**Trouble in Paradise: Our Depravity**

**Esther 1-2**

September 18, 2016

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Our Senior Pastor Ritch and his wife, Kimberly, have just begun a 9 week sabbatical to rest and recharge. So for the next five weeks, it’s my privilege to lead us on a brief journey through the Book of Esther. And I chose this story for several reasons, primarily because of recent and impending economic and political uncertainty. I believe it offers a ray of hope.

We’ve spent the last year in the dense doctrine of Romans and we’ve almost reached that famous promise in 8:28: “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.” And I thought this was an opportunity to have a change of pace and reinforce this promise by asking, How? What does that look like? And studying perhaps the most profound Biblical illustration, the Old Testament story of Esther.

It’s a story where God’s name is never mentioned, and yet His fingerprints are everywhere. It’s a story where real life complexity, political ambiguity, questionable morality come together. And a hidden God in a hostile world turns grave danger into a great deliverance and transforms desperate instability into a decisive victory. It really illustrates all human history is actually one giant reversal where Satan’s darkness is overpowered by God’s light. This story showcases what you might call the elegance of providence. Or we’ll put it like this: Our aim is to celebrate the beauty of destiny. And so we shall celebrate.

I’m excited to begin! To awaken your appetite, here’s a preview of our 5 course menu. First, today we’ll study “What’s wrong with this picture?” and face our depravity in *Trouble in Paradise*. Next week, we’ll examine our enemy and where evil comes from in the *Rise of the Nemesis*. We’ll study our strategy and what to do about it in *Leap of Faith*. And then we’ll test if there’s any hope when we behold God’s supremacy in *A Turn of Fate*. And finally we’ll answer the question, “Who wins?” and celebrate our victory in *The Great Reversal*.

This is an entire book in just five weeks. So each time, we’ll cover a lot of material. I recommend that you don’t get too caught up in taking notes. What you want to have is your Bible because we’ll be going through it as we go through the message. Do what helps you keep your attention, but remember that the rest is online for later review. We’ll be reading the verses as we go through the story.

For many years, in the attic of my wife’s childhood home was a stuffed animal frog. It was given to my father-in-law before he began his own business, when he worked for the City of Los Angeles Sanitation Department. And through the course of making rounds, he frequently passed this yard with children playing in the sprinklers. And when they found out he had a young daughter at home, they offered him this toy gift.

Well, years went by. And a young man from that family was a performer. And he went on to be very popular and broke multiple world records. He was the only artist to be inducted into the Hall of Fame for both dance and song writing. He is the global phenomenon for many decades known around the world as the “King of Pop,” Michael Jackson. In 2009 he announced his final concert series entitled “This is It.” It was 50 shows in several countries, all sold out. And three weeks before the first concert, he has a drug overdose and dies. It triggers a global response. Web traffic goes up almost 20%. User overload crashed TMZ, LA Times, AOL instant messenger, Twitter and Wikipedia. It was a global outpouring of grief and a celebration of his life. There was a procession, a funeral, and a tomb, and eventually things go back to normal. And in the silence, the title of his last concert still hangs in the air. “This is it.” It is known to some as the greatest concert that never happened. What was intended as a statement ends as a question. This is it? That’s all? Nothing more? His reign as king left to tarnish by way of history and controversy? We know the power of disappointment, but it takes the most successful kings to prove there are no exceptions. Paradise is lost, never to be regained, at least not without some trouble.

Israel knows the pain of disappointment. They enjoyed the splendor of Saul, David, Solomon. Each hero fell in his own way. Disobedience had tarnished their glory. The paradise they had thought to regain, the glory they had been called to display, the garden presence they’d been commissioned to enjoy was soiled. So deeply in fact, that God was forced by His own word to send them into exile, abducted by foreigners. Decades pass. A small remnant returns to Jerusalem to rebuild. But thousands of Jews remain scattered abroad, subject to the pagan politics of Gentiles. Israel knows the trouble of paradise lost. It’s a problem we understand in our day just as well. With the most advanced technologies, the finest luxuries, and yet with ISIS or cancer or depression, we’re forced to ask, “Is this really it?” It’s painfully obvious that something is wrong with this picture. As perfect as our wonderful kingdoms appear, no paradise is without its troubles.

