

“Our Family Tree: Esther”

Dear Friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

There's nothing like a good story to catch your attention; nothing like a little drama (and deceit) to keep things alive. You know the kind, the stories filled with power and passion, a little bit of romance, intrigue, the more attractive (and compelling) it becomes.

It's the kind of stuff you find on the afternoons soaps, as well as, these days, in some of the primetime television series and some of the so-called “reality shows” that have become quite the craze.

When I was growing up, it was series like *Days of Our Lives*, *General Hospital*, *As the World Turns*. Today, it's shows like *Jersey Shore*, *Real Housewives*, *the Kardashians*. (Whoever they are?) I'll do us (all a favor) and not ask for an answer.

Today we're in the next to the last week of our Family Tree sermon series. We've been reading (for the past several weeks) the stories of some of our Old Testament ancestors, zeroing in on what happened in their lives and what we can learn (from them) for ours.

Next week it's (our last week), the story of Nehemiah; a man who was called to rebuild that which had been torn down and destroyed; an appropriate way to close things out. Today's it's the story of a woman by the name of Esther, one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman, the other one being our Old Testament relative Ruth.

It's also a book that could have (easily) been turned into a television series, an afternoon soap. The story of Esther has all the parts: drama and deceit, passion and power, enough romance and intrigue to keep your attention throughout.

Esther's story is a fascinating story. It's a story about Esther and her life, what she was doing, how she was used. But, more importantly, it's a story about God and what he was doing (and how he was using) what was happening in life for his purposes. We'll say more about that in a moment.

Esther is also one of those stories that if you don't know the whole story, it's hard to follow. Now, we don't have time for the whole story. We read three sections from it in our readings. There's a lot more going on than what we read.

Let me give you the big picture version, a summary of what it's all about. From there, we can dig (a bit more) into the detail as we go. If you look up at the screen (for a moment), you'll see there's actually a rather simple framework to the story.

In chapters 1 & 2, Esther becomes Queen. (That was our first reading.) Now, there's more going on than what we read. If you read those chapters, the king, King Xerxes 1, had his first wife, Queen Vashti, deposed. Bottom line, she had not done what he asked and he had her sent away.

What happens is, he starts looking for another wife, a new queen, and that's where (and how) Esther comes into play. Esther is chosen as King Xerxes new wife, and (from that point on) becomes queen. What's important to note (in the story), as it begins, is that Xerxes was king over Persia, and that Esther (unbeknownst to the king) when she was chosen, was a Jew. And so, (in the story), a Jewish woman becomes the Queen of Persia.

In chapters 3 & 4, the plot thickens. There's a plan to destroy the Jews. Their very existence (as a nation) is threatened. A man by the name of Haman, second in command only to the king, plots to put them all to death.

Now, there's quite a back-story to Haman's plan. The history between the Jews and (this particular family) goes way back, and it's not pretty. There's a grudge that goes deep, and so he plots to do away with the nation. And he does it (at least in the text) because (another man) by the name of Mordecai, himself a Jew, who just happens to be the older cousin of the now-Queen Esther, (you couldn't make this stuff up), refuses to bow down and worship when Haman passes by. As a result, he plots to have all the Jews killed and convinces King Xerxes to sign the decree.

In chapter 5 through (the middle of) chapter 8, that's when Mordecai pleads with Esther to intervene on behalf of the Jews. It's not as simple as it sounds. Even as Queen, she had no royal right to make such a request. In choosing to do so (as she did), her very life was on the line. And so her request (as it was made) became a strong and courageous act of faith.

From there, in the second half of chapter 8 through the end of the book, chapter 10, Esther's request is granted, Haman's evil plot is uncovered and he ends up being hanged; and Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, because of an earlier act of bravery on behalf of the king, takes Haman's place as second in command over all of Persia. By the time it's all over, the Jews are saved, the bad guys lose out, and God (as always) has his way.

Our Family Tree...the life and the story of a woman by the name of Esther. In the big picture, it's a story of God's sovereignty. It's a story of God working through real-life situations to carry out his plan. In the smaller picture (if you will), it's also a story about how his plan is impacted and carried out through us.

