

# Heroes of History: Esther

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 24 September 2006

## Uncertain Future

Without question, it has been the most difficult and the most painful decision we've ever had to make – the decision to engage in further study and so conclude our pastoral ministry among you. For the sake of you, our church family, we felt that we needed to make a decision now, rather than in three or six months' time. So we've taken a kind of leap of faith. There are a number of matters that are still up in the air for us. Will I get a scholarship? How are we going to live? Will Lorraine go out and work? It would be fair to say the future is a little uncertain. I guess from time to time we all have moments when the future looks uncertain. When we're not sure what will happen next. That's what makes the story of Esther such an amazing one. Turn with me to the book of Esther. If it's been a while, and you can't remember, Esther is right after Ezra and Nehemiah (p.485). We're going to look at a number of texts as we walk through Esther's story. But first let me quickly set the scene. The story is set in Susa, the capital of Persia, around 470 BC. For over a century, the people of Israel have been living in exile far from the Promised Land, their future very uncertain. Let's read 1:1-12. And in his anger he divorces the Queen, passes a law that she must never again enter his presence.

## Act 1: The Beauty Queen

So in this opening scene the author wants us to understand the conditions under which the people of Israel live. This King Xerxes is a man of immense power – his kingdom extends from Asia Minor all the way down to Africa and parts of India (1:1). But while his power may be great, his character is not. The picture we get here is of a self-obsessed, indulgent, impulsive, irrational despot. A man under whose rule no one – not even the Queen – is safe. But now the king no longer has a queen. So in chapter 2, when he sobers up and his anger subsides, he asks his "personal attendants" (2:2) – literally his young bodyguards – "What shall I do?" Guess what these young, testosterone-charged men advise? Find a hot-looking women. Hold a Miss Medes and Persia Beauty Pageant, where every province in the empire contributes one beautiful young virgin to the royal harem. And the girl who "pleases the king" the most will become his wife, the ultimate trophy wife. Now one of the contestants is a young Jewish girl, an orphan, who was adopted and raised by her kind older cousin, Mordecai. We're told that she is "lovely in form and features" (2:7). So she makes it through the preliminary rounds, and finally ends up being selected to go before the king.

So she commences the preparation process. Now, to put this in context, try to imagine a time when you were going to go on a date with someone you were really interested in. For the women, how long did it take you to get ready – do your clothing, hair, and makeup? How many of you, at least one time, spent more than 15 minutes getting ready for the date? How many of you have spent more than one hour getting ready? How many of you have ever spent more time getting ready for the date than you actually spent on the date? How many of you ever had more fun getting ready for a date than you actually had on the date? Well look at the preparation time involved for Esther on her first date with the King. Verse 12: "she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments ... six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics." That's a lot of pressure for a first date. Esther does all this and v.17 says: "Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women." She's a woman of such remarkable beauty and charm that she wins. She becomes queen, a trophy wife – eye candy – for the most powerful man in the world. To celebrate, the king throws another banquet, another party (v.18). And he and Esther live happily ever after. Right? Not quite.

## Act 2: The Looming Crisis

In chapter 3 the story line takes an interesting twist. "After these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him higher than all of the other nobles." Agag was king of the Amalekites, a people known for their hatred of the Jews. Haman is an Amalekite, an enemy of the Jews. Verse 2: "All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai [Esther's guardian] would not kneel down or pay him honour." We don't know why. The text doesn't say. But what we do know is that Mordecai is a good man. He's been good to Esther. And he's been faithful to his king. He once saved the king's life by uncovering an assassination attempt. But this Haman is so obsessed with his own honour that the text says (v.5): "When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, 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, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes." So Haman goes to the King and in v.9 offers him a bribe of "ten thousand talents of silver" (v.9) – that's about 345 tonnes, as much silver as was collected from all the nations in the Persian empire – if the king will eliminate these people. Now in typical fashion, without even finding out who they are, the king impulsively says, "Do with these people as you please." So Haman does. He issues a decree that on an appointed day all the Jews in the empire are to be killed. God's chosen people are to be annihilated. God's dream of redemption is at risk. If ever the future looked uncertain, it's here.

