

**Pastor Tom Mortenson**

**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**January 13, 2019**

**Strangers in a Strange Land**

**Esther 1**

**Prayer:** *Father God, we do again thank you for your grace and your goodness and for the gift that you are to us. And Father, again, we just again think of a large component of that gift is your word which we get to open up and actually delve into the wisdom that you've given us. And, Lord, we're launching a new series a new book this day, and again I want to pray for your Holy Spirit's power, that you would accompany us, that you would give us the ability as we go through the book of Esther to glean what you have for us specifically and individually and that, again, it would be of permanent value and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, as I said, we are looking at the book of Esther and the book of Esther is really unique in all of the scripture. It's primarily a story, and like any other story, it has an author, it has a plot, it has a set of characters. We don't know who the specific author of Esther is but we do know that God is its ultimate author, despite the criticism that this book often receives. Many people have questioned whether the book of Esther even belongs in the

scripture primarily because God is not mentioned once in the entire book. In fact, Martin Luther was said to have hated the book of Esther. The plot is a story that's filled with betrayals and palace intrigue and plot twists that look like they came from a novel. The characters, well, they're primarily a beautiful Jewish girl named Esther who was orphaned and then raised by her cousin Mordecai. They were part of the captured remnant of Israel who had been kidnapped and sent off to Babylon who now find themselves living in this small community of Jews in Persia during the time of King Ahasuerus.

In a nutshell, the plot goes like this: There's a very powerful king, and he's publicly embarrassed at a banquet by his wife. He's drunk, and he wants to put his wife on display and she refuses. This act of defiance stuns the king, stuns his court. They decide that they have to do something. And so he publicly divorces her and he launches a nationwide search for her replacement. Mordecai and his cousin Esther, as Jews, have been living in this nation under the radar, so to speak. The Persian Empire has allowed and even encouraged the Jews to assimilate into its culture. So Mordecai and Esther get pulled right into that. They understand that they are essentially strangers in a strange land and that their lives are at the mercy of those in power and so they do their best to blend in. Mordecai hides his Jewish roots and he instructs

Esther to do as well.

Now Esther, the orphan, is singularly beautiful, and because of her beauty she is recruited to be part of the king's retinue of possible replacement brides. So as the story unfolds, her cousin Mordecai has now become a respected member of the local government while Esther becomes one of the king's favorites and eventually the queen. The plot begins to thicken when Mordecai insults a man named Haman, a very powerful member of the king's court who bristles because Mordecai refuses to bow down to him. Well, Haman decides that Mordecai and all of his fellow Jews need to pay for this disrespect by being eliminated. So Haman makes it his business to destroy not only Mordecai but every one of the Jews who are living in Persia.

Now the rest of the book of Esther really centers around God's ability to take these extraordinarily bad circumstances, circumstances intended for the absolute and complete destruction of Israel, and superintend them for good, even for folks who've been captured by the culture. I mean the story clearly invites comparisons to the book of Daniel in that Daniel as well was captured along with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and they were sent off to Babylon as well. We spent a lot of time, if you remember, studying the book of Daniel. And one of the things we

learned was how uniquely passionate Daniel was for the kingdom of God. Daniel, if you remember, right from the beginning, he stood out and he stood apart. You remember he refuses the king's food. He prefers vegetables and water to the exotic fare that he's been offered and he insists that God's going to make up the difference, and sure enough, God does. And so we follow Daniel for the many, many years that he serves faithfully as a trusted aide to Nebuchadnezzar but more importantly we see someone who never compromises his faith, regardless of the pressure that he's under. We remember that Daniel was once thrown into the lions' den for refusing the king's edict that no one pray to anyone but the king. We think of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and remember them being thrown into the fiery furnace because they refuse to bow down to the king's image. And so we looked at this book and we saw these great and these mighty miracles that God did in the lives of Daniel and his associates, but now we're going to see a very difficult cast of characters in Esther and Mordecai. And so let me just state flat out at the very beginning that they were not the spiritual superstars that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were. They were ordinary sinners, just like you and me, trying to figure out how to live in a very dangerous culture.

