

## **Esther: Maximizing Ministry Potential**

Esther 1-10

Rev. Brian Bill

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A couple moving out of their apartment in Burbank, California were in the right place at the right time. Konrad and Jennifer Lightner were carrying boxes to their car when they noticed a toddler throwing toys out a third-floor window. By the time they came out with their mattress, they saw the boy throw his leg over the window sill and cling to a telephone wire, spurring a split-second decision by the Lightners to position their mattress below. Konrad commented, *“He started crying, and I knew he couldn’t make it back to the window, so I just started getting ready for him to let go. I kind of grabbed him and lowered him real fast to the mattress.”*

What’s amazing is that the Lightners weren’t supposed to be in the alley when the toddler fell. The only reason they “happened” to be there was because they had been delayed by a stuck elevator while moving the mattress. Jennifer added, *“God definitely had us in the right place at the right time.”*

We’re going to discover today that God puts each of us in the right place at the right time for His purposes. Grab your Bibles and turn or click to the Book of Esther. To locate Esther, simply find the Book of Psalms, which is the middle of the Bible, and go left two books.

The events of Esther take place after the exile when most of the Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra. Babylon has been defeated and Persia is the world power, with it’s empire of 127 provinces extending from northern Africa all the way to India.

The Book of Esther reminds us that God never forgets His people because He has made promises to them – the words *Jew, Jews* or *Jewish* are used 53 times! He is not just present in Jerusalem but in pagan palaces. Interestingly, God’s name is never used in the book but His fingerprints are everywhere. He may be invisible but He is never indifferent.

There are 5 primary characters in this literary masterpiece. Three of them are fairly positive models that we can follow and two of them are negative examples to avoid. Let’s start with the bad guys.

- *King Ahasuerus (Xerxes)*: Ruler of the world. Focused on money, sex and power.
- *Haman*: The villain. When this book is read by Jewish people, they often use noisemakers to drown out Haman's name every time they hear it. Let's try that today. Simply *hiss* when you hear his name. BTW, I gave out kazoos when I spoke on Esther in chapel at QCCS last year – that was a mistake.

There's also a pair of queens:

- *Queen Vashti*: Woman of conviction who refused to cooperate with her husband's drunken demands.
- *Queen Esther*: Exhibits both inner and outer beauty; goes through identity crisis.

And a good guy:

- *Mordecai*: Foster father of Esther; a man of integrity and faith.

Please follow along as I narrate the major events.

### **The Miss Persia Pageant**

In the opening scene King Ahasuerus throws the “mother of all parties” that lasts six months! This is like a 180-day pep rally in which he showed off his glory and splendor, much like we see Kim Jung-un doing in North Korea. Persian parties were known to have up to fifteen thousand guests. When this party was over, he hosted another one that lasted seven days.

On the last day of the party, the King commanded his gorgeous wife to come out and parade in front of all his drunken men. She told him to take a hike because she didn't want to be gawked at by a bunch of crude men. The king was angry and embarrassed so he ordered her banished from the kingdom and we don't hear from Queen Vashti again.

A couple years later, the King decides it's time to find another Queen. His attendants tell him to hold a Miss Persia Pageant in chapter 2. I've never watched the Bachelor TV show and don't plan to, but it probably had a vibe like that. Mordecai, who heard about the upcoming contest, told Esther all about it. When

the king saw her, he ended the pageant immediately, gave Esther a rose and took her as his wife. I should add that no one knew she was Jewish. It's at this point that we begin to see the invisible finger of God at work behind the scenes.

One day when Mordecai was sitting outside the king's gate, he overheard two disgruntled employees talk about assassinating the king. Mordecai alerted Esther and she warned her husband. The King had the two conspirators killed. This incident was recorded in the official royal records but Mordecai was not rewarded. Keep this detail in mind because it will come up again.

### **Haman's Arrogance**

Fearing for his life, the King instituted a massive shakeup in his government and promoted a power-hungry politician named Haman to be his right hand man in chapter 3. Haman is a slimy character and is known as an Agagite. As we trace his family tree through the pages of Scripture we discover that an Agagite is an Amelikite. The Amelikites were descendents of Esau and were enemies of God's people (see Exodus 17:16).

Historically, King Saul was ordered by God to completely destroy the Amelikites in 1 Samuel 15, but he disobeyed. Because he let King Agag live, Saul lost his kingdom. Now, thousands of miles away and 700 years later, Saul's sin is still causing problems for God's people. This is a reminder that we must deal decisively with sin in our life, or it will keep tripping us up, even affecting generations to come.

