

Esther - Sermon 1
God will work through you or around you
Chapters 1-2

Good Morning – Our country woke up Monday morning to the tragic shooting in Las Vegas. It’s awful. Much has been said about it. I hope you will pray for those families affected. And there are a lot of them. If you find yourself asking or a friend asking “Why would God allow this?” I want to direct you to the very series we just finished called “My Problem with God.” There in that series we spent a whole sermon on the problem of suffering and we also posted an article Thursday to the blog addressing vegas specifically. I hope that serves to help you out. You don’t want to answer pain with logic of course. You answer pain with the empathy, love, and hope of Christ. And that blog will give you more resources there.

Introduction To Series

If you are new to Mercy Church we believe the bible contains God’s word to us and there is nothing better for us than to dive into its pages and meet God there. We preach through it and we study it in our community groups. It shows us who God is, it shows us who we are, and how we relate to God in light of who he is. I love how much Mercy Church loves the bible. And if you are new, these next four sermons are going to serve as a fantastic introduction to the awesomeness of the Bible to reveal truth and change you from the inside out. We are going to spend four weeks in the Old Testament Book of **Esther**. So if you have your bible, get it out and turn to page 853. At least that’s where it is in my bible. This is one of those where there is NO SHAME in hitting up the

table of contents. 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, **ESTHER**, Job.

In this book what you are going to see is a woman who attempts to follow God’s will for her life when it is never clearly revealed as to what that will is. And that’s what makes it so powerful for us. If you’ve ever asked the question “God what do you want me to do?” And felt like you just never heard a really clear answer...you will identify with this book.

I spent all of college asking God PLEASE, please just reveal to me what I’m supposed to do with my life and I will do it! I walked around UNC’s campus in the fall and hoped the leaves on the ground would spell out “sports marketing.” But all they ever spelled was “basketball season is almost here...” And I’d love to say that I became a more mature Christian and grew out of that wishing mentality but...nope. I still battle with it today. In fact one of our last trips to Charlotte to decide if we should plant a church here Courtney said to me “what do you expect to happen? You think God is just going to write “Spence, Move Here” and I was like...he doesn’t need the comma but yeah that’d be great. And it never happened!! It was just “Football is better here.” But nothing about God’s will.

The Book of Esther is going to reveal to us **how God works and how we fit in to God’s plan**. It’s going to be awesome. Little bit of background on the book

It’s one of the last OT books ever written. We don’t know who wrote it. Some think Esther’s cousin Mordecai who is

also a main character wrote it. But we can't really be sure about that. Ultimately we believe God wrote it through the Holy Spirit and used someone to do so but we don't know who. This is a book beloved by Jews still to present day. It is read annually at the beginning of the feast of Purim which will come up in the story. It's one of two books named after a woman in the Bible and I think you will see throughout this series how the bible gives honor and nobility to women. Esther is a woman that gets put in a tough seemingly no-win situation and shows wisdom and courageous leadership. She is the deliverer of God's people. I am so excited about this because I think about my two girls and how I want them to see examples of women being world changers and history makers because one day that is going to be them. And this story is right at the top for me so I can say look girls one day God is going to put you in a spot where you can change the world and I am preparing you for when that day comes! So I'm hype about getting into this book.

But Christians in general aren't as in love with this book. If you go and search you will see very few commentaries written on it, none before the 7th century or so. Not a lot of pastors preaching on it. Martin Luther...the great reformer who sparked a movement that changed history... said he thought this book should be cut out of the bible. And the reason Christians have avoided it like grandpa's fruitcake at Christmas dinner, is because its just a bizarre and confusing book. In these 10 chapters there is not ONE mention of God. Not one. He never speaks and he is never mentioned. On top of that, the "good guys" are morally compromised characters. And no other book of the bible brings up Esther. I always say "let

scripture interpret scripture" but in this case...too bad. And instead of digging into it, the church has left it alone.

