



Do you ever feel like your destiny is all wrapped up in the roll of the dice? Sometimes you're lucky; sometimes you're not. Sometimes you roll a lucky seven; sometimes you roll snake eyes. Sometimes how your life goes is just about being lucky.

There are times when a set of circumstances come together; maybe you experience a huge disaster, or perhaps a wonderful windfall in your favor, and you wonder about that. Some call it a coincidence, like you were in the right place at the right time. Others say it's more than that. Someone is working behind the scenes, putting the pieces together and all the little things that happen are part of a larger plan.

Many of us believe that, but we also wonder how our own free will plays into all of this. If God is really writing my story, am I really free to make choices that make a difference in the outcome? What part do my choices play in this story?

Today we're looking at chapter 20 of The Story. God's people have been taken into exile in Babylon. While there, Babylon was defeated by Persia. The Persians had a different way of handling their subjects than the Babylonians. Kings Cyrus allowed any of the Jews who wanted to go back to Palestine to do so. They'd still be subjects of Persia, but they could go back. About 50,000 of them did that, but most of them stayed in Persia.

This is where chapter 20 comes in, covering the Old Testament book of Esther. The story of Esther tells us about what life was like for those who stayed in Persia. It tells us how God didn't abandon them there; they didn't get written out of His story. God continued to be with them. It's interesting, Esther is one of only two books in the Bible where God's name isn't mentioned. I'm sure there were times when the Jewish people in this story felt God was absent. But God's hand is all over this story.

### The Main Characters

There are four main characters in this story, and since we've been talking about dice I'll assign each of them a playing card. First, there's a King. His Greek name is Xerxes. He's the King of Persia. He's one of the most powerful men in the world.

Second, there's a Queen. This, of course, is Xerxes' wife. Two women will fill this roll as the story plays out. Initially, Vashti is Queen. But things don't go so well for her and she's replaced by a beautiful young Jewish woman named Esther.

Third, there's a Joker. Not in the sense of being funny, but in the sense of an antagonist; a foil; a bad guy. His name is Haman. He rose to a position of power under Xerxes. Haman hated the Jews.

Finally, there's an Ace named Moredcai. He's Esther's older cousin who raised her. He's an ordinary Jew living in exile. He may have a low level governmental job, but he's an Ace in the hole for the Jews.

### Queen Vashti is Deposed

The story begins in Xerxes' palace in the city of Susa. In the third year of his reign he throws a party. This isn't just any old party. This will last six months! The idea is to invite important people from all over his domain to admire his wealth and power and ultimately to help him to plan a campaign against Greece. After 180 days it's all capped off with a 7-day banquet. The King says drink all you want. This guy likes to party! Then Xerxes has an idea.

**"On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him...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" (1:10).**

Many believe Xerxes wants her to come wearing her crown and nothing but her crown, so you can understand her response:

**"But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come" (1:11).**

She refuses to be paraded before a bunch of drunken men like a piece of meat. But to refuse the King is humiliating and embarrassing for him. So he consults with his advisors, "Guys, what do I do about this?" One of them said, "We have a problem. We can't have a Queen who disrespects her husband. If this gets out all the women in your kingdom will think they can ignore their husbands. Do something fast!" So the King banishes Queen Vashti from his presence; never to appear before him again. And he sends a reminder to each household in his kingdom: "every man should be ruler over his own household."

### A Jewish Girl Named Esther Becomes Queen

Four years go by. Things don't go too well in Xerxes' campaigns against Greece. He begins to feel depressed and lonely. So his advisors come up with an idea: "Let's have a beauty contest? We'll get all the beautiful women from your kingdom together, give them the spa and beauty treatments, let them spend a night with you, and then pick one to be the new Queen." Xerxes says, "Okie

dokie!" I'm sure they all volunteered to be judges too! This is where Esther comes in.

