

*On August 21, 2015, two American service members Spencer Stone and Alek Skarlatos, and their friend Anthony Sadler, boarded a train in Amsterdam headed to Paris. These three tourists had planned to do some sightseeing but unknown to them a 25-year-old Moroccan terrorist had boarded the train armed with an AK47 rifle, a pistol, a box cutter, and 270 rounds of ammunition. He was planning a terrorist attack during which he wanted to kill all the passengers on the train to grab the attention of the world.*

*When the terrorist opened fire, the three American immediately sprang into action to engage the terrorist and subdue him. Stone was stabbed with the box cutter but his injuries were not life threatening and using first aid skills, the three Americans tended to those who had been wounded.*

*As you might imagine, the story made headlines around the world, and later, Clint Eastwood made a movie about it called “The 15:17 to Paris” where these three men actually played themselves in the movie. Now, here’s what you may not know:*

*These three young men first met at a Christian school they attended in Sacramento, and their faith played a role in their lives. They felt the Lord had prepared them and placed them on that train for such a time as that. Skarlatos later told a journalist that if you look at the odds of everything that happened and how close they came to dying on so many different occasions, it’s too coincidental for it just to be chance. It had to be God looking out for us.*

*Since then, other details have emerged. Though the three young men had known each other in high school, their lives had gone in three different directions. They found themselves together on that trip for the very first time. The three decided to leave Amsterdam a day earlier, and at the last minute, they decided to switch from coach to first class which is where the attack took place. Stone had training in two skills that proved useful, BJJ and advanced first aid.*

*Also, remarkably, the terrorist’s AK47 had misfired which allowed the three to subdue him – and the problem wasn’t with the rifle, the problem was with a faulty round of ammunition.*

*Stone later said that he had never felt calmer in his life when, at the moment the terrorist aimed his rifle at him and pulled the trigger, nothing happened due to the faulty ammo.*

*Another unexpected fact was that the terrorist dropped the magazine from his handgun just before reaching the three Americans. “We know these series of events were not a coincidence” said Sadler whose father is a Baptist preacher.*

*“It’s like our lives were leading up to that moment. You don’t always know what God has planned for you, but what we have come to realize, in hindsight is that this was all part of His plan. That’s where we were supposed to be that day. In hindsight, it looks like we were preparing our whole lifetime for that moment. There’s no denying it.”*

That’s an awesome story where God put the right people, in the right place, at the right moment, to do the right thing.

The Bible is full of accounts just like that, and this morning, we will continue to look at one such account, as God in His great wisdom and divine providence, placed someone exactly where they needed to be to play a role in rescuing God’s people from harm.

We are making our way through the book of **Esther**, and if you recall from last week, Haman – an enemy of the Jews, who just also happens to be the number two man in the entire Persian Empire, goes to King Ahasuerus and easily convinces him that it would be in the best interest of the king to exterminate a “certain people” he described as different and rebellious. The king, foolishly trusted Haman, and granted him permission to do what he wanted to do with these people, and then Haman was given the king’s signet ring. With that ring, Haman could create any document he wanted to, stamp the seal with the ring, and then what was written would become law – and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Nisan – the first month of the Jewish calendar, Haman did just that.

Haman summoned the royal scribes, and under his direction, the scribes wrote out the extermination orders against the Jews. These orders were stamped with the king’s signet ring making them official, and then they were distributed to all the regional officials and all the governors across the known world.

Every province within the Persian Empire received the order to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews. It was a license to kill – announced publicly, announced in advance, and it was to be carried out on one single day – eleven months from then.

With Haman’s extermination order in place – the fate of the Jews appeared to be sealed, and that brings us to **Esther 4**, beginning with **verse 1**.

**<sup>1</sup> When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. <sup>2</sup> He went as far as the king’s gate, for no one was to enter the**

**king's gate clothed in sackcloth. <sup>3</sup> In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.**

When Mordecai learned about the extermination order, we are told he becomes grief-stricken. We know that people express their grief and sorrow in different ways. We tend to hide our emotions, we are a little more reserved with them, but in that culture, they were very visible and vocal when expressing what they felt. We are told that Mordecai **tore his clothes**, and put on **sackcloth and ashes**, which is an activity we see often in the Bible when God's people were dealing with extreme grief and sorrow, and if you don't know, **sackcloth** is a coarsely woven fabric, usually made of black goat's hair, and it hung on a person like a stiff burlap sack. It's uncomfortable to wear – I think it's meant to be uncomfortable, and on top of that, they would heap ashes upon themselves, especially upon their heads, as a sign of distress and despair, and all of this would be accompanied with loud wailing and crying.