The reason is our depravity, our sin, our fallenness. The evil that expelled us at the start keeps us from ever returning, with one exception. There is a promise that one day a Mighty King, an unblemished King, would suffer our trouble so that we could enjoy His paradise. It’s a promise that strangely finds fulfillment in the darkest depths of depravity. So while we’re waiting in this world of trouble, what does God want us to do? How do we respond? The opening chapters of Esther offer us four Acts to set this right, here. It offers us four short stories and four ways of how to live in a world of trouble. When we face this trouble of senseless power, prosperous pagans, the world has it all, we watch from the outside, how do we respond?

**I. Get Ready: Brace for the splendor of God’s glory.**

Get ready with expectancy. That means anticipation, even joy. To brace yourself, prepare yourself because you’re about to get knocked over.

My senior year of college was a busy time. I was finishing a Finance class among others. I was at the tax office in the mornings, serving as a waiter in the evenings. And I got invited to dinner with this friend and his parents. I almost didn’t go. I was so busy, coming off an evening shift and wanting some sleep. I talked with my friend Daniel.

He said, “What are you doing tonight?”

“I don’t know. I got invited with Adam to this place. I’m not going to do it.”

“Where were they going to go?”

“Oh, some place called *Ruth’s Chris*, or something. I don’t know.”

And he goes, “Wait! Ruth’s Chris? You gotta go! You gotta do what you’ve gotta do and go.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. This place sounds weird. But I’m looking at his face, and he’s kind of bracing me like this is going to be a big deal. So, I make the effort, I jump in the car. I needed that anticipation because it was going to take about an hour to get there. We drive, and then when I arrive, suddenly I understand *Ruth’s Chris*. There was an 11 ounce tender cut, perfectly buttered filet on plates heated hundreds of degrees and sizzled through the entire meal. We have lobster, signature three-cheese macaroni, whipped, warm sweet potatoes with the savory pecan crust, tender grilled asparagus, house-made buttery hollandaise sauce, flame-prepared crème Brulee custard topped with fresh berries and mint.

I hardly remember the conversation. For a college student, this was paradise. I mean, my friend had convinced me to get ready and brace for this meal. And even at the mention of it, our mouths begin to water. When we taste the best this world offers, it should inspire us to salivate and thirst and brace for the splendor of the Designer who is to come.

Story #1 we’ll entitle “A Swanky Feast.” And here it is hosted by the King of Persia, named Ahasuerus. He is known in history by his given name, Xerxes, the son of Darius the Great. Here, he is a ruler of the Persian empire. And this is the opening money shot about some senseless opulence or luxury or wealth. Within this first act we find four examples of God’s splendor for which we can brace. They parallel the lesser splendor of the King of Persia, Xerxes. There are four observations.

1. His sweeping authority.

We’re told the setting and given the reach of his reign.

*1 Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, 2 in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel,*

There was one king to rule them all. There are three symbols of his authority here. The geographical area is comprehensive. It is from India to Ethiopia. It’s like that winning board game *Risk*. There’s no country that his kingdom doesn’t touch. And second, the political scope is expansive, 127 provinces. Third, the imperial stage is impressive. It was a royal throne in Susa, a citadel. It’s one thing to have a winter home. He has a winter palace. His authority is broad and sweeping.

2. His secure sovereignty.

He holds this decadent feast. This is Eden 2.0!

*3 in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, 4 while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. 5 And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.*

There are two aspects to his sovereignty here. First, the military motivation. History clues us in that this was preparation for war. It was a show of power to push for military confidence in preparing for an upcoming campaign. All the armies were coming in and it was probably designed to avenge the death of his father, Darius, who died at the hands of the Greeks near Athens, at the battle of Marathon. So it’s a demonstration of power, building confidence and allies. Leaders are probably rotating to attend this feast because second, there’s an unheard of mad duration. This was 180 days. You’ve heard of holidays; this is practically a holi-year. It was 26 weeks of an exhibition of power. After these days, there’s a grand finale. It is a week long feast at the citadel. This is powerful imagery, really. A palace garden filled with splendor and glory. It is beauty and authority reminiscent of Eden, a paradise of peace. His sovereignty is secure.

