

## Faith to Act

[Esther 3:8-10, 4:5-14](#)

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In every life, there comes at least one moment that makes sense of all the other moments of life. It is then that you know why you are here, and what you have to do.

Like many good dramas, and like most of our lives, the story of Esther has three acts. In all three acts the primary actor is God. But he never comes center stage in our drama. His name doesn't even appear in the story of Esther. But be sure, this is God's story. He is acting through providence, creating opportunity and even crisis. Everyone else, including you and me, is only acting in response to this God who is always in the wings.

Act One: Young king Xerxes inherited the powerful Persian throne from his father. He's very much the character we expect for the part of one who has stumbled into wealth. He loved parties and friends and beautiful women. He wasn't very smart and was easily manipulated. His appetites were strong; his ego fragile.

Shortly into his reign, Xerxes threw a party for his officials and ministers that lasted seven days. We are told, "Drinking was by flagons without restraint." And "when the king was merry with wine" he commanded his beautiful queen, Queen Vasti, to grace their party wearing the royal crown. But the queen knew it wasn't the crown they wanted to stare at, and so she refused to come. This embarrassed the king and terrified his ministers who were afraid that if their wives heard that the queen refused the king there would be "no end of the contempt" they would all receive at home. So they persuaded the drunken king to make a decree declaring throughout the land, "that every man should be the master in his own house." They also said, get rid of Queen Vasti. Which is what the king did.

When Xerxes sobered up, he realized that he was now the master of his house, but there was no one in it but him. So his friends, always ready with an idea, persuaded him to host a beauty pageant with the most stunning virgins in the empire. The winner would become the new queen. This idea was tailor-made for Xerxes, and so the invitation for contestants was sent out.

At this point, Esther came on stage. She was an orphan who had been raised by her older cousin Mordecai. His great-grandfather was among the Jews carried into captivity in Babylon before it fell to the Persians. So Esther and Mordecai were Jews. But they decided it was best not to mention this in the interview portion of the beauty pageant. Of course, Esther won the pageant and was made the new queen of Persia. That is how Act One concludes.

Much of the early part of our lives is spent trying to get to the right place, taking advantage of the opportunities we have, dealing with the crazy bosses and supervisors with fragile egos. All of it is a way of making a fairy-tale dream come true. The anonymous orphan peasant can become a queen. We thought that if only we could get the crown, the job, the spouse, house, and children, then the drama would be over. From then on we would live "happily ever after." But that is only Act One. We haven't even seen the real drama of life yet.

That occurs when everything you were trying to achieve is threatened. A disease invades your body. You lose your job and your money. Your child gets sick, or your spouse dies. Now it is clear that you are not writing this drama. Now it is clear that this drama is not about your dreams. Now you understand that this is about the creation of your character. Now you are in Act Two.

Act Two: One of the highest ranking officials in Persia, an evil man called Haman, persuades the king to make everyone bow before him when he walks through town. Everyone does this because it is the law - everyone except Mordecai whose religion prevents him from bowing to another. Haman loved to see people bowing before him along the streets. I'm thinking he probably dreamed up lots of errands he had

to run just to see the wave of bowing as he walked along. But every time he passed Mordecai, it irritated him to see this one man standing in defiance.

So when Haman discovered that Mordecai was a Jew he hatched a sinister plot to have all the Jews killed. Anti Semitism, anti-anybodyism, is usually rooted in a personal vendetta. Haman told the gullible king that the Jews refused to obey Persian law, that they were scattered throughout the land, and that they were a great political threat to Persia. Something had to be done about this national threat to security. Just to make sure he had convinced Xerxes, Haman offered to contribute 10,000 talents to the king's PAC fund, if he will just do this one tiny favor and order the execution of the Jews. And so the unwitting, stupid, king gives Haman his signet ring to order the death of these "traitors."

When Mordecai got word of this plot he sent word to Queen Esther that she must go to the king and plead the case of the Jews. At first, Esther resisted. She reminded Mordecai that she couldn't just waltz into the king's presence. If she went without an invitation she could be killed, and she hadn't been summoned for a month now. <sup>3</sup>"I don't have the influence you think I do. Who am I to deliver the people?"<sup>2</sup> She just got her life to the right place. She would like to be more than queen-for-a-day.

Mordecai was not gentle with his young cousin. He told her, "Do not think that you will be spared in the palace. It is from the palace that the evil is coming." But she could probably take her chances on this. After all, she was beautiful and privileged. The king seems to adore her. We all think that we will be spared evil. We have so much going for us. The injustices of homelessness and crime will never come our way. The horrible disease that is claiming twenty-five percent of Africa will never invade our homes. The violence tearing apart the Holy Land will never wreak havoc on our streets. That is why we worked so hard in the first part of the drama of life - to get to a safe place. There are no safe places. But it is our favorite illusion to think we have found one.