Mike Cospers has done an excellent study on the book of Esther and this is what he says. He says:

...there's a problem with looking to Daniel: Most of us aren't a Daniel. In fact, we are far from it. As much as we recognize that our culture is in decline, we also kind of like it. Christians in general consume as much mass media and are as addicted to pornography, as likely to divorce, as consumeristic, and as obsessed with social media as the rest of our world. Again: We're immersed in a secular age, and it's had a profound effect upon us. Daniel's faith was ironclad. He never let the pressure of exile shake his faith, and he didn't adopt the dominant culture's way of life. I wish that were me, but it's not. I'm not a Daniel. I -- like many of us, I suspect -- am more troubled than Daniel. Less steely. Like the old hymn says, I am "prone to wander," prone to moments of grey doubt that leave me wondering how certain I am about the things I think I believe and value most.

I think Mike Cosper nails it. But there's good news in the book of Esther. And what should be our take on this book throughout the entire series is once again the power of Romans 8:28. Because as we study the book of Esther, we're going to see in their lives that all things really do work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose, even when they mess up. Romans 8:28 does not say that all things work together for good to those who are spiritual superstars. It basically tells us that if

you are one of God's own, if you by faith have exchanged Christ's righteousness for your sinfulness, then God himself has taken up residence within you because you've given your life to him. If that's the case, then you, too, are going to find that every single event in your life is going to have an appointed end, that is God's definition of what is good. And that end is the shaping and the molding of your life uniquely into the image of Jesus Christ. There's no one in the world who can bear the image of Christ like you can, because there's no one in the world like you. And God is so great, he's so good, he's so loving and so power powerful that he surrounds his children with the ability to superintend every single event in their lives with one stated goal, and that's to give you the ability to reflect Jesus in your life so that you, as an individual, can bring honor and glory to him. And Mordecai and Esther is really a firsthand story of how that works. And we'll see that they're probably much more like you and me than Daniel and his associates were. They were trying to figure out a way to live in a culture that intensely resented a faith that won't bend, a faith that wouldn't accommodate. And we're going to find on more than one occasion they fail.

So let's start right at the beginning. We pick up on the story of Esther at this party that's held by Ahasuerus, and he was a piece of work, to put it mildly. This is the king who was weak, who was

power hungry, who has no problem whatsoever brutalizing those around him to show them how powerful he was. I've read many different accounts of him and he was arguably insane. The book of Esther opens up with an elaborate description of the party that's being thrown by the king. This is *Esther 1*. It says: *Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces -- just imagine how huge a kingdom this is -- in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal thrown in Susa, the citadel, in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and all the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.*

To just think about how much wealth this king has, I mean this is not a feast that lasts for a day or a week. This is a feast that lasts for six months. And it wasn't a simple party that this king was throwing, I mean, he was preparing for an assault on the Greek Empire and this lavish party had a number of different reasons for existing. What he wanted to do is really demonstrate the vast strength and power that he had. And he wanted to do that to enlist their support for his next attempt at expanding the Persian Empire. It's an attempt that would end in abject failure. So this king gives a feast, and he gives a feast for the big shots, first and

foremost. But he also gives a feast for the rank and file. We pick up in verse 5, it says: *And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hanging fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.*

One sure way to ensure the loyalty of your subjects is to offer them something for free, and here you have this party with free food and drink, and we have this text mentioning that while this is going on, Queen Vashti is actually having a separate feast for the women in a different part of the palace. We find this is where the plot begins to thicken. We pick up at verse 10. It says: *On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.*



Now, at this point, many commentators are divided as to exactly what it was the king is demanding. There's a significant number who suggest that the king was demanding his queen show up wearing nothing but the crown, because he was putting her on display quote -- "*for she was lovely to look at.*" Others say that the party by this time had gotten so rowdy and so raunchy that someone in Vashti's position basically didn't want to lower herself to even want to show up. Well, at any rate, it seems like Queen Vashti did the unthinkable. In verse 12 it says: *But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.* You have to understand, this guy is unstable in the first place, and he's in all likelihood extraordinarily drunk, and here he is before all of his guests and he finds his wife, the queen, has flat out refused him. Again, verse 13: *Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of the King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?" Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, "King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him and*

*she did not come." This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.*

You can see, Vashti's response has become this huge threat now to the entire kingdom. I mean, if she gets away with this affront of actually disobeying her husband, there's no telling what havoc is going to be released in the kingdom. Verse 19: *If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.*

Well, if you want proof that this king has actually lost his marbles, realize what he's now ordering. He's ordering every

single husband in the kingdom to do what he doesn't have the power to pull off with his own wife. I mean, really what he's doing is he's ordering all of the women in the kingdom to let their men -- quote -- "*be masters in their own household.*" Somehow he thinks he can order every single wife in the kingdom to do what Vashti refused to do just by a declaration from the king.

