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**Scripture:** Esther

Alright – here’s a deep theological question for you – Who is your favourite Disney Princess? I know, I realize I’m not speaking to 7 year old girls, but I do know that Disney Plus has 50 million subscribers, so I’m going to bet you’ve got a favourite Disney Princess. Cinderella perhaps? Jasmine? Belle? Disney princess stories literally make billions at the box office. The tales of these lovely ladies capture the imagination and delight of people all around the world. I watched the remake of Cinderella at the theatre a couple years ago and walked out with happy tears in my eyes, although my kids say that I cry in every movie, so maybe that’s not saying much.

Today we get to talk about what could very well become the next up and coming Princess Blockbuster, and this story just so happens to be nestled in the pages of the Old Testament of the Bible. This is the story of Esther.

Esther is easy to read, and easy to love. It’s got all the elements of a terrific story—it’s about a young woman who had everything taken from her—her parents, her freedom, her virtue; she was powerless and invisible, an orphan girl in a man-dominated culture that rises to the heights of national influence. This story has got it all—romance, injustice, courage, intrigue, deception, and redemption. Who doesn’t love a story like that?

In fact, let me encourage you to pull out your Bibles this week and read Esther’s 10 short chapters for yourself or aloud with your family. I’m telling you, you won’t be disappointed.

The reason we’re diving into Esther today is because we’re in a series about defining moments.

Defining moments are fork-in-the-road situations of life that send you in one direction or another, depending on how you respond to them; they’re points in life when you have to make a pivotal decision, or when you experience something that fundamentally changes you.

For example 20 years ago, my husband Randy and I got to a point in our, then, dating relationship where we knew it was time to either commit to marriage or break up. We weren’t entirely sure that we were compatible and didn’t know if we could weather the ups and downs of a life-long commitment together or not. We asked for advice from some trusted people and asked for wisdom from God and then made our decision to jump in. Choosing marriage was a fork-in-the-road, pivotal decision, that sent us in one direction over another and fundamentally changed us both.

Like our decision to get married, sometimes we choose defining moments for ourselves—maybe a new job, buying a home or moving to a new city. But other times defining moments are thrust upon us—and this happens when we experience the death of someone we love, an unexpected medical prognosis or a worldwide pandemic.

Esther is a fabulous biblical example of someone who had events outside of her control thrust upon her for which she had to make some life-altering decisions that became defining moments in her life. Today we want to learn from her story and unwrap principles that can shed light on our own lives.

So, we’re going to work our way through 3 things today: first, we’re going to do a quick review of Esther’s genealogy—don’t worry, it’ll be great, I promise, second we’re going to do a quick review of the story of Esther leading up to her defining

moment, and third, we're going to talk about the character and integrity of Esther that gave her the ability to make a really hard decision and see what principles we can apply to our own lives.

So, first, let's back right up and see where Esther sits in the pages of history, because I love the Old Testament, and also because it's going to help us understand her story better. I want to try something different with you—I want to try the emoji version of Esther's genealogy.

We're going to start with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Patriarchs of the nation of Israel of which Esther was a part. Jacob, the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, was given the name 'Israel'. This Israel had 12 sons, who became the family heads of the 12 tribes of Israel, a nation that was beloved by the God of creation and chosen to be a beacon of his presence and to bring blessing to a broken world.

A crucial thing to remember about this nation is that God had a special relationship with them and cut a covenant with them—and in this, he was obligating himself and committing himself to them—and *they* to him. But despite this covenant that was cut between God and Israel, despite God's clear boundaries of their commitment and boundaries for how to live best in the world that God had placed them in; Israel turned its back on the Lord over and over again, they traded the blessing of his presence for imitation gods that they could see and touch, and they exchanged right behaviours for sinful ones.

The nation's waffling affections between God and cheap imitations for God is most clearly articulated in scripture through the story of Israel's leaders. The nation of Israel was first led by Moses and Joshua—remember, out of Egypt and into the Promised Land—and then it was ruled by judges like Deborah, Samson and Gideon. Over time, the people demanded a king like the nations around them had, and even though God was supposed to be their king, he gave them what they wanted and anointed them kings that they could control and be controlled by: first Saul, then David, then Solomon, but as the nation continued to turn away from the ways of the Lord, it began to self-destruct. The 12-tribe nation divorced into two warring factions of *Judah* and *Israel*, each governed by their own kings.

