

“For a Time Such as This—Esther, part 2”

So, I'm embarrassed to ask this, but am I the only one that kind of freaks out with these new-fangled roundabouts here in Joplin? I got trapped on one in front of South Middle School last week. I got on it and couldn't get off. I'd try to catch that road and somebody else would jump in and throw off my trajectory and round I'd go again. I drove 20 miles to get one block. Lots of movement, not much progress. Keep that image in mind for later.

Let me start with a very quick recap of where we ended last week. I talked about how we all have a mission in life. A real mission that God has in mind for us. But we also have what John Ortberg calls a **shadow mission**. That other mission that we drift into if we're not trying, working, intentional about our real mission. Some of us don't even know about this shadow mission and that makes it even more dangerous because then you don't even know if you've slipped into it. My shadow mission is different than your shadow mission but almost always our shadow mission is centered on pleasure, comfort, selfishness, and sometimes darkness. And a shadow mission is deadly—it can kill relationships, it can kill your joy, it can kill your sense of God's presence and love.

Last week we saw how all this came into play in the book of the Bible called Esther. In a nutshell, the events unfolded like this: Xerxes is the king of Persia, the largest empire in the world at that time. He's a power hungry, praise hungry, insecure man who throws a 6 month long party for the officials of his kingdom. When he's showing off all his possessions, at one point when he's had way too much to drink, he wants to show off his queen to everybody. He wants her to parade naked in front of this drunk crowd. She says, “No way!” He throws a fit and deposes her as his queen. He then has a beauty contest to find a replacement queen. Esther, a young Jewish woman, ends up winning the favor of the king. She's made queen of Persia. Her adoptive father is a man named Mordecai and he's one of the king's officials.

Haman is the king's right hand man—second in command of the entire empire. He's got insecurity issues. It enrages him that Mordecai, Esther's dad, won't bow down to him when he walks past. Haman is so enraged, in fact, that he wants to kill Mordecai, but not only that, Haman wants to kill all of Mordecai's people, all the Jews in the Empire. He dupes the king into signing a decree to have all the Jews exterminated, about 75,000 of them. And when Mordecai finds out he has his freak-out moment, but then realizes that maybe, just maybe, Esther, his daughter can stop this mass murder, this pogrom. He asks Esther to approach the king to see if he won't cancel the decree so all the Jews don't die.

Esther tells him that the problem is the king has this rule that if anybody approaches him without being asked, that man or woman is put to death on the spot. The only exception is that if he extends his golden scepter to that person, then they'll be spared. She says, “And on top of that the king hasn't even called for me in a month and I don't know how much influence I have with him. He might want to get rid of me!”

Mordecai says to her, “Esther, who knows, but that you were brought to this royal position for a time such as this. This is your mission. Don't give in to your shadow mission of comfort, of a life of luxury.”

Mordecai's words help Esther to clarify the difference between her real mission and her shadow mission. A transformation happens. Her heart begins to break over the things that God's heart breaks over. She realizes that the lives of tens of thousands of people are at stake. She finally agrees and says, “I will go to the king and if I die, I die, but I will at least try to stop this death sentence for all my people.” She takes three days to pray and fast and prepares for what might be her own death. That's where we left off last week.

Because of Mordecai's words, she is a different person. Yes, she's still scared, but she's ready to do what she was put on the earth to do. She doesn't know the outcome. All she knows is that this is the next step that God is asking her to take.

Let's talk about this for a second. Lots of Christians pray to God and say, “God show me what your will is. Tell me what you want me to do so that I can consider it.” Or we say, “God if I do this, then what is the outcome going to be? Tell me that.” Here's the problem with that: It takes no faith to follow Jesus if he tells you everything that's going to happen. Faith means listening to God and taking that next step even though you don't know what's going to happen. Esther new the next step God wanted her to take, but she did not knowing the outcome. It was an act of faith to stand there before the king.

She did it because her heart was breaking over the things that God's heart was breaking over. Bill Hybels calls that a holy discontent. And it makes me wonder: Is there something you see in this world and when you see it you say to yourself, "That is so wrong. That should not be. I can't stand it when that happens to somebody." Is there some need, some injustice, to gap of mercy you see that breaks your heart? Because that could very well be God saying to you, "This breaks my heart, and I want it to break yours, and I want you to do something about it." And it's probably not going to be comfortable. It's probably not going to feed your shadow mission.

Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." Too many Christians today are saying, "Jesus I will take up my easy chair and follow you." As Jesus calls you to take a next step, please know, please accept that that next step could be the most uncomfortable thing he's ever asked you to do. Esther was willing to take her next step not knowing what was going to happen on the other side.

