

Esther: #2 “A Lucky Day” – Esther 3 & 4

Dr. Matt Cassidy – 4/22/2012

Do you want to hear a story of villains and heroes, valor and fear, jesters and queens, crowns and scepters? It is a great story, the book of Esther.

It is one of the most notorious stories in the Old Testament for many different reasons. It tells a lot about our lives but more importantly the reason we are studying it is that it tells a lot about God, and the way that God works in lives like ours – in this day and age. Esther is a fascinating book that is still often quoted today by Jewish people when they are feeling like their very lives are being threatened.

Review

In review, we looked at the first two chapters of Esther last week. Starting off, we introduced three characters.

One of the main characters is a little girl named Esther. If you could picture her being about five years old, standing in front of two fresh graves, of her mother and father. She is an innocent little orphan. She is holding the hand of her cousin, an older man, Mordecai, who is a very shrewd Jewish person. They are Jews from Israel but they are living in Persia because their ancestors had rejected God and they were exported to Persia as a form of punishment. While living there, Mordecai is raising his cousin Esther. It is as though she is his only child. They are spending all of their time together, never missing Sabbath school together, his teaching her the ways of life.

Then suddenly out of no where, one day, guards from the palace come rummaging through every single house, every barn, every closet, looking for young, beautiful virgins. Esther is now maybe 15 – 17 years old and she qualifies for that. The palace guards grab Esther, tearing her away from the arms of her cousin Mordecai. Mordecai is asking: *Why is this happening?* The guard says: *Because Queen Vashti made King Xerxes mad – and you never make him mad. Now he is looking for a wife, a new queen who will do what she is told.* Mordecai pleads with the guard: *Look, before you take her, let me say two things to her.* He confidentially takes Esther to the side and says: *There are two rules. One, never tell them that you are Jewish. Two, never make the king mad.*

So Esther is whisked off to the palace, where there are 100s or maybe a 1000 different girls, all beautiful, all young, all virgins. They are initiated by the head of the eunuchs who tells them: *You will spend twelve months preparing for one night. We will teach you the etiquette and rules for dealing with this King Xerxes* [this mad king, who is nothing more than a boy with a temper, whose is uncontrollable and unpredictable.] You will have one night with him and in that one night, he will either like you or hate

you, or he might even forget you. But if he remembers your name, he might call you back. If he calls you back, he might even make you his queen. If he doesn't, no one will ever see you again. You will be put off in a separate dormitory and you will never be seen or heard of from that day forward.

Oddly enough, as a stroke of luck for Esther, this head eunuch, Hegai, likes her a lot, and because of that, he arranges his best people to prepare Esther for that one night. She presents herself to the king and – you are not going to believe it – she wins. You have to use those terms lightly. But she becomes the queen, Queen Esther. But this is no Cinderella story because King Xerxes is no Prince Charming.

This book is known for banquets; it is all about banquets. Banquets are actually the key to the whole ministry. While they are having the banquet for Queen Esther, where they are celebrating, her cousin Mordecai is able to get in to her a couple of messages through the eunuchs: Send this to the queen. Two rules: Don't tell them you are Jewish. And, never make him mad.

While all that is going on, Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate of the palace in Susa, and suddenly he overhears a couple of people conspiring to kill the king, the king who had his daughter taken away from him. Mordecai decides to turn in this information by secret message to Esther. Esther tells King Xerxes and the king finds out that the plot is in fact true, that these men were going to try to take his life. So, what does the king do to these traitors? He makes an example out of them and has them impaled on poles that sit out in the hot Middle Eastern sun. These two men's corpses rot in front of everyone. – Don't make King Xerxes mad. Don't plot against him. Let everyone know this. There is a very short trial period for those who conspire against the king.

That is how the book of Esther ends in chapter two, with Mordecai informing the king and the king finding these men out, and the men being impaled on these poles. Mordecai, by the way, does not get any thanks for that. The chapter just suddenly drops off.

Then we have a new character. There are four major characters and we have introduced Esther, Mordecai, and Xerxes, the crazy king. But the fourth person we will introduce, you have to appreciate the bigger picture because sometimes it take a 1000 years to write a really great story.

One thousand years before Esther was in Susa, Israel was being birthed out of Egypt. In Exodus 12, the Jews are coming out of Egypt, and it is the first time God will call them – my child, my son. Coming out of Egypt, they are extremely vulnerable because they are like newborns. This one tribe of nomads, the Amalekites, seizes them in their vulnerability. The Jews have spent something like 400 years making bricks and so they are not ready for combat. Maybe the Jews could throw bricks in combat; that is all they could do. The Amalekites try to extinguish God's people on the day of their birth as a nation, practically. That is how the relationship starts between the Jews and the Amalekites.