So we pick up on *Esther 2* starting at verse 1. It says: *After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti."* This pleased the king, and he did so. 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, 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. 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. So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. 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. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.*

See, Mordecai knows that being assimilated into the Persian culture means hiding your Jewish roots, and even their names represented an attempt to bridge the two cultures that they found themselves part of. There was the culture of the kingdom of God and there was this culture of Babylon and Persia. I mean, Esther's given name was actually Hadassah. We just read: *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. You know what the name "Esther" means? Esther was taken from the pagan goddess Ishtar. It's one of the pagan gods of Babylon. Mordecai's name was taken from the pagan god Marduk. That alone should tell you a lot about the issue*

of assimilation for Esther and Mordecai.

And again, Mike Cosper observes, he says this: A Jew named Mordecai living in the citadel was a compromised person. He'd sacrificed his identity and taken up a place in the center of power in a foreign government -- a government that had been more gracious, perhaps, than the Babylonians towards the Jews, but a foreign government with a demigod king and a pagan religion at its core. There should be no doubt about it when we meet Mordecai: He's a compromised man, living with a Persian identity in service to a Persian king.

See Mordecai and Esther assimilated into the culture that had captured them physically, mentally and spiritually. Well, the reason why the book of Esther is so appropriate for us is that many, if not most of us, have also been captured by a culture physically, mentally and spiritually. And here's why. We may not have been part of a military campaign that defeated, scattered and transported us to another time, place and culture, but as believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to live lives as new creatures no longer giving our first loyalty to the culture that the Bible refers to as "the world." This idea of "the world" is what Jesus called the fallen powers of each and every culture that seeks throughout that culture to wage war against the kingdom of God. So

"the world" changes from culture to culture. In Jesus' day the world was either the pagan culture of Rome or it was the highly ritualized religion of Israel. But understand, both of them were dead set against the kingdom of God for completely opposite reasons, and both had a vital hand in crucifying the son of God. See, when Jesus encountered opposition, he recognized exactly where it was coming from. He knew that this world had been captured by his enemy Satan and that he and Satan would be locked in mortal combat that resulted in Jesus ultimately having the victory. Make no mistake about it, this world has an unbridled hatred towards the things of Christ and his kingdom because it recognizes deep down that he is the lone existential threat. To the extent that you identify with Christ will be the extent to which the world sees you as a similar threat. *2 Timothy says: In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

See, the Bible very clearly states that Jesus, he came to this planet and he came with a mission and the mission was twofold. One was to offer up his life as a ransom for us and the other was to destroy the work that the devil had already done. Now, the ransom work was the result of Adam's fall. I mean, God knew that giving us the freedom to fall also included the risk of actually falling. And Adam, well, he clearly fell. God took that risk not as we understand risk, I mean, we see risk as an either/or type of a

situation where one choice produces one outcome and another choice would produce a very different one. God knew precisely what the risk was of giving us the freedom to fall. From his perspective, this wasn't a risk. This was a certainty. I mean, Adam would indeed choose to rebel against God and side with the enemy. Adam would indeed willingly, perhaps not understanding the consequences, but willingly nonetheless give up his perfection in order to embrace sin. God knew the moment that Adam took his very first breath that his life would entail his son's death, and that death would be a sacrifice for Adam's sin and for all of ours. And yet for reasons beyond my comprehension, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit pressed forward with that plan. Adam would be totally free but Adam would take that freedom, he would embrace sin, and he would ultimately fall. The evil one would gain control of the world until such time as Jesus entered into it and utterly defeated him on his own territory. That's the second part of God's twofold plan, and it's not over yet. I mean we know that Satan controls this world because we've gotten some internal glimpses of how this works and we saw that primarily in Jesus' temptation in the desert.