**"Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair... Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died" (2:7).**

So this young Jewish girl becomes a part of this contest. She begins to win the favor of the officials. She gets special beauty treatments, the best perfumes and cosmetics. This goes on for a whole year! You guys think your wife takes a long time to get ready! By the way, this entire time Esther tells no one she's Jewish. Mordecai told her not to, and she keeps that and her connection to Mordecai a secret.

Xerxes is completely taken by Esther. After 12 months he chooses Esther to be his new Queen. He's so excited he throws another party and makes the day she becomes Queen a national holiday.

### **Mordecai Uncovers a Conspiracy and Saves the King**

At the end of chapter 2 the scene shifts and we read about something that seems insignificant but later will be important. Mordecai discovers two of the King's officers are planning to assassinate him. He tells Esther about this and she reports it to the King. An investigation takes place and it's found to be true. The two conspirators are impaled on a pole and the whole incident, including Mordecai's role, is written in the King's annals.

### **Haman Maneuvers for an Edict to Destroy the Jews**

Sometime after this Xerxes hires this man named Haman and makes him his second in command. Haman is addicted to power. Sometimes when you elevate a guy you see what he's really made of. Haman is in love with himself. He even requires people honor him by kneeling down in his presence. He's also a racist. He's part of an ethnic group that hated the Jews. He was a descendant of Amalak and there'd been bad blood between the Jews and the Amalakites since the days of Moses.

You can understand why Haman is so upset when he meets Mordecai. As a Jew, Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman. This infuriates Haman! We read,

**"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" (3:6).**

Haman was a Hitler; a true racist bent on genocide. So he goes straight to Xerxes and tells him about this rebellious group in his kingdom who refuse to bow the King's authority. He says, "They're not like us. They're not on board with your policies. People are starting to wonder who's in charge here." Haman

even offers him a boatload of money and asks him to make a decree in which a day is set to destroy the Jews. The King agrees. And do you know what they do? They cast lots (rolled the dice) to determine the day. A day is chosen, eleven months in advance. It says,

**"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 children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods" (3:14).**

Imagine being a Jewish person living somewhere in Persia during this time. Imagine the fear. Imagine the questions this raises in your mind about God. "God, where are you? God, what about your promises? You said you'd never leave us or forsake us. Where are you, God?" These are questions we all ask from time to time.

By the way, right after that it says, *"The king and Haman sat down to drink..."* (3:15b). Imagine such calloused hearts. They've just ordered genocide and they're sipping wine coolers by the pool!

### **Mordecai Implores Esther to Help**

When Mordecai finds out about all of this he's wrecked. He puts on sackcloth and ashes and walks around the city wailing loudly. Jews all over the kingdom follow suit. Esther hears about this and sends someone to Mordecai to see what's going on. Mordecai gives him a copy of the edict to show Esther, asking her to go into the King's presence and plead with him on behalf of her people. But she sends him back to tell Mordecai it doesn't work that way. "If the King doesn't hold out his scepter and invite you into his presence, you don't dare approach him. That will get you killed. And, by the way, things have been a little chilly between the King and me. I haven't even seen him for thirty days!"

Mordecai won't back down. He scratches out another message to Esther and sends it back. He says,

**"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 who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this" (4:13b-14).**

He never mentions God's name, but God is all over this. He's saying, "God will look out for his people. He'll keep his promises to us. Maybe it's no mistake you're in this position of influence. Maybe this isn't just a roll of the dice. God may have arranged to put you where you are so you could be his instrument of deliverance." This is what we call a defining moment. Have you ever had a defining moment? In a matter of minutes you must decide who you are, where you stand.

Esther reads this and takes it to heart. She also realizes she's about to do something that unless God steps in could get her killed. She writes back 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 attendants 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” (4:16).**

Esther isn't just beautiful on the outside, she's beautiful and courageous on the inside. Again, she never mentions God, but she's leaning hard on God here. She believes in the power of prayer and fasting.

