

**Series: *WHEN NO ONE'S LOOKING—September 24, 2006***

**TAKE A STAND!  
When Courage and Compassion Kiss  
Esther 4:1-17**

**I. INTRO**

- A. A number of years ago, an article in *Time* magazine about supermodels made this comment: **Today's pretty women, supermodels, represent a new breed: manikins with sex appeal. What makes them successful, famous, and worth \$25,000 a day?** -The article goes on to define how a woman needs to look if she's going to be one of the top models—you know, the usual stuff about height, eyes, nose, weight—and then this closing comment: **Who they are is how they look.**
1. And that's the twisted message of our world—**you are how you look.** Read almost any women's magazine, watch any series of ads playing on TV—particularly during a chick flick or Oprah, and the twisted message is that age--or anything else that affects **how you look**—is your greatest enemy is age. If you're not careful, you might get bagged up, marked down, and put on the "seconds" shelf, like vegetables at the supermarket.
  2. God, the One who creates all beauty, would not at all agree with the twisted beauty pageant mentality of our world. And in a fallen world like ours, we tend to forget that God looks way, **way** beyond—**way** deeper outward appearance--the outer 1/4<sup>th</sup> inch of our bodies—and looks at our heart.  
-Most ads tell you how to get rid of gray hair—as if it's a sign that you're getting old and moldy. God says that gray hair is like a crown of honor. I **totally** agree with God!
- B. We are not the first ones to live in a beauty pageant world. I'd like to tell you this story this morning of a woman who lived in that kind of world—and won the Miss Universe pageant of her day. But that wasn't her crowning moment. That came five years later in an act of incredible inner strength that put her beauty—and her life—on the line for her people.  
-That woman, Esther, has been known through history for a character trait that everyone craves. **Courage.** So, are you ready for her story?

**II. HERE SHE COMES...**

- A. Let me set up the story. It's about 480 BC, Israel has been conquered, sacked and destroyed by the Babylonian army—and most of the people carried off as exiles to Babylon. But the Medes and Persians have defeated Babylonia—and now they are in charge of the Jews.
1. The king of the Persian Empire—the most powerful man in the world of his day--is Xerxes. He's a guy whose decisions seem to mostly be made under the influence of his friends when everyone's drunk. In fact, that's how the book starts out. A kind of brag-a-thon, where everyone's been partying for over a week—and Xerxes decides to have his wife, Queen Vashti—come in and parade her beauty before all his drunken friends.

-But, she, as you can understand, wasn't real thrilled with that and says something no one ever said to the king. **No!** Well, his ego can't handle that—so, after consulting with his drinking buddies, deposes her. And the search is on for a new queen. Now, how many of you think that Xerxes will try to find someone of dignity, nobility, and intelligence to be queen? **Ehhhh!** He sets up a beauty pageant. There will be a search for the most beautiful virgin in each of the 127 provinces; they will get beauty treatments for a whole year—then they will spend a night with the king, and whoever pleases him most will become queen.

2. Now, you have to understand—unlike the Bert Parks variety, “Here she comes....miss-celaneous...”—this pageant wasn't voluntary. A young Jewish named Hadassah—or Esther was drafted. The only thing this book—Esther—says about her is that she was **beautiful in form and feature**. Esther had lost both her Mom and Dad and was adopted by her cousin, Mordecai.
  - One of the things that becomes clear about Esther is that her beauty went deeper than her skin. The eunuch (ouch!) who ran the beauty treatments so favored her, that he gave her the most favorable spot in the harem. And she won Xerxes favor too, and became queen.
- 3 Another player comes into this story whose ego is actually bigger than Xerxes—Haman. Haman, in our world, would be known as a brown-noser. And it gets him quite far—to the point where everyone is ordered to bow before him. Problem—Mordecai, Esther's cousin and adopted Dad won't do it.
  - a. So, Haman comes up with this plot to murder all the Jewish people in the Medo-Persian empire an act of revenge. Now, Esther, at her cousin Mordecai's strict instruction, had never revealed that she was Jewish.
    - So, the plot thickens. Haman goes to Xerxes and tells him that there are people in the kingdom who are quite different than the others--then, this bold-faced lie—**and who do not obey the king's laws**. Haman's says, “I think we ought to just annihilate them all—and I'll pay for it!” Xerxes, moral dishrag that he is, says, **Okay! Do with the people as you please**. Then they sat down and got drunk.
  - b. Mordecai—and the whole Jewish population—is devastated. What you find throughout history is that when horrible things happen, some people become victims—and some are kicked into action. Mordecai goes into action. When Esther asks why he's in mourning—it's clear that her role as queen is more or less that of a trophy-bride. She doesn't know a **thing**.
    - Anyone ever challenge you to do something really scary? Something that could cost you everything? Well, Mordecai tells Esther that she needs to approach Xerxes and ask him to stop this decree.
    - Now, in our culture, the immediate thought is, “Why is this such a big deal between a husband and wife; King and Queen?” What's so **life-threatening** about it?
      - Well, it's because her relationship with him was more like slave and owner. She was one of probably 127 other wives in the harem. That's not all. Probably for safety reasons, this king had isolated himself—and the law was—**anyone** who approached him without being invited was immediately