If you remember the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he goes out into the desert, pressed out there by the Holy Spirit. Understand that the desert itself is the habitation of demons. So

Jesus is headed out there for a confrontation with the devil, and if you remember, he first goes out there and then he fasts for forty days and forty nights, and in that weakened state, he meets the devil himself. And three separate times the devil tries to entice Jesus. Three separate times Jesus repulses him using the very same means that is available to all of us, and that's the word of God. The very first time the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread because he knew how hungry he had to have been. The second time he tempts Jesus to go outside of his humanity by tempting him to leap from a tall peak, saying that the angels would bear him up; and thirdly, the devil drops all pretense and simply tells Jesus, I'll give you the world because it's mine to give, if he would simply switch allegiance from God the Father to Satan. This is how the devil put it to Jesus in that temptation in the desert. This is *Luke 4:5*. It says: *And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." And Jesus answered him, "It is written "'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"*

Jesus tells Satan you can keep your worldly kingdoms and then he tells him to worship the one true God. But it begs the question.



All right. Who delivered all the kingdoms of the world to Satan? It was Adam. It was his decision to forego his perfection. It was his decision to infect himself in such a way that he and God could no longer fellowship together, as God was still perfect and Adam no longer was. Worse still, the creation itself was delivered over to Satan as it, too, identified with its fallen crown. *Romans 8* says: *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.* You see, Adam passed on this futility, this imperfection, and he passed it on to every single one of his offspring, including you and me. This was the world that Jesus came into, and he referred to it repeatedly as "the darkness." In *John 12* he says: *"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness."* You see, Jesus came into this world knowing that taking it back and utterly defeating the enemy was a forgone conclusion. So make no mistake about it, there is nothing more threatening to Satan in this world than Christ. *1 John* says: *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.* So you have to understand that it is into this formal spiritual warfare that you and I and every other person on this planet has been born. Most of us live our lives on this planet completely unaware of what it is we've been birthed into and why, that is, until we encounter

the living God who forever changes lives. I mean, I personally encountered the Spirit of God in May of 1973 and it forever changed my life. But I can remember before that, I mean, prior to that moment, I was a product of this world. I was living my life looking for success as it's defined by this world, blinded to the misery of a life without purpose until God turned my life upside down.

I recently heard someone say the two most important events in your life are the day you were born and the day that you realize why you were born. Westminster Catechism tells us why. It says: The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Tell that to those who are still thoroughly engaged in the world and you will see that they will see you not just as different but as imminently threatening. And the reason why that is is very clearly stated by Jesus who said in *John 15*: *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."* The more you understand this, the more you'll be able to operate in this world. You see, deep down, the world and everyone who is in it knows who belongs and who does not. They may not be able to put their finger on those who are no longer of the world but they know deep down inside that they're a threat.

I want to talk a little bit about Tim Tebow. Tim Tebow's a professional athlete, but he's a man who has made it very clear whose kingdom he serves. And you know, the world has made it clear what it thinks of Tim Tebow. I want to read you an article. It's rather long but it's very powerful. It recently was run in the *Tampa Bay Times*, and the article was written by Tom Jones, entitled: "The Unfortunate Truth About Tim Tebow Haters," subtitled: "Tim makes you look at yourself. And sometimes you don't exactly like what you see." He says this:

Over the next week, thousands of people in Tampa Bay will celebrate Tim Tebow being in town to play minor-league baseball. They will pack the stands in Tampa and Clearwater just to get a glimpse of one of the most famous athletes to ever live. They will cheer him for every little thing he does on the field because they love every little thing he does -- and stands for. But there will be thousands who cannot wait for Tebow to leave town. They're already sick of him. They don't want to hear about him. They don't want to talk about him. They don't want to read about him. They hate him. Surely you know someone who hates Tebow. You might be that someone. "He's a very polarizing figure," says Mississippi State football coach Dan Mullen, who coached Tebow at Florida. "There are haters in the world. I would say there are more Tim haters than doubters." The question is: Why? Why do so many people hate

Tim Tebow? He's passionate about every aspect of his life, yet he isn't arrogant. He's dedicated. Loyal. He's respectful of others, even those who don't respect him. He's a leader. He's polite. He's humble even though he's better than most people at everything he's ever attempted. Those who truly know him have nothing but praise for him. You never hear a bad thing about him from someone who has ever spent significant time around him. He serves his fellow man. And most of that is done away from cameras and publicity. He's one of the nicest, kindest, compassionate people on the planet. Yet he is hated by more than a few. It's not that he's a Gator. Or that he wanted to be an NFL quarterback. Or that he wants to play baseball. Or that he's disingenuous, because he's not. It's his faith in God. "People attack," Mullen said. "They attack his religion." Tebow isn't shy about sharing his beliefs or crediting God for his life. But it's not as if he's forcing people to listen to him. If you don't want to see it, turn off the TV, turn the page, move on to something else. Yet, the haters say things like, "Why does he have to shove his religion in my face?" "I respect his faith," Mullen said. "It was who he was on a daily basis. It doesn't mean that you have to have the exact same faith, but you can sure respect someone who has these strong beliefs. That's a positive way to live your life. Whether you try to do that in religion, or in college football, or in the classroom, or in a TV career, or in missionary life -- or in trying