Then Mordecai says something for which we have no defense and no illusions. "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this." There it is. The whole drama will turn on your response to this inescapable idea. This is your calling. This is why you are here. The meaning of your whole life is sometimes determined by how you respond to a single moment.

You know that you have reached the decisive hour of your life when you are confronted with a great crisis. The crisis places everything that you spent the first part of your life building at risk. You know you have to respond to this crisis because it makes sense of your whole life. But there is a great reluctance to act. Of course there is. All leaders in history have been hesitant to act. They know that in acting they will lose their privacy and their illusions of living a protected life. Now their lives are sacrificed for the causes they are about to take up.

Maybe you are being asked to serve the public. You've been in Washington long enough to know how hard the public is on its servants. Or maybe you are being asked to serve children. You've just finished grad school, and gotten your career underway. Or maybe you are being asked to go back to work. You've just got your children, and you don't want to leave them. Maybe at work you see something wrong. Everybody tells you to leave this thing alone. It will kill your career to say anything. But it's wrong, and you can't leave it alone. Maybe a spouse or a cherished friend is alcoholic. Everyone knows it but no one is saying anything. You could continue to cope and enable the behavior as you have. Or you could risk losing everything by intervening. Choice. You have to make a choice.

How do you do that? The same way Esther did: Not by being certain that you will be spared, or that you will succeed. You don't know that. No, you find the courage to make a heroic choice by resigning yourself to losing your life in accepting its mission. In the words of Esther, "If I perish, I perish." In the words of Jesus, "Those who lose their lives will find them."

After making the decision to give her life to this newly discovered mission, Esther became quite cunning. This is so important. She didn't just rush into Xerxes chamber and squeal on Haman. That would have only resulted in her execution. Instead, she was wise in how she constructed her plan. When you have decided to take on injustice somewhere, don't go tearing at the machine gun nest. Don't destroy yourself trying to make a difference. We don't need more people who got burnt out trying to help. As Jesus said,

"Be as innocent as doves, but as wise as serpents." So get yourself a good plan. It's a critical part of the life of faith. Then prayerfully give the plan to God as well.

Playing to the king's affection for parties, Esther throws him a doozy. When he asks how to repay her, she asks only to throw a better party. And she says, "this time bring that Haman fellow with you." Only after the king enjoys this party as well, and is deeply in her debt, does Esther reveal that she is a Jew and that Haman is seeking to destroy her and her people. The king is both enraged and confused. Not knowing what to do, not being particularly bright, he runs out of the room. Haman is terrified and throws himself at the feet of the queen begging for mercy. Then the king returns to the room, sees Haman lunging at Esther and thinks he is making a play for her. This is too much for the king so he executes Haman on the gallows he built for Mordecai. Then the order to exterminate the Jews is repealed.

So now, we think, the drama is over. The good guys prevailed, and evil has been averted. So it wasn't about getting our dreams to come true, but to participate in the dreams of God. So that's the end of the story. No.

Act Three: This may be the most important act of all, and it is where many of you are living today. You have made your heroic choices in life. You had that moment of putting it all on the line. You thought it would kill you, but it only gave you a better life. So, now what? How will you be a good steward of your success?

In the final act of the drama of Esther, we find her leveraging her influence with the king to kill not only Haman but 75,000 of the Jews' enemies in Persia. This is a part of Esther's story that is not told so often. Maybe such carnage makes sense to the ancient mentality, but it is hard for us to find the Word of God in it. In fact, God did not tell Esther to slaughter all her enemies. Maybe this is why God's name does not appear in the drama of Esther. After seeing how the victim had become the victimizer, God may have preferred to keep his name out of the credits.

Again, it may be unfair to import contemporary sensibilities into this ancient drama, but we do have to wonder if the story could have ended better. What if Esther had chosen not to act as Haman did? What if in the end this became a story, not about revenge, but about grace and forgiveness? What if power was used to make room in the kingdom for even the enemy?

The point is that the story is not over once you prevail in a crisis. You are still on stage. The drama isn't over yet. Every day of life is spent making choices that will determine the moral of your life's story.

Almighty God, give us the vision to see why we have been placed where we are in life. Give us the courage not only to struggle for what is right, but to be gracious to those we struggle against, that you may not hesitate to associate your name with ours. Amen.