About 700 years before the time of Jesus, *Israel* is conquered and exiled from their homeland to Assyria. *Judah* follows about 130 years later—they are conquered by Babylon and they are also exiled. No more unified nation, no more kings for Israel or Judah. In fact, Israel didn't become an official nation again until 1948.

Super sad, but important to know because this is the lead-up to Esther's story. Esther is an Israelite (otherwise known as a Jew), whose family had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon. About 50 years after this exile, Babylon is conquered by the Persian Empire and interestingly, this conquering king allowed for any Jews who wanted to, to go home to Jerusalem. But for whatever reason, Esther's family, along with many others we discover, remained, and 50 more years later, Esther shows up.

We are told that at some point in her childhood, Esther's parents have both died, and she has been adopted and raised by her cousin Mordecai. They lived in Susa, which was the capital city of the Persian Empire—and if geography is helpful for you, this city, Susa, was located in present day Iran, close to the west border near Iraq. At that time the ruling king of Persia was Xerxes the great.

The biblical story of Esther begins with the author describing this very opulent and impressive king of Persia. He was wealthy, and he was powerful. It so happened that because of some rash decisions that had been made by Xerxes and his defiant queen, Vashti, that Vashti was deposed and Xerxes was in the market for a new queen. Rather than finding a princess from a neighbouring nation, Xerxes was counselled to choose a woman from within his own empire and many young beautiful women, including our Jewish Esther, were taken from their homes and brought to him night after night as prospects. Keep in mind here that Esther's Jewish identity was kept securely concealed and no one knew of her Jewish heritage or even her relation to cousin Mordecai.

If we fast forward a bit, the short story is that Esther turns out to be the winner and is crowned as Xerxes' queen.

Very early on, we can see that Esther has already experienced some pretty significant defining moments, hasn't she? She has been orphaned for one, she's been taken from her home with the high probability of becoming a sex slave for two, and she has unwittingly become queen to the ruling king of

an empire. Despite the significance of these events, we're working our way towards an even more defining moment in her story.

And to do that, I need to introduce you to the bad guy in this story named Haaman. Haaman is King Xerxes second-in-command, his prime minister if you will. And Haaman has a major historical vendetta against the Jews—the people of Israel, who mostly wiped his ancestors off the face of the earth a long time before this—and this Haaman also has a personal grudge against one particularly annoying Jew, who just happens to be Mordecai, the secret cousin of Queen Esther.

Haaman's intense hatred of the Jewish people leads him to simply ask the king if he can have every Jewish person in Persia murdered. Scripture says that Hamaan asked to "let a decree be issued to destroy them"...and "So the king took the signet ring off his finger and gave it to Haaman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews...do with the people as you please."

So, Haaman devises a plan to annihilate the Jewish people throughout the entire Persian Empire. When Esther's cousin Mordecai gets wind of it, he literally goes into mourning, which for this people group was no quiet experience.

*Esther 4:1-3*

*"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."*

This was all reported back to Queen Esther, who I'm assuming was living in happy ignorance at the palace, doing whatever the queen of an empire would've been doing.

But what is also sent to Esther along with the report of Mordecai's mourning is a message from Mordecai asking her to,

*Esther 4:8*

*"go to the king to beg for mercy and plead for her people."*

And while that sounds like a reasonable request based on our experience of how communication in a marriage relationship usually works, Esther was dealing in a vastly different arena.

You see, Esther reveals to Mordecai that she hadn't seen the king for a month—and I'm sure we could offer all sorts of speculations about why, although we don't really know. But she knows the Persian law that anyone, including her, that even dares to approach the king without having been summoned is at a very significant risk of being put to death, and she's more than aware that Xerxes has already done away with one queen, and probably wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

This is understandably a pretty terrifying prospect for Esther. This is not just a nerve-racking public speaking engagement, nor is it simply an awkward subject that she needs to broach with her husband who is probably the most powerful man in the world. She could be executed just for approaching the king. And we all know that the fear of pain, death, and dying is a very strong basic human emotion. Is she willing to die for these people?

Cousin Mordecai's response to Esther's dilemma about whether or not to risk her life to defend her people is the turning point of the whole story and the lead up to the defining moment in Esther's life that we want to look at closely. "Mordecai sent this reply to Esther:

*"Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"*

Esther's story finds its climax in a moment where she is faced with a major decision—will she risk her life approaching the king on behalf of the Jewish people, or will she say nothing in an effort to save her own skin? Can you imagine what it must've felt like to be faced with a choice like this? Can you imagine the conflicting emotions going on inside her?

If we fast forward again, after 3 days of fasting, Esther does, in fact, put her life on the line and approaches the king. Incredibly, she isn't put to death after all. In fact, she fully succeeds in dismantling Haaman's plans for a genocide, saves the lives of her entire people group, gets the bad guy Haaman executed, *and* has her own cousin Mordecai take Haaman's place as Prime Minister.

She came out completely victorious. She became the hero.

But she would have been defined differently if she had chosen differently, wouldn't she? If Esther had chosen to turn her back on her people, hide in her comfortable palace and silently watch them all die, she would have been no hero—she would have defined herself as cowardly and selfish. There's something so very distasteful about someone who is selfish, isn't there? We are naturally repelled by people who put themselves first at the expense of others. Even people who don't ascribe to Christian morals and ethics would agree with this.

But Esther offered her life on behalf of others and her actions in this important moment defined Esther as selfless and courageous didn't it? And we love those characteristics, don't we? I was watching Batman, of all things, with my kids last weekend and realized that the whole story of his heroism revolves around him giving his life away for the people of Gotham, culminating at the end of the movie with a final flight to his certain death carrying a bomb far away from the people he loved. Life-giving love is the ultimate heroism isn't it? Listen to this real life hero story that I read online:

In August 2018, a passenger boat carrying 24 people slammed into an object in the waterways of Rivers State, Nigeria. The boat capsized, throwing its occupants overboard. Without hesitation, Joseph Blankson dove into the waters. As soon as the 36-year-old had rescued one person, he would go back to save another. One by one, Blankson pulled 13 people to safety. Sadly, while attempting to rescue a 14th soul, he succumbed to fatigue and drowned. Joseph's incredible sacrifice meant that he was the only fatality that day. Blankson left behind his wife and children. Mercy Blankson described her husband as a loving father who, "put people first, before himself."

Joseph gave up his breath, his life, his future, so that other people could live. Don't we all secretly hope that if we were ever in such a situation like this that we would act with honour and courage and conviction too? How *can* we be like that? How can we become people who choose well when we find ourselves in these kinds of defining moments?

Well, let me first very clearly say that making selfless decisions and responding well in tough situations doesn't happen by accident and no one is born with the predisposition to sacrifice their life for other people. Our *actions* and our *reactions* are a product of our character and our integrity. And these things are *built* slowly over time.

Character and integrity are built through a lifetime of *small* decisions and disciplines; defining moments are often only the tip of the iceberg revealing this character development that has taken place.

In Esther, if we're careful to recognize it, we'll see that her character and integrity *has* been carefully cultivated all the way along her life's journey—it doesn't just show up in the climax.

For one thing, we know that Esther's cousin Mordecai, who brought Esther into his home and raised her as a daughter, he was a man of strong principles; he refused the smallest compromise. Why do you think Haaman hated him? Well, it was because Mordecai simply wouldn't bow down to him. And why wouldn't he bow down? Because, as a Jew, he knew that he was called to worship the Lord alone and that bowing to a man would compromise this principle. I'm convinced that Mordecai instilled this strong sense of integrity in Esther as he raised her. You can hear him encouraging her to choose the right but difficult path in his suggestion that perhaps she has become queen for such a time as this. Mordecai was a man of integrity who had a significant influence on Esther's character and in this we ought to be encouraged that we as teachers, friends, parents, and grandparents who train and model and encourage character growth in others have a more significant influence than we may realize.

Well, what do we know about Esther? The story describes her as beautiful and winsome—she gained admiration from people. In chapter 2, verse 9 tells us that she won the favour of the king's eunuch, verse 15 tells us that she won the favour of everyone who saw her, and verse 17 says she won the favour and approval of the king.

True beauty that is worthy of favour and approval is described in,

## 1 Peter 3:4-5

“Clothe yourselves with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God. This is how the holy women of old made themselves beautiful.”

Esther’s true beauty was found in her character. And more specifically, Esther’s winsome character showed up by being teachable. In chapter two we discover a few examples of this:

- 2:10 “Esther had not told anyone of her nationality and family background, *because Mordecai had directed her not to do so.*”
- 2:15 “When it was Esther’s turn to go to the king, *she accepted the advice of Hegai*, the eunuch in charge of the harem. She asked for nothing except what he suggested.”
- 2:20 “She was still *following Mordecai’s directions*, just as she did when she lived in his home.”

People who are teachable realize that they don’t have all the answers and are open to *listening and learning* from others. And this doesn’t mean they’re weak, it means they’re wise. In Proverbs 13 it says that “those who take advice are wise; people who despise advice are asking for trouble.” Esther was able to accept wise counsel from trusted individuals and allow it to influence her actions and reactions.

And this reveals the most significant aspect of Esther’s character. Esther was a person of humility.

The online dictionary definition of humility says that it is a modest or low view of one’s own importance—and this can make it sound like a negative quality. But humility is not negative. Humility is a low view of your own importance in the sense that you understand that **you’re not more important than others** and you’re not **less important than others**, either. Humility is an understanding that every human is equally valuable: a recognition that you are worth no more **or less** than anyone else.

Even though Esther was a bit of a local superstar, she knew that her status did not mean that she was more valuable than other people—she may have had a different role than others but her life was no more valuable than the life of another.

University of Berkely has something called the: Greater Good Magazine—Science based insights for a meaningful life – and it says that humble people accept their own strengths and *limitations* and this allows them to develop true compassion for humanity that shows up in generosity, helpfulness and gratitude—which ends up having a positive impact on relationships as well as on our personal mental and physical well-being. Humility is really incredible!

And for Esther, this humility and wisdom built within her the selfless moral compass that she needed when she faced her defining moment, allowing her to courageously submit her life on behalf of her people.

And the crucial thing that I want to point out here is that when Esther practiced humble self-lessness, she displayed for us not just the character of Esther, but the character of God. Esther didn’t make this character attribute good. It *is* good because it comes from the perfect nature of God. It is part of who he is.

Remember at the beginning how we walked through the genealogy of the Jewish people? Remember how Esther’s story is found within a larger love story between the God of the heavens and his covenant people? Remember how God had cut a covenant with them and committed himself to them and how they kept turning their backs on him? Here in Esther recognizing that God is providing rescue for his people again reminds us of *his* character. It reminds us that the Lord is full of *compassion*, *he* is generous, and *he* loves to save. *He* loves to give life. That is God’s character which Esther is simply reflecting.

Esther is one fabulous story amongst so many others that is part of a long Biblical narrative of rescue and redemption for God’s beloved that eventually finds its perfect fulfillment in the salvation of Jesus Christ, who perfectly revealed God’s selfless, compassionate character. Esther offered *her* life on behalf of her people, foreshadowing the full and ultimate provision of redemption that God brought about for us when Jesus offered his life on *our* behalf.

And when *we* choose to follow him, we become part of God’s family, we take on his good name and are called to actively cultivate God’s good character in the way that *we* live our lives so that our right

conduct continues to give an unbelieving world a picture of God's good character.

*Ephesians 5* says,

*"Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God."*

In *John 15*, Jesus says,

*<sup>12</sup> This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

We should be taking on the same attitude that Christ Jesus had, that Esther had. And what kind of attitude was this? A humble one, willing to submit to God and to others.

Cultivating humility is very counter-cultural to the typical self-promoting norms that we are more accustomed to in our society. In a culture so obsessed with finding and knowing myself and saying 'yes' to my every desire, dare we risk the adventure of giving ourselves up like Esther did? What a high calling it is to develop God's selfless character in us. And how, practically can this be done?

Well, if we look back at the story of Esther, we'll notice that Esther took 3 days to fast before she went to the king. Fasting was a first step in incrementally dying to self before truly giving it all up. Is it easy to face death? No, way. But it is manageable to say no to life-giving food hour by hour. Fasting was a way of giving up her pleasures and preferences, saying no to herself, of dying to herself little by little, in order to resolve herself to a greater purpose. It's hard to release self-protection all at once. It's easier to release it incrementally. Fasting is a tangible way to do this.

Like Esther, it's the small, incremental choices that we make that establish our character. *Philosopher Will Durant said "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit"*. We don't instantly become models of selfless character and integrity without a lifetime of quiet diligence in the little things.

In *1 Timothy* and *1 Corinthians* we are told to,

*"...train yourself to be godly..."*

"All athletes are disciplined in their training...I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should." No athlete wins an Olympic medal without years of living in relative obscurity following the daily habits and disciplines of training – a friend of mine is an Olympic bronze medallist in synchronized swimming; believe me, she knows this! While I was pulling a picture of her off the internet this week, I came across a quote from her. She says, "I can't control the marks from the judges, but I can control how I train every day."

In the same way, our character is gradually strengthened through daily training, through diligent habits. They don't have to be big or fancy, in fact, they might be quite small and even mundane. There's a favourite speech of mine that I like to watch now and again. It was given by a US navy admiral addressing a university graduating class. He shared with them 10 lessons he learned from his basic seal training years before. We're going to watch the first of his ten lessons. Here it is:

Every morning in basic SEAL training, my instructors, who at the time were all Vietnam veterans, would show up in my barracks room and the first thing they would inspect was your bed. If you did it right, the corners would be square, the covers pulled tight, the pillow centered just under the headboard and the extra blanket folded neatly at the foot of the bed. It was a simple task—mundane at best. But every morning we were required to make our bed to perfection. It seemed a little ridiculous at the time, particularly in light of the fact that we were aspiring to be real warriors, tough battle-hardened SEALs, but the wisdom of this simple act has been proven to me many times over. If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another. By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that little things in life matter. If you can't do the little things right, you will never do the big things right. And, if by chance you have a miserable day, you will come home to a bed that is made—that you made—and a made bed gives you encouragement that tomorrow

will be better. If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.

It's almost funny, isn't it? Change the world by making your bed? And yet, I love it. Because it's something bite-size that I can say yes to. What are some of the simple things that we can say yes to as we train and discipline ourselves to develop God's humble, self-less character?

Perhaps it's as simple as daily choosing to serve your family at home or your co-workers on the job, giving away your time and money, apologizing when you've wronged someone, sacrificing your time to pray and read the Bible and practice *obedience to it*.

*Colossians 3:12* says,

*"Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."*

For the vast majority of us, no one puts our clothes on for us. We choose, and actively *put on* our own clothes in the morning. What does it look like for us to choose and actively *put on* God's good character? To put on humility, to put on selfless love, to put on forgiveness, to put on kindness. That is what God looks like and that's what he wants us to look like too.

Now, if this discourages you because, like me, you've got the best intentions to act this way and yet, it seems like selfishness and fear and pride and bitterness and all those nasties just pop their heads back up? Then you need to hear today that we are not left on our own to simply muster up our own willpower to become who we are called to be. Remember that our God of compassionate love lives within you and that he is working in you, giving you the desire and power to do what pleases him (Phil 2:13). Remember that God is like a vine and we are like branches and that when we remain in him, we will bear much fruit. (John 15:5) I want you to be encouraged today remembering that Jesus Christ produces righteous character in us and will complete a good work in us. We're not robots, we've still got an independent will that we need to constantly submit, but God's life is living in us.

And I guess, when we confess our missed opportunities and poor choices, it reminds us that we need to *rest* in God's grace and forgiveness. And this, probably more than anything keeps us on the path of humility that produces that good selfless character in us after all.

And God's character is *good*. The humility and selflessness of God that Esther displayed to a watching world made her a hero. When we cultivate God's good character in us, it's good for us and it's good for the world.

Can I challenge you today to actively cultivate godly character like Esther so that when you're faced with a defining moment, you'll be ready? Take some time today to write down one or two simple habits that you know you need to start to help you develop a more teachable, wise, humble, and self-giving character like Esther had—like Jesus had. It's my prayer that as we all continue to pursue this kind of holiness, that the life of Christ will take root in our lives and grow up in us to produce a harvest of blessing.

## **In the Moment**

### **Decisions that Change our lives Forever**

#### **Esther**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. Are you more of a Batman or a Disney Princess kind of person? Who are your favourite story characters and what is it about these stories that we enjoy so much?
2. Recall one defining moment in your life that you chose and one that you didn't choose.
3. If you had been in Esther's place, do you think you would have hidden in self-protection, or do you think you would've approached the king? How do you think you would have felt?
4. What do you think motivated Joseph Blankson to save so many people in the Nigerian river? Why do we consider people like Joseph heroes?

5. Mordecai had a significant shaping influence on Esther's character and integrity. Who do you have influence on?
6. Would your friends or family describe you as someone who is teachable? In what ways do you practice this?
7. Humility is a low view of your own importance in the sense that you understand that **you're not more important than others** and you're not **less important than others**, either. This can be a difficult balance to achieve. Where do you find yourself along the spectrum?
8. Since our new identity is rooted in God, we are called to cultivate God's good character in our lives (like Esther did in hers). Jesus was our ultimate example of God's character through his selfless sacrifice. What are some practical ways you can practice selfless love at home or at work or in your neighbourhood? Identify one or two simple habits that you could begin today that would help you cultivate godly character.