Haman was a prideful person who demanded that everyone literally bow before him. And everyone did - except Mordecai as seen in 3:2: ***“But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.”***

Mordecai's refusal to revere really got under the skin of Haman. Verse 5 tells us that he was ***“filled with fury.”*** Knowing a bit about Haman's heritage helps us understand why he hated Mordecai so much. Interestingly, Mordecai's lineage is traced to King Saul. When Haman found out that Mordecai was a Jew, he looked for a way to destroy all the Jews in the empire. Haman's anti-Semitic feelings dominate him as he puts together a plan for an ancient holocaust.

Haman bribed the king in order to get him to issue a decree to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews on a set day in the spring. This amount of silver weighed over 300 tons! He was basically funding the extermination of the Jewish race from

the face of the earth. This day of slaughter was determined by the rolling of dice, which in Hebrew is *pur*. This provides the background for the Feast of Purim, which is still celebrated today.

When Mordecai hears about this, he stops eating and begins to weep and wail loudly. 4:1 says that he ***“cried out with a loud and bitter cry.”*** Queen Esther hears about her foster father’s mourning and sends Athach (the father of *Aflac*, JK) to get more information.

### **Esther’s Courage**

Mordecai pleads with Esther to use her position to protect the Jews in 4:8: ***“Command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people.”*** Esther’s initial response shows her fear because no one knew she was Jewish. It had been about 30 days since they had spoken and the law stated that you had to be summoned by the King.

When Mordecai hears Esther’s hesitancy, he turns up the heat and makes a very convincing closing argument in 4:13-14: ***“Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”***

This passage is the pivot point in the book. Pastor David Strain suggests mentions three parts to Mordecai’s message.

**1. Uncomfortable choice.** *Don’t think you’ll escape the holocaust when it happens.* You’ll be wiped out just like everyone else when it becomes clear that you are one of God’s chosen people. It’s time for you to choose to live out your identity. You’ve been living a double life far too long. It’s impossible to serve two masters.

**2. Unshakable hope.** *If you don’t do something, God will send someone else.* God can just as easily use another person to accomplish His purposes. God will accomplish all He intends, regardless of our involvement. Esther is important but she’s not indispensable.

**3. Unavoidable duty.** *God has positioned you exactly where He wants you for His purposes.* Esther, this is your purpose in life! This is what God has made you to do!

Esther's faith and courage then begin to kick in. She instructs all the Jews in Susa to spend three days fasting. By calling people to fast, she acknowledges that she needs the help only God can provide.

After she replenishes her spiritual tank, she tells Mordecai that she will go into the king. She decides to risk her life and says courageously in 4:16, ***“If I perish, I perish.”*** Like an ancient Oskar Schindler, she is willing to take a stand and put her life on the line in order to benefit others.

You can almost hear Esther's heart pounding as she walks down the long corridor to the king's chamber. When the King sees Esther he smiles and says, ***“What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.”***

Esther told the King that she would like him to bring Haman to a special banquet that she had prepared. She knows the way to a man's heart is through his stomach! After dessert is served, the King once again asks Esther what she wants. You can feel the suspense building as she tells him to bring Haman to another feast the next day and then she'll tell him.

Haman is now feeling pretty haughty and euphoric because he is the only one invited to eat with the king and queen two days in a row! 5:9 says that he ***“went out that day joyful and glad of heart.”*** But, as he was leaving he spotted his nemesis Mordecai at the front gate. Maybe now Mordecai would give him the honor he deserved. But Mordecai didn't even acknowledge him when he walked by. He was filled with rage but controlled himself because he knew that Mordecai and his people would soon be eradicated by the king's edict.

When Haman got home he called all his friends together and told them about his rise to the top. About half way through his self-promotion party, he cleared his throat and said in 5:12-13, ***“Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.”***

His wife and his friends come up with a great idea. They encourage Haman to erect some scaffolding 75 feet high and ask the King to hang Mordecai from it. Haman is thrilled and has some workers construct it right away. He could hardly sleep that night knowing that in the morning he would finally be rid of Mordecai the Jew.