Now you move forward 500 years and we are now in the United Kingdom Period. The first king who has ever ruled Israel is Saul, who is from the tribe of Benjamin (one of the twelve tribes of Israel). One of the first orders Saul ever receives from God as the first king is: We have got to deal with these Amalekites because every vulnerable moment we have, they try to kill all of us. They are the jackals of human kind. They prey on the weak.

The king of the Amalekites at that time was Agag – remember that name. When we introduce the next character of our story, which is extremely important, we need to remember first of all in Esther 2:5 that Mordecai is a Benjamite (from the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that Saul is from). But this new person being introduced is Haman and he is an Agagite. What that means is that he is a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites. This is the third round of a thousand-year grudge match between Israel and the Amalekites.

Esther 3

When we pick up the story in Chapter 3, that is where it starts with this introduction of the new person who is evil.

Esther 3:1 After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman ...

Four times it will read that Xerxes honors Haman.

... son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai (the Benjamite) would not kneel down or pay him honor.

Let me just say, if you thought the villain in this story was Xerxes because he is crazy and evil – and you would assume that - this Haman is worse than Xerxes. It has gone from bad to worse because Haman is literally bred for evil. He is predetermined to want to kill every single Jew that exists in Persia. According to these verses, Haman has the king's ear. If Haman gets the king's signet ring, Haman will try to kill everyone who is a Jew.

:4 Day after day the royal officials spoke to Mordecai but he refused to comply.

Everyone there was commanded to kneel down and bow their heads. Mordecai, being a Benjamite, would have nothing to do with it.

Now you might think it is easy to visualize that. But I would like Chris to stand up, as the house lights go up. When you see someone doing that [standing up, with folded arms across his chest], you don't see the 500 – 600 people seating down around him. You see one person standing up. Thanks, Christ.

That is what Haman saw, day after day. Haman did not see the whole city fall to their knees; he saw one man, fold his arms and look up. It drove Haman crazy – this Benjamite, this Jew.

In verse 5, we find out what happens:

Esther 3:5 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, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

Haman would not be satisfied with killing a single man; he wants to kill every single Jew because he is an Agagite and that is what he does.

Haman needs to pick a date because he is superstitious which is common for that day. So on the first month of the year, he had the soothsayers roll the dice because he wants to cast the lots. A lot [literally like shaking dice] is cast to determine what day would be the best day, according to the planets, to kill all the Jews. Haman learns the best date is the last month of the year, the 13th day.

Now, Haman goes to the king to get permission. Haman says to Xerxes: There is a group of people that do not honor our customs and they show contempt because of that (verses 8-9). I will pay you 300 tons of silver if you let me take this into my own hands.

Xerxes doesn't care so much about the silver and so he says this:

3:10 So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."

:12 Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned.

..... :13 Dispatches 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 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

Do you know what Jews do on the 13th day of the first month?

What do you do on July 3? You get ready to celebrate Independence Day, don't you? You are trying to find the last package of hot dogs at HEB. If you have little kids, you are decorating their wagons, tricycles, and bicycles, and you are trying to find a parade to go to. You are filling up on all those festive activities because this is the day around here, especially if we are patriotic, we celebrate how God set us free.

On the 13th day of the 1st month on the Jewish calendar, that is the day before Passover. So all the Jews are preparing for their most festive meal, the Passover meal, getting the lambs ready, and the

unleavened bread. They are doing all the things that excite them. --- That is when all these couriers are coming into every single village and hammering on the posts, yelling: *Hear ye, hear ye! You have eleven month to live. There will be an order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews - young and old, women and little children – everyone will die. You have eleven months to prepare.*

All the non-Jews were doing inventory of the Jewish homes and people, of who was going to get killed and who was going to acquire what.

While all of this is happening, while we are going from this extreme high of the Eve of Passover to now this death sentence, all the Jews are in absolute disarray. Then the next verse says this:

:15b The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

That is a bit of an under statement, isn't it? We are supposed to hate this Haman. I have to tell you, if any verse will get you to do that, it is this one. Haman is having cocktails with the king on the porch that overlooks Susa while all the Jews are in a panic.

This is a great story. That is how chapter 3 ends. Is that great? The king and Haman were sitting down for a drink. It is so suspenseful and it is so true to life.

The prime minister of Israel gave a gift to our President Obama last month, actually about three weeks ago. Do you know what it was? It was the book of Esther because Israel is feeling the threat of extreme annihilation to kill, destroy, and annihilate everyone, young and old, women and children, because the Iranians are working on a nuclear missile. *Benjamin Netanyahu* – it is getting weird now – Benjamin Netanyahu gives our President the book of Esther to read so that he might learn something.