So let's pause for a minute and hit the question again: **What's your shadow mission?** Everybody has one. If your life just goes on default mode, where will it drift? Maybe it's about being able to project an attractive image, because in our culture that's a big deal. It was for Esther.

Maybe it's about more money. Maybe it's about more power, more security. Maybe your shadow mission is a quasi-spiritual one, looking really good spiritually, or feeling self-righteous, or kind of superior to folks.

Maybe your shadow mission is to get people to approve of you. Last week I got a call from a friend's wife who works at my youngest daughter's school. She said, "Aaron, a mom at school told me today that her five year old heard from your daughter, Abby (who's also 5) that you had been arrested for drunk driving." That's not even funny. I mean who believes a 5 year old? Besides, Abby was driving and she had not had a drop! But seriously, I couldn't sleep that night worrying about that what that mom thought of me. I don't even know who it was. Approval.

Maybe your shadow mission has to do with bitterness or cynicism and you want to be able to vent that as often as possible. Maybe it's to go through life and say clever things, and be funny, and get attention.

I know what my shadow mission is. It's selfish, it's about approval, it's about fear, and I know apart from God's help, my life would deteriorate into that shadow mission. What's your shadow mission?

The second question: **Who is Mordecai in your life?** Who is the spiritually wise person who knows you, and loves you, and helps you discern God's activity and calling in your life, and loves you enough to challenge you when you're ready to settle for your shadow mission? And who are you a Mordecai to? Who do you do that for?

More and more people have nobody. No Mordecai. I heard again recently that Americans are far more isolated today than they were two decades ago and a growing number of people say they have nobody in their life that they can confide in. If you don't have a Mordecai, start praying and ask God to send you one. One of the best ways around here to find a Mordecai is to be part of a home group. That is part of why we have them. By the way we've got 30 groups getting ready to start next week! That's awesome.

Some of you have known God for a while and have grown spiritually; you could lead a home group like that. You could help a group of people become Mordecai for each other. And if you are feeling a tug at your heart then my words to you are the words Mordecai had for Esther: **"...and who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).**

Well, Esther had a Mordecai and that meant that everything changed. So this beauty queen, this trophy wife, fasts and prays for three days, puts on her royal robes. You can imagine what's going on inside of her. She goes to the King's inner rooms and she stands in the inner court and waits for the King, in defiance of the law. Life or death hangs in the balance. She sees the King and there is that moment when he reaches out his golden scepter and she is going to live, at least for today. Then in Chapter 5, verse 3, the King asked, **"What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom. It will be given to you."** (Esther 5:3)

Now it looks like she can have anything she wants at this point. But just know that this is king talk for, “I am in a really good mood today; I may even let you hold the remote tonight. What is it you want?” He doesn’t mean this literally.

So what she says is, “I’m having a party. I want you to come and bring Haman too.” So the King and Haman went to the little dinner party that Esther had prepared and as they were drinking wine, the King again asks Esther, **“Now what is your petition? Ask and it will be given to you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom and it will be granted?”** Esther replied, **‘My petition and my request is this: If the King regards me with favor and if it pleases the King to grant my petition and my request, then let the King and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the King’s question’**” (vs. 7) .

What is going on here? Why doesn’t she just tell him? Because she is taking one step at a time in her real mission. The first step was to approach the king. The second step was to get the king to the first banquet. The next step was to get him to the next banquet. She’s taking small steps because this is big scary stuff.

Listen, Christianity is following Jesus one uncomfortable step at a time. Take one step at a time toward that thing that breaks your heart. Is it people that are still struggling to come back from the tornado? Is it the people that lost everything and are living in FEMA trailers? Is it single moms? Is it people with addictions? Is it at-risk school kids? You don’t have to try and fix those problems all at once, just take one step. And then take another. And as you do God starts to do some amazing things.

We have a side story to take care of in Chapter 5. After that first party the evil Haman leaves feeling good. But again he runs into Mordecai and again, Mordecai won’t bow down to him. He calls his wife and friends together and boasts about his wealth, and power, and kids. He boasts about how he was the only person the queen invited to the party with the king. Then he says, **“But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the King's gate”** (Esther 5: 9-13). Haman is obsessed with the one thing he cannot have—Mordecai bowing down. That’s a sure sign your shadow mission has gained control, when you’ve got everything, all kinds of blessing, but you can’t see them because of the one thing you don’t have. It’s an infection in your life that spreads to everything.