3. His stunning majesty.

*6 There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. 7 Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king.*

He flaunts a collection of priceless fabrics and craftsmanship. This an exotic, ornate utopia. This is called breaking out the finest china. There are designer, custom-made, one-of-a-kind goblets beaming with gold and bubbling with red wine. This palace sparkles like a royal resort. Even the Kleenex was sprinkled with gold. You and I register at *Bed & Bath*. Xerxes brings the *Beyond*. His majesty is stunning!

4. His absurd generosity.

He holds an open bar. You might call this “on the house.” For those brides who have ever cried over wedding RSVP’s, here is the guest list. It’s endless.

*5 And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.*

And the drink limit is bottomless.

*7 Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. 8 And drinking was according to this edict: “There is no compulsion.” For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.*

The royal allowance is preposterous!

*9 Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.*

This is just on the side.

I recently read about this engaged couple who described their method of maintaining a healthy relationship. You’ve heard of his and hers mugs. They have his and hers luxury mega-yachts. His is the 7th largest privately owned vessel in the world. Hers is 192 feet with two bars, a Jacuzzi, gym, library, and a private chef. It costs $340,000 a week to maintain, plus $40,000 for fuel. Well, what we have here in Esther is a his and hers royal feast. There is absurd generosity here.

There is a one word response to this first act: Wow! There is sweeping authority, secure sovereignty, stunning majesty, and absurd generosity. Wow! But why would God save His people a taste of such a pagan feast? Is He intimidated by it? Of course not!

Psalm 49:16-20 Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases. For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him. For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed—and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light. Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.

God is not intimidated because He will tell you of another man. This is a man who has been given full authority. This is a man whose feast never ends. He conquered sin, Satan, even death, and now enjoys the most secure sovereignty. He is the creator, sustainer and possessor of all majesty. This is a Man named Jesus, who actually came in humility. He showed the greatest example of absurd generosity by

Philippians 2:7-8 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

When Pilate says in John 19:

John 19:10-11 So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

He’s not intimidated because

### Colossians 1:15-16 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

This is the same God Daniel saw.

Daniel 7:9-10 “As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

This is the same God in Revelation that John saw.

Revelation 1:12-18 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

This is the God before whom we say, “Wow!”

We get ready. We brace for the splendor of God’s glory. Our world is intoxicated with the American dream, but they’re not dreaming big enough. It’s like a child who can’t fathom how marital intimacy could be sweeter than chocolate. We’re so easily impressed with the glory of man, that we miss the Designer who empowers the gifts to give us a taste of Him.

Why would anyone visit our church? Why would any of our kids be drawn to the truth? If we’re jealous and enticed about other jobs, other cities, other families, other looks, hungry for success and food and money and popularity, always bracing for the next vacation, the next raise, the next house. What are we saying is worth our “wow”? What if we said brace yourself for Jesus because nothing will knock your socks off like God? Child of God, look up! Trouble is temporary, but paradise is forever. Get ready and brace for the splendor of God’s glory.

Xerxes here paints a picture of a perfect kingdom, but it’s going to fall short. It’s all part of a setup to prove that it takes but a fleeting breath, and this house of cards will collapse.

**II. Watch out: Beware the sting of God’s irony.**

When you face the trouble of reckless human pride and arrogant people get their way all the time, how do you respond? You watch out and you beware the sting of God’s irony. Watch out with sobriety. That means clarity, even fear.

As proud as we are that this world has advanced in many ways, it’s still a dark place. In one country, there’s a dictator who brutally purges his own officials. And he is rumored to have executed members of his own team by way of anti-aircraft weaponry. It’s a method designed to send a message, only it’s not the one he intends. Instead of being revered, he ends up being ridiculed. And actually in an ironic turn, his national government outlawed sarcasm. Frantic grasps for power betray a weak desperation to retain something that is slipping. Sometimes in seeking to defend our honor, we end up destroying it. And such is the case of Xerxes the Terrible. This is the sting of God’s irony.

Story #2 is about reckless arrogance. Now we move from a swanky feast to a cranky beast; from the money shot to the big shot. And within this act we note two of God’s ironic stingers to beware: His curse and His ridicule.

1. His persistent curse.

This is a battle of the sexes. It is no mistake that this garden celebration reminds us of Eden. It’s why the curse stands so starkly in this marital relationship. You remember that in Genesis 3 God said to the woman:

Genesis 3:16b Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.

