



As a boy I thought heroes were men with masks, equipped with super powers to defeat the evil villains they were locked in an epic battle with. One year my favorite might have been Superman, the next year Batman, then Iron Man, and the next year Spiderman. I still appreciate these fictional heroes but the longer I've lived, the more I've come to appreciate the everyday, unsung hero.

Many of you have probably seen one of the movies telling the story of these heroes. It's almost like Hollywood is constantly looking for a heroic person for us to focus on. Now, I love stories like this, but there are thousands of unsung heroes, people from whom we can learn heroic lessons. We all know women like Mother Teresa and Rosa Parks. Maybe you've read *I Am Malala*, the story of Malala Yousafzai who survived a gunshot to the head from the Taliban while standing up for women's education. But what about women like Nadezhda Popova, who flew 852 missions during the World War II? How about Christine Mansfield from Connecticut, who pulled two women from their cars after a head-on collision?

I could go on and on, but the bottom line is, there is something about our culture that loves a good heroic story. And this morning that is exactly what we're going to talk about. But as we all know, for any story to have a hero there has to be tension. There must be a huge problem people need to be saved from! This is exactly what we're going to see in the book of Esther. A horrific edict was written that said,

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 (3:13).

How could such a terrible edict be written? Will a hero rise up to save God's people or has He forgotten them? Have they turned their back on God one too many times and God is finally ready to wash His hands of them? To answer those questions we need to turn to the book of Esther.

We're going to go through the entire book of Esther this morning. It's 10 chapters long. After studying it, we'll close with some application as to how this story can change our lives. To help us better understand the story let me give you the four major characters. First, there's a King in this story. His Greek name is Xerxes and 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, would be 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 and courageous 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 in the hole. His name is Mordecai. He's Esther's older cousin and he raised her like his own. Mordecai is just an ordinary Jew living in exile. He may have a low level job governmental job, but he'll play a critical role in Queen Esther's life.

Two Courageous Women

The story starts out with a drunk king who throws a huge party for all the people in his kingdom. This was typical behavior for Babylonian kings prior to engaging in battle. Most scholars think this was the party Xerxes threw before he invaded Greece. While in high spirits, King Xerxes summoned his wife to come into his presence. Basically she was a trophy wife and he wanted to parade her around. Much to his surprise, Queen Vashti denied his request, and was he furious.

But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger (1:12).

He was so mad at her courageous action to deny him that he wrote a law, a law that could never be repealed, stating Vashti was never to enter his presence again. In addition, he removed her from her position as queen.

A few years later, King Xerxes remembered the queen and her defiance. To console the king his personal attendants suggested that a search could be made for young, beautiful virgins to be brought to the king. Think *Bachelorette* except these women didn't choose to be there. They would be taken from their home, many of them would have sex with the king once and then live in his harem. Included in this group of women was an Israelite named Esther. But Esther didn't let everyone know she feared God.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, (2:10a).

Esther went through 12 months of beauty treatments before meeting the king. And guys, you thought your wife took long to

get ready! When Esther's time came to be brought to the king he fell in love with her and made her queen and threw a party!

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti (2:17).

Two Contrasting Men

We've just seen three of the main characters in our story and now we're going to meet two more. Mordecai was Esther's cousin but her parents died so he adopted her as his own.

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).

Most likely Mordecai's grandfather was taken captive by the Babylonians and he has been raised in the city of Susa. Mordecai was probably an official of some sort, because throughout this story he is typically described as "being at the king's gate." One day, while sitting at the king's gate, Mordecai learns of a plot on the king's life.

During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes (2:21).

Immediately he shared this information with Esther, who tells the king and the king's life is spared. The men who plotted against the king were executed, and credit was given to Mordecai for saving the life of the king.

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. All 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 (3:1–2).

Haman is basically the complete opposite of Mordecai. Haman is an Agagite. It's important to know Haman's nationality because King Saul was supposed to kill all the Amalekites. But Saul disobeyed God and spared the king of the Amalekites, Agag. The Agagites, descendants of the Amalekites, got their name from Agag. For all these years, the Agagites hated the Jews. There has been a family feud between the Agagites and Israelites for hundreds of years. But right now Haman is a man who is close to the king and his elevated position probably played into his pride. Everyone at the king's gate paid Haman honor except Mordecai. Things are about to get personal between Haman and Mordecai.

In Babylonian culture, it was inappropriate behavior for Mordecai to not bow to a higher official, but I think Mordecai was committed to only bowing his knee to God. When Haman learned about Mordecai's actions he was enraged.

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. 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 (3:5–6).