### Act 3: Mordecai's Strategy

But turn over to chapter 4. "When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly." This looks like it's just an expression of sorrow. It's actually a political statement. Like someone waving a placard outside the Beehive, Mordecai is publicly expressing his displeasure with this edict. This is incredibly courageous. When Esther asks him what's the matter, he says to her, "You've got to go the king and plead for your people." But it turns out that Esther doesn't want to, for a very good reason. In v.11 she says, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that 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 sceptre to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." Think about that. They're married, and Esther hasn't seen her husband for a whole month. It's clear to her that the king is not as excited about her as he once was in the early days. So she has good reason to question how much influence she has with him.

Now lots of people would have given up at this point. But not Mordecai. He goes on to challenge Esther with these incredible words. Verse 13: "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..." (Mordecai obviously has faith that Someone is at work in this story, Someone who is not seen, whose name is not mentioned, but who holds the future in his hands. We'll come back to this.) "...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?*" In other words, Mordecai says, "Esther, you have not been brought here, to this point in your life, just to be eye candy for a king. You have not been brought to this point in your life so that you can be comfortable and wear a crown on your head. You have been brought to this point in your life for the sake of God's people, for the sake of God's dream to redeem this world. This is your moment, Esther. Others have gone before you. Others will come after you. But this is your moment. Right here. Right now. If you say miss this, you miss the whole reason God gifted you the way he has. Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

### Act 4: Esther's Appeal

So Mordecai helps Esther discern God's activity in her life, God's calling. So she sends word to Mordecai (v.16): "Let's fast and pray for three days." And then these extraordinary words. "When this is done, I will go the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." What an amazing woman. Xerxes has no idea the kind of woman he married. I read this last week a story about Mattel Corporation, the company that produces Barbie dolls and G.I. Joes. These dolls had little voice boxes in them. They could say something when you pulled the string. Someone in the factory slipped up, and the G.I. Joe voice box ended up in the Barbie dolls, and the Barbie voice box ended up in the G.I. Joes. So when they hit the shelves thousands of kids ended up horribly confused. They would pull G.I. Joe and he'd say, "Let's shop till we drop." And they'd pull Barbie's string, and she'd say, "Hit the ground hard, hard, hard!" Xerxes thought he was getting a Barbie doll. He ends up with G.I. Joe. Esther is willing to put everything on the line – her position, her status, her life – to do what she believes God is calling her to do.

Let's pause here and ask a couple of questions. What is your calling? How has God gifted you, called you, to serve his people here and now at this point in your life? Second question. Who is your Mordecai? Think how Esther's life would have turned out if she didn't have Mordecai? Who is Mordecai in your life? Who is the person who helps you identify God's calling? Who knows you and loves you enough to challenge you when you stray from that calling? And to whom can you be a Mordecai? A few weeks back there was an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. It was about a major study that says we are far more isolated today than we were just two decades ago. A sharply growing number of people say they have no one in whom they can confide, nobody to speak into their lives. No Mordecai. That's why being a committed member of a church family is so important. That's why regularly attending a home group is so important. You build relationships that get beneath the surface, the kind of relationships that don't happen by chance. You need a Mordecai. Esther had one, and it changed her life.

Look at what she does next. After fasting and praying for three days – we're in chapter 5 now – Esther puts on her royal robes. She goes and stands in the king's inner courts and waits for his response. Will it be life or death? Put yourself in Esther's place. Imagine what's going through her heart. When the king sees Queen Esther standing in the court, he is pleased with her and holds out to her the gold sceptre in his hand and says (v.5), "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you." Now you have to understand how king-talk worked in that day. This was code for, "I'm feeling kind of generous today. What can I do for you sweetheart? Would you like a cup of tea? Do you want to be in charge of the remote control tonight?" He's not offering half his kingdom. Esther can't just blurt out, "I'd like to have you revoke the unalterable law of the Medes and Persians and fire your Chief of Staff." So what she says instead is this: "I'm having a party tonight. Would you come, and bring Haman." At that party, the king again asks Esther, "Now what is your petition? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." And Esther replies (v.7): "My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favour and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfil my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question." Do you see what's

happening here? This young woman is outmanoeuvring the most powerful men in the kingdom. By getting the king to agree to come to a second banquet, Esther has tricked him into publicly committing himself in advance to grant her request. We've almost reached the climax of the story. But not quite.

