

Esther
Heroes: Amazing Stories of Faith
Esther 4:1-17
October 22, 2017

Welcome again to worship today.

A very wealthy, religious little old lady was a soft touch for any panhandler she happened to meet on the street. One day, she met a very shabbily dressed man and impulsively pressed a five dollar bill into his hand, smiled warmly and whispered, "God speed."

The next day the shabbily dressed man knocked at the door of her house and said, "Here's a hundred dollars. Godspeed came in first and paid 100 to 1."

A first year seminary student might look at that story and ponder all the ramifications of whether and what parts were God's will. Was it God's will for the woman to give the panhandler \$5? Was it God's will for the panhandler to go to the race track? Was it God's will for him to win? Was it God's will for him to give back money?

Me, I just think it's a good story.

We often wonder, then seek to discover God's will. Is it God's will to do this, do that? Is it God's will to speak or remain silent?

Then we wonder about God's will in the events of our days? Is it God's will for a friend to get sick, or the roof to leak, or the police officer to write that speeding ticket?

We are in the final two weeks of our series "Heroes: Amazing Stories of Faith." We have talked about David, Hannah, Paul, Moses, Joseph, John, and today, we will talk about Esther.

I invite you to turn to page 5 in your bulletin.

Now, let me say a couple of things about Esther. First, Esther is not the most "Rated G" book of the Bible. There are a few things about it that come from a different time in human experience. We don't talk about harems and the like anymore.

Second thing I want to say today is that I'm a bit nervous. You see, a bunch of ladies in the church have studied Esther in a Beth Moore series, so me even tackling this book increases the possibility, no maybe the probability, of going home this afternoon and Myra telling me I was wrong, and other women telling their husbands on the way home, "Gary was wrong in his sermon." You know what I mean fellows? Our wives are absolutely certain they are smarter than us, so to publically demonstrate that is not a very smart thing to do. But hey, I'm just a dumb man, so I'll plow ahead anyway.

Here is the lesson from today's heroine: **Esther depended on God and His perfect will.**

The events in Esther take place nearly 2,500 years ago in the city of Susa in what is modern day Iran. Before this, exiles from Judah had spent nearly 70 years as captives of the Babylonians. After Babylon's defeat by Persia and King Cyrus, he began to set those captives free.¹ Many Jews began returning home, but not all did. Others remained in settlements throughout the Persian Empire. Life was hard in Judah – think post-Katrina – while life for the Jews in Persia, now the world's dominant economic and military power, was much more comfortable in many of the magnificent cities of Persia. In addition, the culture of Persia was considered the most advanced of its day with an

¹ See 2 Chronicles 36:23

enhanced legal system, modern postal system, and wealth flowing through the empire, raising the standard of living for most. Many of the Jews who chose to stay did so because they were accumulating wealth as evidenced by the gifts they sent back to Jerusalem. Even more so, what we see in both the stories of Daniel and of Esther today is that those Jews who stayed behind had the opportunity to be witnesses of the one true God.

That leads us to our first lesson from Esther: **Heroes take advantage of the opportunities placed before them.**

It happened like this. King Xerxes was in the 3rd year of his reign which began in 486 BC. He was a man focused on power, money and sex. He had a violent temper and often acted without thinking. The Book of Esther begins with Xerxes holding a grand festival lasting for over 6 months designed to exhibit the power and wealth of his Kingdom. At its conclusion, he held a 7 day feast filled with food and drink. By the 7th day, he was quite drunk and called for his beautiful queen, Vashti, to come and parade before his guests. She was offended by his request and promptly refused.

Now in those days, refusing a command of the King was tantamount to writing one's death sentence. Mercifully, Xerxes instead signed a decree that she never appear before him again. Her house was taken away and probably everything she owned as well.

After a while, he regretted what he had done. At the urging of his counselors, he holds a beauty contest to choose a new queen. The historian Josephus records that 400 virgins, including Esther, were brought to the palace to live for a year before the contest. The eunuch in charge of the king's harem is immediately taken with Esther and gives her 7 maidens, the best part of the house of women to live in, and all the perfumes and ointments a girl could dream of! When she eventually appears before the king, Xerxes is also captivated by her and selects her to become the Queen of Persia.² However, Esther's Jewish heritage is not revealed.

At the same time, one of Xerxes advisors, Haman, is promoted over all the king's princes. Haman's promotion goes straight to his head, and he considers himself above others. The King commands that all the people of the land bow before Haman just as they would bow to him.

Day after day Haman passes by Esther's cousin Mordecai who refuses to bow down to him. Haman's anger grows each time he has to pass Mordecai. Haman's hatred may also be fueled by the fact that he is an Amalekite and Mordecai is a Jew. The Amalekites and Jews were bitter enemies since Israel's wanderings in the wilderness back in Moses' time. Therefore, Haman devises a plan that will not only get rid of Mordecai, but all of the other Jews as well. Sound familiar? He pleads with the King not just to kill Mordecai but all of the Jews of the land and so a decree is written and sent to all the provinces that all Jews must die.

