

SERIES: God Incognito: As Seen in the Book of Esther
SERMON: *For Such a Time as This*
SCRIPTURE: Esther 3-4
SPEAKER: Pastor Jeremy Krause
DATE: July 11, 2010

Good morning. I'm excited and honored to have the opportunity to open God's Word with you this morning. Our privilege and responsibility is to worship Him. Let's spend a few moments in silence as we prepare our hearts and minds for worship through the preaching of God's word.

My name is Jeremy and I've been the Student Ministries Pastor for 2 years. For those of you who know me, it will come as no surprise that I have "issues". If you don't believe me, ask my wife. One of the issues that I struggle with is anger. I don't mean a small dose of being upset—I mean I can get really angry. Six years ago, I was driving in Kansas City on Mother's Day. Brooke and I had celebrated with her mom and were headed to visit my mother several hours away. We had gotten a late start and made a few wrong turns. Brooke kept telling me where to turn, but we were lost. I didn't realize until later that she was telling me where to turn based on her speculation—not based on the map. That did it—I was angry.

I was angry because we were late; she was guessing; I didn't know where to go; and on and on. The longer I drove, the angrier I got. The angrier I got, the faster I drove. And, as you can imagine, I was a real sweetheart to my wife. "Why would you pretend to know where you are going when you are as clueless as me?!?"

I can still remember how angry I was—when I turned left into a small intersection. Had I been paying attention, I would have realized that I was turning from a two lane one-way street and needed to stop. Instead of noticing the red stoplight, I barreled through and it was at that moment my life went into super-slow motion. A pristine Mercedes SUV was obeying the local traffic laws as my small, green Toyota Corolla smashed directly into its rear wheel. The SUV careened into the stoplight causing it to crash and I was scared.

Brooke was safe, but shaken up. And as I realized what had just happened, I was overcome with remorse and regret. The driver of the SUV was so upset especially since he had installed new rims on his ride. In fact, after looking at my Corolla he said to me "You don't even want to know how much those rims cost." I think he was right. In that moment, I would have given anything to be somewhere else. I would have paid an exorbitant amount of money to avoid that tragic mistake. I literally wanted to crawl under a rock and hide for a long time—or until the owner of the Mercedes SUV got reimbursed for his rims.

How did I respond to this mistake? Well, I had to return to KC for court. Evidently, you can't cause tens of thousands of dollars in an accident and pay a simple fine. I had to go before the judge, ask for forgiveness and take a defensive driving course. Oh yah, and I needed to apologize to my wife. The point is this... I was facing a situation I would have given anything to avoid—but I needed to man up and face it. How will you respond when you're face to face with a similar situation?

At World's of Fun, they have a Chicken exit next to the loading area for the roller coaster. Perhaps you're like me and would prefer the Chicken Exit. However, the chicken exit may not be what God has called you to.

Today we're going to look how our Hero and Heroine (Mordecai and Esther) respond to an opportunity—though crisis would be a better word to describe their situation. In case you have been absent, allow me to catch you up to speed with the book of Esther. Please turn there in your Bibles, just to the left of the middle book of the Bible: Psalms.

We have learned that King Xerxes (or King Ahaseurus as some translations read) reigns in all of Persia. He is an impulsive and unpredictable King. He threw a 180 day party in which he showed off his Kingdom and wealth. After this great party, he decides to have an “after party” for 7 more days. The text describes the furnishings and even highlights that the goblets were all unique! What a party. After the King had drunk his crunk juice; that is a great deal of wine, he continued his pompous quest by asking his beautiful queen to model for the guests. She declines and is quickly banished.

After the King's anger subsided, his 7 stooges—as Pastor Mike has referred to them—proposed an idea similar to “The Bachelorette”. One of the contestants in the Persian version was a beautiful Jewish orphan named Esther. She has been raised by her cousin Mordecai and instructed by him to keep her ethnicity a secret. Esther is quite popular and quickly becomes a favorite in the contest. The King is quite pleased with Esther and loves her more than all the other women. So what does the showy King do? You've probably guessed it—throws another party.

By the way, in case you were taught on the flannel graph in Sunday school, that both Esther and Mordecai were faithful heroes throughout the whole story, let me suggest a correction... They hadn't returned with other Israelites to assist in the rebuilding efforts of Jerusalem that Ezra describes. In fact, Esther hides her faith: not living by the Mosaic law, not following the dietary rules, nor observing Sabbath. Esther and Mordecai become heroes, but they aren't idyllic characters.