Without God’s grace, this conflict, this brokenness poisons every relationship. It’s a curse that in verses 10-12 is in full swing. There are three guarantees about this curse. First, it’s real. We can look at the obvious existence here.

*10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus,*

We find that Xerxes, a man in control of the known globe, loses control of himself. By the last day of this feast, the pompous king has had too many glasses and his impulsive appetite expands beyond the pleasure of taste to the pleasure of sight.

*11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.*

So they are to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to show the people and the princes her beauty, because she was lovely to look at. It’s a derogatory position here before the king, in degrading attire, the royal crown, showing just who she belonged to, for this disgusting purpose of public exhibition. Her personal body would be the object of attention before this audience of all the people and princes. And the pathetic reason here is of showing off her attractiveness. This is a man of reckless indulgence and vulgar arrogance. We may be back in the garden, but the curse remains unbroken. It is real.

And second, it’s firm. Xerxes meets his match here. She is a woman of stubborn defiance. The curse isn’t just one-sided. It goes both ways. It insults the greatest king with humiliating resilience. His honor extends beyond his reach, and he finds the limits of his sovereignty. Vashti gives a shocking but not so surprising response.

*12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.*

Vashti rejects his authority and his agents and proves she is not a royal cream puff. The curse is firm. And third, it is nasty. Look at the devastating consequences here. The king had fuming fury. Do you catch God’s irony here? A king who rules over all except himself and his wife. Apparently Eden 2.0 has a virus. The sting of God’s persistent curse.

2. His elegant ridicule.

This is what you call legal overkill, here. Xerxes is an “off with the head” king. He has an excessive overreaction. In this little kangaroo court he makes a brash decree to enforce kingdom-wide submission and send a message. But in this episode, we can see at least three objects of God’s scorn. First, look at the king’s unbecoming weakness. Xerxes has a bit of a problem with indecision. His first action is to consult the committee. There is the narrator hint that this is his pathetic pattern. In fact, if you keep your eyes out for that throughout the rest of the book, you’ll notice there is a pattern of indecision.

*13 Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, 14 the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom):*

These are seven priority VIP committee members. Xerxes may be a pompous king, but he’s a bit of a puppet king. He is arrogant and dependent. Look at the haste with which he poses his question. He’s a bit whiny. What should be her consequence?

*15 “According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?”*

What should we do? There’s a bit of indecision. Like drunkenness, this is an unbecoming weakness for the king. You start to see the smile of God’s irony. Second, look at how God mocks Xerxes’ so-called wise counsel. Memucan gets a bright idea. He recommends a solution, but he’s unaware of three glaring flaws. First, the exaggeration he spins is way too paranoid, here.

*16 Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.*

The dramatic consequences he concocts here is a female mutiny, a full kingdom wife-strike.

*17 For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.’ 18 This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.*

That’s a bit of a paranoid exaggeration here. He turns a marital conflict into a national crisis. This leads to second, a ridiculously brash two-fold suggestion. His first suggestion is extreme. Banishment!

*19 If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus.*

So from the royal source was an irrevocable nature, unmistakable clarity and order a final, permanent banishment from the king himself. The second suggestion was less extreme and more enticing. After her banishment, replacement.

*19b And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.*

This is a brutal edict. It was impulsive, inordinate, irreversible. It was a ridiculously brash suggestion here. And third, we have some flimsy argumentation.

*20 So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.”*

This is an irresistible guarantee and an overstated promise. This is some unwise counsel. God is subtly mocking here. We sense His ridicule for the unnecessary zeal with which Xerxes carries out such foolishness. He takes the bait. We see two signs of this zeal. First, the pleasure with which he regards the silly edict.

*21 This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed.*

And second, the manner in which he follows this silly edict.

*22 He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.*

The king sent a letter to a ridiculous range and with an unnecessary detail. It carried a pointless command that every man be master in his own household. Everywhere in every script to everyone, he commands basically everything. You can almost see citizens rolling their eyes. “Here he goes again! Whatever that means!” He’s sending a message, but it’s not the one he intends. It’s an impulsive decree that he’ll soon regret. Sure, it wasn’t his idea, but does that really get him off the hook? It’s an unbecoming weakness here. This is unwise counsel and unnecessary zeal. This is the elegant ridicule of God and His persistent curse. Beware the sting of His irony.