Haman vents all this and his wife suggests that he build a gallows seventy five feet high and have Mordecai hanged on it. So he says, “Yeah, that is a good idea.”

That same night, the King can’t sleep and when the King can’t sleep, nobody sleeps. So, the King asks his servants to read to him because when you are the King you don’t have to read to yourself. So he says he wants to have his servants read The Annals of the King to him. Guess what the Annals of the King is about? It is about the King. So they start to read to him and they read this story about this guy named Mordicai and how he saved King Xerxes life and had never been honored for it.

Haman shows up the next day prepared to ask if he can hang Mordecai. He doesn’t know about this reading thing. Haman walks in and before Haman can say a word the King asks Haman what should be done for the man that the King delights to honor? Haman thinks, “Well, I know who that is. Who is there that the King would want to honor other than me?” So he answers the King: **“For the man the King delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the King has worn and a horse that 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!”** (Esther 5:7-9).

And the King says (now imagine this moment) the king says, “Hey, that’s a good idea, Haman. The man that I delight to honor is Mordecai. And so I want to honor him, and you be the guy who pulls the horse. Great idea, Haman!”

When you read that you might think that God is trying to punish Haman. But no. I think that God is trying to get Haman’s attention and show him some mercy. God is trying to give Haman a way out, a chance to change his mind, to stop his crazy scheme to kill Mordecai and all the other Jews. God is doing this to try to open Haman’s eyes.

For some of you, God's doing the same thing. He's trying everything to get your attention before you really blow it big time, and mess your life up so bad that it will never be the same. God loves you enough, just like he loved Haman enough, to try to get your attention. But Haman doesn't get it.

And now from here it's all downhill for Haman real fast. He's humiliated by this. Esther holds a banquet the next night, and she tells the King the whole story, that she and her people are about to be destroyed, and the King says, "Who's going to do that?" And she says, "This wicked Haman." And Haman ends up being hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai. The king has Esther find a new right hand man. And guess who that is? Mordecai. The king calls off the decree. The Jews are saved.

All because one man was willing to name reality to a young woman—who knows, but you have come to your position for such a time as this? And one woman said no to a shadow mission of safety, and security, and wealth; and yes to following God to the point of giving her life; and now, and now and now and now, it's our day. It's your day. You are where you are. I don't know why, maybe you don't either, but you have been given what you have been given, and you are where you are, for a reason. It may not be as dramatic, but you have a mission. And you have a challenge.

And the bad news is, on our own strength, we'll always give in to our shadow mission. But the good news is, Jesus understands, and he is working, for your good. By the way, you should know that Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions the word God. The reason that God is not mentioned is because it's all about God. God is doing things behind the scenes in every single part of the story. Working thing to bless people and guide them, and offer them mercy, and second chances. God is behind the scenes working through people's personalities and experiences; their good decisions, and bad. God's not mentioned in this story, but he's the main character anyway!

God is working in your life, whether you believe in him or not, whether you care, whether you feel him there or not. But the minute, the second that you take step toward that real mission, that thing that God's calling you to do, that thing that breaks your heart because it breaks God's heart, the second you take that step in that direction, God begins to unleash things into your life.

When the tornado hit and I was asked to speak at the memorial service, I told them I didn't want to do it. They didn't ask me because I'm a good speaker. They asked because our church was hit so hard and I've been around here for so long. When they asked me I gave them the names of two other pastors that I think are better speakers, better men than I am. I told them that with people missing and lives lost, and our building a wreck, I needed to be concentrating on other things. I told them that if I do this, I don't use Higher Power language; that I would talk about Jesus straightforward. I thought that would really scare them off. They said, "We want you to do it." I didn't want to do it. And I was so glad when it was over. But the outpouring because of it was, and is, still unbelievable to me. That was one of those, time-such-as-this, moments. There's a possibility that I'll speak briefly at a conference of 15,000 people in October about Joplin and what happened here and how people can help. That makes me really nervous, and I feel very inadequate to do something like that, but if it can do some good for this city that I love so much, and the people here that I love so much, then maybe that is a time-such-as-this moment too. But I've got to take a next step. And so do you.

Your real mission will take you somewhere, not just driving in circles around the roundabout. Lots of activity, no real movement. God is working in your life for a moment such as this time. Take your next step in mission and watch God unleash some of the things you've been really, longing for. Esther's story is your story. It's my story. It's God's story, for a time such as this. It's your move. And for today that is the good news. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am deeply thankful for Rev. John Ortberg's book, *Overcoming Your Shadow Mission*, and Pastor Perry Noble of Newspring Church, for his teaching on Esther.