I am just telling you that this is a great story that is still being told. Sometimes it takes 4000 years for a great story to be told.

Esther 4

The Jews do what Jews do when they are in mourning and grieving and calling upon God. They tear their clothes and they cover themselves in burlap and throw ashes upon themselves or dirt – sackcloth and ashes it is called. They are moaning and groaning and crying out to God. They can't even eat.

Mordecai is doing this too. Because of that, it gets back to Queen Esther that Mordecai is outside the king's gate doing this. She needs to find out why. Here is the thing. She is so isolated from the world that she is living quite literally in an ivory tower. She has no idea what is happening to her people; and no one knows that she is a Jew.

She is going through these eunuchs because she can't talk to Mordecai. Mordecai sends word to Esther, saying: *Here is a copy of the decree declaring our death sentence. Here is what you need to do. You need to go to the king and plead for your people – for mercy for your people.*

4:10 Then she instructed him [the eunuch] to say to Mordecai, “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:

The law is that it makes him mad.

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.”

Esther is saying: When I was taken from my home, you, Mordecai, told me two things. You told me (1) don't tell anyone that you are Jew. (2) Don't make the king mad.

I was made the queen and you told me two things: (1) don't tell him that you are a Jew and (2) don't make him mad. Now, you are coming to me and telling me to: (1) Tell the king you are a Jew, and (2) make him mad.

So Mordecai does something very strange. We have romanticized this passage. If you have memorized any verses in this book, you have memorized one of the last verses that we will look at. But you are missing the bigger context of it because Mordecai sends this word back to Esther.

There are three truths that motivate people to change.

The first one is: You will not survive.

4:12 When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape.

Really. No one knows that I am a Jew.

Mordecai says: Yet.

The second truth is: It will happen anyway.

4:14 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.

Do you see what Mordecai is saying – the father-figure, the one who raised Esther since she was maybe five years old? He is giving her no choice in this. He is telling her: Look, I am going to make this very difficult for you – or God will. But you are stuck right now between a rock and a hard place. You being safe behind the walls as the queen is over.

This is what is called *tough love*. It is not Hallmark card love. It is not the love spelled *wuv* love. This is the real thing.

Mordecai is saying: It is time to change who you are for something bigger than you are. He is making Esther do it. She has some freedom but he is taking away a lot of her options. He is saying: Your country is more important than you. He is saying: I love you so much, I can't leave you where you are in your safety. --- That is good parenting.

The third truth is the one we like so much: There is so much more to this.

4:14c And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

This is a defining moment in her life. In a nutshell, it goes like this:

You don't have much choice and there are so much bigger things going on here. Do you just think you are lucky that you survived when you parents died? Do you think it was just luck that got you favor in the eyes of Hegai the eunuch? Do you think it was luck that caused you to be picked to be queen? Are you kidding? There is so much more going on here than you in your palace. And you are not making it out of here alive.

So, here is what happens when people are often caught between a rock and a hard place and they realize they are just part of a bigger story and the story is not about them. They become something; they are transformed into something – something new.

Look at verses 15 – 17. Here is Esther's response to Mordecai and his threats.

4:15-16 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.

:17 So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

This is a pretty big transformation. I want you to understand that in Chapters 1 – 3, every descriptive word of Esther is passive. She obeys well. She does what she is told. She is a nice little girl. She is obedient. She is a little bit of a milque toast. Now she is caught between a rock and a hard place, then sees that she is part of a bigger plan. She realizes there is maybe something else going on in the universe that made her queen. Her father-figure says: *You better step up or die*. Now, all the words are hers, telling other people what to do.

In literature, and you probably learned this in eighth grade and then had to re-learn it in eleventh grade literature class, just because someone is mentioned a lot in a story, that does not mean they are the lead character. The lead character in the story is the person who changes the most.

Mordecai will not change; he is the same throughout. Haman is always going to be evil. Xerxes is a crazy drunk.

But Esther goes from milque toast innocent orphan to a conquering, courageous queen. That is what this part of the story is about.

One commentator [Ryken] says this about Esther:

“... initially a beautiful young woman with a weak character, becomes transformed into a person with heroic moral stature and political skill.”

Mordecai does what he is told. Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.

Keep reading this book. That is the way it goes. Esther is a changed woman.

What Does It Take to Change?

What does it take to change? What if we are all Esther’s in the waiting?

What does it take to change you?