Do you see the contrast in these two men? Mordecai is a God-fearing Jew and Haman is hell bent on power. Here's a classic example of overreaction. A private battle results in a plan to annihilate an entire race of people. That's a little excessive, wouldn't you say? But it all goes back to this ancient conflict. The rest of the chapter describes how Haman went about his plan. It details the amount of money Haman offered and how Xerxes causally went along with the plan. Want to know what makes it worse? The day Haman chose to kill the Jews was the day before the Passover. The irony is unmistakable. The day before celebrating freedom from Egyptian oppression, a decree was made for their very destruction.

Last month I was in Cambodia with Mark Mitchell teaching the book of Revelation to pastors. We had a free day while we were in Phnom Penh, a day to get adjusted before the conference started. On that day we visited two places we will never forget. The first is called Toul Sleng. Toul Sleng was a high school that was turned into a torture chamber/prison under the communist leadership of Pol Pot. People were brought here who had an education, wore glasses, or had soft hands. They were tortured and would confess to things they didn't do.

After confessing they were brought to the second location we visited: The Killing Fields. In this location people were slaughtered and thrown in mass graves. It was horrific. As we walked around the grounds, there were bones left from the victims on the ground. All of this was tough, but the worst part was a tree in the middle of the fields. It has a sign that reads "Killing tree against which executioners beat children." We almost lost it. Many of us didn't even know that under the Khmer Rouge it is estimated that 3–5 million people lost their lives in Cambodia from 1975–1979. This is the result of hatred.

You see, when we read the words in the Bible of God's people being sold into complete destruction it can be easy to skim the words and pay no attention. But this is what Haman wanted to happen to all of them. He wanted all of them dead. Earlier I said that "for a hero to rise up there must be a terrible event." The unthinkable is about to happen, and the question remains, Who will come to their rescue? If ever there was a time for a hero to emerge in our story it should be now.

The Courage of Heroes

The Jews will die if no one comes to their rescue. Chapter 4 begins by telling us that Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes and went around mourning. Mordecai didn't hide his emotions like we do. And Mordecai isn't the only one in tears.

In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes (4:3).

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.

Word made it back to Esther of Mordecai's actions. Scripture even tells us that Esther was distressed. At this point three different conversations happen between Esther and Mordecai through Esther's personal attendant. Apparently isolated in the palace, Esther hadn't heard about the edict. So the first thing she does is send Mordecai a new set of clothes. But Mordecai refuses her offer. I don't blame him. Esther is trying to tell him, "Mordecai, whatever it is, we'll be okay. I'm the Queen and you're my cousin and we don't have to worry." But Mordecai knows this is bigger than just the two of them.

During their exchange Mordecai sends Esther a copy of the edict. I imagine Esther receiving the edict, reading it, and falling to her knees in shock. Sitting high above the rest of the people, Esther thought she was safe. But now she realized that her fate is the same as any common Jew. She responds and informs Mordecai that she hasn't seen the king in over a month. She reminds him of what he already knows—anyone who approaches the king uninvited has but one fate: death. It sounds like her marriage isn't going all that great either. Listen carefully to Mordecai's response, because we're about to read some of the most famous words in the Old Testament.

When Esther's words 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 who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (4:12–14).

The tension is almost too much! Esther must act, I mean, she **will** act, right? Will she become a hero and save God's people from their impending doom, or will she cower? Thankfully Esther is a quick thinker and puts the good of others over self-preservation. Esther chooses to finally reveal her heritage publicly. This

queen has all the beauty and courage! She sends a command to Mordecai to have all the Israelites fast and pray for three days. This was a strict fast of no eating and no drinking. On the third day she plans to present herself to the king and put her fate in the hands of a sovereign God.

We learn something big here, about how a real hero acts. Our response to defining moments won't thwart the purposes of God, but it will reveal our ultimate allegiance. Our response in tough situations doesn't hinder God's plan but shows where our commitment lies. This isn't always easy; if it was easy, Esther would have gone immediately to the king, but she doesn't. She needed time for God's people to petition God to act on their behalf.

Esther steps out in faith and approaches the king, even though she hasn't been summoned. Esther puts her life on the line in a heroic attempt to save her people. King Xerxes was feeling kind and extended the scepter to Esther so she could enter his presence. She made a request to invite the king and Haman to a banquet. From the beginning of the story, we know Xerxes likes a good banquet in his honor. While at the banquet that evening, Esther sensed it wasn't the right time to make her request to Xerxes; it wasn't the time to reveal her nationality and tell him her life was endangered. You've probably been in a situation like this, when you needed to wait for the opportune time to have a conversation with someone. You may have wanted to share your thoughts but knew it just wasn't the right time. Esther used discernment and invites the king to a second banquet the next night.

