



**T**he stories of the great heroes and heroines of the Bible inspire and instruct us in our own lives. Each one has a “who knows?” moment when God’s story seems to break into regular, everyday life—a critical moment offering a sense of calling or purpose. It’s as true for us as it was in ancient days. Who knows? Maybe God has plans to use you for His glory. Who knows? Maybe God put you where you are, with the influence you have, for a reason. Who knows? Maybe the things you suffer today will make sense in time. When God shows up, a sense of mysterious discovery enters our lives. Who knows what God has planned?

## REALLY? • ESTHER 4:11-16 • Tim McConnell • April 15, 2018

Hey, does my story matter? Over the next seven weeks we'll be asking that question. Does my story matter? When I was in Oxford, my supervisor was the classic mad professor—a genius. He could name every use of a Greek word in the corpus of classical literature, but it was rare he got all his buttons right on his shirt. He once drew a full map of the Mediterranean on a projector screen before he realized it wasn't the white board. During exam week one time I saw him in his Oxford robes rushing down the sidewalk and across streets with a pile of papers under his arm that looked like they could slip out into the gutter at any moment and he would never know. I thought, every one of those papers is the hopes and dreams of some Oxford undergrad. Then I thought, *or me!* What if my paper fell out into the gutter? I kind of walked ten feet behind him for a while to catch anything that fell. Is that how God is? Is that how we are to God? Do you ever wonder if your life is just one in an unmanageable pile of stories tucked thoughtlessly under God's arm, or left behind in the gutter of heaven? This is my life. This is my story. It's the only one I have. Does my story matter to God? Starting with Esther and moving through seven stories, here's what I hope we see: Your story matters. Together you and I are going to say, **"God is in my story. My story is in God."**

Esther is a funny book, a little odd. It's a stunning piece of literature. We're just dipping in, but you'd be blessed to read the whole thing. It's got romance, murder, kings and queens, palace intrigue. It's odd because it's one of only two books named for a woman. Esther and Ruth. It is also odd because it is one of two books in the Bible that don't mention God. Esther and Song of Songs. God is involved throughout both of these books. In fact, the point of Esther is that God is involved even when you don't think He is. God is in your story even when you don't see Him there. God is in my story and my story is in God. So how does Esther run? Let me give you the quick version. It all begins with a woman saying no. During the reign of King Xerxes of Persia, around the 480's BC, Xerxes had a wife named Vashti who was beautiful. During a seven-day drunken festival to celebrate his awesomeness, Xerxes called on Vashti: "Hey, why don't you come out here and parade around so everybody can see what a hot wife I have." That's my translation, but that's about the speed of it. To this brilliant offer, Vashti says, "No. I don't think so. That's not what we're going to do." I want to pause there and just say, as pastor, as a father, I hope every young woman in this church knows how to confidently stand and say **"No."** "No" is one of the most important words in your vocabulary. No, that's not gonna happen! Any man who won't accept "no" is not

a man you need to hang around anymore, even if that man is the king of Persia. That's a little lighthearted, but let me say it more seriously now. If any of you, woman or man, are in a place where someone in a position of power over you is pushing on you, pressing you into uncomfortable places, I want you to call us. I trust every minister on this staff—just pick one, and call us and we are going to come. First Pres is on the way to get you out of that situation, because that is not right. Vashti says no. And in God's providence, in God's mysterious way of being part of the story even when you don't think God's part of the story, this moment of principle, of rightness through Vashti, her "no" opens up the door for everything that happens next.

Vashti is dismissed. Xerxes runs a nationwide beauty contest to find a new wife. Esther wins. By virtue of her beauty, Esther rises to the position of queen. But there's a lot more to Esther than meets the eye. Esther is Jewish. She is part of the covenant people of God, living conquered and marginalized, hidden in the shadows of Persia—a great ancient kingdom to rival Rome at its height or the Chinese Dynasties. Esther was part of the people of God. Esther was also adopted. We don't get the story of her original family, but we do know that Esther was adopted by Mordecai because she had no father, no mother, no one else to do it. Mordecai was her cousin, and he adopted her into his care. See this now, Esther came from nothing, less than nothing. But "as fate would have it..." Is that what we should say? "As it turned out"? the luck of the draw"? No. As God would have it, she rose to a place of great influence.

"Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality" (Esther 2:17-18). On that day, Esther is able to say, "God is in my story." Could she have said that when she was alone and vulnerable, without a mother, without a father? In her best, maybe. Could she have said it when her cousin Mordecai took her in and adopted her as his own daughter? If she was at her best, maybe. But in this blessing, in the moment of blessing, let there be no doubt any longer: God is in my story. Explain it some other way. I was an orphan girl, and now I'm the Queen. I was nothing and unknown, and now the whole empire celebrates my name. God is in my story.

Now the crisis. A member of Xerxes' court named Haman, in a lust for power and hatred for Mordecai and the Jewish people, decides to launch a plan to kill all the Jews and take all their possessions for himself and his network. Some people ascend to power by stepping on the vulnerable; others give themselves away to see people thrive and wait for God's hand to lift them up. Haman was the first type. When Mordecai caught wind of it, he got a message to Esther, his adopted daughter, now the Queen. And we get our little passage today. In the crisis, Mordecai tells Esther, "You've got to do something! Go to the King!" But Esther is not sure. The King hasn't spent any time with her for the last month, and even though she's the Queen, she can't see him whenever she wants, if she bursts into his inner court without an invitation the King could have her killed.

So here comes the challenge, the clarity in the crisis, the moment of truth. It's also the moment where God shows up. Mordecai challenges her, if you don't do it, God will get it done another way. He says it like this:

"For 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" (Esther 4:14). There you go. There it is: "Who knows?" Our title, our key verse. Who knows? Who knows but that God put you right where you are to have His person, His woman, His daughter right there to do the right thing at the right time for His glory. Who knows? Who knows? Are you willing to see?

In the crisis, Esther comes to faith. Watch now. "Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai:" She had to think about it just a second, that's what I read there. She wasn't ready right then, "Get out of here Mordecai. Dad!" But she thought about it. She prayed, maybe. Then she said, "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me." (That's a call for prayer by the way). "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" (Esther 4:15-16). Does anybody think "three days" is important? Esther prefigures Christ here. Three days, I'm willing to die so my people can live. That's faith. Lord, this could be it. I could die doing this, but I know You want me in there. I'm in. I step out of the boat. I walk out on the wire. I'm entirely in Your hands. Behold Your servant, let it be unto me as Your word commands. If I die, I die. My life is Yours. Can't you hear Jesus whispering to Esther, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:24 ESV)? Or you and I could say today, if you've given your life to Jesus, "I have been

crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). This is faith emerging in the moment of crisis. Faith. A life given to Jesus. If I die, I die. I'm not getting out of here alive anyway. Lord, my life is Yours.

Esther maybe looked back and said, "God is in my story." She could look back and see enough. All this comfort, all this renown, all this fame, all this wealth and privilege and influence—it came from God. God is in my story. She was nothing. God made her everything. But you can't get to faith until you say, "My story is in God." My story belongs to God, and God may be writing something that I only partially understand, or maybe don't understand at all! "God, I don't know why this is happening. I don't know why I have to risk it all again. I don't know why I have to go through this pain and this crisis. I don't know why I have to wonder if my life is about to come to an end right here, right now, but God—I'm Yours. Use my life to write Your story, however You will." Well, Esther does it. You can read the rest of the story. Haman winds up hanging from the gallows he built for Mordecai. It's a rough, dramatic story—Esther and Mordecai are not perfect; the revenge they get is bloody and pretty awful. But take this point away from Esther: Who knows? God might have you right where you are to do just what He wants for His glory. Who knows what lies on the other side of your total commitment to Christ?