sentenced to death. This applied to wives and children—because kids were known for killing off the King—their Dad—to get the throne.

-Esther says to Mordecai, "I haven't even **seen** him for a **month**." Now, remember, she was selected as queen on the basis of her beauty. They've been married 5 years. Beauty—five years of aging...Get the picture?

- c. If I'd been Mordecai, I probably would've wimped out; "Yeah, Esther, I see what you mean. I can hardly ask you to lay your life on the line...Okey-dokey!"

-Not Mordecai. He says these stunning words:

**"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 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 royal position for such a time as this?"**

**-Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "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 maids 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." So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions (Esther 4:12-17 NIV).**

-The most challenging words in this story are: "And who knows but that you have come to a royal position for **such a time as this**" The point is, "You weren't created to be a trophy bride! Think about it, Esther—this is a crisis—and you are where you are in the palace at the same time. Do you think that's a coincidence? Think God gave you your beauty just to satisfy some wealthy guy's ego? Think **deeper! THIS IS YOUR MOMENT!**

-For Esther, that was one of those great moments where compassion and courage kiss. It's one thing to have compassion—and just **feel bad** about something. It's quite another when God-given courage is thrown into the mix. So she asks all the people to fast and pray—this will have to be a "God thing"—then her closing words, If **I perish, I perish!** Those sound to me like the words of a fireman running **up** the stairs Sounds to me like the words of a fireman running up the stairs to the World Trade Center when everyone else is running down.

-Suddenly, maybe for the first time, survival against all the other contestants in the beauty contest is not the primary goal of her life.

Her life will be about something bigger. **Much** bigger. The preservation of God's people at a pivotal point in history. Most of us have a defining moment—a turning point—and this is Esther's. Up Esther has just doing what Mordecai tells her to do; now **he** does what **she** tells **him** to do.

4. The drama and poignancy and irony of what happens next is the stuff legends are made of. Undoubtedly scared to death, she approaches Xerxes—and finds out that God got there before she did. He was pleased with her! **What is it, Queen**

***Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you (Esther 5:3 NIV)!***

-Now, that sounds pretty extravagant—but it’s actually king-talk for, “Hey. I’m in a good mood today!” He’d have been quite shocked if she’d said, “Okay! Half for me, half for you.” It was more along the lines of, “Would you like to have charge of the TV remote tonight?”

- a. What you see as this story unfolds is the wisdom and character hidden in Esther—stuff that may never have come out without a challenge to lay everything on the line.

-What happens next in this story is a brilliant combination of Esther’s courage, Haman’s ego, Mordecai’s vindication—and God solidly at work through the whole thing.

- b. Let me net it out. Esther’s response to Xerxes is an invitation for him and for Haman to come and do the two things they liked most—eat, and party. -After the first banquet, she still put off making her request—but invited the king and Haman to another banquet. And **then** we see God at work:

\*Haman bragging to his family about his greatness—and at the height of his self-glorification, having a 75 foot gallows created for Mordecai—the fly in his ointment.

\*But God gave Xerxes a case of insomnia—and to help him go to sleep, some reading from the official kingdom records—and a story of how Mordecai once uncovered a plot to take his life.

\*Haman showing up early in the king’s court—expecting to ask for Mordecai’s execution—and finding out that the king has chosen him to **honor** Mordecai instead. Haman’s smart. He **knows** he’s in trouble—especially when his wife and friends say, “Whoa! Sucks to be you, Haman!”