One final caveat to mention, at the end of Esther chapter 2, Mordecai discovers a plot to kill King Xerxes. He reports it to Esther and she informs the King. After the investigation, the allegations are proven true, and the would-be assassins are quickly executed. Mordecai's efforts were recorded in the Royal Record. And so, what would we expect now? Who would we anticipate to receive a grand and well-deserving promotion? Let's look to the text, Esther Chapter 3. Before reading, I want you to know that I won't be reading and expounding every verse in both Chapter 3 and 4.

3:1-2 *After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. ²All 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 would not kneel down or pay him honor.*

Instead of Mordecai, some guy named Haman receives the promotion. What do you think of that?!? It's important to understand what the original audience may have thought. I believe the original Jewish audience would have hated Haman even before reading that he received the promotion due Mordecai. The clue is in Haman's ethnicity. Haman is an Agagite. "Oh," you say "That clears it all up!" Allow me to explain.

About a thousand years before Esther, God redeemed His people from Egypt. Guess who is awarded the distinction of being the first nation to battle God's chosen people as they trek to Sinai? Answer: The Amalekites. You may remember the battle in which the Israelites were winning when Moses arms' were held high. However, his arms grew weary and so Aaron and Hur gave him a seat while holding his arms up. The Israelites defeated the Amalekites and here's what God said to Moses after the victory in Exodus 17.

Exodus 17:14-16 *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." ¹⁵Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. ¹⁶He said, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."*

Fast forward with me 500 years to 1 Samuel 15. We read that the Israelites, led by King Saul, were to devote the Amalekites to destruction. King Saul, obeys most of the command but leaves some sheep and cattle alive, as well as King Agag. When Samuel confronts Saul, he defends his disobedience on the grounds that the living livestock was intended as a sacrifice to God. Samuel responds:

1 Samuel 15:22 *Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*

It is this ethnicity that the author calls our attention to. The cursed Amalekites who God is at war with—led by a King Agag in 1 Samuel. This reference to an Agagite would have probably stirred the emotions of any Israelite reader or hearer.

Back to Esther 3. Not only did Mordecai, the Jew, not receive a proper promotion; but what is worse, an Agagite becomes second in command in Persia. Perhaps we can find some comfort in that Mordecai won't kneel to Haman. But, why wouldn't he give Haman honor?

Perhaps you're thinking, "Well Jeremy, strong Biblical characters kneel down and pay honor to only God." Well, that's a fine thought except it's not accurate. We have plenty of evidence that demonstrates other faithful followers of God kneeling to humans. In fact, in chapter 8 we read that Esther bows at the King's feet. There is a distinct difference between bowing in honor and bowing in worship. The reason for Mordecai's refusal is most likely because of the animosity between the Jews and Amalekites. I wonder if Mordecai ever regretted his decision to remain standing. As we'll soon find out—his determination to not bow would have drastic consequences. Look at verse 5.

3:5-6 *When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. ⁶Yet 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's arrogance and wickedness take him to an incredible depth of evil. Haman decides to not only have vengeance on Mordecai, but the entire Jewish race. As Pastor Mike mentioned to me, "Racial hatred is not invented by Haman but it may find its epitome in him—killing an entire race because of one man's snub." Yet before he proposes his plan to the King, he first decides to choose when to enact his plan. We read that Haman casts the Pur—that is they rolled something like dice—so that fate might determine when the most opportune time for the destruction of the Jews should begin. But tell me this, who do we believe controls the dice? As you probably know, a Biblical worldview completely contradicts the idea that chance and fate rule our world and the pur.

I want to pause here for a moment and ask you to consider if you truly believe that God is in control of all that goes on. Do you believe that God purposes promotions and medical miracles? And what about flat tires and stubbed toes? Is God controlling both the cosmos and minutia? Haman doesn't believe this. He is planning his massive and horrible plan by consulting a few lucky rolls. Well, Haman selects his day... or rather, when God purposes which day Haman will propose for the annihilation of the Jews—Haman then goes to King Xerxes. We'll pick up in verse 8.

3:8 *Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them.*

Here we find Haman leading the King on quite a spin of the facts.

