

The Story: The Queen of Beauty and Courage

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 01] Let's start on the lighter side. Have you ever felt like you were in the wrong place at the wrong time? Have you ever had a job in a workplace where you didn't feel like you contributed or even that you fit in?

I've been there. Have you ever felt like your circumstances were completely out of control? And perhaps you felt as though you couldn't seem to do anything right, no matter how hard you tried. I believe that for all of us, there are times when we get too close to our own circumstances. And perhaps we even begin to lose perspective that God is always in control.

Even if we believe in God, I think we can still develop the perspective that the things that happen to us in our lives are largely at random.

Largely happen by chance. And maybe that's how we perceive a lot of things in our lives. And when it comes to chance, the idea of that, it's hard not to think of Las Vegas.

[1 : 16] Because that's a place where the odds can literally be either for or against someone. And a person's circumstances and their literal fortunes can be at the mercy of a roll of the dice.

And it can all seem like complete coincidence. Again, a roll of the dice. And you may remember that last week, I mentioned during the time of the Persian Empire, the Jews were often treated better than they were by captives, when they were captives of other nations.

And a few weeks ago, we recognized that Daniel was treated better. This morning, we're going to recognize how two other Jewish people, Mordecai and Esther, fared under Persian rule.

Our sermon this morning is titled, The Queen of Beauty and Courage. And we find ourselves in the book of Esther. It's one of my favorite books.

It seemed like the fate of the Jewish people at that time was subject to a roll of the dice. In the book of Esther. Their fate seemed to be at the hands of the current ruler of their captors, the Persians.

[2 : 38] But we're going to see this morning that even in seemingly random circumstances, God is working behind the scenes to fulfill his grand saving purpose.

And that purpose, as we've learned, is to point all nations to him. To draw all of his people back to their purpose.

The book of Esther presents one of the most intriguing episodes in the story. Because in the book of Esther, we're introduced to a man named Haman.

Haman, who literally rolls the dice. So if you're familiar with the story, you will be familiar with Haman. But if you're not, just know that he really is the epitome of the stereotypical villain.

I've often imagined that Haman may have even had a mustache that he twirled. He was ambitious. He was selfish. He was ruthless.

[3 : 42] He was paranoid. Great character traits, right? He was vicious, violent, greedy. Just a really, really bad guy. So if you think of Haman as being the poster boy for the opposite of how a good person should behave, you're pretty close.

So during the exile of the Jewish people into Persia, many Jews were living in the capital city of Susa.

And they also spread across the 127 Persian provinces. So they were spread across that country. And it's in Susa, the capital city where Haman lived.

Haman was a descendant of the Amalekites. And he hated, hated the Jewish people. Particularly one Jewish man named Mordecai.

So let's take a moment to refresh our memories on the people called the Amalekites. Do you remember us talking about them already in our series? It's a while back now, but the Jewish king Saul, you may remember, was told by God to destroy the Amalekites.

[5 : 00] It wasn't a suggestion. It wasn't vague. It was a clear directive. But Saul disobeyed. Saul and his men kept the spoils of their battle with the Amalekites and left many of them alive.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise then, that as Saul disobeyed God's command to him, God's will in that situation, that the Amalekites were the first people who obstructed the people of Israel from entering the promised land.

Do you see how that came around to bite them? It's like God knew what he was doing. So this picture shows you Haman and Xerxes, the king of the Persians.

Generations later, after this issue with the Amalekites and King Saul, generations later, Haman, a descendant of these Amalekite people, he shows up to cause trouble for God's people.

So this slide gives you an idea of what Haman and King Xerxes may have been like. Haman carried a grudge against the Jewish people, and he also held a powerful position in the Persian Empire under King Xerxes.

[6 : 21] So who was King Xerxes? Do you remember that we learned that Darius was the king of Persia during Daniel's time? So Xerxes was Darius' son.

He was his heir, his successor. And like his father before him, Xerxes ruled the Persian Empire at the apex, at the top of its power.

They were at the top of their game. So in Haman, we have a powerful man who hates the Jewish people, and he also has the ear of a very powerful king.

Haman convinces Xerxes to decree the extermination of all Jews in all 127 provinces of Persia.

And he also decrees that whoever kills the Jews can then keep their possessions. So we read in Scripture that Haman casts lots.

[7 : 29] And lots in Hebrew are known as pur, P-U-R, singular, or purim, which is plural. So we read in Scripture that Haman literally throws, essentially, dice to determine the day to kill the Jews.

And the dice come up, Adar 13th. And that may mean nothing to us, but it translates to March 13th for our calendar.

So in the story at this point, as the saying goes, the die is cast. You've probably heard that expression. The fate of the Jewish people has been determined by the roll of dice, seemingly at random.