- c. Then comes the second banquet Esther had planned for Mordecai and Haman. And **this** time when she’s asked what she wants, she’s ready. Right in front of this guy who, to this point has been Xerxes best buddy, she says, **Grant me my life...and spare my people.** The king asks the \$60,000 question, **Who is he? Where is the man who has dared do such a thing?** And Esther points the finger, **The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman (Esther 7:3, 5-6 NIV).** And suddenly, it’s all over.

-The king is so infuriated, he leaves the room—and when he comes back, he finds Haman falling all over Esther, who’s reclining on a couch, begging her to spare his life. By the end of the day, Haman is dangling from the 75 foot gallows he’d made for Mordecai.

-Not only does he spare the Jews, he gives Haman’s estate and position to Mordecai and vindicates the Jewish people. And, on the Jewish calendar, this event is still celebrated every year on the day of Purim. Funny, the word **purim** means **dice**—but the truth is, nothing is up to chance when God is involved and we have the courage to live out our calling!

- B. I have a question for you. What would it take for you to believe that you are **where** you are, you know **who** you know and you're here this morning—**not because of a roll of the dice somewhere, not because you're such an amazing, gifted, intelligent person, and not even because you're such a superior worker and entrepreneur—but for such a time as this!**

We see people who achieve incredible things and amazing wealth, and we think, "Wow! They're lucky!" We see beautiful people who are taller, more muscular, with thicker hair, smoother skin, whiter teeth, and we think, "Wow! They're lucky!" People in other lands hear legends about what normal life is like in a place like Markham, where clean water is a turn of the faucet away, food is as far away as the refrigerator, there are safe cars and houses and comfortable beds, and reasonable leaders who are held accountable—and say, "Wow! They're **lucky!**"

1. Jesus made a comment one day that gives Heaven's perspective on "being lucky." His comment was: **Much is required from those to whom much is given, and much more is required from those to whom much more is given (Luke 12:48 NLT).**

-It's interesting, when you think about it, isn't it? Hadassah/Esther turned heads wherever she went. I'm sure she had more than her share of jealousy, envy, snappiness and downright meanness—and probably cat-calls and other nonsense. But her beauty wasn't just a freak combination of genes, something she could use to preen her ego. In her case, God used this **gift** to put her in a place where she could save the future of her people.

2. Fortunately, Esther had someone in her life who loved her, challenged her, and gave her the **for such a time as this** perspective on **why** she was queen. When she balked, it was Mordecai who point blank told her, "If you chicken out and go into the fetal position and suck your thumb at this point, God **will** get his work done another way, but **you** and your family will perish.

-Do you have anyone in your life who dares to confront you on how you are either courageously using the gifts God has given you or squandering them on yourself? Truth you may not **want** to hear—but need to hear? Truth that inspires you to a defining moment in life? To act with courage and with dignity?

3. I see what Esther does as this awesome definition of courage; out of compassion, doing the **right** thing.  
Even when you're scared to death—and when it may cost you more than you ever planned to spend. We sometimes define courage as soldiers taking someone else out under fire on the battle field. Killing someone to save your own skin isn't necessarily courage—it's self-preservation. Getting angry and dumping your load on someone may be audacious and reckless—but it's not courageous; it's more like a lack of self-control.  
-Courage is when you defy your fear and lay your ego, or a relationship, or your money, or even your life on the line out of love or compassion.
4. What's interesting in this story is that in the first three chapters of it, Esther starts out as this passive beauty queen. She's wins favor wherever she goes—but pretty much does what Mordecai—and then Xerxes tell her to do.

-John Ortberg writes about a mix-up at the Mattel toy factory some years ago. Apparently the voice component from GI Joes accidentally got mixed with those from Barbies in hundreds of dolls. Imagine Christmas morning, a little boy pulls the string on a GI Joe and it says, “**Let’s shop till we drop!**”—and a little girl pulls the string on a Barbie, and it barks out, “**Hit the ground hard, now! Move it! Move it! Move it!**”

-It’s pretty cool, really. Xerxes thought he married Barbie, but he got GI Joe!

5. I think, this morning, you and I need to honestly look at what we’ve been given and where we are. Most of us would have to say, I am a person to whom *much* has been given.

