



If you have been following the news lately, no doubt you've heard the courageous but heartbreaking story of Kayla Mueller. A *CNN* article I read this week online wrote:

Kayla Mueller made helping people her life's work. After graduating from college in 2009, she traveled to northern India, the Palestinian territories and Israel to assist humanitarian groups, her family said through a spokeswoman. She then went to Syria to help people whose lives had been torn apart by war, especially children.

"Syrians are dying by the thousands and they're fighting just to talk about the rights we have," the humanitarian worker told *The Daily Courier*, her hometown paper in Prescott, Arizona, in 2013. "For as long as I live, I will not let this suffering be normal."

ISIS said in an online posting this month that a female American it was holding had died in a Jordanian air strike on Raqqa, Syria. The Mueller family confirmed her death on Tuesday and said ISIS took her captive in August 2013.¹

What the article failed to report is Kayla was a devout Christian who dedicated her young life to helping those in need of freedom, justice, and peace. Another article shared more about Kayla's faith;

During her captivity, Mueller sent her family an emotional letter, which they received in the Spring of 2014. Instead of focusing on her captors or her bleak situation, Mueller shared with her family how her experience had strengthened her faith in God.

She wrote, "I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator b/c literally there was no else....+ by God + by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall."

She added, "I have been shown in darkness, light + have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it. I pray each day that if nothing else, you have felt a certain closeness + surrender to God as well + have formed a bond of love + support amongst one another."²

I've been caught up this week in Kayla's story for several reasons. First, she lived a life that is the polar opposite of what most millennials consider worthy. Millennials are those born from 1980–2000 roughly. They want to be role models and change the world, but they want to do it through designing a billion dollar app, or recording a multi-platinum album, or creating a critically acclaimed TV show. Their role models are Taylor Swift and Mark Zuckerberg. Kayla Mueller didn't do any of that kind of stuff; she just wanted to end suffering in our world. What struck me about Kayla is how she risked her life to live out her calling. She knew that her vocation, the reason she was created by God, was to do her part to alleviate suffering in the world. It made me

wonder, What would I do if I had to risk everything to accomplish the one reason I was placed on this earth? What about you?

Today we are going to look at another courageous young woman who risked her life to fulfill the one reason she was placed by God on this earth. Her name was Esther and her incredible story is found in the Book of Esther. What's so unusual about this book is that God's name is never mentioned, but in this fast-paced novela we see the evidence of his presence and protection absolutely everywhere. We're going to sweep through this entire book because if there was ever a time in human history that was crying out for courageous leadership, that time is now. Even if you're not a Christian, Esther's life will challenge us. Let's begin our journey in Esther 1:1-5.

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: 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 Media, 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.

Finding a Queen

King Xerxes, at his winter palace in Susa, throws the mother of all parties that lasted for 180 days. Can you imagine 6 months of eating, drinking, dancing, revelry and probably everything else you can imagine? All the VIP's of the kingdom were there too. If that weren't enough, after the 180 days, the king gave a banquet for 7 more days. And during the same time, Queen Vashti was also hosting a party of her own for the women in the palace. On the seventh day, Xerxes is drunk and wants to show off one of his personal royal prizes and calls for Queen Vashti to come in. The king wants everyone to see her beauty. For some reason, Queen Vashti refuses to come in. Some scholars think she refuses because she didn't want to be unveiled. That would be scandalous. Others believe the king wanted her to come in with **just** her crown. That's really scandalous! No one refused to obey the king, not even the Queen. The king was furious.

I want you to see here how the author will use the literary technique of irony all throughout the book. Here you have the most

powerful man on earth, showing off all his wealth and power, and yet he can't even get his wife to come into the party. Ouch. What the author wants us to see throughout the story is how the hidden hand of God, God's providence, is constantly working even when things look really bad. God is setting the stage for a new queen, one he will pick.

King Xerxes, still fuming, consults with his trusted advisors about how to handle the situation. They decide to banish the queen forever from the king's presence and they issue a proclamation in all the kingdom for men to rule over their households. Talk about a major overreaction! The party ends on a sour note and business goes back to usual in the kingdom.

Some time passes and King Xerxes starts to daydream about his ex-wife, Queen Vashti. He can't get her out of his mind and his advisors are tired of seeing him moping around the palace. I don't think it's sex that he needed; he had all the beautiful women he could handle. All he had to do is snap his fingers. What he wanted was a wife, a partner and someone to share life with. So, his advisors come up with a great idea, "Hey, let's round up all the beautiful young virgins of the empire and throw a Miss Persia contest! We'll parade them past you king, and you can pick out the very best to be your new queen." Look with me at Esther 2:5-7,

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. 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.

Two King's Men—Mordecai and Haman

Mordecai is a Jew, living in exile and raising a young girl named Esther. We are told two things about Esther: she was an orphan and she was beautiful. The text says she has a lovely figure. You get the idea. It's no wonder Esther was taken to the palace and forced into the pageant festivities.