But when we leave it alone, we are missing out not only on a vital message God has for us, but one that helps us make sense of the world around us. In fact most scholars do acknowledge that Esther is a literary masterpiece that has few equals in all of ancient writing. And leaving God's name out of the story is the strategic design of the author to get a giant point across. See throughout the book you will see things that "happen" to occur. Esther, the one jewish woman in the running, "happens" to get chosen by the king out of hundreds of women. Mordecai "happens" to overhear the plot to kill the king. The king "happens" to be unable to sleep the night before Mordecai is to be executed by his enemy. "happens" to ask the historian to read him some stories from the past few years. The historian "happens" to read about Mordecai out of all of the history available. The next day the king, without knowledge of the plot to kill mordecai, has the very guy plotting to kill Mordecai, to be the one to honor Mordecai. The author is telling us something between the lines. THIS CAN'T ALL JUST "HAPPEN!" You didn't just HAPPEN to be born when you were born. You didn't happen to wind up in this room today. You didn't happen to get the job you have, to be in the school you are in, to have the friends you have. Your life ISN'T AN ACCIDENT, IT ISN'T RANDOM COINCIDENCES! What God is going to show you over the next month is that while sometimes God works through his visible hand of miracles, he is always working through his invisible hand of Sovereign control. Weaving your story into other

stories in ways you can't possibly begin to see yourself. And he's doing it for your good and his glory!

That's why we need Esther. Because it shows you how God works through everyday circumstances and situations. It shows you God is in the "happenings" of your everyday life. Most of our daily lives aren't God parting the red sea. It's disobedient kids, ordinary jobs, daily routines and oil changes! And Esther shows you contrary to what you can SEE, God is right in the middle of all of it and every little moment matters. AND...it shows you God wants to use you in these moments. It shows you he cares about the 1000th interaction with your co-worker. He cares about the cashier at harris teeter. He cares about your kids coach and he cares how you talk to your kids. And the more you read Esther and see him between the lines, the more it helps you see him between the lines in your life. Seeing his will for your moments. And when you start seeing what he wants in the small moments, you will be ready for the big moments when they come. And you'll have courage to follow him there to. It's going to be awesome.

Intro to Chps 1-2

Today is going to be about introducing you to the characters and plot of Esther. That's what chapters 1 & 2 are all about. The big idea we'll hit today and really the overarching idea of the series is:

God is going to work through you or around you.

Which will it be? What you are going to see today is that God is going to use people to accomplish his mission of making his glory known on all the earth. And he has a spot for you in that mission. And he's going to use you

somehow. Maybe as a spectator, maybe as an obstacle, maybe as a player. That's going to be your part. See he uses The ordinary stuff with ordinary messed up people. That's where God loves to work. So you will play a role. But what role will you play? Good news: There are no perfect characters in this book. There are no perfect characters in this room. So this should be a great fit. Let's meet our contestants

[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, Esther 1:1-2

His Persian name is Ahasuerus. His Greek name is Xerxes. You heard of Xerxes? You shouldn't watch it, but if you have seen Frank Miller's film, "300"—a bunch of men who CrossFit 7 days a week and a bunch of women who don't wear enough clothes, that's why I can't recommend it. It is the story of King Xerxes, this man.

He towers over the entire story of Esther. He's about 35 years old, grew up in the palace while his dad, Darius the first, went all manifest destiny all over the middle east. The empire Xerxes inherited was unquestionably the largest in the known world. In many ways it WAS the known world. It stretched across 127 provinces (1:1) from India to Ethiopia. It stretched into modern day Pakistan and northern Sudan.

This king has conquered many nations. He is in total control of them. Do you see the nations included in this? One ruler over Egypt, Libya, Israel, Turkey, Iraq, Iran,

Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, & Pakistan? 3 million square miles in total. Nobody could do that today. There is no kind of power that can make all those nations agree let alone but subjugated to one ruler.

Herodotus, a greek historian in this time, refers to this king as Xerxes the Great. This guy was THE most powerful guy in the world in his day.

When it came to **religion** Xerxes was the one who was worshipped. There may have been other pagan gods they had in their customs but it was Xerxes that all honor was given to. In addition to his wife he had a harem of women who were there to please him however he desired. Hugh Hefner who just died this past week, he was nothing compared to this guy. This guy had absolute power, he treated women like they were disposable, and there had never been a kingdom as large as his at any point up to this. & He was a god ruling over all of it. Perched on top of one of his TWO palaces. This one over looking modern day Iran.

[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.

Do you catch what we just read? Xerxes the great thinks he is SO GREAT that he throws HIMSELF a 6 MONTH PARTY! If it hits 10pm at a party I'm looking for the exits and Courtney is like where did he go?

