The penalty is death. **Esther is scared**, she doesn't want to do it. So, he says to her that **even if she doesn't do this, God will use other means for saving the jews.** But then he says, **'But who knows, maybe you were made queen for this very purpose, to save your people.'** This seals it for **Esther commits** to go to the king saying, **"If I die, I die."**

**Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet.** At this banquet she says she has a request for both. **She will prepare a second banquet** for them where she will **make her request.** **The first is to butter the king up with food, booze, and her beauty.** The second is to make the pitch.

**Drunk and on the way home from the first banquet, Haman sees Mordecai.** In a drunken rage he orders that a **tall stake** be erected where Mordecai will be impaled for all to see. His final triumph and revenge.

**That same night the king has trouble sleeping.** I don't know if he was **hungover or what the problem was**, but he had one of his assistants come and read to him from **the chronicles** of his rule. **This bedtime reading finally leads to the part in the King's story where Mordecai saves**

**him.** The king had **completely forgotten** what Mordecai had done for him. As he fades off into sleep, **he commits to do something** about this.

**In the morning, as Haman is entering the King's presence ready to ask permission** to put Mordecai to death by impaling him on the huge pole he had erected, the king speaks first. The king says **“hold that thought”** and directs Haman to go find Mordecai and **honor him for what he had done** for the king, putting some of the **King's clothes on him and leading him around the city** on a horse, **singing his praises** to the general public. What an amazing **plot twist** in this story. **Can you see God working?**

**At the second banquet, Esther reveals that she is Jewish** and tells the king that Haman has schemed to **murder her and Mordecai as well as all the Jews** living in Persia. **With this news, that his right-hand man wanted to kill his beautiful young queen and the man who saved him,** the king, in yet another drunken rage **orders Haman to be impaled on the stake** that was meant for Mordecai.

**But this does not solve the problem** of the first decree. **In Persian law,** a decree made by the king could not be rescinded. Therefore, **Esther and Mordecai's plan was to make another decree** allowing the Jews the ability to defend themselves against anyone who might want to destroy them. **Therefore, the Jewish people are informed, prepared and armed** so that when some of their neighbors come to kill them they win a great victory and are saved.

**The story is wrapped up and Mordecai is elevated to second in command in Persia.** Esther and Mordecai collaborate on writing a new decree that establishes **a day of celebration on the very day that they were to be destroyed.** This celebration was called **Purim, which is the word for dice** which is how the evil plot he decided on the date when the massacre would take place.

**Let's return to the challenge** which was set at the beginning. **In this book that never mentions God,** where did you see God working? **It's all over the story. It's easy for us** to see God working **because we know how it ends,** but for Esther and Mordecai it would have been harder. **And maybe that's the case for you right now.**

**The challenge is to see God working** even when it seems like he isn't. **In this story as it is in our lives, we can miss God working because we see...Unlikely circumstances.**

So much about **this story screams “this is a lost cause** and God's people have no hope.”

- They are exiles.
- They were different.
- Political power was not on their side. Against those **They had no recourse who hated them.**

**When it doesn't look like God is working, it's not only** the circumstances that look unlikely, but also there are...Unlikely people. **The kind you think God could and would never use for his good purposes.**

- **The king was a drunk** who was easily manipulated and morally rudderless.

Drunken party animal who doesn't curb his desire for young women. He likes people to think he is amazing, trotting out the queen because she is beautiful.

- **Other officials who are bigoted and corrupt** who are against them.

**Mordecai if he had just given Haman a little bit of token respect**, none of this would have happened. **Did he encourage his niece to do this?** With an uncle like that...?

**Esther, she was willing to hide her connection** with God's people. **Join the king's harem.**

<sup>2</sup>So his personal attendants suggested, "Let us search the empire to find beautiful young virgins for the king. <sup>3</sup>Let the king appoint agents in each province to bring these beautiful young women into the royal harem at the fortress of Susa. Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the harem, will see that they are all given beauty treatments. <sup>4</sup>After that, the young woman who most pleases the king will be made queen instead of Vashti." This advice was very appealing to the king, so he put the plan into effect. Esther 2:2-4

**God is working through morally compromised people and against the culture and the most powerful men in the world.**

<sup>13</sup>Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. <sup>14</sup>If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen **for just such a time as this?**" Esther 4:13-14

**For such a time as this?** God allowing this **mercenary young Hebrew woman**, who was **ashamed of her heritage, to become queen at the time when** the exiles are about to experience a genocide. **There's no indication that she entered this perverse beauty contest with the higher motive** of making things better for her people. Her motives don't appear to be pure at all.

