

The Story: For Such A Time As This
By Jason Huff
Psalm 116:1-9, 1 John 3:11-16, Selections from Esther 2-4

Our final Scripture readings today are selections from Esther 2-4. Listen now to the Word of God. "Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter. When the king's order had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa...Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. The girl pleased him and won his favor...Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman the Agagite. All the royal officials knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor. The royal officials told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet 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 throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes...

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done [by Haman], he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. In every province, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. Mordecai told [Hathach the palace eunuch] everything that had happened. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa. He told [Hathach] to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "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." Mordecai sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For 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?" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "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."

Famous people don't exist in a vacuum. They are attached to the events of their day. I say George Washington, you say “American Revolution.” I say Abraham Lincoln, you say “Civil War.” There's Churchill and WWII, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Ronald Reagan and the fall of European communism. In millions of situations, human history changed because of one person's actions. Sometimes we say that they born for such a time as this.

I don't know the first time that phrase was used in history, but the Bible applies it to Esther, the heroine in week 20 of *The Story*. Hers is among the most unique stories in the whole Bible. As a woman of her era and a typical exile from Judah, she had no say over the path of her life. Despite her low place in society, her choices saved the Jewish people from destruction. We'll look at the full story, then see what God is teaching us through it today.

Vashti, Xerxes' wife, refused to come to him during a banquet held to honor the kingdom. This situation shamed him, and his nobles worried it would set an example. So Xerxes issues a decree that Vashti would never appear before him again. That's where Esther enters the equation. As we heard in the Scripture reading, Esther was a beautiful young Jewess that had been raised by her cousin Mordecai. She was taken with many other women to the royal harem, and her kindness brought her favor. Eventually she was noticed by the king and became queen. Meanwhile, Mordecai discovers a plot by two of Xerxes' men. He relays the message through Esther, she tells the king, and the assassination plot is foiled. While Mordecai isn't given any special honor, his service is noted in the king's records.

Then Haman comes to prominence. Haman is an Agagite, a prince of the Amalekites, enemies of Israel since its earliest days. For reasons unknown, Haman was promoted. By the king's decree, others were to bow to him. Mordecai refused. When Haman finds out, he's so infuriated that he sets out to kill not just Mordecai but his entire people. Because he has the king's trust, he convinces Xerxes to annihilate a certain race from his kingdom – when Haman sends out the decree with the king's seal, it commands the entire empire to eradicate the Jews.

When Mordecai finds out, he is beside himself with grief, and he turns to Esther, the only person he can trust. Esther is reluctant...she has no right to go before the king. If she approaches him without first being invited, if he doesn't approve, she dies. He hasn't called her in over a month...so she doesn't even know if she's in Xerxes' favor. But as Mordecai tells her, God will make a way with or without her. But isn't this perhaps the reason she has become queen? Esther asks for him and all the Jews to fast and pray...and then she will go to the king.

Xerxes was pleased to see Esther and welcomed her. When he asks her request, Esther prepares two feasts for him and Haman. Haman is delighted, and knowing that he has the king's favor, has a gallows built so that he can ask for Mordecai to be hung. But the tables quickly turn. Xerxes has a sleepless night and reviews his records, finding the entry about Mordecai's loyalty. On the morning Haman was going to ask for Mordecai's execution, Xerxes has Haman ride Mordecai through the streets on the royal horse, decorated in the royal robe – the very honor Haman desired for himself. And at the final banquet, Esther reveals Haman's plan to have her people killed to the king. Xerxes has Haman hung on the gallows built for Mordecai, and he gives orders that the Jews are free to defend themselves against anyone who might try to carry out his original edict. Under that decree orders, the Jewish people win great victories throughout the empire, and Mordecai eventually became second in command under Xerxes.

Esther is a story of intrigue and politics and danger. In my studies this week, I saw how Esther and Mordecai's lives point to God, and I believe God has a lot to say to all of us through it. Here are three things to take home this week to chew on...first, *we too exist for such a time as this*. Second, *we must not honor that which God detests*. Finally, *God is involved in human events even when His explicit action isn't apparent*.