Generally speaking, this is a story about how God works. A lot of times the way God works – and I would say, most of the time – is that God enrolls us in a school that is located right between a rock and a hard place. He takes away a lot of our choices because we will generally choose to stay, sometimes regardless of how uncomfortable it is. Then He tries to get us to see the bigger picture of how we might fit in.

God has a plan and He has the power to pull it off. He wants us to be part of that plan. Most of us would rather be comfortable. God wants us to be transformed from someone who is addicted to comfort and being left alone, to being courageous and part of His plan. So, we are put into this formula where present pain is greater than future fear. That is what He has to do. He has to put us into a situation where present pain is getting greater and greater than what we fear in the future.

A lot of times, He is working with us and then He has to work with all the people around us – because a lot of people around us have the Hallmark view of love and what it means to be a Christian. So every time God gets you to that place – between the rock and the hard place – some Christian swoops in and writes a check and gets you out of there. Or, the Christian comes in and does something and says “there, there”. Your husband or wife can be your worst enemy because they enable you to continue to not make the choice, the choice that could cause you a re-birth.

The whole metaphor of birth is your mother saying: *You can’t stay here any longer. I know it is comfortable and I am carrying you around and doing all the work. It is warm and cozy but you need to see the light of day and there is going to be a lot of pain between this life and the next life.*

If you have never been born again, you don't understand this because born again is that same experience where this is not working any more. Whatever you fear, God is bigger than that. Whatever you cannot do, God can do through you. Whatever it is that is causing all the suffering for you and all those people around you, God is able to get you to the other side of that.

If you think being born again in salvation is a once and done experience, you are wrong. Around here, we talk a lot about being born again-again because you still have that temper. You still have those addictions or whatever it is – that stupid stuff. So listen, God's modus operandi, the way He works things is to arrange for you to have a terrible time at work or school or home or wherever and He is trying to get you to move. He does that because He loves you. He does not want to leave you alone as an innocent little orphan. He wants you to be a conquering queen.

The other thing He does is that He gives you a bigger purpose in life. He wants you to see that you are part of the kingdom of God. God has a plan and He has the power to pull it off. If you are not part of that, one way that He puts you between a rock and a hard place is through boredom. You have been everywhere and you have done everything and you said this: *Is this all?* – Well yeah, if it is all about you – this is all. Your vacations and your extravagant dinner parties and even grandchildren – Is this all? Yeah, this is all. There has got to be more. Great, I'm glad you asked. Maybe you are supposed to be doing something for God's kingdom and not for yours.

Answer this question in your small groups. You can only mention one and it has to be brief. How many times have you almost died? Think about the details of that. If you don't know them, ask your parents. They were there during many of them, I will bet. Okay, so why are you alive then? Esther, how did you get to be queen? Wherever you are, how did you get here, now? Why are you still alive? It is not for you; it is for God's people, for God's purpose. When you understand that, then the suffering plus the purpose can cause you a new understanding of the purpose of life – and can cause you to be courageous beyond your craziest imagination. That is what is happening in the book of Esther. That is what is supposed to be happening in our lives as well.

God is not out to make us comfortable. That is not His purpose. He is out to make us part of His plan. His kingdom will come and His will will be done, with or without you. What He wants you to do is to join His kingdom and join His plan and do your best because you will be glad you did.

That is the story of Esther's life. That is the story of our lives. It could be the story of your life.

Here is what I am asking us to think about today. If you are in between a rock and a hard place, could you consider today that maybe you are there because God is trying to get you to become someone else? That is part one.

Part two, if someone you dearly love is between a rock and a hard place, could you look at it from this perspective of Mordecai's. Instead of rushing in under the guise of Christian compassion, find maybe a deeper understanding of love and say: *May I should leave them there. I won't write a check. I won't say the things they want to hear. I will say the things that are true.*

Maybe you could be the person who says: *I have to enforce consequences because you will not leave this womb. It is killing you and the mother; get out.*

Two points of view: If you are the one between the rock and the hard place, or two, if you are watching someone else go through it, could you just hold their hand and watch? You could tell them maybe there is something bigger they can be part of. That is our assignment.

You need to read Chapters 3 and 4.

What happens when Esther meets the king, you will have to see that next week. It is a good story.

Lord,

I ask that your Spirit would help us right now see where we are in your eyes. Maybe our disinterest at work or in life is not just a phase but actually a conspiracy of You trying to make us into someone we are not. And we are putting up a terrible fight. God, I ask that your Spirit would help us understand that the suffering we might be enduring right this very minute has a purpose. Lord, I ask that You help us to see that we are part of a big plan. We are custom-created by You, and we have been allowed to live this long because You have spared us. We have a part to play in the kingdom of God. Lord, help us see that big point of view. Help us to love each other deeply, truthfully, even with tough love. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen