

DON'T WASTE YOUR INFLUENCE

When you observe your life do you see God at work around you? When you go about your day do you ever think about how God is using you and the events of your life to accomplish His eternal purposes? (pause here and let this sink in a moment) Or, are you someone that questions whether there is any purpose or meaning to life at all?

Welcome to **Week 5 of Prepare The Way!** Over the last few weeks we have followed the journey of God's people into Babylonian captivity as God had previously warned them through His prophets. And now we are observing God's preparation of his people for a return back to the Promised Land in order to set the stage for the coming Messiah. A Messiah that has been promised since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and a Messiah who is not only for Israel (God's chosen people) but who is for all mankind in order to deliver us from our sin.

Today we are going to be in the Book Esther. Esther is one of only two books found in the Bible that focuses solely on women as the main emphasis of the book which God uses in His redemption story. Both of which are key components in setting the stage for the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. The first one is the Book of Ruth who was the great grandmother of King David. Ruth is a vital link in the ancestral line from which the Messiah would be made flesh linking together Jew with non-Jew in the very bloodline that would give birth to the Messiah.

The symbolic nature of Ruth (a non-Jew) being purposefully placed within our redemption story is to emphasize the fact that the Messiah (Jesus) is for ALL mankind not just for the Jewish people. And then of course there is the Book of Esther, who because of her bold faith and her position of influence, God uses her to spare the Jewish people from total annihilation. Esther is considered to be the last of twelve books that make up the historical section of the Old Testament. The other books being Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

As we come to the Book of Esther, Daniel and King Cyrus of Persia have gone the way of their fathers before them. That's just a nice way to say that they are now dead. In fact, the events of Esther are going to take place during the reign of the Persian King Xerxes (who in some other translations is also referred to as Ahasuerus which was derived from the Hebrew and Latin form of his name.)

To put this in perspective regarding the biblical timeline of events Esther takes place during a period when Jews were being allowed to return back to Jerusalem in order to rebuild their city which would place the events in Esther somewhere between the first return of the Jews to Jerusalem (led by Zerubbabel in 538 BC) and the second return (led by Ezra in 458 BC). Since the days of Daniel and the moment that the Persians took control of Babylon, the Jews have received nothing but favor while in captivity and isolation from their homeland. So much favor in fact, that true to God's word given to the people through Jeremiah the prophet, God is in the process of providing opportunities for His people to return back to the Promised Land to rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. But the hatred for God's people still remains and it runs

deep. Even though the people of God have been able to garner favor with the kings of Persia, not everyone is happy about their existence and that hatred burns so hot towards them that there are those working in the shadows that would love nothing more than to extinguish them from the earth.

One thing we definitely see all throughout the Bible is this. Even though Satan has worked hard to stir up animosity towards God's people among the nations, God still sovereignly provides for them and protects them as He does all of His people. So, as we take a look at the story of Esther **I want us to see how God used Esther's circumstances, her position and her influence to make a difference in the lives of her people and my prayer is that this will inspire us to allow God to do the same in our lives.** Because here's the deal, **your life does matter, it does have purpose and God is at work all around you!** As you are finding **Esther 2** I am going to ask God to prepare our hearts for what He has for us today. **(PRAY)**

If we are going to allow God to use our circumstances, our position and our influence to make a difference in the lives of others I want us to see the **TWO ATTITUDES** we need to possess in order to see that happen.

Now, let me set the context for what happens here in the Book of Esther. The story begins when King Xerxes had the foolish idea to show off his beautiful wife before a drunken gathering of his government officials, closest friends and party attendees on the last day of a 7 day feast of celebration. After the queen refuses to do as the king commanded her (btw, who could blame her), the king is forced to make an example out of her in order to discourage all the women of the kingdom from wanting to rebel against their husbands in the future. So the King was advised to make a decree that Vashti, his wife, no longer be allowed to come before him and that her royal position be given to another.

Once the king's anger subsides the servants who attended to his needs suggested that he summons all the beautiful virgins of the land to be brought before him so that he could choose a new wife to replace queen Vashti. One of those chosen to be brought before the king was a beautiful young Hebrew woman named Esther. She was an orphan who was being raised by her older cousin Mordecai.

ESTHER 2:8-10 (NIV)

8 When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. **9** She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. **10** Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so

ESTHER 2:15-17 (NIV)

15 When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. FAVOR seems to be a recurring theme for those who faithfully follow God! **Honor God and He will honor you!** We saw this with Joseph! We saw this with King David! We saw this over the last couple of weeks with Daniel and his three friends! And once again we see it here with Esther!) **16** She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. **17** 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. There's God again! Some might say, "It doesn't sound like it to me. She is being taken from her family and placed in the king's harem against her will. How is this God working in her life?" Watch what happens, because as we are going to see, God is at work behind the scenes in the circumstances of Esther's life. And btw, He is also at work in our life in the same ways!) **So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.**

Not long after Esther was chosen to be his queen did King Xerxes promote Haman, the Agagite, to be his right hand man over all the princes and officials in the land. Now, here we need to know a little background information to understand the significance of Haman's promotion.

Haman was an Agagite which means he was a descendant of King Agag of the ancient Amalekites who were notorious enemies of Israel. And here is why this is significant to note. The Amalekites were descendants of Amalek, who happened to be a son of Esau. The feud between the Israelites and Amalekites goes all the way back to the rivalry between the two brothers Jacob and Esau caused by Jacob's deception when he stole Esau's blessing. (Genesis 27). Btw, this is why **FORGIVENESS** and **RECONCILIATION** is so vital! Unforgiveness and bitterness has done more to divide people, tribes, families and nations than anything else!! Not only can it last for generations but in the process it hinders people from having a relationship with God. Think about what it did to Esau's faith and his relationship with God. Think about what it did to their family. So much so that it impacted generations that followed! Could it be that Haman does not have a relationship with God because of generations of unforgiveness and bitterness harbored toward Jacob and all his descendants? **Do you want your bitterness and unforgiveness to have the same result in your life?**

This is why Jesus said this in **Matthew 6:14-15 (NIV) 14** For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." The point being, how can we ever be in a position to receive the forgiveness God wants to give us if we never learn to forgive those who hurt us? The bitterness Esau had toward his brother caused them to separate from one another and ultimately caused Esau and his descendants to separate themselves from God.

This feud is even deeper than what we see begin with Jacob and Esau. The Amalekites were the first ones to attack Israel when they came out of Egypt in **Exodus 17**. These same Amalekites are the ones that God instructed King Saul to completely destroy in **1 Samuel 15** but he disobeyed and it cost him favor with God. Another interesting side note here. Guess what the King's name was, who led the Amalekites at this time? King Agag! If that wasn't enough.

Mordecai is a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin which just also happens to be the same tribe that King Saul was from. Bottom line, there is a deep seeded hatred between Mordecai's family and Haman's family going all the way back to Jacob and Esau.

This hatred is going to manifest itself in a plot by Haman to try and get rid of all of the Jews!! Here is a reality in life that we face everyday, HURT PEOPLE, HURT PEOPLE! I want you to note that if Haman is successful in his plot it will mean no salvation for mankind because the Messiah is supposed to come from the Jewish people. If the Messiah doesn't come as foretold by the prophets of God then God cannot be real and His promises are just wishful thinking. At stake here is more than a group of people and a family dispute that has gone on for generations. What is on the line here is God's name and God's kingdom agenda! And Haman goes right to work on his plan to destroy the Jews especially after he has an encounter with Mordecai in Esther chapter 3.

ESTHER 3:1-6 (NIV) **1** After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. **2** All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

3 Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" **4** Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

5 When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Mordecai's disrespect of Haman triggers a bunch of generational baggage. Notice what takes place next **6** Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. So Haman utilizes his new found influence and position to try and manipulate the king in order to achieve his own personal agenda and that is to exact revenge on his long time enemy Israel. Here's the deal. We will either use our life and influence for our own personal agenda or we will use it for God's kingdom. But we will all choose one or the other.

ESTHER 3:8-11 (NIV)

8 Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. **9** If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury."

10 So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. **11** "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."

As a result of the decree established by the king, Mordecai begins to mourn for his people and word of this gets back to Esther who is now in a very precarious position. She is queen of Persia but she herself is a Jew. It is here that we are going to see how God is at work, which btw is interesting because God is not even mentioned at all by name anywhere in the book of Esther. I think this is both interesting and actually good for us because it serves to make the point I want all of us to see today. **You may not know God personally this morning! You may not recognize His work. You may not even feel His presence at times when you are in the middle of a circumstance impacting your life. But that doesn't mean He is not at work all around you!**

God may not be mentioned at all in this story, but He is very much involved in the lives of those living it out! And this leads me to **Attitude #1 - We should be looking for God in the ordinary events of life.**

Think about this in terms of the events in Esther! The people of God are in Babylon because He placed them there as a result of their sin. Esther became queen because God had given her favor first with Hegi who was in charge of the king's harem and then with the king himself. And now Haman has a plot to kill all the Jews which would seek to undermine God's eternal plans regarding mankind and now Esther is uniquely positioned to intercede for her people before the King in a way that no one else can. Watch what happens next.

ESTHER 4:1-14 (NIV)

1 When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. **2** But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. **3** In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. Even though Mordecai cannot get to Esther, God sees to it that she gets word through other means because it is through their mourning and fasting that they are calling on God to save them from this edict.

4 When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. **5** Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

6 So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. **7** Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. **8** He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

9 Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. **10** Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, **11** "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for

any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”

12 When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, **13** he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. In other words, don’t think you can hide in your comfort. But instead, trust in God, not in your comfort.

14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, Why? Because God made them a promise through Jeremiah the prophet right before Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Babylonians almost a century prior.

Jeremiah 32:36-41 36 “You are saying about this city, ‘By the sword, famine and plague it will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon’; but this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: **37** I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. **38** They will be my people, and I will be their God. **39** I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them. **40** I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. **41** I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul. Because of this promise Mordecai says what he does to Esther.

Esther 4:14 (NIV) 14 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?”

