**Lesson for September 29**

**Open the Conversation**:

We are all drawn to athletic competition, either as participants or spectators, or both. We love to watch rivalry matches, games, and individual competitions. We definitely love a phenom! When someone possesses skill beyond their years we flock to watch their expertise. We might buy tickets for a game because of this one young player showing astounding skill or make sure to catch all their replays. The Olympic Games give us so many of these opportunities. Who are some of your favorite phenoms?

Before the game, we know these athletes have devoted themselves to readiness. They have chosen sacrificially to prepare themselves for the moment they will be called on to respond to the moment.

**Introduction:**

In terms of faith, we see some examples in Scripture of God calling on people, even those who are very young, to be prepared to shine in obedience to God without notice. David didn’t know that day in the fields that he would be called home to be chosen as Israel’s next king. Samuel didn’t know God would call his name in the silence of the night to begin leading him to become one of Israel’s most courageous prophets. But each of them were nourishing their faith, walking with God in prayer throughout the days of their young lives, listening to Him, enjoying His company, eating His Word. Today we will see Esther respond in faith, confident that God was leading her even into a place she would not have anticipated.

She was likely a teenager when we join her story. Please don’t ever think you are too young to affect the Kingdom of God. Your obedience to God is powerful in the lives of those you are influencing. When you belong to God and walk with Him you bring His Kingdom into every situation you are in. He looks for hearts that trust Him and are willing to be used to work through.

About thirty years after the events recorded in Haggai, we come to the events that transpired in the book of Esther. This is the story of a young Jewish girl who lived with her relative as an exile. God’s people had been in exile and though some groups had returned home, Esther remained with the group left in the reigning superpower of Persia. Despite their exile, these were still God’s people, and He was working out His redemptive plans on their behalf. The Israelites were living in a time between facing exile as the consequence for their disobedience and rebellion before God and the deliverance God promised to bring about when they turned their hearts back to Him. Think about the wondering and speculation that would be involved as they lived out their days questioning when their relationship with God would be restored and they would live in their own land under their own rulers once again.

**Read Esther 1:1-12**

* What specific things would have been hard living as one of God’s people during this period? What makes waiting particularly hard in your life?
* When or how have you experienced God’s presence even when He seemed to be silent?
* When have you seen God use unusual or unexpected circumstances to work in your life or the world?

**Read Esther 2:1-11 and 3:1-6.**

* How do you tend to respond when circumstances take a different turn than what you expected?
* What is the difference between viewing circumstances themselves as God’s provision, and viewing God Himself as your provision?
* Why might Mordecai have counseled Esther to refrain from announcing her Jewish heritage?
* When have you felt led to do the right thing according to God even when it meant trouble for you personally?

**Read Esther 4:14-17, 6:1-3, 7:1-6 and 8:1-6.**

* How might God have placed you in your exact time and situation to do His will?
* What do these events teach you about God’s work that we don’t see?
* Notice how Queen Esther responded to Mordecai’s wisdom to her in 4:14-17. What do you see in her that would be a good example to follow?
* What qualities do you see in Esther that point to her faith in God?
* Where might you need to stand for the Lord, even if the earthly outcome is uncertain?

**Wrap Up:** The biblical account of Esther has a great deal to do with what we don’t see in the forefront, although the story is captivating and must have been terrifying at times for Esther and Mordecai. We know Esther must have had a vibrant trust in the Lord who gave her the wisdom, humility and courage she needed to stand for God’s people. We know God was working and providing, though He doesn’t speak directly in the book of Esther. His people act based on His character and His ways.

* Where is God calling you to take a stand for Him now? How will you respond?
* How can we as a group encourage one another toward faithfulness to God in questionable moments?
* Who could you share the story of Esther with today?

