

Defining Moments

The Shadow Sovereign-Part V

Esther 4

She was born into slavery in Dorchester County, Maryland in 1819. Her mother and father were pure blooded Africans, both of them slaves from the Continent of Africa.

Corn meal was her main source of nutrition, along with meat whenever her father was allowed to hunt or fish. She slept as close to the fire as possible on cold nights and remembers sticking her toes into the smoldering ashes to avoid frostbite.

At the age of six, she was considered old enough to work all day long and was rented out to a nearby family. She was whipped during her time there and sent back after eating one of the woman's sugar cubes.

At the age of 12, she was injured by a slave owner when she refused to help tie up a slave who was trying to run away. The blow to her head would cause seizures and headaches at times for the rest of her life.

When she was 29 years old she decided to risk her life and escape in Pennsylvania. The other slaves tried to discourage her asking – what will you eat? When it's dark, how will you know which way is north? She was determined though . . . and slipped away in the night, in 1849 and eventually made it to freedom.

She would later say to her biographers, "I had crossed the line and I was free, but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom – I was a stranger in a strange land."ⁱ

With that, she got a job in Philadelphia, saving every penny as she planned to return and rescue her family and friends. She would devote the rest of her life rescuing slaves from the south and leading them to freedom.

Her name was Harriet Tubman and she was considered one of the most fearless conductors along what was known as the Underground Railroad. Her nickname was Moses.

At one point, there were wanted posters put up throughout Maryland and southward with her picture on them. And a bounty promised by plantation owners and the State of Maryland for the staggering sum of \$50,000 dollars – and that was 150 years ago.

On one occasion she said, "I would fight for freedom so long as my strength lasted – and if the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me."ⁱⁱ

Over the course of her daring escapes – from slave hunters and scent dogs and wild animals, Harriet Tubman would eventually lead nearly 1,000 slaves to freedom.

When an early biography was being written about her, Frederick Douglass, a former slave and then a well known and respected business leader and abolitionist, was asked for his commendation on her life. He wrote to Harriet Tubman, these powerful and stirring words, and I quote, "I need words of commendation from you more than you need them from me. The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received encouragement at every step of the way. I have worked in the day – you have worked in the night. He midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion . . . I know of no other [slave] who willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our people than you have."ⁱⁱⁱ

There is little surprise that to this day, Moses – Harriet Tubman – is revered and honored for her death-defying sacrifice – over and over again – for the freedom and safety of her fellow American slaves.

Frankly, there is something in all of us that is stirred by the biography of someone who risks everything for someone else – for something that is right and just and true.

Well, the date has been set and it is now irrevocable, by the law of the Medes and Persians. The edict has been copied a thousand times and the famous pony express of the Persian Empire is distributing the wanted posters with the simple edict – Jews must die.

And the reward to any Persian who fulfilled the edict would include the implied bounty of whatever they could steal away from the Jews own possessions before Haman got his hands on it.

In the palace of the king, however, undetected by this plot, was a Jewess who had won the crown and now served as the Queen of the Empire.

This crisis would now become nothing less than her defining moment.

She and her cousin Mordecai had kept the secret of their Jewish lineage safe from everyone, for nearly 5 years.

But Haman, the Prime Minister, in retaliation to the insubordination of Mordecai who refused to bow down to him – discovered the secret – Mordecai was a Jew.

And Haman made up his mind to settle an old family feud, by killing not only Mordecai the Jew, but every Jew throughout the Kingdom.

Now, as you already know, God is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the Book of Esther. But neither is Satan.^{iv}

And don't you doubt it for a moment . . . they are both at work.

This is only one more assault of Satan against the covenant people of God – it's only one more attempt to stamp out the promise of a coming Messiah.

And at this point in redemptive history – the spotlight suddenly focuses on that orphan girl who became the queen.

She *just so happened* to have won the king's heart – she *just so happened* to be Jewish – the cousin of Mordecai, who *just so happens* to be currently serving in the Administrative offices of the King –and because of that position, he *just so*

happened to hear about plot to assassinate the king; and he *just so happened* to tell Esther who told the king.

What an amazing string of coincidences!

These are not coincidences. In fact, there is no such thing as a coincidence. That's our earth bound explanation. That's our shortsighted determination.

Coincidences are the providential acts of God who prefers to remain anonymous.^v

Defining moments are really nothing more than recognizing the providential hand of an anonymous God, and surrendering your life to join Him in that particular work.