- He begins with a truth: there really was a certain people dispersed and scattered among the Persians.
- Next is a half-truth: customs are different... well that could be true but it depends on which customs you are referring to.
- The third point is an exaggeration: They do not obey the king's laws. We know that Mordecai didn't bow to Haman, but he likely followed many of the King's laws.
- And then he finishes his request with a completely faulty conclusion: It is not in the King's best interest to tolerate the Jews. Was it not in the King's best interest for Mordecai to save his life? And why now is it suddenly not in the King's interest?

3:9-11 *"If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business." ¹⁰So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹"Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."*

I want to be honest with all of you and tell you that I was quite troubled at this point of the story. Why would Xerxes agree to such a wicked plan? Why wouldn't he at least investigate the race Haman referenced? And then why would he return the bribe money to Haman? And if he returned the money to Haman, how are we to solve the puzzle in verse 7 of chapter 4 when Mordecai references the exact amount of money used to bribe the King?

The answer to these questions was solved in some of my homework regarding Persian cultural etiquette. Understand that Xerxes was being bribed with a significant amount of money—half of the annual revenue from taxes. That would be like bribing the President of the U.S. with a cool trillion bucks. When made such an offer, King Xerxes would likely accept—but cultural customs would dictate for him to respond politely—the equivalent of “nah, don't worry about it.” It would be similar to eating at a restaurant with Brooke and I and paying the bill. I'll tell you that you don't have to do that, but I'm glad when you do.

Most scholars believe that King Xerxes takes the bribe and allows Haman to have his way—since he's being so handsomely rewarded for his willingness. And Xerxes sends the message in verse 13.

3:13-15 *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 thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.*¹⁴ *A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.*

¹⁵*Spurred on by the king's command, the couriers went out, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.*

Imagine for a moment the panic—mourning, fasting, weeping, wailing, and sack cloth. Thankfully the month of Adar is 10 months away. Perhaps you're wondering what God is up to at this point. As you might remember, God's name is never mentioned in this book. But if you were an Israelite, isn't this exactly when you'd be begging God to show up and do something... anything?!?

And I wonder in your life, if you've ever been in a situation that has felt as if life and death are on the line. And I wonder if you've ever given God a little piece of your mind, saying something like “Why don't you show yourself and take care of me right now? Don't you know how hard this is?” And though we don't read God's name in this text, what is the storyteller begging us to consider? That God is Immanuel “God with us” whether we see it or not; whether we believe it or not; whether we admit it or not. Have you ever wondered what God is up to? Has life crumbled in around you leaving you hurt and bewildered? **WHAT WILL YOU DO?** I'm glad you asked. Let's read about Mordecai's response in chapter 4 verse 1.

4:1-2 *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.*² *But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it.*

Mordecai responds by mourning. And what does Esther do? Look in verse 4... she sends him clothes. Esther knows that Mordecai shouldn't be at the King's gate in sackcloth—this was against the rules. And King Xerxes isn't a very even keeled king, known for his discerning temperament. But Mordecai refuses the clothes and so Esther sends a trusty Eunuch to inquire of Mordecai's grief.

4:7 -11 *Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. ⁹Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹"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 scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."*

Now put yourself in Esther's position. Mordecai has asked her to go before the King "Sweet Heart" and beg for mercy. Problem is there is this little-bitty law that EVERYONE knows: you can't just go talk to the King whenever you feel like it And if you do, you'll be put to death—unless the King extends his mighty scepter. The second problem with Mordecai's request is that the King hadn't called Queen Esther to him for 30 days. And most of us would be surprised to imagine this King was sleeping alone, if you catch my drift. It seems that Esther has fallen out of favor. Finally, there is a certain ex-Queen named Vashti who made an attempt at independence and look where she ended up. She was deposed of because she disobeyed the King. So Esther sends the Eunuch back to Mordecai with her explanation.

And if we could have witnessed Mordecai sharing his answer to Esther through Hathach, I think we would have heard him talk very slowly and very somberly. Allow me to read this how I imagine Mordecai would have spoken. (Spoken slow and dramatically)

3:13b-14 *"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴For 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 who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"*

What Mordecai explains to Esther is that she can't escape. See, if Esther approaches the King, she might be put to death. And yet, consider what the consequences of silence would entail. Certainly some in the kingdom were aware of her relationship with Mordecai. What would happen if her ethnicity was revealed? On the other hand, what would her life be like if she was determined once and for all to deny her people and her God? Wouldn't this be a death of a different form?

