Sermon: "Esther: Woman of Courage" NSAC September 4, 2022
Series: "Old Testament Bible Characters" Pastor Dave Sattler
Texts: Esther 1-10 Sub-Texts: Isaiah 55:8-9; 1 Corinthians 15:55-58; 2 Corinthians 4:7-10
Sources: Bible Gateway, NIV Life Application Bible, YouVersion. Commentaries: EBC, NAC, *"The Five Megilloth"* edited by Dr. A. Cohen (1946). Books: *"Faith For Exiles"* by David Kinnaman (2019) and *"Ordinary Prayer"* by Jeremy Rios (2012). Online: *Purim: English Feast of Lots* (brittanica.com). Images: unsplash.com & pixabay.com. Movie: *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003).

I. <*Slide*> Introduction:

- Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining us in person and online [we see you too] … today for the final instalment of our riveting Summer Series on "Old Testament Bible Characters."
- There've been a ton of highlights including: Abraham as an example of faith, Jacob and his battle for blessing, Ruth and her noble character; and then last week we looked at the wisdom of Solomon.
- Today we come to … Esther.
- A woman of tremendous courage, her story … is the stuff of Oscar-winning motion pictures, reads like a *NY Times* best-selling novel, and pops off the screen like a blockbuster Netflix mini-series.
- Full of political and racial conflicts, crazy power-plays, romance, and deception … the drama, intrigue, and irony in the Book of Esther is absolutely delicious!
- <***Slide***> The scene's set in 5th Century BC—chronologically, roughly halfway between the times of David and Jesus.
- Many of the Jews, God's people, find themselves still in exile. Originally taken captive over a hundred years earlier by Nebuchednezzer, Babylon's king, those who chose to stay are now under King Xerxes, head of one of the most powerful regimes in history: the Great Persian Empire.
- King Xerxes sets up his administrative headquarters in modern-day Iran, in a place called Susa, today about 700km southwest of Tehran.
- While Esther and her family enjoy some measure of freedom, as Jews in Persia, there's still much religious and ethnic tension with which they must contend.
- This all forms a backdrop for the Bible's magnificent Book of Esther.

<Prayer> "Lord, please move me out of the way. We're hungry to hear from you."

II. The Biblical Story of Esther

1. <*Slide*> Queen Vashti Is Deposed (Esther 1)

- To showcase his "vast wealth" and the "splendour and glory of his majesty," (v4) King Xerxes throws a six-month-long festival that culminates in a week-long banquet … featuring, among other things, couches made of gold [rather uncomfortable] … and an open bar!
- In "high spirits from [the] wine," (v10) the party climaxes when the king summons his wife, Queen Vashti "to display her beauty to all the people." (v11) <u>But</u> she refuses to make an appearance.
- "Furious," King Xerxes makes a decree "that Vashti is never again to enter [his] presence." Humiliated, the king issues the following edict, "all the women throughout his vast realm will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest." (v18-20) [Amusing how, for the rest of the story, it seems that the women are 'calling all the shots'!]

2. <u>Esther Becomes Queen</u> (Esther 2)

- A search for a new queen ensues. "Bring all the(se) beautiful girls [in the kingdom] … to Susa," the king orders. (v3)
- **<Slide>** And this is how we first come to meet Esther. Ch2:5-11: "*Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as* ***Esther****, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.*"
- ***<Slide>*** "*When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favour. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day [Mordecai] walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.*"

- **<*Slide*>** Esther is an orphaned daughter of Jewish exiles being raised by her cousin Mordecai, who'd graciously taken her in—likely from birth.
- Discovered for her beauty, Esther is whisked away to the palace where she undergoes "twelve months of [further] beauty treatments." (v12)
- While at 'the spa,' it says, "Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her (v15)"—and especially King Xerxes who soon "set[s] a royal crown on her head and [makes] her queen instead of Vashti." (v17)
- Meanwhile, cousin Mordecai catches wind of a murder plot against the king, reports it to the recently-crowned Queen Esther, who informs the king, her new husband, credits Mordecai with the crime-stopping tip, and the assassination attempt is foiled!
- As penalty, the two conspiracists are "hanged on a gallows" and all the events are tidily "recorded" in the empire's history books. (v23)

3. <*Slide*> <u>Haman Plots To Destroy The Jews</u> (Esther 3)