## Act 5: The Jew's Triumph

The text says that Haman goes home from the party in high spirits, but when he sees Mordecai refusing again to bow down to him, he's filled with rage. His wife suggests to him that he have some gallows built 75 foot high and ask the King to have Mordecai hanged on them in the morning. Haman says, "Good idea," and has the gallows built. But, that same night – this is chapter 6:1 – it just so happens that the king could not sleep. So he asks his servants to read to him. They say, "What shall we read?" He says, "Read me the book of the chronicles." Guess what the book of the chronicles is about. It's about the king and his reign. He's saying, "Read that book about *me*. I like that book." So they start to read to him, and they happen to read a story about a Jew called Mordecai who once saved the king's life but was never honoured for it.

The very next day, the King and Haman go to Esther's second banquet. We're in chapter 7 now. Esther finally tells the story of how she and her people are about to be destroyed. The king, who you'll remember is hot-tempered and mercurial at the best of times, gets all fired up and roars, "Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther says, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." So, at the king's command, Haman ends up hanging from the gallows that he had built for Mordecai. And with Haman gone, the king needs a new Chief of Staff. So who does he pick? The man who saved his life: Mordecai. Then Esther again approaches the king, and explains how Haman's decree for the annihilation of the Jews still stands. So the king gives Mordecai authority to issue a counter-decree giving the Jews in every province of the empire the right to assemble and protect themselves. And the people of Israel are so feared, we're told in 8:17, that "many people of other nationalities became Jews" – committed themselves to the God of Israel. All because one man says, "Who knows but that you have come to this place for such a time as this?" and one woman says, "Alright, I'll go to the king, and if I perish, I perish."

If there's one message in this story that we need to hear it's this: You are where you are, and you have been given what you have been given, for a reason: to play a role in God's plan to redeem this world. Sometimes it might not seem like that. Sometimes it might feel like God is far away, and the future is very uncertain. You may be feeling like that right now. But if so, this story is for you. You realise this is the only book in the Old Testament that never mentions the word "God." I think the author did that for a reason, because that's so often the reality of our lives: the main character is not seen. But he's there, nonetheless, just off stage, directing the play, controlling the outcome. How is it that of all the women in the Persian empire it's a Jewish girl named Esther who becomes queen? How is it that of all the men in the empire, Mordecai is the one who saves the king from assassination? How is it that of all the nights on which the king could have insomnia, it's the very night that Haman builds the gallows for Mordecai? How is it that of all the stories the one read to him is of Mordecai saving the king's life? How is it that the scheming murderer Haman becomes the victim of his own schemes, swinging from his own gallows, and that Mordecai, his intended victim, ends up becoming his replacement? The writer wants us to know that even in exile – far from their homeland, far from their temple, in a dangerous and uncertain world – the people of Israel are not alone. God is with them. Just off-stage, but always at work, in unseen, unknown, unlikely ways. In mangers. In crosses. In offices. In neighbourhoods. In churches, just like ours. As he was once with Esther, he is now with us, with you. And he is in control. And he has you where you are for a reason. "Who knows but that you have been brought to this place for such a time as this?"

## Questions

1. Read Esther 3:12-14. For the people of Israel in exile under the rule of King Xerxes, life was very uncertain and their future looked very bleak. In what ways do you worry about the future?
2. Winston Churchill once said, "In every age there comes a time when a leader must come forward to meet the needs of the hour ... Tragically, there are times when a leader does not arise to the hour." Can you name a time when you took a risk for God? What happened?
3. Read again the incredible word spoken in Esther 4:12-16. In what ways might God be saying to you, "Who knows but that you have come to this place in your life for such a time as this?"
4. Esther realised that she stood at the crossroads of her people's destiny because Mordecai spoke into her life. Who is Mordecai in your life? If there's no one who knows you and loves you enough to speak into your life, what steps could you take to find people like this?
5. In 10:3 it says that Mordecai ends up the second most powerful man in the empire, "held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews." Are you as committed as you could be to your church family?
6. Esther discovered her calling. What is yours? Read Luke 4:1-13. What are the greatest threats to you fulfilling your calling?
7. Read Esther 1:19. In what ways do you see an unalterable law, a law or purpose "that cannot be repealed" at work in this story? What are the implications for you personally and for Milford Baptist Church over the coming months?

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