And you know you gotta have confidence in your militaristic might when you can invite all the leaders of the kingdom to go away with you for 6 MONTHS to party. We are talking 15,000 people with an open bar for 6 months. And the only rule at the bar? (v.8):

[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. Esther 1:8

In other words, the only rule is there are no rules!" 6 month open bar? Terrible idea. Wedding Reception open bar leads to madness. 6 Months? It's madness and they are engaged in every form of debauchery they can think of. And I know you think...how awful and wasteful. If it were you, you think, you'd give all this money to the poor. No you wouldn't. You'd throw a party. You'd invite all the famous people and there would be a flurry of Insta posts. #humbled to be with JZ & Queen B at my party. My cousin Blake Shelton finally came to my party. That'd be some of you. Others of you would spend it on yourself some other way. That's our culture. We highlight and read about famous people because deep down we WANT TO BE THEM. We want to be awesome just like he was awesome. And you see it in verse 4 – Xerxes is throwing the party why? As a fundraiser for the aids crisis in Africa? NO. TO SHOW "the riches of his royal **glory.**" There's your worship word.¹ It's about him.

¹ I found Mark Driscoll's introduction to Xerxes to be incredibly helpful. It was in his first sermon in his series on Esther. I leaned on him here and in the closing.

This guy had money, power, he was according to Herodotus this tall handsome absurdly wealthy man who ruled over all from on high. Do you get the point the author is trying to make? Read between the lines. The pagan god-king is trying to show the whole world HIS glory.

Chapter 1 continues to tell us that despite all this, Xerxes wife wasn't too impressed. Queen Vashti is the first of two women who undermine Xerxes from inside the palace. The second half of chapter one is the scene where Xerxes is at the end of the 180 day feast and is actually on the last day of a 7 day feast he had thrown for the whole country. The After Party. So he says on day 7 – Tell Vashti to come to me.

She says nah. Stands up to him. Says no. And the king is offended. Of course he is. And one of his yes-men whispers in his hear “what if the other women in the land hear that she defied her husband? Then they will all defy their husbands. And we can't have that. SO...here's what you gotta do. First, kick Vashti out. She gone. No more queen Vashti. THEN, Put out a law that says “all women must honor their husbands.” Think I'm kidding?

[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.” Esther 1.20.

So he sends it out to the whole kingdom. Every household for 3 million square miles that men are to be masters in their homes. That is perhaps the greatest

shovenistic overreaction in recorded history. Maybe *that's* what Cam read before his press conference.

That's how chapter 1 ends. That's our introduction to Xerxes the great. And in just a minute I'm going to show you why that's all a big deal. First, let's meet two other main characters.

Chapter two opens with a beauty contest. Basically, the king calms down and realizes he needs a queen to replace Vashti who he booted out. So, his advisors basically come up with The Bachelor. Govenors from all 127 provinces search out beautiful young virgins who are brought to Xerxes' harem and then one by one the king, for lack of better word, interviews them to see if they'd be a good fit. That's the backdrop the author sets up to introduce us to Mordecai and Esther. **Let's Mordecai**

[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. Esther 2.5-6

Ok something needs to stand out to you. There is a Jew living in Susa. He should be living in Jerusalem. But God appointed Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to take the Isrealites captive as a punishment for their sins. You can read over in the book of Daniel for that story. Don't miss it because the author is again tipping his hat to the invisible hand of God. Back to Mordecai, who is going to show up 52 times in this book. Now the fascinating thing here is

that the Babylonian captivity has ended and God's people had already been told to leave and return home.

But some families stayed which was directly disobeying God. Mordecai's family was one of them. They began to compromise themselves. Mordecai finds himself eating food God's people shouldn't eat, participating in festivals they shouldn't, living where they shouldn't. In other words while there are a few shining lights in Mordecai and in many ways he's a hero in the story, he's comfortable compromising his identity as one of God's people and he keeps his Jewish identity confined to his private life (we'll see that in a second). Which may ring true for some of you. He's a good guy, don't get me wrong. But he willingly sends his adopted daughter to Persian bachelorette and tells her to conceal her identity as one of God's people. He's a good guy who compromises and tucks his faith away when it threatens him. That's important ya'll because you are tempted to see the characters in this story as good guys and bad guys. Well, some of them can be put into those boxes. Haman who we will meet next week is basically pure diabolical evil. And never changes. Xerxes never really changes the whole time. BUT, Mordecai and especially Esther...they change. They move from morally compromised people to models of faithfulness to God. And we are going to talk about why that's so awesome in a minute.

