

“Caught in a Golden Cage”

Esther 1-3

Series: Rising from the Ruins Week 7

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For a moment, imagine you are stepping up to the top platform at the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Feel the thrill as they drape the gold medal around your neck and start up the triumphant strains of the Star-Spangled Banner.

Now it is March 27th. You sit in the Dolby Theater in Hollywood, California. The MC on the stage says, “And the winner is...” and you hear your name. Rising to the podium they place in your hands a golden Oscar at the 94th Academy Awards.

It’s Sunday night. Teammates dump a cooler of Gatorade over you. Cannons shoot a hurricane of confetti. Players and fans mob the field. You rise to the stage to hoist the Vince Lombardi Trophy as the winner of Super Bowl LVI.

Okay. You can come back to your ordinary life now.

What a thrill it must be to reach the pinnacle of success. In the spotlight, at the top of your game, one for the record books. After the last two years of struggle, frustration and even depression, it’s a pleasure to bask in the sunlight of success for a moment – even if it’s someone else’s success.

Yet here is the untold secret: success can be just as hard to handle as failure. You might find yourself caught in a cage of gold. At first it’s exciting to advance or ascend to a new level. You make the elite team or get the lead role. You are invited to hang with the popular crowd or get into a top school. You land a coveted position. Doors open to upper management. You gain access to the exclusive inner circle. The praise and perks are great. Yet they come with a price. You feel the pressure to blend in and be like those around you. Temptations call your name. Boundaries get blurred. Rationalizations, justifications, and compromises become standard operating procedures. Your faith in Jesus, your values, your standards start to look old-fashioned and outdated. So you hide them or even deny them. You begin to think like the others, talk like the others, behave like the others. You don’t like what you are becoming and you don’t like what you see in those around you. But you feel trapped, caught in a golden cage.

Tony Dungy faced that trap. Today the Pro-Football Hall of Fame coach is known for leading the Indianapolis Colts to victory in Super Bowl XLI. Though raised in a solid Christian home, Tony felt the pull to conform when he first played for the Steelers.

When I arrived in Pittsburgh, I was a good kid who had been raised well and wanted to do right, but I was in a new situation – and new situations seem to make

us more susceptible to peer pressure. I certainly was hoping to make the team and fit in.¹

When he was traded to the San Francisco 49ers the challenges increased.

At twenty-four years old, in my third year of professional football, I was venturing into a different world, one with many more temptations than I had ever experienced before. Drug use was very prevalent in the Bay Area.²

Dungy witnessed the terrible price drugs can demand.

After being an NBA first-round pick in 1986, Len Bias's life ended at twenty-two as the result of a cocaine overdose. Eight days after Bias's death, twenty-three-year-old Don Rogers, a Pro Bowl free safety for the Cleveland Browns, died the same way at his bachelor party the night before he was to be married.³

Instead of succumbing to the tempting power of pro ball's golden cage, Dungy became a role model for players - to show them a different way to play and coach, lose and win.

Esther knows the solid gold bars of a gilded cage. Her birthplace is Persia, the heart of an empire which rules from India to Ethiopia including the Promised Land. This Jewish girl's home is the capital city of Susa. She has never been to the Holy Land. Her bio is one of the most gripping stories of all time: there are secret conspiracies, threats of genocide, incredible irony, unexpected plot twists, life or death decisions and acts of unbelievable courage and sacrifice. It's so spell-binding Hollywood turned it into a movie: "One Night with the King" – which is the story of Esther's visit to ... Elvis.

No, the king in this story is Xerxes (486-465 BC). Going back in time in our *Rising from the Ruins series*, Esther lives decades before Ezra and Nehemiah who serve under Artaxerxes I (465-425 BC). She rises higher than a Gold Medal, Oscar or Super Bowl Trophy to be Xerxes' Queen. Yet she soon discovers her successful ascent traps her in a golden cage. Will she give into the gilded life or take a stand for God and her people? Jesus has placed each of us in a position of influence. What will you do? Blend in and cave in or dig in and take a stand? Will you conform or work to transform with God's help? Esther proves a person in the right place, at the right time, can change the world, if she or he has the courage to take a stand for God. Let's review the cast of characters. Each is in a position of influence. What they do with that power is dramatically different.

First there is King Xerxes. Once he succeeds his father Darius, Xerxes puts down rebellions in Egypt and Babylon. He is known to history for losing the battle of Thermopylae to the Greeks and building the magnificent palace at Persepolis. In the Bible he uses his position for **Self-Indulgent Pleasure**. He shows off his wealth, throws lavish banquets and drinking parties which last for days, and even treats his Queen Vashti and the women of his harem like trophies to be put on display. When she rightly refuses,

¹ Tony Dungy, *Uncommon: Finding Your Path to Significance*, (Tyndale House: Carol Stream, IL) 192-3.

² Dungy, 90.

³ Dungy, 134-135

Xerxes throws a temper tantrum, dismisses Vashti, and goes so far as to make it a law “that every man should be ruler over his own household.” Esther 1:22. Men...don’t try this at home.

Next there is Haman whom Xerxes elevates to second place in the empire and he wants everyone to know it. Haman expects all subjects to kneel as he passes by. He uses his position for **Self-Centered Pride**. Haman will soon collide with our third character.

Mordecai is a leader in the Jewish community of Persia. A descendant of King Saul from the tribe of Benjamin, he did not return with the Jews who rebuilt the Temple. Some scholars think a court official named Mardukaya listed in cuneiform tablets from this time is the same person. He uses his position to promote **Self-Sacrificing Principles**. Mordecai worships God alone. So he takes a stand – literally. As crowds kneel to worship the passing Haman, Mordecai stands. This enrages Haman and he crafts a plot to kill not only Mordecai but all the Jews throughout the empire. He says to King Xerxes

There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business (Esther 3:8-9).