### **Esther Invites the King and Haman to a Banquet**

After three days she does what no one else dares to do—she stands in the inner court of the palace, right in front of the King's room where he's sitting on his throne, and she waits. When he sees her,

**“he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter” (5:2).**

He asks her what she wants and offers her half of his kingdom (he's had a few). Instead of coming right out with her request, she invites him and Haman to a banquet. The King thinks, “Party? I love parties!” So he grabs Haman and off they go. At the party, they're enjoying some good wine and he asks Esther again, “What is it you'd like? I'll give you anything.” For some reason, she just doesn't feel the time is right, so she says, “Come with Haman to another banquet tomorrow night and I'll tell you.” Haman's thinking, “Another dinner. Just the King and Queen.. and me. Yeah!”

He's riding high. How could life get any better than this? But then, as he's walking out of the King's palace, guess who he sees? Moredcai, who again refuses to bow down. Haman is incensed. He'd like to “off” him right there, but he holds off. He goes home and the first thing he says to his family is, “Guess where I'm going tomorrow? The King and the Queen are having me over for a little din-din. And, by the way, you know that Jew Mordecai? He still doesn't get it. I just saw him and he still disrespects me.” So his wife says,

**“Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself” (5:14).**

### **The King's Insomnia Leads to Moredcai Being Honored**

Then the scene shifts back to the King. That night he can't sleep. He decides to read and picks up a book that chronicles the events of his reign. It's like reading the minutes from a board meeting. That's the perfect sleeping pill! But he comes across the story of how a Jew named Mordecai uncovered an assassination plot and

saved his life. Just another roll of the dice, right? He calls for his assistant and asks, “Did we ever do anything for this guy? Did we ever honor him?” His servant says, “No, nothing.” Right at that moment, the King overhears someone in the outer court. Guess who? Haman has come early to ask the King for permission to impale Mordecai that morning. The King invites him into his room and before Haman can say a word he asks, “What should be done for the man the King delights to honor?” Haman is thinking, “Wow! This is my lucky day! The King wants to honor me **and** I get to kill Mordecai!” He tries to act real humble and says,

**“Have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden... Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’ Go at once... Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate” (6:8–10).**

I wish I could have seen the look on Haman's face! I can see him just start twitching, but that's what he does. He spends the next day parading Mordecai around the city as the man the King delights to honor.

### **Esther's Request of the King Leads to Haman's Death**

But remember that night is the banquet Esther invited him to. He rushes home, changes his clothes and heads over to the palace. So there they are, the three of them, and the King says to Esther, “Now please tell me what you'd like me to do for you.” Finally, Esther makes the big ask:

**“If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated” (7:3–4).**

This upsets Xerxes and so he asks her:

**“Who is he? Where is he - the man who has dared to do such a thing?” Esther replied, “And adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!” (6:5-6).**

I love what it says next. It says, **“the King got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden.”** Oh my gosh! He left his wine! This must have been a big deal! Meanwhile, Haman is terrified and begs Esther for his life. Just as the King reenters the room, Haman trips, probably on a Persian rug, falls on Queen Esther, who's reclining on the couch. The King walks in and sees him there on top of his wife, and says, “So now you're coming onto my wife?”

That's all it takes for the King to order Haman's execution. They cover Haman's face. It's like, “Dude, you're going to die. It's curtains for you.” One of the servants even says to the King, “You know I just went by Haman's house. He's got a pole fifty cubits high set up in his backyard. It was for Moredcai, you know, the

guy who saved your life. Gosh, it's a pity for it just to sit there." The King says,

**"Impale him on it." So they impaled Haman on the pole he'd set up for Mordecai" (7:10).**

### **The King's New Edict Results in Triumph for the Jews**

What a story! Let me summarize what happens from there. Finally, Esther reveals to the King that Mordecai is her cousin. She brings Mordecai in to meet the King and they beg him to do something about this edict to kill the Jews. It's impossible for the King to revoke the original edict, but he can write a new one, and that's what he does. He writes one that allows the Jews the right to gather and *"protect themselves and their families"* (8:11). That new edict is sent throughout the Kingdom and the result is *"joy and gladness among the Jews"* (8:17). Sure enough, when that day comes months later, not a single Jew perishes. Meanwhile Mordecai is given the estate of Haman and made second in command to Xerxes.