The one word response to this act is: Yikes! We fear at the end really, not the king, but God and how He mocks such reckless arrogance. This true King who will execute His fury with laughter upon all who mock Him.

Psalm 2:1-12 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.” Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

This is our God, the one we fear! He says

Hebrews 10:30-31 For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And those who defy Him are without excuse because even now He offers mercy. This God, Jesus, suffered man’s ridicule and became the cure to this persistent curse.

Galatians 3:13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”

2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Watch out! Beware the sting of God’s irony. Know that not even the greatest ruler can escape God’s curse. And yet, as all of our lives are filled with sin and brokenness and shame, and all God has to do is hit the Replay button, for those who find refuge in Jesus, the tapes have been erased. Child of God, chin up! Trouble is temporary, but paradise is forever.

**III. Look close: Behold the sovereignty of God’s story.**

The king clearly has issues. Is there any hope for subjects when a man like this is in charge? But perhaps he’s not the one pulling the strings. You think, what about this trouble that we face with heartless human politics? When we’re at the mercy of the world’s system, how do we respond then? We look close and we behold the sovereignty of God’s story. Look close with curiosity, with fascination, with hope.

One of the fun parts of Dad being a seminary professor in Africa was inviting students over to our house. On Friday nights, they’d pile in and we’d taxi them over. We’d talk, play games, listen to music, watch videos. And one night, my dad pulled out his famous card trick. It was the same trick he’d pulled on me dozens of times growing up, only now I knew the secret. He had this group of students gathered and something special happened. They’d never seen magic before. And the way my dad perfected this trick was by pretending like he’d messed it up. He’d feign a mistake, but it was all part of the act. They’d think, “This guy is ridiculous!” And then all of a sudden, he would reveal a card. And the thing is, the more desperately terrible the trick seemed, the more magical the success became. And when they saw the card suddenly appear, they gave Friday nights a name that stuck for years, “House of Wonders.”

Magic is not destroyed by knowing the ending. We all know the guy is not going to die. The secret of magic is the same as this story. The more hopeless it gets, the more wondrous it is to behold. Look close at God’s story. Like a master magician, He exposes silhouettes and says, “Check this out!” So here it is: Act 3. It’s about a wondrous providence in which we look to a forlorn beauty, this girl, Esther. After the money shot and the big shot, here’s the long shot. And within this third story we look at four aspects of God’s sovereignty to behold.

1. His mysterious providence.

There are three independent human actions that are mysteriously influenced by God’s providence: memory, relationships and feelings. Recollection, interaction and emotion. God is involved in all three. Xerxes comes home from war. He loses his campaign, sees an empty throne, and remembers the incident.

*1 After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.*

The passive verb “what had been decreed against her” implies that the king doesn’t take responsibility for that. He remembers that crime of defiance and her punishment. Enter the relationships:

*2 Then the king's young men who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king.*

They offer a barbaric recommendation. They say, “There’s plenty of fish in the sea.” Here’s the process:

*3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. 4 And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” This pleased the king, and he did so.*

So, Step 1: Abduction. Step 2: Beautification. Step 3: Selection. And now the interaction sparks some emotion. This royal beauty contest pleased the king. Why not? Hundreds of virgins? A different woman every night for a year? And he does so. This is not a pretty picture! And yet behold memory, relationships, feelings and sin are all mysteriously directed by God’s providence. And somehow, God’s hands are not dirtied. We know God doesn’t tempt anyone, James says. (James 1:13) And yet,

Proverbs 21:1 The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.

This is a mystery that Pastor Ritch will explain when he returns to teach through Romans 9.

The story makes a sharp transition here.

2. His faithful protection.

Here we get a bit of a back story. Mordecai is the noble defender and Esther is the tragic orphan. These are tough conditions. And as we listen, we hear these two obstacles that God’s faithful protection overcomes. First, He is faithful to protect His people even when comfort is undeserved.

*5 Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.*

His nationality is emphasized here. They are foreign residents with a foreign name because of this tragic fate. Mordecai doesn’t belong there. He had been carried away, abducted from Jerusalem among the captives. Nebuchdnezzer, the king of Babylon had carried them away as God had sovereignly promised as a punishment, because he had stubbornly refused to obey. And yet, here he is. He is protected even though it is undeserved.

Second, God is faithful to protect His people even when comfort seems unavailable. His relationship with Esther is explained.