On the surface, things are looking up for this beautiful orphan girl. She's moving into the king's palace! But remember, Esther didn't willingly sign up for this. She's already lost her parents and now she is taken from her home, put into the custody of a stranger, and prepared for the "one big night" with a depressed, overweight, pagan king. The Jewish historian Josephus, tells us that as many as 400 women were involved in the competition. If this were like other pageants, there must have been some serious backstabbing going on as well!

Esther would remain in the palace, getting beauty treatments for a full year before she would be presented to the king. Now, a whole year of spa treatments in Napa Valley does sound pretty

amazing to me! But, the whole thing must have disgusted Esther. If picked, she would be forced to give up her virginity to a pagan king who she had not married. For all she knows, he'll sleep with her and throw her out the following day. I can see why the reformer Martin Luther hated this book. We struggle with it as well. How can anyone possibly see God at work in this awful situation? How could one stay committed to God in an environment like that? But, every indication in this story tells us that Esther was more than a pretty face, she was a woman of character. She remained committed to her God. When it was finally her turn to go see the king, the king was absolutely stoked!

She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. 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. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality (2:16–18).

Esther moves into the palace and begins to live a life of luxury as the new Queen of Persia. But, her new reality will soon be turned upside down again. She will be thrust into the defining moment of her entire life, one in which the fate of the entire Jewish race hangs in the balance. This defining moment will decide if she is merely a beauty queen or a saint, a sex symbol or a courageous risk taker for the Lord. Before we get to that defining moment, let's meet the antagonist of our story, Haman. After Mordecai uncovers a plot to assassinate the king and saves the king's life, it's Haman who gets promoted instead.

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 described here as an Agagite. If you go back in The Story, King Saul was commanded by Samuel to destroy the Amalekites once and for all. They were a nation who constantly attacked Israel. Saul failed to obey and spared the king of the Amalekites, King Agag. The Agagites were descendants of the Amalekites. For years the Agagites hated the Jews. And now, the Agagite gets promoted. Let's continue in verse 5.

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).

The contrast between Mordecai and Haman is clear. Haman is an evil, slimy, piece of work. He is the guy that no one really respected. Why else would the king need to force people to bow down to Haman? But Mordecai refused to bow down because, as a Jew, he was to only bow down to God. Haman is furious and begins to think of ways to destroy not just Mordecai but **all** the Jews. Haman conceives a devious plot to destroy the Jews and gets Xerxes to buy into it as well. A letter is posted throughout the empire that essentially read, "Destroy and kill all the Jews, women and children included, on this date, which is a year from now." While the city is in shock over the edict, Haman and Xerxes are sitting down by the pool, enjoying a cocktail together.

Mordecai, along with the Jewish people, are distraught with this news and go into a state of fasting and mourning. Esther is approaching her defining moment.

Esther's Defining Moment

Defining moments often come in dark times, when evil seems to be winning. Sometimes it's evil in our culture, like here, but sometimes it's evil in our own hearts. It was the evils of war, genocide and famine that forced Kayla Mueller to act, to get on a plane and do what she could to alleviate suffering. Defining moments will usually always confront us with the opportunity to act, to do something, to make a choice. Apparently, because of her isolation in the palace, Esther hadn't heard about the edict. She sends her assistant, Hathak, to Mordecai to find out what was going on. Mordecai tells Hathak everything and gives him a copy of the edict. Mordecai urges Esther to act, to go immediately to the king and plead with him on behalf of her people. But Esther sends Hathak back with this message;

"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 they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king" (4:11).

Mordecai is asking Esther to do a dangerous thing. So, Esther tells Mordecai, "You don't understand. No one barges into the king's office without an invitation, not even his wife. I could get killed for doing that." It's easy for us to judge Esther here, but we need to see that she was in real danger. For most of us, we will never be in a position like Esther, where we have to make a life or death decision. Esther was afraid. And who can blame her? Mordecai sends her back a powerful, life changing message,

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).

These are some of the most famous verses in the entire Bible. Mordecai bluntly tells Esther not to be so naive and think that she will be spared from Haman's evil plan. It was still a secret that Esther was a Jew. Mordecai's words hit Esther with a hard dose of reality. Will she seize the opportunity and act decisively on behalf of God's kingdom and His greater purposes? Or will she cower in fear? She finally comes to the realization that this may be the single reason God has put her on earth and made her queen, "for such a time as this."

Esther's response to Mordecai shows her maturity of faith and character. Instead of acting rashly, she calls for all the Jews in Susa to fast for three days and three nights. After that time, she'll go see the king and if she dies, she dies. That was what she says. Here's where we see the real wisdom of Esther. She doesn't just rush into the king's presence with bold faith. She rallies God's people to pray and fast. She doesn't try to muster up enough courage to act; she doesn't go at this task alone; she relies on God's people to join with her in this and together they seek God. After three days, she makes a risky move.

