

For a book that is so lavish and extravagant in its characterization of its main characters, the book of Esther is notably understated in its treatment of God.

God never speaks.

For that matter, God is never even *named* in the book.

This helps us – because we live in a time when we have “larger than life” people in politics and culture –  
and it often appears that God is silent –  
and we feel helpless before the powers of this age!

Esther and Mordecai are living in a world that is overtly hostile.

“The Jews are a small minority in the Persian Empire and are potentially vulnerable.

A second given is the arbitrariness of Persian laws in general and Haman’s decree in particular.

Such a law cannot be revoked.

And with Haman at the helm,

there is no doubt that it will be executed thoroughly...

A third given is the social code of the period.

The palace has a particular rule of conduct.

A constant series of royal laws suggests how hidebound life in the palace is.

In addition the wider social code assumes a number of static relationships such as the low status of women.” (Wells, 55)

But Mordecai will call Esther to think of all of these obstacles as gifts!

“Take your femininity, your long training in the harem, your vulnerability,

your membership of the Jewish people –

givens that may seem challenging or unjust –

and treat them as gifts by incorporating them into the larger story

of saving your people.

[And] each of these apparent givens does indeed become a gift

in the course of Esther’s sequence of banquets for and petitions to the king.”

(Wells 56)

The weak and foolish things of the world are precisely what God uses in salvation to shame the wise and powerful!

This flips the script from Mordecai’s earlier counsel!

### **1. Mordecai’s Lament and Esther’s Distress (v1-4)**

*When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry.*

<sup>2</sup> He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. <sup>3</sup> And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

In chapter 2, Mordecai told Esther not to reveal her people,

In chapter 3, Mordecai himself revealed his people  
in his explanation for why he did not bow to Haman.

Now, Mordecai clearly and publicly displays his solidarity with his fellow Jews  
as he goes to the entrance of the king's gate in sackcloth and ashes.

Notice two things about Mordecai's lament:

First, the Jews have been accused of following their own law – *not* the law of the king.

Now, it is true that Mordecai observes the Law of God here –

but that does not mean that he disregards the law of the king.

The King's law was that "no one was allowed to enter the king's gate  
clothed in sackcloth.

One does not appear sad in the king's presence!

And so Mordecai obeys the law – and yet goes right up to the edge of the law!

He is presenting his complaint and lament before the king –

as close as he can get while remaining observant of the law!

This is a good reminder to us as we consider the proper way  
to lament and complain about laws in our own land.

Communal laments – communal protests – are entirely appropriate!

The great mourning among the Jews

included "fasting and weeping and lamenting" (v3).

But Mordecai, as one who was a mid-level bureaucrat in the administration,  
had opportunity to make a statement that could reach higher up...

Besides, his cousin was now the queen of the harem!

In Persian politics, having an insider in the harem was an important card!

But secondly, notice the way that Mordecai does this.

He takes the route of humility – indeed, of humiliation!

He does not issue a protest to the king.

There is no "March on Susa" to protest against the injustice!

No, there is one man –

one representative man – who humbles himself on behalf of his people.

He who was clothed with honor at the gate,  
now clothes himself with humanity's weakness –  
identifying himself as a Jew publicly in the sight of all.

Clothing will be important in the book of Esther.  
The royal crown was the crucial apparel in chapters 1-2.  
The signet ring is the key accessory in chapters 3 and 8.  
Sackcloth and ashes vs. garments is the key in chapter 4.  
Royal robes and the scepter will take center stage in chapter 5-6.  
Chapter 8 will bring together royal robes, a crown, and the signet ring.

Mordecai will travel from humiliation to exaltation.

But at first, Esther does not understand.  
After all, she has heard nothing of the king's decree!

Why should she?  
As far as anyone knows, there are no Jews in the harem!

So  
<sup>4</sup> *When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her [about Mordecai], the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.*

Esther is deeply distressed.  
She realizes that something is terribly wrong –  
but she is still operating under Mordecai's instructions,  
that we should *not* reveal our Jewish identity.  
When you have lived for years in secret –  
hiding, deflecting, avoiding –  
your natural impulse is to cover up anything that would reveal.

Hearing that her cousin is in sackcloth and ashes tells her that something important is happening.  
And when she sends garments to clothe him –  
he refuses to accept them.  
But he doesn't explain why.

Probably he is unsure how reliable the messenger was.  
His refusal of the garments can be understood as saying,  
“send someone you trust with an important message.”