When Mordecai learns of Haman's plot, he tears his clothes and goes into bitter mourning, lying in sackcloth and ashes at the king's gate. This is as close as he can get to Esther, for it is unlawful for anyone to enter the palace grounds in sackcloth.³ As the king's decree spreads throughout the kingdom, many other Jews also put on sackcloth and ashes and wept.

² See Esther 2:17

³ See Esther 4:2

Esther's servants bring word to her of her cousin's state, so she sends him new clothes to cover him. But Mordecai refuses her tokens of comfort. So Esther sends a servant to find out why he is mourning. Mordecai tells her the reason and sends along a copy of the king's decree. Then he instructs Esther that she must use her position and influence over the king to intervene on behalf of her people.

Here's where we pick up the text, from Esther 4:13-17:

*Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die." So Mordecai went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*⁴

Mordecai warns Esther that even she will not be safe from Haman. Mordecai's faith, however, never wavers, for he tells Esther that if deliverance for the Jews does not come through her, it will arise from somewhere else.

And that is critical for heroes to understand, that the opportunity before them is a choice to participate in God's plan of salvation. And if they don't, they will miss out. But God's plan will never be thwarted. God will just raise up another servant who says, "Yes, here I am, send me!" Heroes understand they have been given a time and a place and an opportunity to be witnesses of the one true God and to do God's work, no matter the sacrifice. Esther responds in verse 16, "If I must die, I must die."

Second, heroes seek God's will through prayer and fasting.

Esther sends word to Mordecai to fast and pray for 3 days along with all the Jews and then promises she will as well.

When you're facing a problem and you're not sure how to handle it, where do you turn? So often, we turn to friends, family, spouse or even co-workers. Why is it that so often the one who is All-Knowing and All-Seeing is the last one we consult?

Heroes know they need to get serious about their prayers and seek God's guidance. And that prayer is enhanced when you fast. When we fast and pray, it creates a heightened sensitivity and hearing. Heroes listen for the voice of God and the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit to lead them and invite others to do so with them.

Third, heroes overcome their fear by trusting in God.

One of the major reasons why you and I might not step out in faith and do something great for the Kingdom of God is fear. Fear comes in all kinds of shapes and sizes.

A psychologist at Yale once compiled a list of some of peoples' most prominent fears: Fear of failure, fear of commitment, fear of trusting others, fear of speaking publicly, and fear of being alone. Fear is a very real emotion in people's lives. It controls us, it limits us, and it enslaves us.

And God doesn't want that. Esther has lot to lose and a lot on the line. Esther has lived in the royal palace for several years, and this has detached her from the normal activities of the common citizen. She lives the good life with the world at her

⁴ Esther 4:13-17 (NLT)

disposal. As queen, she has servants, the finest clothing, the choicest food and a great deal of time to pursue her interests. Esther initially tries to avoid becoming involved by sending word back to Mordecai, saying that if she goes before the king without being called, she may very well lose her life!

At this point in the story, Esther shows us that her fears and ours can get the most of us. But God doesn't want fear to rule her life and decisions nor ours. And so, repeatedly throughout Scripture, God tells us "Fear Not." That command is found 365 times in the Bible, one for every day of the year. I don't think that's a coincidence. In other words, God doesn't want a single day of our lives to be dominated by fear.

Fourth, heroes realize God is always at work.

The Book of Esther is unique because it is one of only two books in the Bible in which the name of God does not appear, the other being the Song of Solomon. Yet despite this omission, Esther's story tells us something that God is often at work both before and during the circumstances we face. Even though God is never mentioned, which I think means even though we might not be aware of Him, He is always at work.

This is seen in our understanding of grace. We believe in prevenient grace, which is God at working our lives, even before we may know there is a God, before we come to faith or before we become aware of God in our midst.

Throughout Esther, there is a series of "providential events" (holy coincidences) that could only have been orchestrated by the God. For example, the very circumstances leading to Esther's selection to replace the fallen-from-favor former Queen Vashti were providential in nature.⁵ God was evidently at work behind the scenes, preparing Esther for her nation-saving role!

Heroes realize that they are never alone, but rather God is working ahead of them and in concert with them when they step out in faith, embrace the opportunities set before them and then act on God's behalf.

Mordecai tells Esther, and it is a verse we need to apply to our lives as well,
*"If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"*⁶

Who knows if God has placed you right where you are at just this time to be a hero, to save another? Will you stay silent, stay safe, do nothing? Or will you be a hero today?

⁵ See Esther 2:18

⁶ Esther 4:14 (NLT)