- 5 years now pass between chapters 2 and 3.
- Next, King Xerxes promotes a man called Haman to position as his chief minister and commands everyone to pay homage to him.
- Ch3v3: "But Mordecai would not kneel down or honour [Haman]."
- The text is fuzzy as to why he refuses. Perhaps it's because Mordecai's a monotheist—a worshiper of the <u>one</u> true Hebrew God.
- Enraged, Haman learns Mordecai is a Jew and looks for a way to use his newfound power to annihilate <u>all</u> the Jews in the kingdom.
- Just a quick aside here. Haman offers a telling commentary of how, in human history, the hatred of <u>one</u> often darkly, quickly, tragically turns into hatred for an <u>entire</u> <u>race</u> of people.
- Haman then "cast[s] … the [*pur*] that is the lot" (v7) to determine when to launch attacks on the Jews to destroy them. Then, Haman pitches his plans to the king who signs off on the attacks, puts a bounty on the Jews, writes it into Persian law, and even presents his precious signet ring to Haman to 'seal the deal.' (v8-14)
- Ch3 ends with this crazy scene, "The king and Haman [sit] down to [celebrate over a] drink, <u>but</u> the city of Susa [is] bewildered." (v15)

4. <u>Mordecai Calls On Esther To Help</u> (Esther 4)

- Angry, and terrified when he learns of the king's recent order, Mordecai tears his clothes, "put[s] on sackcloth and ashes, and wail[s] loudly and

bitterly" throughout the city. As do Jews throughout the provinces. (v1-3)

- **<*Slide*>** This is when Mordecai calls on Esther for help.
- But Esther is trapped. She knows if she speaks to the king without being summoned, she's dead—literally "she will be put to death." (v11)
- She informs cousin Mordecai and they engage in this now-famous interchange in Ch4:14-17:
- Mordecai says: "'*For [Esther] if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?'" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 'Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.' So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.*"

5. <*Slide*> <u>Courageously Esther Goes To The King</u> (Esther 5)

- After three days of fasting in preparation, Esther dons "her royal robes (v1)" and approaches the king—at great risk.
- So courageous, it's clear she's more concerned about the safety of her people than saving her own skin.
- And, rather miraculously, Esther is received well despite not having been summoned. The king even offers her "half the kingdom." (v3)
- But that's not what Esther's after; her diplomacy is subtle and brilliant.
- Instead, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet she's prepared (v4) and later, over drinks, the king asks, "What is your request?" (v6)
- Esther's response? 'Come to dinner again tomorrow night.' "<u>Then</u> I will answer the king's question." (v8) Is Esther <u>purposely</u> holding the king in suspense to build his <u>curiosity</u> so that when she <u>finally</u> reveals her request he's more anxious to fulfill it? Savvy.
- "In high spirits," Haman heads home after dinner and brags to his family how he's the <u>only</u> person invited to the queen's place for <u>dinner</u> two nights in row! (v12)

- Haman's self-satisfaction is short-lived, however, because the guy who refused to bow down to him, "that Jew Mordecai," whom he's just bumped into 'on Lonsdale' on the way home from dinner, is still alive.
- His wife suggests he "have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it." (v13-14)
- [Imagine my worry this week when I walked the church alley, saw this, and thought, 'Who's plotting my doom?!!' It's not gonna end well for you!]

6. <*Slide*> Mordecai Is Honoured (Esther 6)

- Suffering insomnia later that evening, the king, to help him fall asleep, calls for the history books and story's read of Mordecai heroically thwarting the assassination attempt on him five years earlier. (v1-2)
- Prompting the king to ask, 'Has Mordecai been duly rewarded for his valour?' (v3)
- Just then Haman shows up, early in the morning, hoping to ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai. Oblivious to why he is there, the king immediately asks Haman, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?" (v6)
- And, thinking the king wants to celebrate him, in a bizarre plot-twist, Haman describes an elaborate procession through the city streets in his honour. (v9) To which the king commands, 'At once do all of this for Mordecai the Jew!' (v10). What?!!
- Having no choice, Haman obliges the king and parades Mordecai, his archenemy, through the streets. Afterwards, Haman heads home, grief-stricken. And while he's unloading on his loved ones, Haman is whisked away to the second banquet Esther has prepared. (v13-14) [Oh yeah, we nearly forgot about that, didn't we?!]

7. <*Slide*> Haman Is Hanged (Esther 7)

- Over dinner the king again asks Esther, "What is your request?" (v2)
- And, for the first time, Queen Esther reveals her Jewish identity, "If I have found favour with you, O king, grant me my life … and spare my people … for [we] have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation." (v3-4)
- King Xerxes asks, "Where is the man who [dares] to do such a thing?"
- And Esther points, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." (v5-6)

- Infuriated, the king leaves the room and Haman, petrified, begs Esther for his life—allegedly assaulting the queen in the process. (v7-8)
- Seeing <u>this</u> pushes King Xerxes to the brink. Informed of the gallows Haman has secretly built upon which he intended to hang Mordecai, the king orders, "Hang [Haman] on it!" (v9) "So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai." Justice. And incredible irony.