Whether it's rescuing slaves or risking the crown – or your own reputation – or your fortune – or your personal comfort – and maybe even your own life.

Once again, the Book of Esther continues to unfold like a well designed play. There are four scenes that take place in ***chapter four of the Book of Esther.***

1. Mordecai's Demonstration

The first scene is just outside the administrative office building.

I invite your attention to *verse 1. 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. 2. He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the King's gate clothed in sackcloth.*

So here's Mordecai – recently revealed for who he was, identifying with the Jewish people who are now headed for certain death.

Here he is outside the king's gate – the administrative building – literally crying with a loud and bitter cry.^{vi}

In our western world we hide our mourning and our tears behind handkerchiefs and black veils.

Not in the Middle East. More than likely, you've seen that part of the world – perhaps through video clips on news shows – as a mob pushes a casket overhead through the crowd while wailing and crying out.^{vii}

That's what's happening here. He holds nothing back. He's dressed in dark, rough goat hair clothing – typically used to make sacks – much like burlap today.

He would have been wearing it next to his skin to further demonstrate his preoccupation with pain.^{viii}

He's torn his clothing – a symbol for the tearing of his emotions and his broken heart; he's now dressed in sackcloth – dusting his head and beard with ashes, weeping and wailing outside the Palace walls.

This was the customary Jewish action that involved mourning and grieving sinful behavior or special times of prayer for deliverance.^{ix}

But that action alone might not convince you that Mordecai is getting his heart right with God.

Maybe he's just really upset, and rightly so.

And he isn't the only one – **notice verse 3. In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews** – now notice this phrase – **with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.**

The only other time in the Hebrew Bible where you find those three verbs in exactly that identical construction is in the Book of the prophet **Joel and chapter 2 verse 12.**

While the individual words for fasting and weeping and wailing appear many times, never together just like this.

I agree with the Hebrew scholars that this reference would have been identified by the original readers of Esther – they would have immediately connected Ezra's construction here with the earlier prophecy of Joel which invites the people of Israel to **"Return to [the LORD] with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and wailing."**

In other words, there is no longer a hidden agenda with Mordecai – he's actually spearheading a call to a national revival and abandonment upon the sovereign mercy of their true and living God.

I also agree with commentators who see in the fact that later in **verse 16**, Esther will ask Mordecai to get all the Jews who live in Susa to **fast for her** – clearly indicates she is asking for intercessory prayer. But Esther's not there yet.

2. Esther's Hesitation

In fact, when she finds out Mordecai is dressed in sack cloth, she sends him out a brand new suit of clothes and asks him to change.

When he refuses, **verse 5** informs us, Esther has her personal eunuch go out and find out what all the ruckus is about.

She's evidently sequestered inside the Queen's quarters – she's heard from other members of her personal staff that Mordecai is outside wailing away – evidently someone has died in their family – or there's been some kind of tragedy.

She doesn't know what it is – in fact, it's possible that she doesn't even know about the edict yet.

So she send Hathach – her personal attendant – and no doubt body guard, outside to get the details.

A little while later he comes back in to her quarters armed not only with a copy of the wanted poster – and delivers to her the stunning news that the Jewish people are going to be wiped out – by order of her husband and the prime minister.

This personal eunuch was entrusted with the confidential news of her nationality – that had been a secret. There is the likelihood that he himself was a Jew.

But then there's the bombshell – there's this special command from Mordecai – **verse 8b. to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people.**

You have to be kidding.

No one knows these are her people. She's kept her secret hidden from the King and his advisors. Only her most trusted friends and personal staff evidently knew.

"I don't wanna come out in the open. Besides, Mordecai, have you forgotten a couple of things?"

a. A legal problem

And she sends back a message through Hathach that reminds Mordecai of overlooking an obvious legal problem; notice **verse 11. "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.**

Nobody just walks into the Oval office.

b. A personal problem

And then adding on to the legal problem, Esther throws in a personal problem – this little nugget,

“And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days.”

Many Old testament scholars read into this that Ahasuerus’ interest in Esther is on the wane.

As far as Esther is concerned, the timing couldn’t be any worse!

Like the old saying goes, “When you marry a child of the devil you will eventually run into problems with your father-in-law.”^x

And is Esther ever in trouble now – it seems the devil has her hopelessly pinned down.

If she remains silent, the edict will be carried out and surely someone – perhaps even Mordecai – will spill the beans.