Xerxes approves the plan without even asking for the name of the condemned people. When Mordecai learns his obedience to the Lord threatens the lives of every Jew, he goes into mourning – tearing his clothes, covering himself in black sackcloth and throwing ashes upon his head. Loudly he wails throughout the city. As the news of the coming genocide spreads across the empire, the same anguished cry rises from every Jewish heart. They all turn to God with fasting and prayer. The only one who does not know about the edict of death ... is Esther.

Our main character was orphaned as a child and raised by her older cousin Mordecai as his daughter. When beautiful young women from across the empire are gathered to take Queen Vashti’s place, hometown girl Esther is among them. As she is taken from Mordecai’s protective care he makes her promise to keep her Jewish heritage a secret. She even adopts a Persian name, Esther, instead of her Hebrew name Hadassah. This is for self-preservation and survival but it’s not God’s will. Yet it works in her favor.

Before a young woman’s turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. Esther 2:12

This chapter of the Bible is brought to you by Ulta. Esther wins the beauty contest.

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. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen. Esther 2:17

Esther ascends to the top. Yet she soon finds she is trapped in a golden cage. It seems she enjoys living the life of a queen, eating unkosher food and reveling in all the attention. Yet when news of the coming holocaust reaches her, she has a decision to make. Will she pursue self-indulgent pleasure, self-centered pride or will she sacrifice herself for God's principles?

It is a great temptation for you and me to become like everyone else. It's safe to be a Christian within these walls. But when teens pass through the hallways of school or hang with their friends, when workers sit in meetings or labor in the field, when neighbors or friends get together, suddenly we hide our Christian identity. A person makes a comment which is contrary, even offensive, to what you believe. A group does something unethical, even sinful, and you go along because you want to belong. You know if you take a stand for Jesus you will instantly be labeled as naïve, fanatic, judgmental or a hypocrite. You fear you'll be avoided, rejected, ostracized. The doors of opportunity will close. So you become like everyone else. Aside from the fact you attend church, would anyone know by your lifestyle you are a follower of Jesus?

I must confess in a social gathering even I do not like to reveal I am a pastor. If someone asks, "And what do you do for a living?" I am not ashamed to tell them. But every time, without fail, I get one of four reactions. 1) They say, "That's nice," and change the subject. 2) They feel guilty and give excuses why they haven't been in church for a while. 3) They quickly review their last comments to see if they said any swear words or off color jokes. 4) They tell me stories about all the ministers they've known who had affairs and whose children are hellions. If they are committed Christians they may start quizzing me to see if I am a true Christian. Just once I would like to say, "Oh I'm merely equipping the corporate expression of the theocratic realm to declare the kerygma for the purpose of cosmic soteriology. And what do you do?" And they'd probably say, "Oh, I'm just a brain surgeon."

God does not want us to be in people's faces with our faith. But neither should we hide our light under a basket. Every segment of society needs Christians who will take a stand for what is right according to God's Word. Jesus has placed every one of us in a position of influence. Will you conform to your world or transform your world with the help of the Holy Spirit? We must stop kneeling down to what a selfish materialistic lifestyle tells us we need to buy. We must stop kneeling down to the promiscuous lifestyle Hollywood tells us we need to pursue. We must stop kneeling down to the culture which tells us to keep quiet about Jesus since all roads lead to heaven and to look the other way when we see abuse, injustice, poverty, racism and disregard for human life. Even Mordecai, who told Esther to keep her identity a secret, will not kneel down. Next week we will see what Esther does when Mordecai challenges her to take a stand.

Earlier I shared with you the temptations Tony Dungy faced when he played for the Pittsburgh Steelers and the San Francisco 49ers. He was influenced by several Christian teammates who helped him walk the talk of Jesus. At the age of 33 he became the youngest defensive coordinator in the NFL and the only African-American. But in '89 he was let go. It was hard for him to find another position because he was a calm, polite leader who never swore and lived by Christian principles. They expected coaches to be

loud and foul-mouthed. In '86 he interviewed for the top position with the Philadelphia Eagles. Instead we chose Buddy Ryan.

I'm sure that approach caused me to not get certain jobs. But I had to be true to myself, too. As a Christian in a high profile job like mine, I had to remember that I was always representing God, and that by carrying on the way a lot of coaches do, I would not be glorifying God.

On February 4, 2007, Tony Dungy and the Indianapolis Colts reached the peak by defeating the Chicago Bears led by his very good friend Lovie Smith in Super Bowl XLI. Dungy made history becoming the first African American coach to win the trophy. At the presentation ceremony, he was asked about the social significance of this moment. With grace and integrity, Tony Dungy acknowledged the importance of this milestone not just for African-Americans but for all America. He didn't stop there. He took us higher.

I'm proud to represent African-American coaches, to be the first African-American to win this. It means an awful lot to our country. But again, more than anything, I've said it before, (Chicago Bears Coach) Lovie Smith and I are not only the first two African-American coaches (in the Super Bowl), but Christian coaches showing that you can win doing it the Lord's way, we're more proud of that.

Instead of the usual insane post game locker-room celebration, there is a picture of the Colts locker room. In it you will see a sidelined Super Bowl Trophy and in the center, Tony Dungy kneeling with his players, hands clasped in prayer. Long ago the Bible taught Tony Dungy what's most important: "Despite these ups and downs, God is with us. God is for us. He won't ever abandon us."⁴

⁴ Quotations come from Tony Dungy, Quiet Strength: The Principles, Practices, & Priorities of a Winning Life, Carol Stream: Tyndale Publishers, 2007 and Michael Michelsen, Jr., "Gentle Warrior," Today's Christian (September/October 2007).