to play pro baseball -- that's a very hard thing to do." Still, the haters can't wait to see him fail. They rejoice that he can't find an NFL job. They smile whenever they read about him striking out or making an error. Not only don't they want to see him do well, they want to see him flounder and flop in embarrassing fashion. It's not good enough that Tebow can't start in the NFL, the haters want to see him out of the league completely. Now those same people are upset that he's playing in a baseball league they don't even follow. To despise someone like that just isn't normal. Tebow isn't a criminal. He never did any harm to anyone. Yet the hate runs deep. Maybe, just maybe, the target of their hate isn't Tebow, but something far more unsettling. "Tim makes you look at yourself," Ohio state and former Gators coach Urban Meyer said. "And sometimes you don't exactly like what you see. I fell into that. I never met someone quite like that, someone who, from A to Z, what he's living is real. He makes you self-evaluate. Sometimes I look at his critics and, while I don't feel sorry for them, I wonder what's the issue here?" Tebow believes in God. He believes in service. He believes in trying to impact people in a positive way, to make their lives better. He believes in doing whatever it takes, including playing baseball, to the best of his ability to reach people and share his story and make a difference in the world. What's wrong with that, exactly? Maybe if people spent the energy it takes to hate Tebow on living their lives more

like Tebow, the world would be a much better place.

Now that's a long article and I read that because actually I tried to edit it and I couldn't find two sentences to take out of it. And here's the bottom line. Tim Tebow is a threat because he knows exactly why he's here. He knows how to be in the world but not of the world. *"And if you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."* See, the kingdom of God is a zero sum game. One side wins always at the expense of the other side. There's no compromise. There's only winners and losers. Jesus himself said, *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."* The ruler of the world knows that well. And so ever since the fall of Adam, there's been this ongoing spiritual war between the kingdom of God and the world, and this in a roundabout way brings us right back to the book of Esther, because Esther is *Romans 8:28* on display: *For those who love God, all things work together for good.*

You see, God had a plan right from the beginning from Adam's rebellion and his plan was to raise up the nation from whom the Messiah would come and the nation was known as Israel. And we read

in the Old Testament and we learned about God's plan and this nation that he raised up and read of a nation that God chose to love not because they were lovely or huge or worthy at all of love, but simply because God chooses. *Deuteronomy 7* says: "*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*"

See, God's reason for loving Israel is the same reason for him loving you and me. It's no reason that we can discern at all. It's simply God's choice. I mean, when God says in *Romans 9*: "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*" I think we all instinctively rebel. We want it to depend on our will and exertion. We want to be worthy of mercy. I mean it almost doesn't compute, this idea of a God who loves us for no discernible reason whatsoever on our part, of a God who fixes his love on sinners no different than any

other sinner in the world and chooses them as objects of his love. I mean, not only does he choose these sinners but then he indwells them with his Spirit and he empowers them to live lives that bring honor and glory to Him. Well, Mordecai and Esther didn't get that. Mordecai and Esther actually had three options. They could have chosen isolation, which they obviously didn't; they could have chosen assimilation, which they did; or they could have chosen a third option which we call sanctification. Now they didn't choose sanctification, but sanctification chose them. And I wish I could say that this happens with exquisite precision and finality but we all know how messy sanctification actually is. You see, God finds us as rebels, he saves us as rebels, and he continues to love us as rebels. And God continues to work his way into our lives knowing that oftentimes it's one step forward and two steps back. And we saw that when we looked at the nation of Israel. We look at Israel and we see that they embody the same kind of journey that we're all on, over and over again they would be rescued, they would be challenged, they would compromise, they would fall, only to be rescued again. And we followed Abraham, the father of Israel, the one man whom God said he would make into the nation of Israel. And we remember he's a pagan idol worshiper from Ur of the Chaldees that God simply fixed his love on. And he fixed his love on him even though he messed up repeatedly. We follow Abraham as he demonstrates great faith followed by great fear. I mean, we see



him willing to offer up his only son Isaac as a sacrifice and yet so frightened at the threat of Sarah's beauty that he lies, telling Abimelech that she's his sister instead of his wife. And that pattern of compromise, of rescue, of renewal and more compromise we've seen repeated over and over again. Well, that's what we encounter in the book of Esther.