This was occurring all over the Persian Empire – from India to Ethiopia among what is estimated to have been 15 million Jews. As the terrible news spreads, so does the grief and the mourning. It's happening everywhere and that's what Mordecai is doing. He's grief-stricken, and maybe he's also realizing that his stubborn disrespect towards Haman had a part to play in all of this. So, in sackcloth and covered in ashes, Mordecai makes his way to the city square, in front of the king's gate, presumably to get Queen Esther's attention. In his condition, Mordecai knew he could not go through the gate, for the gate was too close to the palace, and if the king happened to see him, that might upset the king, and no one wants to upset the king.

Now, it's important to point out that Esther knew nothing about this extermination order created by Haman and blindly authorized by her husband the king. As the Queen in that culture, she lived in a sheltered and secluded environment. She lived in her own little world of pampered royalty – surrounded by luxury, and servants, and a harem, and she would have no knowledge of the turmoil occurring outside the palace.

Anyway, Esther learns that Mordecai is in the city square in sackcloth and ashes, so let's pick up beginning with **verse 4**.

**<sup>4</sup> Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he**

**might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept them. <sup>5</sup> Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king's eunuchs, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.**

Here we are told that Esther's servants learn about Mordecai's condition and they inform her. Again, Esther has no clue about what is happening, but she knows that Mordecai cannot be around the king's gate in sackcloth and ashes – he could lose his job, he could lose his life if the king sees him, so she sends out a change of clothes for Mordecai to persuade him to stop, but Mordecai will not accept them.

Since Esther lives in isolation within the palace and cannot talk directly with her cousin Mordecai, she sends out one of the king's servants named **Hathach** to find out why Mordecai is making a spectacle of himself near the gate. Esther wants to know what's happening, and beginning with **verse 6**, this is what we are told.

**<sup>6</sup> So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate. <sup>7</sup> Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. <sup>8</sup> He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people.**

Hathach finds Mordecai in the city square, and Mordecai lays it all out. He tells Hathach all that has happened with Haman, tells him about the promise of ten thousand talents of silver to the king, in fact, Mordecai provides Hathach with the evidence – a copy of the extermination order of the Jews with the king's stamp on it. Mordecai tells Hathach, *“Give this to Esther, let her see this for herself, and then she can go to the king and plead for the lives of her people.”*

That sounds like a simple request of Queen Esther – but it's not that simple. Let's continue beginning with **verse 9**.

**<sup>9</sup> Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther. <sup>10</sup> Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him to reply to Mordecai: <sup>11</sup> “All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days.” <sup>12</sup> They related Esther's words to Mordecai.**

I'm sure Hathach feels like a tennis ball at this point, bouncing back and forth between Esther and Mordecai – completely clueless in how important he is in God's plan of saving the Jews.

Someone once said, "*Great doors swing on small hinges*" and in some respects, that describes Hathach. Unbeknownst to him, he is literally in the middle of something much greater than he knows. He has no idea what is hanging in the balance, but he faithfully keeps at it, serving as the link between Mordecai and Esther. He explains to Esther what Mordecai told him, gives her a copy of the extermination order to read for herself, and then shares the request for Esther to approach the king and plead for mercy on behalf of her people.

That sounds like a reasonable request but there's a problem with it – access to the king was strictly controlled. In Persia – no one – including the queen, can approach the king without a personal invitation. It's the law – a law that was likely put into place to prevent assassination attempts and to manage the king's time, and anyone who went before the king on their own, without an invitation, could be killed on the spot unless the king extended his **golden scepter** granting them life. That's the one law everyone understood and followed, to include Mordecai, and to ask Esther to approach the king would put her life in serious jeopardy.

So, although the king was her husband, Esther couldn't go up to him and say "*honey bunch, we need to talk*" and she couldn't give him the "silent treatment" either because she hadn't seen the king in thirty days. Esther is in a difficult spot, she's not sure what to do – maybe she has fallen out of favor with the king, and she instructs Hathach to go back and explain all this to Mordecai.