There are a number of lessons from Esther's life that have significance and relevance for ours. Let's dig a little deeper (into the story) and see what we find...and I'll limit our lessons (for today) to just three.

Here's the first. Even when you cannot see it, God is at work. Even when you cannot see it, God is at work.

Now, I don't want to make too much of this one little detail, but there's one little detail (in the story of Esther) that is found in no other book in the Bible, with the possible exception of the Song of Solomon, which is actually nothing more than a love song. (Do you know what it is?) In contrast to the rest of scripture (with that one exception), do you know what is unique about the book of Esther?

The book of Esther is the only book in the Bible where there is no mention (whatsoever) of the name of God. There is no mention of the name of God. No name, no title, no pronoun for God is found in the entire book. It's not there. There's no mention of God's name, not even once. It is nowhere to be found. But God (in contrast) and his presence and his power and his purpose are found on every page.

It's not hard to see, if you start looking beyond what you might (at first glance) only see. Read between the lines and Esther was a woman of faith. She had a deep and a strong faith. She worshipped. She fasted. She prayed. She did many of the things that any (and every) faithful Jew would do.

It was part of her life. It was part of who she was. In contrast to the Persians who had (many gods), the Jews (including Esther) had only one. And it was that one God who was active and at work. And it was that one God, even though he's not (even once) mentioned in the text, who was working to carry out his will.

Even when you cannot see it, God is at work. Even when you cannot see him, it doesn't mean that he's not there. Have you ever noticed that in life? Have you ever noticed that in your own life? Times when it felt as if you were alone, but really weren't? Times when it seemed like no one cared, but they actually did?

I look back on many times in my life when, (at the time when it was happening), it didn't seem like it was. I'd pray and no answers would come. I'd read my Bible and it was as if God didn't hear or care. I'd go to worship. I'd spend time alone. I'd talk with friends and with people I trust...and nothing would happen. And then it would happen, and I'd realize it had been happening. Then it would start and I'd soon realize that it had never stopped. Not always the answers I wanted or had prayed for; not always what I had hoped or expected to be the case, but a clear and certain answer, nonetheless.

I could give you a long list of times in my life when the name or presence or power of God seemed far off, when it felt as if all of the promises (he had made) were only for the life to come. I looked and I couldn't see it. I tried and it didn't work. And then (by the grace of God), I'd stop trying and simply trust. Instead of looking, I'd learn to listen.

There are a number of what we might call God-sightings, God-incidents, maybe even God interventions, (if you will), in the book of Esther. Things you don't see where God is working, but he is. Places where he seems so far-off, but he's actually right there.

In chapter two, we find one example. Esther's older cousin (Mordecai) learns of a plot (taking place) to assassinate King Xerxes. At the risk of his own life, he uncovers the plot and the King is safe...but the King never finds out. He doesn't even know...until chapter 6, when the king can't sleep and decides to read (of all things) some of the nation's history. He turns (if you can believe it) to the exact page where it records what Mordecai had done, at the exact moment when Haman (the one who hated the Jews) was ready to have Mordecai put to death. At that moment, the king intervened and he was saved.

It's the same thing in chapter seven. Haman had just finished constructing a gallows, 75 feet high, where he had planned to hang Mordecai in the morning. Before the (next day) is over, when the king finds out what's being planned, it's not Mordecai, but Haman, who ends up hanging from the gallows he (himself) had built.

God's fingerprints are all over this story, even if his name is not. God's fingerprints are all over your life, even when (and if) it seems like you're alone. (As God's child, you're never alone.) As God's children, we are never alone. Even when you cannot see it, God is at work. (That's our first lesson, and it's important.)

Here's a second: It's not enough to know that God is in control, if we fail to trust and to act.

The key verse in the story comes at a time (in the story) when Mordecai is telling Esther that she needs to speak up. The Jews are about to be killed off. The entire nation is soon to be destroyed. As Queen, she is their last (and only) hope. Even if her life is on the line...even if (her speaking up) ends up being her last (and final) act. She needs to do it. She needs to act on the chance she has. And he's tying it in with the opportunity she has (now been given) by God.

Look at what it says (in chapter 4), starting with verse 12. (It says), "When Esther's words of the impending (destruction of the Jews) 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. 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 now listen closely.) And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?'" (And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?)