8. <*Slide*> <u>The Jews Are Protected, Then Triumph, & Finally Celebrate</u> (Esther 8-10)

- Soon after, Esther informs the king that she and Mordecai are related.
- Mordecai is given the estate of Haman as his reward for good service (v1-2) Then, Esther pleads with King Xerxes to issue a decree to permanently protect the Jews. The king puts it into Persian law (v3ff) and there is great rejoicing amongst the Jews throughout the land. (v17)
- Seems Haman's men are still committed though. For, on the day on which the lot had fallen, his men still carry out attacks on the Jews.
- But the Jews are battle-ready and triumph against their enemies.
- With the tables now fully turned, the Jews celebrate, instituting a national holiday still practiced today: the Feast of Purim [or lots]—to commemorate how the lot <u>cast</u> by Haman eventually fell back on <u>him</u>—and the <u>Jews</u> were saved.
- Modern-day Purim festivities feature … yummy triangular pastries called 'Haman's ears,' plays put on by children, hissing at the mention of the name "Haman," drinking games, and all sorts of merry-making verging on frivolity. There is apparently a saying: "On Purim <u>any</u>thing goes."

III. <*Slide*> <u>Life Applications—Esther: Woman of Courage</u>

- Well, time now to 'land the plane' on a few application points.
- What about the grandeur of God's character and His ways so wonderfully displayed in this story might we need a fresh reminder of today?
- And, when we think of "such a time as <u>this</u>" (4:14) and the life-situations <u>we</u> find <u>our</u>selves in today, what's there to learn from Esther—this incredible woman of courage?

A. <*Slide*> *Power: God turns the power structures of this world upside down. (2 Corinthians 4:7-11)*

- Words related to the Hebrew root meaning *"to rule"* appear no less than <u>250</u> times in the 167 verses in the book of Esther.

- Nevertheless, those who grasp for power in the story prove to be "astonishingly impotent." – EBC Comm, p.2.
- ILL — There's a Sattler legend [not sure how true it is] of how, one time many years ago, my wife and kids where caught in a windstorm on Osoyoos Lake. And I was seen on shore, flexing my muscles and gazing at my reflection in a nearby window, while they were paddling furiously to avoid being blown into the United States! The power of my muscles was no help to them.
- When the king tries to show off, the queen refuses to cooperate. When Haman attempts to abuse power to fulfill his own agenda, joke's on him. Several edicts of this powerful king are over-ruled.
- Strangely, Haman and Xerxes, both obsessed with power, appear to have little power, and seem to be controlled by people all around them.
- ***<Slide>*** When it comes to our relationship with power, 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 tells a very different story: *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."*
- ***<Slide>*** APP/ILL — Oh man, I still have so much to learn in this area.
- Dying to self … each time I try and take hard control of a situation … in my home, in my job, on the soccer field, it rarely ends well.
- When I become obsessed with being a person of influence in places God has not ordained for me, when I try and manipulate people or circumstances for personal agenda, my plans never work. And I usually alienate, or worse, seriously hurt those around me in the process.
- The Christian Story messes with our world's power structures.
- Even when we're "persecuted" or "struck down," powering up is not the solution. Our lives are meant for God's glory. It is God Who promotes not us. When we try and make a name for ourselves and not for Him, we are sorely mistaken.
- Yet, when we humble ourselves, let go of our power, and rely fully on the power of Jesus in us, that's when we become truly satisfied! And, God is glorified through us.

B. *<Slide> Hope: God is in the business of reversing situations. (1 Corinthians 15:55-58)*

- Oh, how the ["tables turn"] in the book of Esther! (9:1)
- It's the classic story of hope seemingly lost, hope dawning on the horizon, then, through a sequence of supernatural events, hope fully realized!
- Esther captures the heart of the Christian Story—and ultimately points us to the living hope provided in the incarnation and resurrection of God the Son Jesus.
- In 1 Corinthians 15:55-58, the apostle Paul says, Q: *"'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."*

- ***<Slide>*** APP — Central to Christianity is the marvellous truth that God loves to redeem our life experiences, to transform situations, and offer hope when there is none—even in the face of death itself!
- So I ask: what in your life feels hopeless today? A broken relationship, a financial situation, a health problem, a secret you carry, that if someone were to find out about, you'd be in big trouble?
- Whatever your circumstance, I encourage you to trust it to God today—even for the miraculous. God loves to reverse our hopeless situations.