And how does Mordecai know that deliverance will come from another place? Again, we don't see God's name in Esther, but this is about the clearest statement to God's providence.

Mordecai's advice reminds me of a famous quote from the movie Braveheart. William Wallace, the Scottish freedom fighter, awaits his execution and is implored to beg for his life. He replies, "Every man dies. Not every man really lives."

Here's how Jesus puts it in Matthew 16:26.

Matthew 16:26 *What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?*

Esther, despite her previous track record, understands Mordecai's point, accepts his challenge and asks him to gather all the support he can.

4:16 *"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."*

Do you think Esther is grateful to be in this situation? I would guess that she would give anything to be in a different set of circumstances—yet this is where God has placed her. And Mordecai won't let her take the chicken exit. And this is where I will leave the book of Esther today. Before I finish, I do want to draw some applications.

Application #1: **Boldly Trust God**

When is the last time you faced a situation in which you were challenged to boldly trust God? Perhaps you find yourself today in a situation that you would give anything to be out of. What does it look like for you to boldly trust God today?

Perhaps some of you have faced a situation at work that calls for you to compromise your values. You may think that you had better obey your supervisor or else your job will be on the line. I've appreciated my little brother who was asked to lie to make a sale. He refused. Would you boldly trust God though it cost you your job? Or what if it costs you more? Your health? Your name? Your family? Your life?

Children & students: will you boldly trust God despite the consequences? For example, maybe you've been lying to your parents and they haven't found out yet, but they're on to you. And you wish you could go back and tell the truth from the beginning. But you've got a big decision in front of you. Are you going to boldly trust God and accept the consequences for your actions—and tell the truth no matter what. Or, are you going to take the chicken exit and lie?

Esther was faced with an opportunity to boldly trust God and look how she responded. I won't spoil the story for next week, but she's determined to risk her life. "But Jeremy," you may say, "you don't know how bad I've messed up." Well, if you're asking that question, I have some great news for you that leads to my second point...

Application #2: **Believe God's Grace**

God's grace is so amazing that He will use you despite your past failures. Consider Esther. She'd been hiding her ethnicity for years. At best she was silently following God. At worst, she had completely compromised her faith to the one true God. And yet, God continued to chase her

and allow her to participate in one of the great stories of His redemption. Indeed, if God can use Esther, than he can use each and every one of us. Is God chasing you right now and inviting you to join Him in His great plan of redemption? Do you need to repent and humbly ask God for forgiveness? Do you believe that God is ready to use you right now—regardless of your past? Oh friends, won't you please believe God's grace and live from truth?

Application #3: **Be Brave**

And finally, when we boldly trust God, and believe His grace, we can respond with courage. Why? Because we know our God is trustworthy and ultimately the God who saves. I'm reminded of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's reply when faced with death in a fiery furnace for refusing to worship an idol...

Daniel 3:16-18 *"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*

This was the type of courage that Esther was being called to by Mordecai. This courage would understand that opportunities demand bold trust, a belief in God's grace and require a response.

And so here is good news for you... God is inviting us through the 3rd and 4th chapters of Esther to boldly trust God, believe his grace, and live bravely. It doesn't matter what you've done or how bad you've blown it, He is inviting you to make today the first day of the rest of your life. It's been said "Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending." Won't you please respond to God through His son Jesus Christ?

Because don't forget that our King Jesus was the perfect model of boldness, belief, and bravery. Like Esther, He determined to risk His life for His people... us. But He didn't say "If I perish, I perish." Rather, he said "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

And He didn't receive pardon, but He was punished. He was betrayed and beaten—punched, whipped, and mocked. And He didn't receive this punishment for breaking the real King's laws. Rather, He had perfectly fulfilled them. It was Jesus who took the punishment that we deserved, so that we might be given that which we don't deserve. As Anselm has said "The debt was so great that while man alone owed it, only God could pay it." So remember Him and model your life after the Savior.

References

Duguid, Iain. *Esther and Ruth*. Reformed expository commentary. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005.

“Introduction to Esther.” *ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Bibles, 2008.

Jobes, Karen. *Esther*. The NIV application commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.