Let's start at the beginning...*God made us for such a time as this*. From her own culture's perspective, Esther has very little standing. A Jewish orphan in exile, a girl, her only protection lies in Mordecai. She has no influence, no standing, no authority, and the only amount she could ever hope to gain would be through a husband. Without parents, without a dowry, in a foreign land, how would that happen? It's hard for us to see just how bleak Esther's situation was. And yet God puts everything in place to save His people through her. Esther was not only beautiful on the outside, but God made her beautiful on the inside, enough that she found favor with her harem master and with the king himself. It's through Esther that Xerxes learns of Mordecai's deeds to protect him. Esther is so favored by Xerxes that she could appear before him uninvited – remember, this king got rid of his first queen for her presumption. Not only that, Esther has the wisdom to hold the banquets where she reveals Haman's vile plan. So many different events play out through Esther, all tying together with the salvation of the Jews.

We may believe that our lives don't have much meaning in the grand scheme of things, that we aren't an Esther. Yet I believe that God has placed all of us in our own unique situations. God has made all of us for such a time as this. You have a unique outlook on life. You have a unique circle of friends and family members, unique hobbies and interests that bring you into ever-larger circles. Where you live, where you shop, where you eat, where you relax...all of them are unique. And God has made you uniquely to relate to the people in your sphere of influence and to steer them towards God and God's will. There is no one in the entire universe just like you, and God has made you for this moment, for this place, for this time. God can accomplish His will through any number of means, but He wants to use you. He created you to do His work, and what better feeling can you have than to know you have used by your Heavenly Father to make an eternal difference in somebody's life? You never know what doors may be opened when you are willing to do God's will. I know Gary has people who tell him their problems over their Angel Food Ministry order that they'd never tell me. You know folks who would never darken the door of a church unless you ask them.

Sometimes, churches wonder why a good pastor doesn't wind up having a whole lot of sheep in his church. As a shepherd, I can help make sheep more godly. I can direct the sheep towards kindness and goodness. I can help sheep run faster, graze better, and find shelter, all spiritually speaking. But as someone here reminded me a couple of weeks ago, there's something a shepherd can't do...in the real world, a shepherd can't make sheep. Who can make sheep? Well, God makes sheep, and sheep make sheep. I'm here to guide the flock, to help us know God's message and His love and live them out. But God has put you here as sheep to multiply...to make more followers of God! And God has made you uniquely able to reach the people around you that He will bring to Himself. You were made for these times, for these folks, to serve God by serving people and leading them to becoming His sheep. Will it be easy? Not necessarily. Following God's calling could have cost Esther her head, but she knew it was the godly thing to do. And so take a leap of faith, be brave, be bold, and be open to do God's bidding. You were born for this. Seriously!

Second thought for the morning...*we must not honor that which God detests*. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman doesn't stem from a Jewish prohibition on showing someone honor. Some scholars have thought that Mordecai would have been giving honor to Haman that was due only to God, but neither Jewish law nor this text say that. Instead, it has to do with Haman being an Amalekite prince. The Amalekites attacked the nation of Israel moments after the Exodus from Egypt, and they were perpetually at war with Israel. Haman's desire to see Mordecai's whole people murdered shows what kind of a person he was. The Amalekites had always been in direct opposition to God and His ways and His people. All of it could have been avoided had Mordecai bowed before Haman, but Mordecai respected God too much to bow to God's enemy.

Today, we too are being asked to honor depravity and those who practice it. The "On Faith" column of the Washington Post regularly claims that those with a biblical worldview have no right to make laws. Two weeks ago, Detroit Presbytery voted to remove the language that prohibits those who are sexually active outside of marriage to be ordained as pastors. These are part of a larger pattern. We are being told to set aside our beliefs that spring from laws God put into place millenia ago as our nation loses its sense of right and wrong.