Well, Mordecai is given all this information, and he replies to Esther. Beginning with **verse 13**, he says,

**<sup>13</sup> Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. <sup>14</sup> For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"**

Okay, there is a lot to digest in this passage, and the first thing Mordecai explains to Esther is that if the extermination of all the Jews occurs as planned – she will not **escape**.

*“Esther, once the killing starts – it’s not going to stop. Once the crowds start killing the Jews one by one, they’ll start with the common people first, but Esther, they’ll wind up on your doorstep and they won’t stop killing until they’ve killed all the Jews including you and your family. Don’t think that your position exempts you from what is going to happen, because there are no exemptions in the extermination order. Just because you’re the queen, you are not out of trouble. You may be the last to go, but sooner or later, you’re going to go.”*

Mordecai gives Esther a dose of reality – but he’s not done, and although God is not mentioned here, Mordecai explains something about God and he says, **“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place.”**

*“Esther, if you don’t say something, I still believe that God will deliver His people in some other way. God’s people will not perish. God has promised to preserve His people, and somehow, someday, He will deliver them – with you or without you – **but wouldn’t it be really cool if He did it through you?**”*

Mordecai had confidence in God and seemed to understand that God was working behind the scenes, and then he asks Esther this famous question, **“And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?”**

*“Esther, think about this – it’s not a coincidence that you, an orphaned Jewish girl, is on the throne. It’s no accident that you are the Queen of the Persian Empire. It’s not dumb luck that put you in the palace. **Esther, could this explain why you were chosen to be right where you are at this very moment?** If you look back Esther, it seems that everything in your life, everything that’s happened to you – both good and bad, has led you to this moment.”*

And although it’s not said, but surely implied here, *“Esther, it’s God who chose you – you are the right person, in the right place, at the right moment. God has put you right where you are **for such a time as this** to do the right thing and intercede for your people.”*

So, Esther had a choice to make. She could choose to do nothing and remain silent – hoping it will all go away – hoping for the best, or she could choose to accept the obvious. She alone was the right person, in the right place, and the right moment, and now she needs to do the right thing. She was the one for such a time as this.

Edward Everett Hale wrote these words which speak about Esther’s choice:

*I am only one,  
But still, I am one.  
I cannot do everything;  
But still, I can do something;  
And because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.*

Esther chooses to do the right thing even though she doesn't know what's going to happen. She doesn't know how it will turn out for her, but now she's determined to allow God to work *through* her.

Then beginning with **verse 15**. We are told,

**<sup>15</sup> Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, <sup>16</sup>“Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.”  
<sup>17</sup> So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.**

Esther tells Mordecai to assemble the Jews in Susa to spend three days in fasting. Now, although God is not mentioned here – nor is prayer for that matter, in the Bible, they seem to go hand in hand as fasting is typically associated with an intense time of prayer to God – but it's more than that – it's more than period of time where you don't eat or drink.

In **Isaiah 58**, God explained to His people that instead of just going through the religious motions of fasting – trying to look really spiritual on the outside – prayer and fasting was a means of humbling oneself in a moment of brokenness – to first get right with God, and then to get right with one another. It's a time of reflection to look beyond the surface and to look into one's heart, and that's what Esther is calling her people to do.

After prayer and fasting, which is a great place to start when you putting your life on the line, Esther says she will do what it takes to save her people. She will appear before the king – in clear violation of the law, and she concludes with the statement: **“If I perish, I perish.”**

**Sometimes it comes to that doesn't it? If I perish, I perish.** Esther is not taking a fatalist attitude with those words, instead she had come to that place – the right place – the tough place, where she fully surrenders her life to God and leaves the results with Him.

For us, in the here and now, there are times when we have to make the tough choices and do hard things even though we don't know how it will turn out – and eventually, I think we all have to come to that place where we can say,

*“I'm going to do what I'm supposed to do, I'm going to surrender, I'm going to follow the Lord, moment by moment, step by step, even though I don't know where He leads me or what will happen.”*

In spite of the fear and the doubt, especially in the fear and the doubt, that's what acting in faith looks like. I'm just going to follow the Lord, no matter where He takes me, no matter how dire it looks, no matter the outcome – for I trust Him enough to leave the results in His hands – no matter what.

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