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**Extended Cut:**

The King of Persia, Ahasuerus or Xerxes, threw two major feasts. His desire was to impress and brag about his wealth and power. These events served to feed his vanity and pride. Look at how these feasts are described, and you can better understand how elaborate and pompous the situation was. The first feast lasted six months and was hosted for the nobles, princes, and military officials with the purpose of impressing them and planning for another battle. He was strategizing to increase his wealth and power further. Following this feast, the King threw a lavish seven-day feast for “all the people” (v. 5). While he entertained the men, Queen Vashti was holding a feast in the palace for the women. During the feast, King Xerxes got intoxicated and, trying to impress his guests, sent for Queen Vashti to be paraded before the men. The Queen refused to take part in something so degrading and humiliating. The king was incensed and, after listening to some of his advisors who were scared that the queen’s refusal would give their own wives permission to do the same, decided to have the queen removed from her position and banished. Thus, the stage was set for God’s plan to save His people using a young Jewish woman.

It’s important to remember when reading sections of Scripture like this, that God is working through circumstances to redeem and save His people. We hold the large narrative of what God is doing in one hand, while examining the circumstances and details with the other. The metanarrative of Scripture provides a place to put accounts that have confusing details and reveal human sinfulness and pride.

Esther, an orphan, had been living with her relative, Mordecai. One of Mordecai’s ancestors was Kish: an ancestor of Saul, who was the first king of Israel. Mordecai could trace his family roots back to royal Jewish lineage. Through the events that followed, God would again redeem the failures of the past by raising up new people who were faithful to Him.

The Jews had been taken into captivity years earlier. Then when Persia overtook Babylon, some exiles were sent back to Jerusalem, as we studied in Haggai. Mordecai and Esther were not part of the group sent back to rebuild the temple, so they remained in the foreign land and had been immersed in that culture. Esther kept her Jewish heritage hidden under the advisement of Mordecai and found favor with the King so that he chose her to be the next Queen.

One of the king’s highest officials was a man named Haman. In chapter 3, we see that Haman was much like the king and sought his own glory from his position. When Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, it infuriated him. This was the starting point for an elaborate plan Haman put into place to exact revenge on not only Mordecai but all the Jews. Mordecai took a stand, and it caused his enemy to put a target on him—even though Mordecai had been well respected and well known, even bringing an assassination plot he overheard to the king, saving his life. Doing the right thing often will not prevent a person from suffering unpleasant or even dangerous situations, but we can always trust that God is with us and working.

With the evil plot of Haman against Mordecai and the Jews in place, the middle chapters of Esther cover details of Mordecai and Esther’s response. We see how Esther planned, prayed, and fasted in preparation to speak up on behalf of her people. While this may seem like a natural situation for the queen to speak to the king about an issue near to her heart, it was not the case. In that day, no one was allowed to come before the king unless he sent for them, including the queen. To win his favor, Esther had to be wise and careful about her actions, or she could lose her life and any hope of rescuing her people. Mordecai’s words in chapter 4 verse 14 are reflective of his faith in God. He told Esther that she may be part of the plan to rescue the Jews but if not, he still had faith that they would be preserved. Mordecai believed God would save His people. Believers throughout the years have been inspired by the encouragement to Esther that it was, “for such a time as this” that she had been placed in her position. It was no accident that she aligned with the exact time in history that her people needed help. This is another sign of God’s providence, despite no direct reference to Him.

God is working regardless of how we perceive Him. He is completely capable of reversing a seemingly unfavorable situation and turn it for His glory. As Christ followers, we are to trust Him and be willing stand for Him even when the circumstances align against us. There will always be those who are looking to thwart the plans and the people of God.

You have been placed where you are to do the will of God and represent Him to the lost world. Esther made the choice to stand for God’s people and Mordecai chose to do what was right, even though it was risky. We also face risks when we choose God’s way and when we obey Him over conforming to the world. Though not mentioned in the book of Esther, God is present throughout the pages, and He is at work in your life too. You can count on God to do the impossible, and you can trust every promise He has made. Mordecai displayed faith in the promises of God from decades earlier and it served him well. No matter what circumstances you are facing, God has the power and ability to reverse your situation in an instant should He so chose. And we can trust that, ultimately, He will flip the script of the enemy until His people are victorious and evil is defeated.