



TOUCHING THE SCEPTER

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One of the most beloved stories of all time is the story of Queen Esther told in the Old Testament. She was a Jew who through quite a series of events became the Queen of Persia. Almost 500 years before Christ was born, a beautiful incident took place that could have cost Esther her life. A wicked plot was afoot to exterminate her people, the Jews. With great courage, she went before the king to intercede for them. Reading in Esther 5:1-2, the bible says: *"Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house. And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So, Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre."*

Esther's rise to the royal household of ancient Persia is one of the greatest stories ever told. Though God is never mentioned in the book of Esther, the fingerprints of His involvement are all over it. It is the story of how God providentially preserved His people so that His promises would come to pass and ultimately the Messiah might be born hundreds of years later. God placed people in the right places and in the right circumstances to be used for His purposes when the time came, and the story of Esther illustrates that as well as any other.

Xerxes was the king of Persia at this time, and he removed his wife Vashti as queen because she had disrespected him. Esther lived here in the land with her cousin Mordecai, and when the king was looking for a new queen, Esther traveled to the palace. She kept her ethnicity a secret and Xerxes took a liking to Esther and selected her as his new queen. It was apparently a peaceful marriage. Some time goes by, and Esther learns of a plot by a high-ranking government official named Haman to exterminate the Jews. Esther was determined to intervene to save her people but, in that day, it was not a simple matter of her walking into the king's throne room and speaking her mind. Oh, no. According to the law, to walk into the king's presence unbidden meant certain death. To approach the king and make a request, the king had to invite the person to come near by holding out his golden scepter as a sign of his favor. This

law didn't stop Queen Esther from making her move. She said, *"I will go in unto the king, which is not according to the law, and if I perish, I perish."* And after a three-day fast, she put on the royal apparel and went and stood in the inner court of the king's house within view of the king's throne. And the bible so beautifully says in Esther 5:2, *"When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favour in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. So Esther drew near and touched the top of the scepter."* The queen made the king aware of wicked Haman's plot and made her appeal, and thus Haman's plan was foiled, and he was himself executed.

Well, there is obviously much more of the story that can be told but I want to focus on this scene before the Persian throne where Esther was graciously allowed to make her supplication to the king. How she must have let out a silent sigh of relief when she saw the king extend his golden scepter to her. According to the law, she could have been put to death. The king would have been within his right as king to do so. But in grace and compassion, he gave her an audience and listened to her request.

This event took place nearly five-hundred years before Christ was born. And about two-hundred years before the time of Esther, Isaiah prophesied of the divine king who would one day come and rule. He would be the absolute Monarch of monarchs, the King of all kings. He pointed his prophetic telescope to that lowly room in Bethlehem seven-hundred years later where God would enter into time and space and to the One who would become the King of the ages and wrote in Isaiah 9:6 *"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: And the government shall be upon his shoulder: And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."* The other prophets prophesied of the establishment of this great kingdom and of Christ's rule. The psalter, in Psalm 45:6, called it as an everlasting kingdom with a scepter of righteousness. The writer of Hebrews quotes that Psalm in Hebrews 1:8, ascribing its prophecy to Christ, saying *"But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom."* A king's scepter was an important symbol of his authority. We're not as familiar with this type of imagery in modern times but the scepter was the expression of an ancient monarch's rule and power. If he held the scepter, it was within his power to do according to his authority. And as is illustrated in the story of Esther, extending the scepter to one was a symbol of the king's favorable disposition toward the person approaching him. When the king held out his scepter to Queen Esther, it meant that he was willing to pardon her transgression of the law. With that assurance, she was able to come boldly before his throne and touch the top of his scepter, indicating her recognition of his power and her subjection to it.

Christ, the King of all kings, whose kingdom was established among men for the purpose of saving men, not only holds the scepter of authority in His hand, but He graciously extends it unto all who will humbly approach Him in faith and obedience. \If we will come near enough to hear His voice as Esther did by standing before the king's door, then he will tenderly and gladly extend to us His offer of pardon from all transgressions through His righteousness, with is the scepter of his kingdom. Romans 1:16-17 says, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For THEREIN is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith."* Here, the phrase 'the righteousness of God' refers to God's means of making men righteousness which Paul says is revealed in the gospel. The gospel is the expression and the means of extending to every person an invitation to approach His holy throne, which we could never do unbidden. We read in Revelation 22:17, *"Let him that heareth say, Come, and let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will let him take of the water of life freely."*

It is truly an incredible thing that a holy and just God would extend such mercy and benevolence to those of us who are worthy of death, by extending His scepter toward us. I want us to use that

wonderful picture as a comparison to the gospel today. There are two sides to this transaction: the king, who has all authority, must first graciously extend the scepter and then the subject must reach out and touch the scepter through submissive and obedient faith. That's a powerful picture of the gospel. It is an illustration of Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:8, *"For by grace are ye saved through faith. It is not yourselves; it is the gift of God."* God must extend His favor by grace, and we must acknowledge and receive it by faith. We must reach out and touch the scepter as the king extends it toward us.