And then look at what God is up to in redeeming and reclaiming this planet—and hear God’s voice, ***For such a time as this! This isn’t just good luck—there’s a plan, there’s a cause that’s way bigger than you think!***

### III. ADRENALIN JUNKIES, RISK-TAKERS & COURAGE

- A. I was reading a recent news report, basically saying that celebrities are in love with themselves more than most people. It’s called *narcissism*. Big surprise, right? Drew Pinsky, one of those who did the study, said “narcissists crave attention, are overconfident, behave erratically and lack empathy.” The study showed that reality TV stars were the most narcissistic of all celebrities.

1. Sometimes people in our world—especially the West—if they don’t have a cause where they can show courage, will do adrenaline junkie things as a substitute. Actually, I think what sometimes looks like courage is actually narcissism.

-I watched one guy recently who jumped motorcycles. In this case, he was jumping over 20 or more cars. The fascinating thing is that he ***knew he didn’t have the right conditions*** but made the jump anyway because, in his words, he didn’t want to disappoint the crowd. He almost killed himself and, if I remember correctly, lost part of one leg if I’m not mistaken.

Playing to the crowd, doing something reckless to impress others or look bigger and better is ***not*** courage. You may just be hooked on adrenalin. And being in business—and taking huge risks is not necessarily courage.

It could be greed, it could be grand-standing, it could be over-confidence—but it’s not necessarily courage.

2. I believe that the character trait of courage, as God designed it, was intended, not for us to make a pile of money and become heroes—but to do the ***right thing for others*** out of compassion. It’s a passion for a cause—usually for others—that forces you to ***do*** something, even when you’re shaking in your boots—whether they’re made by Gucci, Givenchi or Canadian Tire. It’s the sense, ***I’m here in this spot at this time for a reason; if I perish, if things don’t work out the way I hope, even if I look stupid or get humiliated or lose my job—it’s okay. I need to ACT!***

-But, again, I believe it has to be for something bigger than a bank account or a reputation or some other form of image management.

- B. We tend to see courage in magnificent, obvious displays—like Esther, this aging beauty queen, going to the most powerful man in the world—laying her life on the line to preserve her people.

-That's deceptive. I think courage is usually **way** less dramatic than that. I believe that exercising courage is like exercising a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. I believe that people who exercise courage regularly in small, hidden ways are the ones most likely to show it—or inspire it—when someone's life is on the line. I think there are some hidden places where we need to practice.

1. For example, it takes courage to be vulnerable—with God and with others. People sometimes say, "Yeah, well being a Christ-follower is for weaklings.

People who need a crutch in life." I'd like to say, "**Really?! You mean, its weak people who go before a holy God and own their failure and sin?**" I think it takes courage to be honest; to own your failure. To say, "Under this well-manicured, tanned, exquisitely dressed façade is a person who has failed and sinned and screwed up."

a. It also takes courage to **follow**. Particularly, to follow Jesus. To obey Him. To do what He asks. Know why? Because the Bible tells us that following Jesus means living by **faith**, and not by **sight**. Sometimes He leads us in ways that seem illogical. In fact, he usually leads us in ways that go counter to our culture; to put our trust in Him, not our reputation or our money or our insurance.

-And what if we don't have the courage to follow? Well, like kids, we just pretend we don't hear anything. See, it's a whole lot easier to collect knowledge about God—than put His leading right at the core of our lives where it will cost us our convenience, our time and our money to follow Him into the deep water. It **always** takes courage to follow Jesus.

\*To give even when it feels you may not have enough for yourself.

\*To love yourself—see yourself as you are—as He sees you--instead of wasting precious energy worrying about how you look or measure up

\*It takes courage to make a difference and make your life matter.

\*To stand against peer pressure—whether your peers are 15...or 45.

\*To stand against the tide of injustice—and overcome self-pity and greed.

\*And it takes courage to be someone who keeps their promises; who's honest, and unafraid to be know for who they really are...

b. There's another kind of courage that is sometimes rare. Relational courage. We want to be close to others—but people never drift into closeness and intimacy. To find the closeness you long for, you have to let them into your heart—into the spaces of your life where they can actually hurt you.

-And it takes relational courage to raise children right. It's easier to not discipline them—to give in instead of letting them cry, whine and beg. If you're a parent and you have some emotional need to have your kids always like you and love your decisions—you're in trouble.