**Persian law stated** that only those few who were called "**friends of the king**" could enter unannounced. **This was Haman's status, giving him the advantage of access over Esther.**

**Esther was risking her life**, but did not think asking for entrance beforehand would help. **Five years in maybe his interest had waned** or **she doesn't want to arouse the attention** of others by requesting. My guess is that the king gets older and his harem gets younger.

**What Esther is experiencing at this moment is a...**Defining moment of trust. **Is she going to trust God, the God who she denied any connection to, to become queen.**

Here's the first thing she does after making the decision to risk her life by approaching the king.

<sup>15</sup>Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup>"Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die." <sup>17</sup>So Mordecai went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. Esther 4:15-17

But if you refuse to serve the Lord, then **choose today** whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15 **In Esther's case, would she prefer the God of power and the gods of her husband** the king. Would she

prefer to live by **her own wits and beauty**? You know what they say, **beauty fades** over time. **What is she going to choose to put her trust in and serve?**

**Esther's decision means that she now...Openly identifying with God and His people. "Yahweh is my God and the Jews, his people are my people. I'm hitching my wagon to God and his people Israel. Esther's response is to stop identifying with the pagan culture and identify with God's people.**

**She identifies with them first by joining in fasting, crying, and mourning.** This is the first step. **She is letting them know that she is one of them** and she is willing to risk for them.

**I'm going to read the description of Esther at the beginning** of the book and see if you notice anything. At that time there was a Jewish man in the fortress of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair. He was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. <sup>6</sup>His family had been among those who, with King Jehoiachin of Judah, had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. <sup>7</sup>This man had a very beautiful and lovely young cousin, **Hadassah, who was also called Esther.** When her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her into his family and raised her as his own daughter. Esther 2:5-7

**She has two names, what is that about?**

- She changed her name using a Persian name.
- **She entered a beauty contest pretending** to be Persian for a shot at a life of luxury.

**She is turning her back on who she is in order to make a way in a hostile culture. But is that any different than what we might be doing right now?** What do I mean? **We want the benefits of Jesus, but don't want to fully identify with him and his people.**

**To identify with Jesus and his people means to do what Esther did.** Jesus said it this way, "if you want to be with me you need to **take up your cross and follow me.**" **To identify is to say this is who I am.** Our **culture believes** that the only way this word should have power is in **sexuality and gender.** **Identifying myself with anything that comes before identifying with Jesus is an idol and is sin.**

**Are you hiding your connection with Jesus?**

**Are you embarrassed to be associated with God's people?** Maybe you want **Jesus without his people.**

**If Esther had this attitude, she would have kept her ethnicity secret** and let the rest of them fend for themselves. **"After all, what have those people done for me?" Do you want Jesus without the commitment to the people in this room?** I know plenty of people that way. They drop out as soon as **they don't get their way, or it gets difficult or there is an expectation that they make the effort** to be a disciple of Jesus.

**I've struggled with my association** with parts of the larger church. I'm trying to figure out how to create change from the inside.

**Listen to this from Peter, Jesus' closest friend** and follower. <sup>9</sup> But you are not like that, for you are a **chosen people**. You are **royal priests**, (Esther didn't need to be Queen of Persia, she was already royalty) a holy nation, God's very own possession. **As a result, you can show others the goodness of God**, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

**Because of our identity being found in Jesus and all these designations being true for us, we can show others the goodness of God.** Because we were once in the same darkness they are in right now.

<sup>10</sup> "Once you had **no identity** as a people;  
Now you are God's people.  
Once you received no mercy;  
now you have received God's mercy." 1 Peter 2:9-10

**How did God call us out of darkness into light?** By giving us a job to do, **by promising us heaven if we are good...No this is how he called us.** So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he **adopted** you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." Romans 8:15

**Here's the asterisk at the end** of the commercial about how some **new medicine or supplement** can change your life for the better. There will always be risk in identifying with God. **The risk for Esther was death.** We think this is a great story because it had a happy ending. But Esther was willing to identify with God and his people.

Steps of Obedience

1. Recognize how God has been working?

**Another way to put this is, "Can you see the Kingdom of God in your troubles."** What is the kingdom of God? The restoration of God's loving rule/authority over all things.

1. What would "Esther like" trust look like for you today?

The problem with a defining moment of trust is that you never know when it's going to come. And we are never really ready. I'm sure Esther wasn't. But we can be if we expect it to come.