One more thing that's important. The Jews decide to make those days during the month of Adar one of their feast days: a national holiday (9:2-22). They call it the feast of Purim. Again, *pur* means lots, or what we'd call dice. Why? Because Haman rolled the dice and chose that day, but God turned the tables on him, making it a day of joy.

What a story! What does this mean to us today? One thing is this story reminds us of the reality of evil in our world. Powerful, prideful, calloused and drunken men like Xerxes and Haman are still with us. And we know all our stories don't end up quite as nice as this one. Last month I was in Cambodia with Neal Benson. We had a free day in Phnom Penh and visited two places we'll never forget. The first was a high school that was turned into a torture chamber and prison under the communist leadership of Pol Pot. Anyone educated was thought to be a threat. If you wore glasses or had soft hands you were brought there and tortured and forced to confess things you didn't do. Then you were brought to another location, called the Killing Fields, where we also visited. This is where people were slaughtered and thrown in mass graves. It was horrific. There are still bone fragments left on the ground from the victims. The worst part was a tree in the middle of the fields, with a sign saying, "Killing tree against which executioners beat children." We almost lost it. Under the Khmer Rouge 2-3 million people were killed. That's the reality of evil.

But we also learn in this story God is still sovereign over all the events our lives. He's even able to order events and circumstances in such a way we're delivered from evil. Look at Proverbs

16:33, *"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."* God controls the roll of the dice. Here's a book in which God's name isn't even mentioned, and it looks as if God's people have been abandoned and will be wiped out. But God has made promises to them. He'll never leave them nor forsake them. The Messiah, who like Esther will act courageously to deliver us from our enemies, will come from them. God is still with his people wherever they are. Haman rolled the dice, but God ultimately determined the course of what happened to his people. Esther is chosen to be the new Queen from all the women in the Persia. Coincidence? Mordecai overhears of a plot to assassinate the King. Coincidence? Xerxes can't sleep and he just happens to read about Mordecai's heroism. Coincidence? Someone said, "Coincidences are those incidences where God is working a miracle anonymously."

We talk about the upper story and the lower story. The lower story of Esther is about an Ace who challenged a Queen to confront a King about a Joker. The upper story is about how God preserved his people because of another King—the King of Kings. We don't always know what God is doing when we look at the lower story of our lives, but one thing we know, there's an upper story in which he knows what he's doing. He's even able to use evil to accomplish his purpose. What's going on in your lower story today making you wonder, "Where's God in this?" To that, the story of Esther says, he's right in the middle of it. He's working out his purposes. When you think the deck is stacked against you, let God play his hand.

Finally, we learn God's sovereignty doesn't nullify the need for courageous action. Esther was faced with a choice. As Mordecai says, if she doesn't make the right choice God will raise up deliverance from elsewhere, but still her choice mattered. Our choices matter. There are defining moments in life. Defining moments often involve risk. You may not have to risk your life as Esther did, but you'll have to risk your reputation, your job, your security. Defining moments reveal our identity. Who am I? Am I a Persian beauty queen or a Jewish exile? No more walking the fence. Am I a Stanford alumni or a follower of Christ? Am I a scratch golfer or a follower of Christ? Am I member of the Teamsters or a follower of Christ? Am I a U.S. citizen or a follower of Christ? Eventually, we'll have to make a choice that shows how we view our primary identity. Are we citizens of this world or that one? Defining moments are also times to pray, fast and call on God to do what only he can do.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA  
Catalog No. 1404-20S

---

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, February 15, 2015 at Central Peninsula Church South  
1005 Shell Blvd. | Foster City, CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.