But how does this apply to you and me? We honor things by giving them our time, our attention, our money, and our respect. How might our choices show whether we are honoring God or honoring what God hates? I'm reluctant to give you examples because it's not always simple. Let's take the case of a young woman having a baby out of wedlock. A few years ago, that would have been shocking, maybe even hidden from the community. It's not God's ideal by any stretch of the imagination. But should you be her friend, to provide for her and care for her and show her the love of Jesus? Absolutely. We are not called to condemn others but to show God's love in the midst of sin...Scripture tells us that while *we* were still sinners, Christ died for us. We are called to show that love to others who don't yet know God's grace.

But in other situations, people know their sin and yet defiantly rebel against God. In the last week, we've seen the meltdown of actor Charlie Sheen. Yet when he opened a Twitter account a couple days ago, within 24 hours he had 1.1 million followers. His fans have even changed the popular religious acronym WWJD, "What Would Jesus Do," to WWCD, "What Would Charlie Do?" He's receiving all sorts of media attention. We can and should pray for him and his family and all the working folks affected by the shutdown of his show. But rather than to honor him by getting involved in the frenzy, we should ignore it all as Mordecai ignored Haman.

Now Hollywood is a world away, but there are others in our midst who act the same way, who say one thing and do another, who casually lie and cheat to further their business, who mistreat their employees, who jump from one relationship to another unworried about the wrecked lives they leave behind. Paul tells us that we should reach out to those who are in trouble, who are caught in sin, who are outside the church. But there's a difference between reaching out to them and offering them salvation and honoring them, allowing them to believe that their sin is acceptable before God. It is not OK to remain silent when God is dishonored in our midst. Each situation plays out differently, but we must keep this in mind as we make our daily choices and decisions as to whom we will choose to give our honor and respect.

Finally, the book of Esther shows us that *God is involved in human events even when His explicit action isn't apparent*. Of all the books in the OT, Esther is one of the most disputed. That's because the Greek translation of the text from around 150 BC contains 107 extra verses which add 50 references to God. These verses go to great pains to show God's hand and downplays Esther's role. But there's no doubt among scholars that what we read today translated from the shorter Hebrew version is the original. Apparently, somewhere along the line, a well-meaning rabbi decided that Esther needed more God.

But that's what's so stunning about the book of Esther. God is *behind* everything. God is the one who made Esther favorable to the harem master and Xerxes. God allowed Mordecai to overhear the plans of the men who intended to kill the king. God coordinated every last event so that His people would be rescued from their attackers and win great victories over those who were determined to slaughter them. He works through Mordecai and Esther, but God is the hidden hero. To miss God's invisible hand is to miss the point of the story in the first place. It's written in such a way as to be obvious to any faithful believer.

And so it should be with us. So many times we miss the point too. God often hides in the shadows, waiting to be recognized for His mighty deeds. When things are difficult, when a job gets outsourced or the kids just won't obey or there's tragedy in the family, we wonder where God is. God is there. God is in the midst of it. Before time began, He knew what was going to happen. He is already working to comfort you, to care for you, to love you, to wrap you up in His arms. If you believe in Him, if you are His child like Esther and Mordecai, He is working everything out for your eternal good and the good of all those who belong to Him.

We need to acknowledge that He is loyal to us even when we don't see Him. He is there. There are times in our prayer lives when we don't sense His presence; times in our Bible reading when we are more confused than enlightened; times when we come to church and the grand worship of God seems just like so much noise. But take heart...God is still there, and He will be for all time. Trust Him in the silence, and you will enjoy Him all the more when once again you hear His voice.

Esther's bravery in the midst of trial saved the Jewish race. She was born to stand up for her people. And you were born for a purpose too, for this time and place. God wants to use you for His glory, to honor Him and make His glory known even when He is hidden in the curtains of history. Let Him do so, and you will be an Esther too.