Esther's Risky Move

In chapters 5-7 we see most powerfully the hidden hand of God, working behind the scenes of Esther's life. When we come to chapter 5, Esther is about to enter the king's throne room unannounced. I imagine Esther's heart racing, her knees shaking, and her hands sweating as she enters the room. What will happen to her?

When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, 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. Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you" (5:2-3).

A sense of relief must have swept over the Queen after the king invites her in. Xerxes must have wondered what was so serious that would make her desperate enough to risk coming in without being summoned. He tells her, "Whatever you want baby, I will do it." Gosh, right then and there I would have jumped all over Haman and asked for his head on a platter! But, incredibly Esther doesn't do that. She says in verse 4,

"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

A dinner party, really? But, Esther obviously has a plan. She's prayerfully thought this thing through. She knows the king likes to party so she invites the king and Haman to a banquet. And the king loves the idea! Esther throws a banquet and after everyone is full and happy with wine, the king asks again what she wants. But Esther still senses the timing isn't right and invites them to another banquet. In all this we start to sense how the Lord gives Esther courage and strength to overcome her fears. We begin to see how the Lord was guiding her. God is also using these events to prepare the king's heart. This is a great lesson for guys like me who just want to act and get things done. I am a "ready, aim, fire" type

of guy. Esther shows us the power of patience and reliance on the Lord. She slowly plows ahead, trusting God every step of the way.

Meanwhile Haman's rage toward Mordecai reaches a tipping point. After leaving the party in high spirits, he passes by Mordecai at the king's gate, who once again, does not bow in respect. Haman has had enough and after talking with his wife has a 75 foot pole set up. In the morning he will ask King Xerxes if he can impale Mordecai on the pole.

In chapter 6 we come to the turning point of the entire story. During the same night of the party, the king cannot sleep and asks for an aide to read a Persian history book to lull him to sleep. And wouldn't you know it, the aide reads the story of how Mordecai protected the king from an assassination attempt. Some call it luck, I call it God. The king is disturbed to find out that nothing has been done to honor Mordecai.

Early the next morning, Haman struts in to see the king and the king says, "Haman, what is to be done for the man the king wants to honor." Fat-headed Haman thinks he's finally hit the jackpot! He thinks the king wants to honor him! Of course he thinks that!

So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. 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!'" (6:7–9).

King Xerxes loves the idea and says, "Great Haman, go hook up my boy Mordecai with that kind of honor!" Can you imagine the look on Haman's face at that moment? And guess what, it's Haman who gets to lead Mordecai around the city square, yelling out, "This is the man whom the king honors." I love it. After this procession, Mordecai just goes right back to the city gate to do his job. Mordecai can't enjoy the honor while his people face genocide.

The Tables are Turned

In chapters 8–10, the tables are turned and we see how God preserves his people and does not allow any power to annihilate them. At the banquet, Queen Esther finally tells the king what she wants,

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." King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!" (7:3–6).

Haman must have choked on his wine at that moment. In the final twist of the story, Haman himself, not Mordecai, is impaled on the 75 foot high stake. Pride goes before the fall.

Haman's finally dead but the problem remains; the decree of a Persian King cannot be overturned. The edict to massacre the Jews still stands. Thankfully, King Xerxes issues another decree, allowing the Jews to rise up and defend themselves. The response from the Jews is one of great joy. They unite together and attack their enemies and their people are spared. To this day Jewish people remember this great event in the Feast of Purim.

There's so many lessons we can learn from the book of Esther. For me, most powerfully, we see one of the greatest proofs to the existence of God. The fact that the Jewish nation has survived a history of anti-Semitism, persecution, the Holocaust, and yet has endured is proof that the purposes of God will never fail. And this is important to Christians because it's through the Jewish people, the Messiah, Jesus Christ would come. God providentially rules the course of history and when the timing was right, sent his own Son, Jesus Christ into the world to defeat the greatest enemies of all time—sin, Satan and death. We don't need to be afraid of anything or anyone anymore. We are God's chosen people.

More than anything else, the book of Esther, even though his name is never mentioned, shows us that God is fully in control of kings, nations, and world events. When our world is falling apart, when all seems helpless, we trust in Almighty God. We want a God of miracles, the God of the Red Sea, but the book of Esther shows us that God is most often working behind the scenes in the ordinary moments of our lives. We courageously do our part and trust that God is working all things out for the good. Like Kayla Mueller, like Esther, God is still looking for courageous leaders who are willing to risk all for what is right. What if your greatest fear, your heaviest burden, has been given to you "for such a time as this?"

¹<http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/06/middleeast/isis-hostage-kayla-mueller/index.html>

²<http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/54332/20150210/u-s-hostage-kayla-mueller-killed-by-isis-drew-comfort-from-strong-christian-faith-dedicated-life-to-helping-others.htm>