C. *<Slide> Courage: Obeying God is well worth the risk.*

- There was a policy in the ancient world designed to enhance a king's power and guard against assassination: approaching a regent without a summons was punishable by death.
- With no invitation, Esther knows she cannot approach the king.
- And she's still holding onto a big secret: she's a foreigner, a Jew, far away from home, and the king's just sanctioned a genocide of her people.
- To go to the king alone was to risk certain death.
- ILL — Reminds me of that scene towards to end of *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. When facing the impossible odds of fighting <u>all</u>

the armies of Mordor, Gimli, Tolkien's pudgy dwarf pipes up, Q: "Certainty of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?!"

- ***<Slide>*** ILL — Now when God's come calling, I haven't <u>always</u> obeyed.
- Just over a quarter century ago, I received a thin, but clear message from the Lord: "Go to North Shore Alliance Church!"
- Nearly everything inside of me said, "No." Too risky. I was afraid. We were happy at Surrey Alliance, the Lord was using us there, and, even with our young and growing family, we could <u>afford</u> to live there.
- But I sensed God was calling us here "for such a time as this." So we took the risk—jumped in. And, what a ride it's been! Front row seats to some incredible works of God—in us, through us, all around us. Sure at times it's been very difficult, but I wouldn't trade these years for anything.

- ***<Slide>*** APP — Courage. Perhaps like Esther, you find yourself, displaced, a foreigner in a strange and difficult land? Or, in a relationship, family, or workplace at odds with your faith? How is God calling you to live faithfully within the situation you find yourself today?
- Is there something God is asking you to say—even if it makes you unpopular? A thing God wants you to do? A precious possession God's nudging you to give away? A place God is calling you to go?
- Friends, if God has put something on your heart, I encourage you to step in, step up, and do it. It'll be well worth the risk.

D. *<Slide> Sovereignty: God is always working out His purposes in His time and His way. (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

- It's been the source of much debate for centuries—causing some to throw it out entirely: God is not mentioned a single time in the book of Esther.
- Yet, it's still part of our Bible. It's read religiously by Jews every year at the Feast of Purim, because it's part of the family history book of God's people. For, our understanding of God's sovereignty grows out of our real-life experiences.
- Much of life on our planet is lived with no mention of God.
- When, assuredly, still God is <u>there</u>.
- Like one commentator says, Q: "Before wicked Haman is even introduced, God has already installed <u>His</u> <u>means</u> of <u>deliverance</u>: a Jewish Queen Esther in a foreign court and Mordecai the Jew with favour in the eyes of a foreign king." *– NAC Comm.*

- And this is just what God does. Time after time after time.
- ***<Slide>*** There are different ways to view the happenings in our lives—and in our world. 'It's all <u>random</u>,' one might say, 'What we do doesn't really matter. We have no impact on the goings-on of the universe, so eat, drink, and be merry. Do whatever you like.'
- Or, 'It's all <u>fate</u>. And, smart people [like Haman] try and make something of them<u>selves</u> by working the religious, political, social, and economic systems of our world for personal gain.'
- But the Christian Story believes in a Loving Sovereign behind it all working out <u>His</u> eternal purposes in <u>His</u> time and <u>His</u> way. This God-King governs the universe from an entirely different perspective than we(e) humans can understand. And that is <u>such</u> a good thing—a relief!
- In Cf. Isaiah 55:8-9, the Lord says, Q: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*
- Belief in God's sovereignty means putting our faith in God's <u>good</u> character and God's divine perspective high about it all.
- ***<Slide>*** APP — Truthfully though, sometimes it feels like our world, and <u>my</u> life, is in pieces. And I wonder, 'Is God even there?' Often it seems like He's distant, absent, perhaps too busy to care.
- But, we can take comfort in this truth, core to Christianity, that even when our life, or our world, feels like it's spinning out of control, our good God is still in charge of all the affairs of the universe.
- People of NSAC, when God is least visible, when we are tempted to think God has forgotten us, we can be sure: God is still at work.
- And graciously, God even includes <u>us</u> in <u>His</u> work. Like Esther, God invites us to be part of something <u>way</u> bigger than ourselves!
- So awesome. What a joy it is to witness the sovereignty of God mysteriously worked out in our world when we courageously respond to His call and obey! Amen.
- Thanks for listening. Now let's worship the Lord together.