Nothing in life is happenstance or just the luck of the draw. From the simple to the extraordinary. God is at work all around us and He is using everything in our lives to bring about His purposes and ultimately His kingdom. From the good, the bad and the ugly in our life God does not waste anything. Whether you get to make a choice. Or whether you don’t. God is at work, we just need to look for Him. Esther was placed in a situation where she didn’t have a lot of say in the matter. She didn’t get to decide if she wanted to live in Babylon. She didn’t necessarily choose to be an orphan. She didn’t even choose to be a Jew. And she certainly didn’t choose to be placed in the king’s harem. Heck, even as queen of Persia she didn’t even get to decide when she did or didn’t want to come into the king’s presence. But that didn’t mean God wasn’t at work. In fact, God was at work long before she was ever a twinkle in her mother’s eye. And the same is true for us as well.

Two realities Mordecai points out for Esther:

1) Maybe you are where you are for this very purpose!

If we fail to see our current situation as part of God’s sovereign plan we are only getting half the picture when it comes to our lives! Here is what it looks like if we do not see God at work in our lives and our lives as part of His eternal plan.

"You discarded most of the lies along the way but held on to the one that said life mattered." - Stephen King

Obviously Stephen King does not believe in God! So as far as he is concerned the idea that "life matters" is simply a lie that we should discard with all the other lies we have experienced in life. I am here to tell you that you can believe in God but if you fail to see that He is at work in your life and that your life is part of His eternal purpose you will come to the same conclusion as Stephen King. It's no wonder that so many of us feel like life is meaningless and our existence or situation is pointless.

We need to heed what it is that Mordecai is saying to Esther and we need to understand that where you are right now is because God has you there for such a time as this. Even if you are where you are because of your own poor choices. God still wants to use you and work through you to accomplish His eternal purpose. In fact, here is what Max Lucado has to say about the meaning of life.

"Philosophers can debate the meaning of life, but you need a Lord who can declare the meaning of life." - Max Lucado

Mordecai is trying to get Esther to see that God has a sovereign plan and that she is part of that plan. And even though she may not have had much of a say in the things that have happened to her in her life, he is challenging her to make the choice now to allow God to use her in this moment to accomplish His purposes and his Kingdom agenda? The question is, will you and I do the same? Maybe you are where you are right now because God has placed you there for such a time as this. Will you let Him use you to accomplish His kingdom agenda. (Btw, God's kingdom agenda is to help people see their sins are forgiven in Christ and that He wants to have a relationship with them)

And that brings us to the second reality that Mordecai brings to Esther's attention.

2) If you don't let God use you, God will work through another avenue and you will miss out on the blessing.

Ultimately God wins out and I don't know about you but I want to be on the winning side! If God gives us an opportunity to make a stand for Him or to serve Him in some way, why wouldn't we? As Esther has already seen herself and as we have seen in the lives of all those we have been reading about in God's word, God honors those who honor Him. There is only blessing to be had when we honor God. And did I mention already, God always wins out? Losing sucks! I want to be on the winning team!!

Well, based on these two realities spelled out by Mordecai there really is only one thing left to do. And that leads me to **Attitude #2 - We need to obey God regardless of the outcome**

ESTHER 4:15-17 (NIV)

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: **16** “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” **17** So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.

Basically Esther is like, *“well if it is true that I am here for such a time as this, and if I don’t do it God is going to raise someone else to do it, then I might as well trust HIM with my life and if I perish in the process then I perish but come what may I am going to trust God to see me through!”* But she doesn’t get there without recognizing that God is at work in her life and that ultimately this whole thing depends on Him!

Of course, the rest of the story is that Esther does boldly go before the king without him summoning her. And surprise, she does find favor with him as he not only accepts her into his presence but he is willing to grant her whatever she requests up to half the kingdom. So Esther sets up a series of banquets with Haman and the king and at the second banquet makes a plea for her people. Here goes nothing! She takes off her floaties and jumps into the arms of her heavenly Father.

Esther 7:1-7 (NIV) **1** So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther’s banquet, **2** and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, “Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.” **3** Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. **4** For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.” **5** King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?” **6** Esther said, “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. **7** The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

Not only does the king spare the Jews but Haman is put to death for his actions. Just like all the events leading up to this confrontation God had already gone before Esther because God was at work all around her seeking to accomplish His eternal purpose even before her. And God is at work in my life and yours in the same way!

Jeremiah 29:1 (NIV) **1** This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

10 This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. **11** For I know the plans I have

for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. **12** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **13** You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. **14** I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

This was God’s word to His people while they were taken captive to Babylon. This was a word for Esther and Mordecai and this is God’s word for us today! **11** For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. **12** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **13** You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Worship Team Comes Back Up

Invitation:

First of all, do you know that God is at work all around you? Your life has meaning and it has purpose!

Secondly, have you experienced His forgiveness and received His salvation? For those who have your salvation is secure! Just like the seal of the signet ring of the king set things in motion and can’t be changed, it’s the same with the Lord and His salvation. The Holy Spirit is the seal of our salvation in Christ. Ephesians 1:13-14 (NIV), “**13** And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”

Lastly, God is trying to do something in and through your life. Are you hindering it? Will you use your influence for His glory? Will you boldly trust Him by faith today?