But here's where the plot thickens. There's one other person who can't sleep that night. The King ate too much at the Queen's banquet and was up getting some Roloids. This is actually a case of Almighty-induced insomnia or holy heartburn. Did you hear they made a movie about it? It's called *Sleepless in Susa!*

Because he was restless, he asked one of his servants to read from the official records. This would surely put him to sleep! As he started to doze off, he sat up when he heard about what Mordecai had done several months earlier to save his life and was embarrassed that he had forgotten to do anything special for him. This is another example of God's providence because the librarian had 12 years worth of records to read from and he "*just happened to*" pick the one about Mordecai!

At that precise moment, Horrible Haman "*just happened*" to arrive at the court so that he could be first in line to talk to the King about hanging Mordecai. The King decides to ask Haman a simple question, "***What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?***" Haman was certain the King was talking about him so he stuck his chest out and said in 6:8-9, "***Let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city...***"

The King liked that idea and then told Haman to do as he suggested for *Mordecai the Jew!* Haman had to honor the one he hated! BTW, this is the first of five times that Mordecai is called, "***the Jew.***" He obeyed the king but probably didn't have a very good attitude about it. His only comfort was knowing that all the Jews would be killed shortly. When Haman went home for lunch he was probably singing, "*I'm having a bad, bad day. It's about time that I get my way. Steam rolling whatever I see, huh...despicable me.*"

That night he showed up for Queen Esther's banquet. While he once desired her delicacies, my guess is that he now dreaded what might happen. Once again the King asked Esther what she wanted and this time she was ready in 7:3-4: "***If I***

*have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.”*

Notice how she identifies herself as a Jew when she says, “***my people...we have been sold, I and my people...***” The King didn’t understand until now that his queen was one of God’s covenant people and that he had unknowingly signed her own death warrant! He then asked in verse 5, “***Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?***” Esther calmly replied, “***A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!***”

A look of horror falls on Haman’s face as he fell out of his chair. The king flew into a rage and went out for some fresh air to clear his thoughts. Haman then begged Esther for his life but just as the King came back he “*just so happened*” to see Haman leaning on the Queen. Persian protocol forbade anyone from coming within seven paces of the queen and now Haman is trying to hit on his wife! The King exclaimed in 7:8, “***Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?***”

Haman was then led out of the palace and experienced some poetic justice when he was hung on the death machine he had constructed for Mordecai! The word “***gallows***” actually refers to impaling. The King then supplied weapons and soldiers so the Jews could defend themselves. Because of Esther’s stand, her people are now saved!

### **Lessons to Learn**

There are some more scenes that take place in the story but let’s focus on some of the lessons we can learn as we look at the main characters.

**1. Vashti: Take a Moral Stand.** Queen Vashti knew that her morals would have been compromised had she walked into that room full of drunken men. She would not cross the line because she valued her dignity.

Let me also say that she did not tolerate being abused by her husband. Real men do not objectify or abuse women. If you’re in an abusive relationship, can I encourage you to get some help?

Do you need to take a moral stand in your relationships? Is someone trying to get you to compromise your sexual morals? Hold your ground. If you’ve already

crossed the line, ask God for forgiveness and make a fresh commitment to have some moral courage. It's never too late.

It was Edmund Burke who said, *"All that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."* One way we can take a moral stand is to stand up for life by supporting the Walk for Life on Saturday, September 9<sup>th</sup>! Last year Edgewood had the most people there and I'm hoping for even more this year – you can do it in Moline or Bettendorf. This is a practical way for us to catch babies as they are plunging to their death. I see Pregnancy Resources like a mattress that provides a safe landing.

Let me add that taking a moral stand is not easy. In fact, it's often controversial and unpopular. Sometimes there are unpleasant consequences. Though Queen Vashti did the right thing, she lost her position of royalty and was banished from the kingdom. You may take a moral stand and say "no" to sex outside of marriage and be made fun of. Or, you may even be dumped for someone else. Is this easy? No, it requires some courage. Is it worth it? You bet it is. It's much better to be virtuous like Vashti than to be sensual like Samson.

**2. Mordecai: Take a Spiritual Stand.** Mordecai was unwilling to worship anything, or anyone other than God. Are you man enough or woman enough to take a spiritual stand today? Do you have enough courage to believe that Jesus died for your sins and that He rose again? Do you have enough courage to stand up and be counted as a Christ-follower? Do people around you even know that you're a Christian? Have you been hiding your holy heritage? Let's be like Mordecai and speak up for what we believe. If you're a born again believer and have not been baptized yet, take the plunge as soon as possible.