Here's where it starts getting more personal. Here's where Esther's story (in a real way) starts impacting ours. You tell me. When you think about your life, do you think about it in that way? When you are faced with opportunities, do you see (those chances) in light of what God might be wanting to do?

For such a time as this...for such a time as this. That one little phrase, it speaks to every situation in life. Those six little words, they can (and should) be applied to everything we do.

Do you think you are (where you are) only by coincidence or by chance? Do you think what's happening (and going on) in your life is only the result of your own doing and choice? Or is it possible that you are where you are because God has something in mind for you to do? Is it possible that the situations you're dealing with and the opportunities you (now have) are actually situations and opportunities into which you have been placed (intentionally) by God?

I want to be careful here, because I do not believe (for a moment) that God has written a script for our lives in which we have no choice, that we are where we are only because that's what he has planned and chosen for us. I don't believe that, and I don't believe you should either.

More often than not, we end up (in life) in situations and with opportunities because of the decisions or choices we've made. I make bad choices and my situation might not be so good. I make good choices, and (even then) there are no guarantees (in life) that things will go well.

At the same time, because God is sovereign (and he is), and because this is his world (which it is), and because we belong to him (which we do), there are times when he does work, if only (behind the scenes) to place us into places where we can be used by him.

Regardless of the specifics, this is as real-to-life as it gets. Independent of the detail, this is as personal as it becomes. "For such a time as this...for such a time as this."

That one little phrase, I challenge you (this next week) to take it and apply it to whatever situations you face. Those six little words, I challenge you to ask yourself (as you go) if they were not written and meant for you.

You go to school (this next week) and there's a situation where standing up as a Christian (among your friends) might come at a personal cost, but it might well be that God has placed you right there...for such a time as this...whatever it is.

You go to work and it's not the Christ-honoring environment you want it to be, (not even close); but you need to make a choice (or a move) that honors the one you serve. Could it be (as a witness to your Lord) that you've been placed (by God) in the situation where you are...for such a time as this?

You're on the golf course and you have a chance to be Jesus' voice...you're at the store and there's an opportunity to speak out and share his name. Go down the list. It doesn't have to be something big. Most times and opportunities are not. But there are times and there will be opportunities (into which you have been placed) where you will have a big chance to be a difference-maker for Christ.

Esther made a difference. She didn't miss the chance. And so can you, if you keep your eyes open to the times and opportunities you have. Lesson number two: It's not enough to know that God is in control, if we fail to trust and to act.

And then, lesson number three: In a world that is hostile to Christ, we must never compromise on what is true and right.

I don't want dwell on this final point too long. In some ways, it's one of those things that could easily go unsaid. At the same time, I believe (in relation) to the story of Esther, it's worth saying.

In a world like ours, there are so many things that are not right. In the story of Esther, there were a number of issues that you could simply (if you wanted) choose to overlook.

Racial hatred...it's all over the story of Esther. It wasn't as simple as the fact that Haman (the Persian) didn't like Mordecai (the Jew). The truth is he didn't like him because he was Jew. The hatred that was there was (on every level) based solely on race.

And, from there, it's the quest for power at someone else's expense. It's the degrading of women for the satisfaction and benefit of men. It's the devaluing of human life, the misplaced purpose of life, thinking that it's only about personal satisfaction and gain.

We could talk all day about examples of the same things happening in the world today. As Christians, followers of the One died for all people, for all people, (including you and me), let those examples never be part of us.

One final comment as we close. In the closing chapters of this book, after the story plays out and the Jews (as a nation) are saved, there is a festival that is put into place by Mordecai, and a practice that is established from that time forward known as Purim. Purim is a celebration (by the Jews) in remembrance of how (by God) they were saved. Every year, in late Winter or early Spring, two days are set aside by the Jews to celebrate, to give thanks, to offer gifts to the poor, and to remember what God had done for them.

As Christians, we don't celebrate Purim (as do the Jews), but we do and we should always make time to celebrate, to give thanks, to offer what we have to those who do not, and to remember what God has done for us...in Christ.

"For such a time as this"...Don't miss the opportunities God sets in your path to make a difference for him. Amen.