Let's meet Esther

[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.

We don't know what happened to her parents. We know her older cousin adopted her and raised her. And she grew up to be a very attractive woman. But a woman with an identity crisis and the author introduces that in her name. Hadassah is her Hebrew name which means "myrtle" and is symbolic for peace and joy. Esther is her Persian name which means star and can also mean goddess of love. These two names reflect the two worlds she's trying to live between. She belongs to God, but she disobeys the dietary laws. She belongs to God but she lives far away from his people. She belongs to God but she marries a pagan king as we will see in a minute.

She belongs to God but can't seem to shake the Persian lifestyle. I am absolutely sure many of us can relate there. You belong to Christ but you aren't living for him. You find yourself living a dual life so much that you might as well have two names and the thing that makes you shift between the two is convenience. Put on Christian where it's convenient, pagan where it is convenient. Two worlds, two identities. And what you are going to see is that is a collision course. We'll see Esther's two worlds collide next week.

Let's keep going and then drop some application from these two chapters:

[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. [10] Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. Esther 2:9-10

She's winning favor with Xerxes the great, but the whole time keeping her Jewish identity a secret. Just like Mordecai told her to. Well, her turn comes to spend the night with Xerxes.

[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. Esther 2:15-17

Esther becomes queen. The sovereign hand of God moving the pieces to where one of his own is now set as one of the most influential people in the palace of the largest kingdom on earth. BTW I want to say real quick that Esther is a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra is a clergyman working to rebuild the temple. Nehemiah is working to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, starting with its walls so the people could return to a secure city. Esther? She's in the palace. She didn't

choose to be here, yet here she is and in a couple of chapters we'll see God get ahold of her heart and she starts to try and change things from inside the palace that she is so different from. Some of you are Esther. She's trying to make just laws in a barbaric, unjust system. And God honors it. In many ways almost all of us are Esther. Living and operating in an immoral world system and working to bring about justice those who are made in God's image. Working to shed light on the hope of the gospel through whatever influence we have. I LOVE ESTHER!

Ok real quick chapter 2 ends with a scene that is really important in 2 weeks. Short version: Mordecai hangs out by the gates each day just to check on Esther. Maybe feels guilty about the whole thing. I hope he does. Anyways, he overhears two of the king's servants griping and saying they were going to attack the king. So Mordecai tells Esther. Esther tells the king. The king investigates....

[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.

The fact it was recorded in a big book full of a ton of history is important. A few chapters from now, on a very important night, the king has some sleeping problems and wants a bedtime story read to him. And of all the stories in their history the historian "happens" to open up to this one and remembers Mordecai. That will be huge. But we'll come back to that.

Those are our characters. Now, I want to show you how to read this book. First you are to read it to learn how you relate to God. But you are also to read it as a book about Jesus. And that's actually the main point. But first a little about how you relate to God:

**God is going to work through you or around you.
Which will it be?**

Main idea for today that you gotta get your head around. You are not here by accident. The great big idea the author is setting up for us in these first two chapters is that your life doesn't just HAPPEN. Maybe you think you are Xerxes and you have power because you've made something of yourself. You deserve respect and nobody is going to tell you what to do with your life. And today you need to be reminded that the color of your skin wasn't your choice. The fact that you weren't born to a tribe in New Guinea...not your choice! You think you deserve what you have and you have NO IDEA the privilege that's been handed to you just by being able to make it to church today. What the author is making painstakingly obvious is that GOD is using even the great king Xerxes as a pawn to bring about the rescue of his people whenever he deems it. Life doesn't just happen. God has you right here right now to wake you up and ask you: Are you going to keep thinking you are in charge? Or are you finally going to surrender and acknowledge who really runs things? That means he takes priority in your relationships, in your worship, in your time, in your money. And when you step down from your fake throne,

you will step into a story so much bigger and so much more satisfying than you can imagine.