If you remember our last study, we studied the book of Gideon, I don't know if you remember back, remember God appears to him as an angel. At the time Israel is so profoundly locked in this cycle of rebellion and compromise that they've been completely overrun by the Midianites. And here's Gideon and he's hiding at a press and he's trying to thresh out some wheat before the Midianites see what's happening and swoop down and steal it, because this is what had become of a once great nation, and Gideon intensely resents it. And so he's confronted by the angel of the Lord, and he lays out his complaints to this person and he's bitter and he's broken and he's angry that God has abandoned him and his people, and little does he realize that he's making his complaint about God's absence to God himself, who's there appearing before him, because God never left him. Well, the story of Esther is a similar story of rebellion and compromise and God's repeated intervention. This is precisely what we're going to see in the book of Esther, two ordinary, flawed, fallen characters living out their lives between

two worlds sovereignly guided by God's superintending hand, the exact same hand that superintends and guides your hands and my hands if we're one of his.

You know, if there's a hero to be found in the first chapter of the book of Esther, it's not Esther, it's certainly not Mordecai. It's got to be Vashti. I mean, she saw a culture that had reduced women to objects to be displayed for the king's pleasure and she said no thanks! It was a stunningly gutsy thing to do. And Vashti paid a very high price for it, I mean, we're not told what her motivation was, nor what her fate was. We're not unaware what happens when we refuse to play the game. And whether it's Persia, North Korea, China or here in the United States, we see many different examples of people who are willing to literally risk life and limb to stand up for the kingdom of God, knowing that: *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.* Now this is a hatred that's held in check mostly in the United States. Not so in the rest of the world. With only a few years we've seen brothers and sisters and in other parts of the world who have been harassed, brutalized, assaulted and even beheaded for naming the name of Christ. And you all know that's extraordinarily foreign to us. But it's reality to the rest of the world. We've got it so good because we're standing on the

shoulders of the godly men who founded this country knowing the sinful heart of man. And they gave us a constitution that protects our right to worship as we please. But anyone with a set of eyes and ears knows that even this protection can get wobbly as the attacks continue. Tim Tebow is not just an outlier. In fact, Tim Tebow is the canary in the coal mine. And if you don't think our culture is just as wicked and just as potentially dangerous as anything in Ahasuerus' time, you are sadly mistaken. Thank God that our God is far, far bigger than our culture.

The book of Esther is designed to show us ordinary sinners that the invisible hand of God is always at work, no matter what circumstance may suggest. And the more you believe this, the more this will change your life. Tim Tebow is hated. That's simply a fact. He's hated because he chose sanctification over isolation or assimilation. But you know, that hatred doesn't matter much to him. And in his book *Shaken* he tells us why. This is a quote. He says: "Regardless of how your life will impact others and what that will look like, I just know that when your identity is grounded in God, when you trust in Him, you become part of a bigger picture. And you begin to live out this wonderful poem he has written for your life. This is the truth when life is smooth sailing, and this is the truth when storms come." The poem is Romans 8:28. All things really do work together for good to those

who love God and are called according to his purpose. But what we have to really grapple with and understand and take into our innermost being is that God is writing that poem right now for every one of us. I mean, that's been proven true for Tim Tebow and it's true for Mordecai and Esther and hopefully we're going to learn in this study it's true for us as well. Let's pray.

*Father, I thank you for your word. I thank you for Esther. I thank you for Mordecai. I thank you for the journey we're going to go on. We are going to see some incredibly flawed people do some incredibly flawed things and yet the hope and the beauty in all of this is knowing that you never leave them, you never abandon them, you never look down from heaven and say I'm done, it's too much. Lord, we're thankful because we, too, are Esther and Mordecai. We, too, are living in a foreign culture. We are strangers in a strange land. And, Lord, it's my prayer that we would learn that isolation is not the answer, assimilation is not the answer but sanctification is. And I pray you would teach us that lesson over and over again as we look into your book. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*