But if she goes to the king, Esther will not only be asking for help for her people, she’ll also be admitting that she deceived him.

He thought she was a Persian – it was already bad enough that she wasn’t related to the seven noble families of Persia – from which, according to Persian custom, the Queen would come.

But now he stands to face incredible humiliation and embarrassment that he has actually ordered the death of a people to whom his own queen belongs.

He must be an idiot!

But he’s not the kind of man to be considered an idiot – he’s not the kind of man to be humiliated and embarrassed publicly – his former queen can attest to that!

And there’s another problem with telling the king that most overlook. To get to the king, your business with the king must be told to the supreme commander – you had to appeal to his office which arranged the appointments by virtue of priority.

And the supreme commander happens to be Haman. She can’t appeal to him to be admitted into the throne room, obviously.^{xi}

And the king isn’t really interested in seeing her anymore either – she’s hopelessly stuck and so she decides to do nothing.

Perhaps Mordecai anticipated her fear and hesitancy – no doubt he recognized the impossibility of her situation.

It was a long shot and he knew it.

While he’s sitting in the ashes outside the King’s palace, he formulates a divinely inspired response.

When Hathach comes back with her decision to not get involved, Mordecai is ready with three defining moment statements.

3. Mordecai’s Confrontation

In fact, it’s one of the greatest speeches in human history that serves to challenge every believer to this day.

Notice *verse 13, 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.”*

1. Here’s defining moment incentive number 1: You won’t escape in the palace.

Don’t even think – don’t imagine for a moment that you’re gonna be safe in the palace while the Jews are massacred in every province.

You can’t hide behind the curtains in your apartment and you can’t hide behind the crown on your head.

This is a reality check, Esther . . . you don’t stand a chance. The secret will get out. If the Jews die, you die too.

So you might as well admit who you are!

It may be more than irony that we’re given both names for this woman. We’re told that she has two names – Hadassah is her Hebrew name and Esther is her Persian name.

In a very real sense, this defining moment boils down to which name she will decide to live out.

Will she be a Hebrew or a Persian?

In my travels to other countries, I’ve met numerous believers – and when we’ve met they’ve told me their native name – but then they’ll say, “And the name I chose at my baptism is Daniel, or Jeremiah, or Peter, or some other Biblical character.”

In other words, for many believers around the world, their baptism was a defining moment where they chose another name. And they wanted the rest of their lives to be defined by their biblical name.

In a very real sense, we all have two names. One is our given name, but the other is our Lord’s name – Christian.

Defining moments in life often have to do with which name we choose to operate by.

Mordecai is effectively telling Esther to identify with and operate by virtue of her relationship with the covenant people of God.

2. Here’s defining moment incentive number 2: Not only is Esther warned that

she can't escape in the palace, she's reminded that she can't erase God's promise.

Notice the next phrase in *verse 14*. ***For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise from the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish.***

Esther isn't the only one experiencing a defining moment here!

Mordecai is effectively saying that he has decided to throw his trust into the hands of God. He says ***relief and deliverance will come from another place.***

The Hebrew word *maqom* – translated “place” is a reference to God. The rabbi's referred to God with this same word *maqom* . . . the called God ***the Place.***^{xii}

Mordecai doesn't know what God's up to, but he's decided to stand in his personal faith in the providence and protection of God.

This is the desperate faith of one Jew who scribbled on a wall in a cellar in Cologne, Germany while hiding from the Nazi's – I believe in the sun even when it is not shining; I believe in God even when He's silent.^{xiii}

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian along with numerous Hebrew commentaries dating back 1,000 years all view this is a veiled allusion to God.^{xiv}

God will somehow keep a remnant of people because relief and deliverance will most certainly arise from His hand.

And then Mordecai throws in a not-so-veiled threat of God's judgment upon Esther.

Esther, you can't escape in the palace; you can't erase God's promise – and the final one – the most effective of the three incentives for Esther's defining moment is this –

3. Number 3: You should not evade your position.

The famous words of Mordecai are etched into the last part of *verse 14*. ***And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?***

Esther, you have to see it! This is God's doing. There was more to this all along than your crown and my career. This was the hand of God to place you by the king's side to preserve the people of God.

This is the greatest incentive for serving God to this day.

It isn't about the fear of death; it isn't about facing judgment – it's about being involved in the plan of God and the purposes of God for the glory of God.