But again, we'll see that even amid seemingly random human events, God is still in control. A woman named Vashti is Xerxes' queen.

And in Scripture, we learn in the book of Esther that Xerxes is throwing a huge celebration to celebrate himself. The book of Esther is actually two books before Psalms and Proverbs.

[8 : 52] So if you need help finding Esther, it's two books before Psalms and Proverbs. So go ahead and open your Bibles to the book of Esther. Turn your Bible on, or you can listen.

Esther 1, verses 1 to 12. And there's the reference for you. So I'll read it for us. This is what happened during the time of Xerxes.

The Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces, stretching from India to Cush in Africa. At that time, King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa.

And in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Medea, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

For a full 180 days, he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days in the enclosed garden of the king's palace for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa.

[10 : 08] The garden had hangings of white and blue linen fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. Quite opulent, it sounds like.

There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl, and other costly stones. Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other.

And the royal wine was abundant in keeping with the king's liberality. By the king's command, each guest was allowed to drink wine with no restrictions, for the king instructed all wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him, Mauman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zathar, and Karkas, to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles,

for she was lovely to look at.

But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

[11 : 39] Isn't that amazing? Xerxes is so astoundingly self-absorbed. He wants people to celebrate him, to recognize what he has done.

Very few kings accomplished what they accomplished in their own strength, right? They had servants. They had soldiers. They had military leaders. They had advisors.

People who did the work, but not. Xerxes was very happy to take all the credit. He even summons his wife to show her off to his guests.

Hopefully for the married fellows who are here this morning, you are proud of your wife, but I don't know about you, I would never summon my wife as I expected her to obey my commands.

That would not work out well for me. I'm not a big summoner, and she's not a big responder to being summoned. I have to confess, though, sometimes I do want to throw a big party to celebrate her, because she is great.

[12 : 55] But, here's Xerxes. He consults his advisors, and they recommend that he get rid of his wife. And here's their logic.

She won't obey his commands. She won't come when he beckons her. So really, that serves as a bad example for the other women in the kingdom.

Yikes. Imagine women acting independently? How dare they? It would be anarchy. So I don't know about you, but I actually cringe when I read that decision.

It is so selfish, and sexist, and blind. Xerxes does what his advisors suggest, though, because he's just that self-absorbed.

Then he removes his wife. Scripture doesn't say how long they were married, but it probably was longer than a weekend. So immediately, Xerxes goes out and sends for women who can become his harem of compliant women.

[14 : 05] Yikes again. And it's here that we meet Esther. Esther, a beautiful Jewish girl, catches the king's eye more than any other woman in his entourage.

And Xerxes immediately, ultimately, chooses Esther to become his queen. There's irony. The very people that have been decreed to be exterminated are the origin of his new queen.

God doesn't have a sense of humor. The plot of our story this morning really begins to get interesting here. Because we learn that the man that Haman hates most, the Jew Mordecai, is actually Esther's cousin.

And Mordecai took Esther in when her parents died, when she became orphaned. Haman's mortal enemy is now the very close cousin of his new queen.

I love that. And it's probably not too surprising that Esther is very careful to reveal, not reveal, the fact that she's a Jew.

[15 : 30] I've always thought of Esther as a bit of an undercover agent for her people. and for her God. So just as Haman has the king's ear and trust, Mordecai has Esther's.

Remember that the wheels have already been set in motion. The die has been cast. And the fate of the Jews seems to be set on a course for genocide, according to Haman's plan.

Mordecai appeals to his cousin, Queen Esther, and he convinces her, in turn, to appeal to her new husband, King Xerxes, to stop this genocide.

We read about Mordecai's appeal to Esther in Esther 4. He begs her to use her newfound influence to act boldly to try to save God's people.

But let's focus specifically on one thing that Mordecai says in Esther 4.14 and we'll read this together. 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.

[16 : 55] And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. For such a time as this.

The laws of the Persian empire were clear. No one, no one, not even the queen, could go to the king and make a request that would be contrary to something that he had already decreed.

Mordecai's request of Esther, if she acted on it and spoke to the king to ask him to change his decree, it was simply against the law.

If Esther approached the king with this request, it could have very, very serious consequences for her. and it could even mean execution.

But we learn that Esther made the brave, bold, ultimately very risky decision to make her request to the king.

[18 : 14] And despite expectations, despite what we think might have happened in this situation, Xerxes willingly receives Esther. He agrees to hear her request.

God is still in control. So Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet of her own so that she can formally present her request.

Haman leaves and he is so overcome with pride that he begins to brag to his wife and brag to all his friends about how honored he is to be a special guest at the queen's banquet.