Every one of us, in our own way, asks this question from time to time: Am I seen? Am I known? Does my story matter? For me, if I can be very personal for a minute, in my life story, in my psychological makeup, I'm learning that for me there is this inner child who pipes up from time to time, "Hey! Do you see me? I need attention!" I have to parent that little child inside myself. Am I seen? Am I known? It makes me do some great things, like be willing to get in front of thousands to declare the resurrection. But it also makes things hard, when a publisher says no to me about a book, or there is no invite to speak in large gatherings, or in some other way the spotlight dims and my inner child starts humming that song from Greatest Showman: "It will never be enough!" I keep a post-it note on my computer right now of Psalm 138, "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands" (Psalm 138:8 ESV). The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me. God, write Your story. Your story. God is in my story. My story is in God. God sees you, and your story matters to Him.

One of my favorite moments in the Gospels is when Jesus is trucking along in this parade toward a very

important appointment to heal a synagogue leader's daughter, but a woman who had experienced bleeding for twelve years touches His cloak and is healed. Jesus stops the parade and finds her. Then it says, "Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth" (Mark 5:33). She told Him the whole truth. Another version says she told Him her whole story. Twelve years of pain and sickness. Do you think that took a minute? Jesus wanted to hear the whole story. He knows your story. He cares about your story.

I was watching a cool show about a group of scientists tracking Emperor Penguins and waiting for newborns to mature. It was on National Geographic. But these divers there to photograph the penguins swimming went down under the arctic shelf and found this ridiculously beautiful, vibrant, colorful undersea garden. Up above there were two colors: white and black...and frozen! Below was beauty, color. You might think, what a waste! How wasteful of God! You know what? God sees and knows every sub-arctic sea plant and flower and coral. He knows its story. He loves its story. He appreciates its beauty! If that matters to God, how much more do you matter? He knows your story.

I want to close sharing this with you. It's a card I got at Easter from someone here in church. I won't share the name, just the story. "Dear Pastor Tim, Having turned away from God over forty-plus years ago and only opening my heart and mind to Him in May of last year and accepting Jesus as my Lord and Savior in June, your sermon yesterday hit home—I know God used you to talk directly to me yesterday as tears of joy flooded my eyes and fell from my face cleaning me of all my doubts and fears and God told me through you how much He loves me and for me to stop searching for why I turned away and to embrace Him through Jesus and focus on following and trusting in Him unconditionally. Thank you so much for being His voice to not only me but to so many others who are searching... P.S. We are thrilled to have just joined First Pres!" What a great card to receive! That's a keeper. I share that with you because I want you to know that's happening as we worship. As we do what we do, God is doing what God does. Forty years away from God! Do you think that took a minute? Right now there may be someone who has felt their story is forgotten. Am I known? Am I loved? God sees you. God knows you. God is in your story—will you put your story in God? Who knows what lies beyond your life placed in the hands of Jesus?

## STUDY GUIDE

### REALLY? • ESTHER 4:11-16

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Esther 4:11-16. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful. Read it one more time together. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- What stood out to you in our passage? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- Describe Esther's initial reaction to Mordecai's instruction (we read of his instruction in verse 8). How would you depict her "faith" at this moment? When did you similarly respond to a difficult task? Or to God when he clearly revealed a plan of action for you?
- How does Mordecai respond to Esther (verses 13 and 14)? How do you think this message might have influenced Esther to act?
- Although Esther and Mordecai are the focal players in this story, how does Esther involve the community in her decision and action? What difference does this "community action" make in the final outcome? (Read Esther 9:20-22.)
- Even though God is not mentioned by name in the book of Esther, how do you see God at work in Esther's story?
- Where has God placed you? (Where do you spend your time? Who do you spend your time with?) How has God put you in a position of influence? In what ways do you embrace this role as an influencer? In what ways do you resist or discredit this role?

Going Deeper: What word, phrase or thought from today's passage or from our time together is God lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Look around you this week for a person you can encourage to be an influencer for God. Be especially aware of those who seem "unlikely" to fill such a role.

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Is there someone in your life who models what it means to be an influencer for God? What do you notice about his/her life?