When Xerxes and Haman showed up the following evening Esther knew this was her chance. While dining, the king asks Esther what he can do for her; he even offers to give her up to half of the kingdom!

Then Queen Esther answered, "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. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king" (7:3–4).

The words Esther uses here are the same words written in the edict. When they left her mouth, I bet Haman's armpits were sweating; he's just realized he had attempted to kill the queen! The king is furious that his trophy wife's life is in danger, so he asks: "Who is he who did this?" Esther slowly turns, looking directly into Haman's eyes, and says: "This vile Haman." Haman knew it was over for him.

Xerxes leaves the room in a fit of rage. When he steps out of the room, Haman falls on Esther and begs for his life. Of course Xerxes walks into the room and sees what looks like Haman molesting the queen. At that moment Haman was taken outside

where he was hung on the gallows. In his attempt to wipe out God's people he lost his life. If you take one thing from this message will you remember: Real heroes pledge their allegiance to God. Esther pledged her allegiance to God. She trusted in God. She was committed to God. She sought God for help in a hopeless situation and by doing so, she became a hero. Listen to what A.B. Simpson says: "God is preparing His heroes. And when the opportunity comes, He can fit them into their places in a moment. And the world will wonder where they came from."

Living by Faith

As we conclude this story, I want to look at three of our main characters and see what we can learn from their lives. While doing so I'll offer one take-away from each person that we can apply to where we're at. First, let's look at Haman. Haman acted in pride, greed and self promotion. His goal was to move up the ladder, and he ultimately lost his life for attempting to annihilate God's people. When we look at Haman it's easy to point the finger at him and his actions, but we also have the ability to act like Haman. The lesson we learn from Haman is the need to examine our heart. You can self promote in your job in an attempt to move up the ladder. Sure, you may have to cut a few corners and act out of character, but it's worth it for the new position, right? Maybe in your home you treat your family as less important than you to make yourself feel better. Maybe you are solely focused on financial gain and nothing else matters to you. This week will you examine your heart and see where you've been acting like Haman?

Next, let's look at Esther. The lesson we learn from Esther is to be a voice for the voiceless. Esther approached the king on behalf of the Jews. Even though Haman was out of the picture the edict was still in place. So in chapter 8 Esther approaches the king again and is able to have a new edict written stating that God's people can protect themselves from those who want to kill them. Esther was willing to risk her life again to be a voice for the voiceless. Where can you be a voice for the voiceless? How can you use your voice and influence to start a prayer revolution? Maybe there is someone at your school who is being picked on and you've been watching it for months. What about the person at work who deserves the promotion but isn't being considered? Maybe it's your neighbor who just needs a voice to speak up for them or intercede for them in prayer.

The final lesson we're going to look at comes from Mordecai. Mordecai is a man of action. Remember how he was unwilling to sit around and let his people be annihilated? Remember how he

pleaded with Esther to save their people? At the end of the story he is given Haman's job. He writes the new edict informing the Jews that they can protect themselves from the destructive edict Haman put in place. The Jews aren't to go on the proactive, but they can protect themselves from those seeking to harm them. Mordecai acts to help others. There is a progression here that I'm laying out. After you've examined your heart, once you know it's time to be a voice for the voiceless, it's time to act. Don't delay!

Throughout this message it has seemed like Esther is the hero. I've even led you to believe that Esther is the real hero of the story. But when we finally come to the end, we realize that God is the real hero of the story. God is the one who was unwilling to let His people be persecuted and killed. A wise man, and my friend, Chris Lyons once said: "One of the greatest proofs for God's existence is the fact that the Jewish Nation is still alive today." The truth is that God is still the real hero of our story. God was unwilling to let us perish so He sent His son Jesus to save us. God knew how badly our plight was and how much we needed a hero.

I had tried to be my own hero but all I could do was dig my ditch deeper and deeper. Fifteen years and one day ago my life changed. I was released from jail for the last time. I made a promise to God that if He got me out of jail I would do anything He wanted. Five days after being released I met a man who used his voice to reach out to me. He tapped me on the shoulder in one the most unlikely locations and invited me to come to church. He removed any hindrance that may come about and even offered me a ride so I could hear about this hero God. Through his invitation and action my life was changed. God was already working on my heart but I was lost and needed to find God, my real hero.

Just as God acted to save His people from destruction in Esther's time, just as God acted to save me from my life of destruction, God is still active in our lives and wants to send us now to be a hero for someone who is lost. We may not save an entire nation, we may not pull people from burning cars or be military heroes, but we can be heroes to one or two people and point them to our real hero, God.

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

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