But ultimately his hatred for Mordecai overpowers his joy. Haman is completely distraught by Haman.

is completely distraught by Mordecai. He consults his friends and his wife and he just says, you know, what am I going to do?

[19 : 24] This guy is driving me crazy. I can't even stand for him to be alive. And so his wife and his friends suggest that Haman just kill him.

Get it over with. Put up a pole and have Mordecai impaled on it. Sometimes we give a card or flowers to someone that we know who's struggling to make them feel better.

But suggesting that they impale their enemy on a pole seems extreme. But it seems to work for Haman. He feels better again.

And his hatred eases up enough so that he can focus on, I'm going to the queen's banquet. How great for me. We read that Xerxes couldn't sleep that night.

It's interesting. And he asked for a copy of the royal records. And so he takes the royal records and he reads about all the great things he has done as a bedtime story to soothe himself.

[20 : 41] And as he reads these records, Xerxes learns that Mordecai had been loyal to him. And even that, the records tell him that Mordecai had identified two traitors in the king's guard who had conspired to assassinate the king.

This Jew, this unlikely supporter, this unlikely loyalist, shows up on the king's radar.

And the king immediately wants to know what has been done to honor this man, to honor this man for his loyalty. But then he learns that Mordecai received nothing, no recognition, no reward.

So as the king is mulling this over, musing, trying to decide how this got missed, what should be done to fix the situation, Haman arrives and the king, Xerxes, asks him what should be done for the man the king delights to honor.

Guess what Haman's filter is. Naturally, Haman assumes the king means me. The king wants to honor me.

[22 : 03] Oh, I've got a list. Haman begins to list off all the honors that he thought he should receive from the king, that he would receive from the king.

The book of Esther is filled with so many examples of irony. But this is probably one of the most enjoyable ones. King Xerxes takes Haman's wish list and decrees that Haman should go and bestow all the honors he has listed on Mordecai.

God's fun. Haman is devastated by all this. Absolutely devastated. In the process, then he's summoned to Esther's banquet.

And he, in a last-ditch attempt to save himself, save face, reveals Esther's identity to Xerxes. Your queen is a Jew.

She's a Jew and her people have been targeted for genocide. The king demands to know who is responsible for this terrible plot.

[23 : 22] Esther reveals the mastermind behind the whole plot, Haman. Things go very, very quickly from bad to worse to even worse for Haman.

He is ultimately executed on the very pool, the very gallows that he has constructed for Mordecai. Closure.

Remember that the roll of Haman's dice chose Adar 13th, March, as the date on which Xerxes' decree for the Jews would be carried out, for them to be wiped out.

And as we've touched on, Xerxes cannot revoke his royal decree, his initial decree. But he does decree that the Jews can defend themselves when the attack comes.

History tells us that the Jews prevailed during that attack. And since then, the Jews have declared Adar 13th, March 10th, as the Feast of Purim, the Festival of the Dice.

[24 : 45] The story of Esther concludes with Mordecai being honored by taking Haman's place as an official in the empire. And as beautiful, courageous Esther, continues as queen.

If you're familiar with the book of Esther, have you ever noticed that God's name is not mentioned in the book?

Not once. Despite these events that seem to occur by chance, and some even literally, in the case of Haman's casting of lots, at the roll of dice, even though God is not mentioned by name in the story, he remains in control.

Proverbs 16.33 says, the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Random acts are not random. In so many ways, Esther was a stranger in a strange land. As a young woman, as a Jew in Persia, as a queen under the rule of a powerful king.

[26 : 08] But she chose to be courageous. She chose to stand up. She chose to face her fears and make the right choice.

As Mordecai said, for such a time as this. friends, I encourage you to trust God in the seemingly random events and challenges of your life.

Be bold in facing your fears. Illness, aging, financial challenges, loss of home, loss of a job, depression, anxiety, a breakdown in your family, perhaps, a sense of loneliness, being disappointed maybe by the choices your children may have made.

Whatever your fears may be in life, name them. Name them. Call them out. Because in naming them, you'll be better able to give them to God.

Better able to release the hold that they have on you. Because, friends, despite how it seems at times, God is in control.

[27 : 31] God is always in control. Take courage from that and stand in your life. Stand like Esther.

Stand like Mordecai. knowing that sometimes life may just look like a roll of the dice. But recognizing that God is behind the scenes.

And as Paul tells us in Romans 8 28, God is working all things together for good. I challenge you to take a step back and look at your life, at your current circumstances.

God has called you to be.

Consider your circumstances and even the people that you find around you in your everyday life, living across the street, a fellow student in your class, the people you interact with regularly in your life.

[28 : 45] Because perhaps God has called you, perhaps God is calling you to step up and to step into what he is asking of you at such a time as this.

Let's pray. That say that has been