*7 He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.*

Her name is a Hebrew name for a sweet-smelling tree. They were cousins. This is a compassionate role he assumes, the adoptive parent of Hadassah. And we behold God’s faithful protection even when it seems unavailable. This is such a tragic situation. Her appearance is noted here, and yet we see her beauty is working against her. She’s in danger of being stuck in a harem, never to marry another. Do you ever wish you weren’t beautiful? Well, don’t wish too fast.

3. His intricate plan.

The savage contest begins. Three details prove the intricacy of His plan. First, look at the many players. There is the king, the competitors, and the custodian.

*8 So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. 9 And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem.*

This girl makes a good impression! But, she has a secret, her nationality.

*10 Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. 11 And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.*

He knew the danger. He was Esther’s protector. Every day, Mordecai walked in this casual role in front of the court of the harem to learn about her well-being and treatment. He wanted to know how Esther was and what was happening. There were many players.

And second, look at the unlikely odds here: the pageant process.

*12 Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women—*

Apparently the king’s eunuchs have beautifying women down to a degrading one-year science. And it was very detailed, involving diet and perfume and make-up etiquette. And at the end, they would enjoy this ritual adornment.

*13 when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. 14 In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.*

This was a cold, quick process. There was a no-return rule with one exception--the king’s delight and a personal summons by name. The odds are against Esther, but destiny is with her. So, third, look at her total victory.

*15 When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. 16 And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, 17 the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.*

In spite of her hidden lineage and background, she makes a shrewd move and asks for nothing except what Hegai advised. And she finally gets her turn. She is taken in to the king in his royal palace, and the impressions continue. Esther completely wins the king’s grace and favor. The result is coronation and confirmation. In spite of the many players and the unlikely odds, it was a total victory. Behold the intricacy of God’s plan.

4. His gracious compassion.

The king celebrates his new queen, and you can see the gentle smile of God’s sovereignty here.

*18 Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.*

The king gave a feast that has a Jewish theme, unknown to him. And then Xerxes shows off his famous, excessive generosity. He gave royal gifts, and get this. He canceled taxes! Whoever heard of such a thing? A king canceling taxes? Talk about a girl who makes an impression! Xerxes is over the top in his anger and also in his honor. It reminds me of Proverbs 19.

Proverbs 19:12 A king’s wrath is like the growling of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.

I have a question here about the morality of Esther and Mordecai. And the author doesn’t give us much. Is it right or wrong? He’s intentionally ambiguous because there is great complexity here. Let’s just say it is questionable at best. It’s simply not his focus. It’s more like real life. There’s no simple good guys and bad guys. This is about God working for His people. And no one can read this Act and not behold the sovereignty of God’s story. A one-word response as we see the details is: Interesting! It’s very interesting! Hmmm! It just so happened. This is what it’s like to watch God work. All of our lives, every choice, every sin, and you look back like Joseph.

Genesis 50:20a As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good…

It’s very interesting watching God work. Though His name is never mentioned, subtle hints are throughout this story. His fingerprints are on the most intricate details of our lives. This is our God! He is a faithful God. Child of God, chin up. Trouble is temporary, but paradise is forever. Look close and behold the sovereignty of His story. Get ready, watch out, look close and

**IV. Hold on: Bank on the skill of God’s strategy.**

If these are the marks of God’s fingerprints, then what is He waiting for? What’s the hold up? When we face the trouble of these dangerous predicaments in the world, where it seems like there’s no way out, how do we respond? We hold on and we bank on the skill of God’s strategy. Hold on with certainty, with conviction, with faith.

You can almost sense the disillusionment in the disciples’ eyes as Jesus just says it plainly. “Lazarus has died.” “And we’re going to him now? What was the hold up? Why are we waiting?” All Thomas can muster is that Jesus going. It’s a dangerous place. Let’s just go die with Him. And when Martha questions Him, you see compassion in Christ’s care and He weeps by the entrance of the tomb.

John 11:38-44 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Oh! This is why God waited. He wanted to reveal His glory. Sometimes His timing is slower than we’d want, but it’s always for a reason. And amidst the pain of delay, He calls us to hold on and bank on the skill of His strategy. Believe!

Story #4 is about the king’s negligence in spite of what we’ll call a foiled conspiracy. It’s about Mordecai exposing a cheap shot against the king. And within this Act we find three reasons to hold on tight.