## **2. Hathach's Intercession (v5-11)**

<sup>5</sup> *Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend*

*her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.*

Who is Hathach?

We have his name – and that he was one of the king’s eunuchs.  
Eunuchs were appointed to attend the women in the harem,  
because they were incapable of begetting children.  
Noble families would sometimes castrate their younger sons  
as a way of obtaining promotion in the royal court.

But all we know about him was that he was faithful in his service to Esther.  
As the go-between, reporting messages back and forth,  
he comes into some juicy tidbits of gossip!  
Esther is really Hadassah, the Jew!  
And she and her cousin, Mordecai, are trying to overturn Haman’s plot.

Haman is a very wealthy man.  
If Hathach betrays Esther, he could make a killing...

We know nothing else about Hathach – but it is enough.  
He is one of those Gentiles who blesses the seed of Abraham.  
Therefore he will be blessed.

But while we learn very little about Hathach from our text,  
we learn something important about Esther:

Esther sends Hatach to get the details of Mordecai’s affliction – as one says:  
“Esther is beginning to act, to initiate, to take charge.  
A small act, admittedly, to send Hatach, but a beginning!  
The beautiful orphan is being transformed by ordeal.” (McClarty, 223)

Her first act had been to cover – to deflect – to hide –  
exactly what Mordecai had trained her to do.  
But over the course of Hathach’s mediation,  
Esther grows up.

*<sup>6</sup> Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, <sup>7</sup> and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. <sup>8</sup> Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, <sup>[a]</sup> that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him <sup>[b]</sup> on behalf of her people. <sup>9</sup> And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.*

When Hathach returns he brings a copy of the king’s decree –  
with Mordecai’s detailed message –

including Mordecai's *command* that she go to the King –

This is the same word used in chapter 2 – when Mordecai commanded her that she not reveal her people.

It is the same word used in chapter 3 of the King's *command* that all his officials bow down to Haman.

For that matter, it is a word used four times in our passage tonight!

Esther herself had *commanded* Mordecai  
to explain why he was wearing sackcloth!

Now Mordecai commands Esther to go to the King.

And it will be used one more time later!

But here Esther responds by commanding Hathach:

*<sup>10</sup> Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, <sup>11</sup> “All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live.*

Here in the chapter of sackcloth and ashes – the hope of Israel is placed on the golden scepter.  
The favor the king is the only thing that can save them from extermination!

A king who is known for his mercurial moods!

He is easily swayed by his advisors –  
and at the moment, the chief advisor is Haman –  
so that's a problem!

But he is also easily swayed by his passion for women –  
and Esther is his favorite – he has even crowned her 'queen of the harem.'

That's what Mordecai is banking on...

*But as for me, (Esther says through Hathach)*

*I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.”*

It has been a month since the king called for me.

(This is one of those signals that the book of Esther uses  
to tell us that Esther is *not* the “Queen of Persia” –  
since her place is clearly as the 'queen of the harem.')

We had heard at the end of chapter 2 that the king had gathered a second collection of virgins,  
suggesting that Esther's position is by no means secure.

She has survived for four years in her place –

but she is now in doubt as to the king's affections.

(And Herodotus tells us that Xerxes was chasing his son's wife at this time...)

So Xerxes' interests were definitely elsewhere...

Isn't that often how we think?

We make our plans based on what we expect from others.

Oh, I wouldn't talk to so-and-so about that.

He's not interested...

Esther is thinking about things based on her "inside knowledge" of the king and his ways.

### **3. Mordecai's Reply: For Such a Time as This (v12-14)**

<sup>12</sup> *And they told Mordecai what Esther had said.* <sup>13</sup> *Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther,*

But when they tell Mordecai what Esther had said, he tells them to reply to Esther:

*"Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. <sup>14</sup> For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"*

Sure, Esther herself might escape for a short time.

But eventually her "favored concubine" status would fail –

her identity would be revealed –

and she would die.

Even if she managed to keep her secret,

she might live for decades – and then die, alone, without a people to mourn her.

The Jews in other places would undoubtedly survive –

and there would be some deliverer who would arise and protect them.

But the Jews in Susa – you and your father's house – will perish.

How did he say this?

How did he speak to his cousin, whom he loved as a daughter?

How did he say this into the eyes and ears of Hathach, the eunuch?

Undoubtedly in his heart he was saying,

"Hadassah, Hadassah!

O that I could have spared you from this fate!

How often have I longed that I could have protected you

from that uncircumcised womanizer!