-If takes courage in dating relationships to say **No!** It takes courage, when someone is backing up to your front yard with a truckload of gossip to say **No!**

- c. And it takes courage to be honest and moral in all your business dealings and community dealings.  
To refuse to say the shipment is on its way or the check is in the mail—when it isn't. To, at times, refuse the urge to be politically correct and evade the big smelly elephant in the room that **everyone** knows is there; It takes courage to be honest on April 29—even when it costs you significantly. Courage almost **always** has a price tag on it. But, then, so does cowardice. I'd rather pay a price for courage than pay a price to be a coward, wouldn't you?
2. How? How do you develop courage?
- a. I think, like Esther, you have to face the fears that keep you hiding in the bushes. The only way to deal with fear is to walk toward it.  
-In Lori's psychology degree days, she told me a textbook story about this guy who would have anxiety attacks—usually when he was driving--and think he was having a heart attack. Well, they did the tests—and his heart was fine. Know what they told him to do? They said, "Stop the car, get out, and run around the car." If he was actually having a heart attack, he would die. Here's the deal with fear. Your mind needs to be convinced that your emotions are lying! I'm not sure about that advice—but it **is** meeting the fear head on.  
-Esther was chosen to be queen on the basis of her beauty. The fear is, "If I lose my beauty with age, what then?" She had **walk toward it!**  
-Do **you** have a fear that causes you to limp through life? As you confront these fears, one at a time—even when you're sweating, nervous—and have a **Pepto-Bismol** moment, you overcome them. And that **courage** becomes a building block in your character.
- b. There's something else in this story that is very important if we are going to grow in our courage. It's hanging around people who model courage. I think it was Mordecai who sparked Esther's courage. She's thinking, "I'm just the winner of a beauty pageant." Mordecai is this crusty, pushy guy who had the guts to say, "Esther—do you think God has put you where you are just so you can have a cushy life? **I don't think so!** This is your chance.  
-Who says that to you? And do you hear it—or do you penalize them for it?
- c. And finally, it's the power of God behind us and in us—transforming our minds and transforming our character that ultimately makes us courageous people. Before her classic words, "If I perish, I perish" Esther asked **everyone** to fast and pray for God to do something great.  
-The most obvious truth behind this story is that God was at work in every scene. Esther's courage was not a roll of the dice—a 50/50 chance—might work, might not. When courage comes out of a passion to honor God and

do what's right—the courage is backed up by the power of God. But it takes faith to see that. We walk by **faith**, not by **sight**.

#### IV. THE ROLE CALL...

A. In life, there's a role call of the courageous. It's not a role-call of those who, out of greed or ego or adrenaline-seeking, have bet it all. It's a role call of people who looked beyond themselves and, even when they were scared to death, took life on.

\*Noah had the courage to listen to God and spend 100 years building a ship in his back yard—all the while listening to the snickers and guffaws of his neighbors.

\*Abraham had the courage to leave civilization behind and live in tents in the wilderness—simply because God asked him to do it

\*Moses had the courage to act on God's compassion for his people and confront the most powerful man in the world and demand that he let his entire workforce go.

\*Ruth, out of compassion and love for her mother-in-law, had the courage to leave her home and relatives...and then ask a man to marry her!

\*Daniel, lived a life of courage, culminating in telling a ruthless dictator the truth that his ego-mania would ultimately drive him crazy.

\*Jesus, out of love and compassion for you and me, had the courage to stretch out his arms so a soldier could drive nails through them—and then take the sin of the world on him so we could be forgiven.

-And down through the years this courage has inspired very human, very frail, very scared people to do amazing things:

\*Like a Martin Luther—to defy the most powerful institution in his day, the church, and tell them they were wrong

\*Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer—who would defy Hitler and pay with his life

\*Like five young missionaries going to the Waodani Indians in the jungle of Ecuador—knowing they could lose their lives

\*Like Martin Luther King, Jr.—confronting the most powerful nation in the world on its racism and injustice

\*Like Lech Wolensa who, as a believer, started the crack in a whole corrupt communist system by leading his union to defy it—and start a series of events that would take down the whole thing

\*Like Bono from U2—confronting the rich and powerful of the world—knocking on their front doors if necessary—to end poverty and AIDS.

B. When it's all said and done, will your name be on the list of the courageous—in the time and places where it really counts? It could be, you know. I believe it starts with a courageous decision to follow Jesus—wherever, **wherever**—He leads. I believe I am where I am for such a time as this. And so are you. But, we'll have to listen—and have to courage to do what He asks. So, will you? Would you?