One more thing here: A lot of times we preachers tend to talk like God wants to use you for his mission and that is true. BUT, sometimes we make the mistake of letting you think you have control over whether or not God uses you for his glory. I promise you do not have that control. The message of Esther is that God is WAY, WAY, WAY bigger than you and he will accomplish his plan. The question is will you oppose him or will you submit to him? There are no other options. Esther is a story of people working for God and people working for themselves. And God wins. That's the story. You don't get to opt out. And I feel like that might be the biggest thing we need to hear as a church. You don't get to assume God is talking to somebody else & you'll get to that when things calm down in your life. He's talking to you. Either way your life is going to give glory to God. Is it going to be because of how he worked around you, or how he worked THROUGH you? You gotta make that call.

The good news that God can use a messed up people like Esther & Mordecai: it means we can find hope in their story. I think there are a lot of decent people here today who compromise their identity as a Christian all the time. You would say God is #1, you love Jesus, but you find yourself getting swept away by the things of the world like Mordecai. Maybe you find yourself drinking too much too often, maybe you find yourself slipping into crass language that gets a laugh but dishonors God, maybe you've compromised your relationship sexually because you think it's no big deal here in Persia. Maybe any

number of other things all because that's just how it is in Persia. And the great news is, if you will own up to that as sin, God can redeem you. He can renew you & give you the peace & security & joy you've been looking for in Persia. And God can work through you for his glory in ways you'd never believe. Esther and Mordecai are proof of it.

Now I told you this book is actually a book about Jesus. Here's what I mean: When Jesus was with his disciples he told them the deeper meaning of everything in the OT was that it pointed to him.

[39] You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, John 5:39

[27] And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Luke 24:27

All the stories all the laws, it was ALL foreshadowing him. So we, on this side of the cross, look back and read the OT through the lens of the cross. This is massive for understanding the bible and will be a breakthrough that will illuminate the OT for some of you. When you take that lens and put it over Esther here is what you really see from our main characters:

Jesus is the better Esther

You'll see this more next weekend when pastor Rashard brings it for us full force. Esther is tapped on the shoulder by God to save his people. She is their savior. Yet she is

far from the savior the bible is looking for. When Esther is interviewed she hides her identity to save herself. When Jesus is interrogated he reveals his identity to save us. Esther compromises her morals to earn favor with the king. Jesus lived without sin to earn us favor with the true king. Esther goes on to *risk* her life to save God's people from physical death. Jesus had to give his life to save God's people from eternal death. One day, Esther died. And God's people went back to their sinful ways. Jesus is the savior who died but rose again giving us permanent victory over sin and he always remains with his people!

Esther is there to point you to Jesus! She delivers...for a time. His deliverance is permanent. He's the real hero of Esther and the savior we really need.

Jesus is the greater Xerxes

One of the things you feel so much in chapter 1 and will feel throughout is that Xerxes is powerful, but he isn't good. He's not a king you would want to rule you. The kingdom isn't a good kingdom. People are living in fear of their lives constantly. He's an unworthy king. And there is a longing that echoes in this book and in the rest of the OT. Where is a king worthy of his throne? This is one of the last books written out of all of the OT books. And for 400 years after the OT is written there is silence, yet God's people are still yearning for a true king. And Jesus enters in as that king. He has a throne he is worthy of. See if you don't see Jesus in this story all you are left with is moralism. Xerxes was bad, esther was good, so be good. Not that inspiring. The bible isn't just good teaching for us to do, its good news about what has been done for us!

Xerxes sat on his throne feeding sin, Jesus got off his throne to forgive our sin. NOBODY obeys Xerxes anymore. Jesus' words will be forever read and obeyed. Xerxes banished people who displeased him. Jesus died for and welcomes those who betray him. Xerxes paraded his wife around and degraded her. Jesus exalts his wife the church as the pure and glorious. Xerxes died and so did his followers. Jesus ROSE from the dead and so will his followers! Xerxes kingdom came to an end. Jesus' kingdom will have no end! let's give honor with our lives where honor is due!

Jesus is king you've been looking for. Will you obey him? Will you allow God to work through you or will you live a life where he is just working around you? Either way he's in charge. How do you let him work through you? It starts with repentance. That's the hard part. You turn away from you being in charge and you give it to him. But then it moves forward in a couple of beautiful ways. It's full obedience to his commands. Not casual half-hearted obedience but full obedience. That's where real joy is. If you are here as a casual Christian. Meaning you hit church twice a month and have nobody you are sacrificing for other than yourself and you obey the parts of the bible that fit your life...there is no joy in that. So what is it you need to surrender? What do you need to obey? You know what it is.