How often have I wished that you could have married and borne children!

How often have I prayed that God would have mercy...

But Hadassah – what if *this* was God’s purpose?  
What if *this* was the reason why God put you through hell on earth?  
So that right now, at this time, you might intercede with the king,  
and save your people!?”

There are very few moments in anyone’s life where things become this crystal clear!  
Most of our moments are spent in agonizing uncertainty!  
Why is God doing this?  
Why is this happening to me?

Rolf Caylor spent a lifetime wondering why God never provided a wife.  
He had wanted to marry.  
But it never worked out.

Then, one evening, nearly 20 years ago, it became clear to him:  
I have been a bachelor for 50 years so that I can build a building  
where the children of Michiana Covenant can worship God.  
From that day on, he seemed to take great delight in that calling.

For years he served as church treasurer –  
and every year as we contemplated the church budget,  
we would ask him, based on his knowledge of giving patterns,  
whether we could afford to do what we were proposing.

He would smile, and say that God had always provided so far...  
(only years later would I realize that the “end of year giving”  
largely – though by no means entirely –  
consisted of Rolf looking at the balance, and making up the difference).

I cannot promise you that at some time in the next fifty years,  
God will make everything clear to you!  
But I can tell you that God has been in a long habit of bringing clarity  
*in those moments when clarity is needed!*

You might say, “Well, pastor, that’s right now!”  
I’m sure Esther – or should I say, Hadassah –  
would have said that when the officers took her into custody,  
in order to be the sexual slave of the king.  
Oh, I know, concubine sounds so much nicer –  
but that’s what powerful people do!  
They make up nice words to cover over their dastardly deeds...

But here Mordecai is saying, what if God has brought you to this position  
for such a time as this!

What if *you* are the means that God has appointed to save his people?!  
Now, think about it for a moment.  
In one sense, this sounds entirely too arrogant a thought to think!  
Who am I that I should be appointed to this?!

But Paul urges us in Romans 12:3,  
“not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,  
but to think with sober judgment,  
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

Mordecai is saying to Esther,  
you should think rightly of yourself –  
you should think that God has put you here to accomplish his purposes.  
And his purpose is for the salvation of the Jews –  
through which he will save the world.

“The book of Esther is poised between a firm conviction that the destiny of the Jews is assured  
and an equally strong insistence that it is for the Jews themselves  
to bring that destiny about.” (Wells 57)

Only God can save.  
Salvation is *going to happen*.  
But only if you believe and walk by faith!

I have no promises for you.  
Your faithfulness *may* end in your death.  
But it certainly *will* end in salvation!

I saw a lovely illustration of this at Grace Reformed Church’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration  
in Walkerton a few weeks ago.

The banquet rightly celebrated God’s faithfulness over 25 years.  
But I couldn’t help but also see the faithfulness of those three elders –  
those five founding families who are still at the heart of Grace Reformed  
25 years later.  
They had plenty of opportunities for giving up.  
They had plenty of chances – and plenty of reasons –  
to say, no, this is too hard.

Salvation would have still been preached in Walkerton.  
God will always have those who have not bowed the knee to Baal!  
But they and their families would have perished!

And so I say to you!

You have come to this place – for such a time as this!  
You are called to walk faithfully in *this place at this time*.

I cannot promise you that your faithfulness will end like Esther's –  
or, well, maybe I can!

After all, Esther didn't go into this with a promise of success!

#### **4. Esther's Conclusion: If I Perish, I Perish (v15-16)**

<sup>15</sup> Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, <sup>16</sup> “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do.

The first thing to see in verses 15-16 is the contrast with Vashti in chapter 1.

“In contrast to Vashti, who rivaled Ahasuerus by holding a banquet,  
she subverts the Persian court by summoning a power it cannot comprehend:  
she holds a three-day fast.” (Wells, 54)

Do you remember what day it is?

We heard last time that the decree was issued on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the first month.

So, presumably, Mordecai arrives dressed in sackcloth and ashes  
on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month

(though *perhaps* we should understand all of this to still be the 13<sup>th</sup> day).

Either way,

this is Passover –

this is the great Feast of Israel's redemption from Egypt!

But Esther commands that the Passover be transformed from a feast into a fast!

How dare she?!

God had commanded Israel to observe the *feast* of Passover –

but Esther says – let all the Jews of Susa hold a fast *on my behalf*.

Abstain from the Passover tonight – and keep your fast for three days –  
and after three days I will go to the king.