1. His difficult challenges.

God often brings sudden challenges.

*19 Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. 21 In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.*

Mordecai overhears these guards hatching an assassination plot and this is what you’d call the dilemma of civic duty. This was a sudden challenge with three ingredients. There’s unavoidable timing. When the virgins were gathered together he was there, trying to overhear what is happening. It’s a fateful place. He’s just sitting in the King’s Gate. And then this is from some unexpected sources. There are these sensitive close-range position cards with a sinister intention. And their disloyalty is a step further than Vashti. They want assassination, revolution! This is dangerous talk. Even overhearing the whispers could be a crime. Mordecai faces a sudden and uninvited challenge. What is God doing?

2. His threatened people.

God’s people are threatened. Here’s “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

*20 Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.*

She obeyed Mordecai just as she was brought up because she recognizes that there are some threats against God’s people. And Mordecai does as well. There are many enemies. And here she shows a bit of a complex perspective on authority. It’s a challenge. This is not easy stuff. We’re reminded to hold on. God’s people are a threatened people. They get sudden challenges and we have to have faith.

3. His curious silence.

Mordecai is in this place of curious silence. This is a hard thing. “What am I supposed to do? An assassination plot? Maybe this is God’s justice. Maybe He’s going to take out the unrighteous king and Esther can reign. Maybe this is our way out? No, no, no. Too risky! What do I do? What’s God’s will? Is God about to bring a switch? Maybe not. Maybe He’s more patient. Maybe there’s a long game. I don’t know.” Mordecai doesn’t know what to do. What is God’s will? For whatever reason, he decides to report.

*22 And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. 23 When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.*

They were probably impaled on a stake. Plot 1 is exposed and there’s a darker one on the horizon. But just like that, the dusty record book shuts and the matter is over. It is an honorable mention in a boring scroll that will never again see the light of day, and God’s silence is deafening. “Thanks for nothing. You put me in this tough situation and dilemma. I put my neck out and then nothing? Did I miss God’s will?” Our one-word response to this is: Really? What are we supposed to do with this? You can bank on the skill of God’s strategy. It may even get worse for a while, but you can never thwart God’s plan to save His people. You can’t! This is faith, holding on. It means belief amidst silence.

Hebrews 11:1, 6 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

This sounds a lot like Romans 8:28. And we’re surrounded by this cloud of witnesses. These are people who can say, “You can bank on God. Trust Him. Hold on.”

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Hold on and bank on the skill of God’s strategy. To the world, it may seem baffling, like you have no hope. But we hold on with faith because we know God has a plan. He has a plan and we can trust Him. When things feel unjust, you hold on, you bank on the skill of God’s strategy. Trust Him to come through in an awesome way. Even upon that cross, when all seemed lost, what did the Son of God say to the suffering thief with whom we all relate? Child of God, chin up! Trouble is temporary, but paradise is forever.

This is our depravity. We are what is wrong with this picture. We desperately want people to look at us and say, “Wow!” And then we look at ourselves in the mirror and we end up saying, “Yikes!” And somehow we look back over God’s work in our lives and we marvel with suspicion, “Interesting!” And we face our current struggles and we feel like asking, “Really?” But it won’t last forever. Get ready! Watch out! Look close! Hold on!

In the game of Chess there’s a move called a swindle. It’s where a player in a seemingly losing position creatively tricks their opponent and comes out on top. And one of the best chess players in the 20th century was Grand Master, Frank Marshall. In 1904, in Monte Carlo, he came back from an almost certain loss and performed a world-famous swindle. And in Esther, we’re about to watch God pull off one of the greatest swindles of all time. It’s just a hint of the greatest reversal in history, when the eternal Creator will die and come back to life.

We can’t see God. We don’t know what He’s doing. And it may feel like He’s asleep while our families, our careers, our finances and our country collapses, but He isn’t. He’s awake and He’s working. In spite of all the pain, we’ll look back and see nothing could have been more beautiful. He sent Christ to suffer our trouble so we could join him in paradise. The best is yet to come, but before it gets better, it gets worse. Before the light of paradise can shine, the sky for a time must darken. Come back next week and we’ll look at the evil of our enemy in Part 2, *Rise of the Nemesis*.