The providence of God not only requires our surrender to God – but it's more than that; the providence of God actually invites us to participate with God in His global search for those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth.

This is the exciting part of the mysterious synergy between the will of God and the obedience of His children.

The same Lord who said, “I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” was the same Lord who said to His disciples in those final words before ascending to His Father in heaven, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all I've commanded you.”

He isn't going to come down here and teach that three year old Sunday school class. He isn't gonna put money in the offering plate for ministry and brick and glass structures; He isn't gonna write curriculum for adult Bible studies

Do you live with that sense of divine destiny? That God will use you . . . that God has something in mind for you. It might be a sink full of dishes or a classroom full of children or a shop filled with tools and a cubicle filled with paperwork.

Is that all you see? Or do you see that divine destiny and that place as your appointment – and the voice of God whispering from the shadows – I have plans for you.

I read recently about the three different levels of motivation. The first level is physical concerns; the second is recognition and respect; but the third level of motivating someone is to motivate them along the lines of having a purpose in life and having a sense of destiny.^{xv}

Esther, you're the queen . . . but it this moment it doesn't matter. You've got personal connections and power and respect and physical comfort – but they aren't what matters most.

Can you imagine that behind all of this – the pageant and the king's selection of you above a thousand others; your wedding to the King, your title as Queen . . . is that all you see?

Or can you see that at this moment in the kingdom of Persia, you have arrived for such a moment as this!

This is your hour – this is your defining moment. Stand! Speak! Or Die! But whatever you do, do not be silent!^{xvi}

The closing scene in this chapter is breath taking to me.

4. Esther's Affirmation

Esther responds with affirmation to Mordecai's challenge. She puts into motion three decisive activities:

a. First, she summons the Jews to fast.

She commands Mordecai, in *verse 16 to assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.*

Esther is literally applying by faith the prophecy of *Joel chapter 2, which reads, Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.*

b. Secondly, she states her identity with the Jewish people

She says in *verse 16, the middle part, "I and my maidens will fast in the same way."*

In other words, we are in this together.

Many scholars believe that Esther had surrounded herself with other Jewish men and women as her personal staff and attendants, out of sympathy and concern.

For nearly 5 years they must have wondered why this Persian queen cared so much about Jewish people – but now they knew – she was one of them.

c. Thirdly, she not only summons the Jews to fast; she not only states her kinship with the Jewish people; finally, she surrenders to the will of God.

Again in verse 16; I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.

This is her defining moment! Wow, what a change.

She has changed from fear to faith; from hesitation to determination; from concern about her own safety to concern for her people's survival.^{xvii}

Like young David who looked out and Goliath and said to the soldier's around him, "Is there not a cause?"

Is this all we see? Is there not a greater cause?

Esther has come to recognize, as one author put it so well, "There is no safety in a significant life and there is no significance in a safe life."^{xviii}

This was her defining moment.

Let me make two closing observations about defining moments – they are at work in your life more than you may perhaps realize.

- **Defining moments are those small steps of obedience where you act like the disciple you really want to become.**

Whether or not you'll brush past those fears or maybe brush away those tears – and act like the disciple of Christ you want to be.

Douglas MacArthur once said that in the world there was a constant conspiracy against the brave. It's the age old struggle, he said, between the roar of the crowd on one side and the voice of conscience on the other."

I'd like to adapt that for the Christian disciple – it is the roar of the crowd on one side and the voice of Christ on the other.

For you, a defining moment will be tomorrow when you decide whether or not you'll read the word of God, or bow your head and pray at the office lunchroom or the school cafeteria, or tell people you went to church when they ask you what you did over the weekend.

Defining moments are small, simple steps of obedience where you live up to your name and heed the voice of Christ.

- **Secondly, defining moments are those small steps of faith where you trust God like He really deserves to be trusted.**

Eugene Peterson, the author of the Message paraphrase, wrote these words about Esther. The moment Haman surfaced, Esther began to move from being a beauty queen to becoming a [believer];

from being an empty-headed sex symbol to being a passionate intercessor; from the busy life in the harem to the high-risk venture of speaking for and identifying with the people of God.^{xix}

She needed to start living like that. And God deserved to be trust like that too.

So let the crowd roar . . . and clouds gather overhead . . . without any guarantee other than that God deserves to be trusted and that He is faithful.

So I will stand. I will speak. I will give everything I am and everything I have . . . and I will not remain silent any more.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/16/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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