Many have thought that Jesus observed the Passover a night early

so that he would die on the Passover

(it was not uncommon – since there were so many Passover lambs,  
they would start the slaughter the day before).

But have you ever contemplated the fact that Jesus was *not*  
the first view the Passover this way?!

Esther abstained from the Passover in order to prepare for *her* cross!

Her humiliation and exaltation on the third day foreshadowed his.

And yet she had no “word from the LORD” commanding her to do this.

She had only the word of her cousin Mordecai,  
commanding her to go to the king.

When Moses went to Pharaoh, he had the LORD’s command and promise.

But even then, Moses tried to find a way out!

Esther now sees her way clear to her duty –

and on this Passover night, she declares

*Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.*”<sup>[c]</sup>

There are echoes here of her great-grandfather Jacob,

who, when his son, Benjamin (Esther’s ancestor), was taken to Egypt,  
said, “As for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.” (Gen 43:14)

There is a moment when indecisiveness and wavering  
are transformed to an immovable purpose.

I don’t know if you have ever experienced this.

But there have been several times when I have felt my will harden –  
like Sam Gamgee as he is facing Mt. Doom,  
as though the deed contemplated is already done.  
All he has to do is actually do it.

It’s a pretty amazing feeling.

It does not guarantee the outcome.

C. S. Lewis describes this in *Perelandra*.

It simply means that by this time tomorrow the deed will be done –  
or I will have perished in the doing of it!

Esther knows full well that she may die on the third day.

But that’s okay.

Her eyes are now fixed on a heavenly city.

She knows that her story participates in that greater story!

She may perish – but she cannot fail!

And so,

### **5. Mordecai’s Obedience and the Fast of the Jews (v17)**

<sup>17</sup> *Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

Here is our fourth use of the word “command.”  
So far, Mordecai has been commanding Esther  
(except when she commanded him to explain why he was wearing sackcloth!).

But in her transformation, she has moved from obeying his commands  
to commanding him – and he obeys!

Esther began our story as a sex object –  
a beautiful girl who the lustful king had a hankering for...  
but by the end of the story, *she* is the wise sage who controls the narrative.

And so the Jews spend that Passover *fasting*.  
At the command of Esther.

Either Hadassah was being sacrilegious,  
or she is a prophetess – of a stature unparalleled since Moses!

You do not take one of God’s holy feasts and replace it with a fast day!!  
This is one reason why later Jewish tradition added a bunch of “additions”  
to the book of Esther, in order to insert more “religious” material!

You can understand why!  
A Jewish concubine from the harem of Xerxes is ordaining a feast  
and commanding Jews to fast on the Passover!

But the original text of the book of Esther is quite sufficient!  
In the middle of God’s silence –  
when there are no prophets –  
when it seems as though God has abandoned us to destruction...

Esther shows us what it means to live in the dispersion.

We too live in the diaspora of God’s people!  
We are dispersed among the nations.  
Every foreign land becomes a home land –  
and yet, every homeland becomes a foreign land.

We don’t know – in advance – how this particular story will end!  
I will go to the king.  
If I perish, I perish.

But that doesn’t mean that we don’t know what story we’re in!  
We know that we are in the story of salvation.

This story ends at the New Jerusalem – the New Creation.

How should we live – when we know that we will spend the duration of our earthly lives in Persia?

We are not just biding our time here in exile – waiting until we can go home.

This is where we will live until Christ returns!

This is where Christ *calls us* to live until he returns.

We can't just adopt short-term tactics.

We need long-term strategies for how to live here for generations!

That may mean wearing sackcloth and ashes at the king's gate, like Mordecai  
(or, to use a more modern idiom,  
a protest where we sing imprecatory Psalms outside the state capital!)

[Hey, I can only get so modern!]

(honestly, I think that if more Christians sang Psalms in their protests,  
it would really get people thinking!)

Or it may mean that bold, daring, approach to powerful people – as Esther did.

Sometimes it works.

Sometimes it doesn't.

“If I perish, I perish.”

But like Esther and Mordecai,

you go into it – either way – with the conviction that what is good for the people of God  
is good for all humanity!

You're not asking for special privileges.

You're not asking for special treatment.

You're asking to be treated in the same way that all humanity should be treated!

But at the heart of the book of Esther is the question of how you live faithfully  
in a world where those in power are not interested in living faithfully!

How do you use the status that you have – whoever you may be! –  
in order to love God and love your neighbor?