One other thing we can learn from Mordecai is that we must stand against anti-semitism and racism of any kind. We must be a people of unity who embrace all races. I like what Ed Stetzer said recently, *"If you don't like other races here, you're really going to hate heaven!"*

**3. Esther: Take a Positional Stand.** When the book opens, Esther is passive, but then she becomes proactive, realizing that God had put her in a position to make a difference. She demonstrated extreme courage by doing something that could have caused her own death. Don't ever think that you are insignificant. God has put you where you are to make a difference.

Esther eventually realized that she was on the same team with all the other Jews in the kingdom. I don't know if you saw what the Chick-fil-A on John Deere Road put on their sign after Popeyes Chicken opened just a block away. It was so classy. This is what it said: *"Welcome to the Coop, Popeyes!"* Instead of seeing them as competition, they realized that they're both selling chicken. We need to remember that we're on the same team with other believers. I had lunch with a pastor friend who is planting a church in west Rock Island and I welcomed him to the coop! I stopped by Thursday night to check out the Awana leaders conference that we hosted here. Sheila Kuriscak ran point and led one of the training sessions. There were Awana servants from nine other churches in the QCA. One guy from another church came up to me and said that he prays for me a couple times a week. How cool is that? Someone who doesn't attend here is praying for pastors in the QCA! We are not in competition because we're on the same team, right? We cooperate in kingdom coop work.

And part of kingdom coop work is to recognize that God has put you in your family for a specific reason. He has placed you in your neighborhood to be salt and light. He has enrolled you in the school you're in to influence lives. You have your job so that you can communicate Christ to your co-workers. God has placed you exactly where you are for a reason. Esther had to settle her identity and recognize that God wanted to use her position for His purposes to help His people.

*Who we are and where we are carries a heavy responsibility. Each of us has a God-given niche only we can fill. He created you on purpose for a purpose. You are a missionary called to live on mission. See yourself as a missionary cleverly disguised as a waitress or disguised as an engineer or disguised as business owner or disguised as someone who works at Deere. If you go to school, you are a missionary cleverly disguised as a student. I wonder if we miss opportunities simply because we're whining about our work, or complaining about our classmates, or knocking our neighbors.*

God has placed Edgewood where we are, not simply for our own benefit but for the benefit of others. Some time ago the staff team did a prayer walk in the neighborhood. I walked down to Augustana and prayed for the campus. I was burdened that we didn't have an outreach there since we are only one mile away. We've made some attempts but nothing seemed to be working until Pastor Dan made a connection with Meagan Gottcent, a staff member with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. This past year, Pastor Kyle met with Meagan a few times. Just two weeks ago, the deacons approved adding Meagan as our newest Go Team partner.

This past Tuesday the pastoral team did a 90-minute prayer walk on the Augie campus and that night around 40 students attended the InterVarsity worship time! That's double the number who attended last year! We're praying that many of them will attend *Mainspring* Sunday night. 10 small group Bible studies are kicking off this week.

**4. God: Recognize His Sovereignty.** Someone has said that a "coincidence" is *simply a time where God has chosen to act anonymously*. He may be invisible, but He's invincible. His will, will be done.

Let's go on a "God-hunt" every day, looking for evidence of His leading. Expect to see Him in the ordinary and you will be overwhelmed by how many times you find Him. God is always at work as He shifts, directs and guides everything for His glory and our good! And He has always preserved His people Israel, and He will continue to do so. Even when He is most hidden He is still present and working to protect and deliver His chosen people.

Life is filled with appointments, not accidents. When we are unfaithful, God remains faithful to His Word and to His covenant promises.

One clear teaching of this book is the absolute sovereignty of God *and* the absolute responsibility of human beings. God is resplendent *and* we must respond. He is in charge *and* we are charged with the call to repent and receive Him. He is sovereign *and* we must be saved. And His ultimate purpose is to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ, using difficult and delightful circumstances to accomplish that goal.

Jesus died on the gallows for you...will you follow Him today?

*God places His people in particular places at particular times to accomplish His particular plans.*

I'm going to ask you to stand if you're willing to maximize your ministry potential.

- Please stand right now if you've been moved to make a moral stand.
- Please stand if you're ready to stand spiritually for the Savior.
- Please stand if you'll commit to use your position as a platform for kingdom impact.

**Closing Song: “God is Able”**

**New Members**

8:00 am - Bruce and Janelle Daasch

10:45 am – Sarah Harris

**Closing Charge** – As you leave today, you’re carrying a mattress. You will find yourself this week in the right place at the right time to accomplish His purposes. Where does God want to use you to cushion someone’s fall?