First, as was the case with ancient kings, one must be bidden to enter the king's presence. No one inherently has the right to stand before the King of kings. In America, our nation is supposedly ruled by a government of the people and by the people. Though, we cannot just approach a President or other high-ranking official because of security reasons, our government is structured to allow the citizenry access to those who represent us in government. We have a constitutional right to be heard by those in authority because we say their authority comes from the people. That may be the case in a representative democracy such as America, but it is not the case in an absolute monarchy. It was not that way in Persia in the case of Esther. It wasn't that way in the Roman Empire. It wasn't even that way in ancient Israel. And it is not the case in the kingdom of Christ today.

Christ is a righteous monarch who sits in absolute authority over all things. God's own righteousness insulates Him from the sinfulness of His creation: mankind. Our sin, in other words, prevents us from approaching God. Now, many don't see sin that way today. They see sin on the same basis as the wrongs that are committed by one person against another. But sin against God is different because, unlike us, God is perfect and He is holy, which means set apart from sin and evil. Habakkuk 1:13 says, *"Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity..."* Just as light and darkness cannot co-exist in the same place, neither can a holy God and sinful man for then God's own holiness would be compromised. If God simply looked the other way and ignored sin and could remain in fellowship with man as a sinner, then God would no longer be holy and just Himself. So, a way had to be revealed to allow God to remain holy and uncompromised by sin and unrighteousness and at the same time, allow the sinful person whom He loves to approach Him. Well, that's the gospel! Listen then to Paul in Romans 3:23. He says: *"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."*

Number one, Paul established that all people are sinners. *"ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."* This alone sets Him apart from us and automatically denies us access to Him. But Paul says that God has set Jesus forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood." The word propitiation means 'a way to expiate' or to provide a place of mercy. It is the point where the offender may approach the offended and receive mercy and forgiveness. Paul says that Jesus has been set forth by God to be such a place or such a means. He then goes on to explain that through this marvelous plan, God can remain just and separate from sin (that is, His justice and judgment can be upheld) and at the same time, He can extend mercy to the sinner. That's what the substitutionary or vicarious death of Jesus was about. So, Paul says that by making Jesus our sacrifice; our propitiation; our means of expiation and forgiveness; our path to righteousness, God can, according to verse 26, still *"be just AND the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."* So, we must be sure to understand the position we are in in relation to Christ. He is within His right to condemn every one of us because every one of us has broken His divine law. "All have

sinned, and come short of the glory of God..." Not only that, but the bible declares that every sinner is worthy of eternal death. *"The wages of sin is death"* he said in Romans 6:23. But thank God he then said *"...BUT the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord."* So, what Paul is really showing in not only Romans 3 but in the first half of the Roman letter, is that the law condemned us all as sinners because all of us had broken it. It therefore was an act of pure grace that God provided a means to remove our sins and declare us righteous even though we have sinned. That grace was expressed in the offering of His own Son, Christ Jesus upon the cross, in our place. He paid the debt we owed, and Paul says that through faith in Christ and in His blood, we can now enter the throne room and approach the throne of God.

Now then, God delegated all authority unto His Son, Jesus, because He came and did the Father's will on our behalf. Jesus now sits enthroned in heaven and He holds the scepter of righteousness in His hand. It is only by the permission and the gracious favor of Christ that we are allowed to approach heaven. It is only by Him graciously extending the scepter of his authority toward us that we may find forgiveness of our transgressions and be granted His blessings. When King Xerxes held out his golden scepter to Esther, his favor toward her was so great that he was willing to grant anything she might wish, as he expressed it, even *"to the half of the kingdom."* Christ is willing to share with us the authority and the riches of His heavenly kingdom. In grace and kindness, He has extended His scepter of righteousness toward us through the preaching of the gospel. But don't overlook this: just as He must extend the royal scepter, so we must, by faith, reach out touch the scepter in submission to Him. How do we do that? We do so by obeying the gospel when we hear it. Grace has given us the gospel. In faith, we must obediently respond. We reach out touch the scepter when we obey the conditions of the gospel as set forth by Christ and His apostles. To refuse to do so is the same as if Esther had refused to touch the scepter of Xerxes, thus refusing and rejecting his authority.

Let us notice some passages pertaining to salvation. In Hebrews 5:9, the writer said that Christ has been *"made the author of eternal salvation (that's grace) unto all those who OBEY Him (that's faith).* Grace will not avail any person who refuses to submit to Christ's authority and obey Him. To refuse to obey the Christ and circumvent His commands is to reject His authority and refuse to touch the scepter. Many today claim that one can be saved without submitting to Christ in baptism. In fact, most preachers and churches make that claim. But the Savior said to the apostles in Mark 16:15-16, *"Go ye therefore into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature"* Gospel means good news. Through their preaching Christ is extending the scepter unto unworthy and sinful mankind. He said *"Go and preach the gospel to every creature. (listen now) He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. He that believeth not shall be condemned."* Christ, in grace and mercy, extended His scepter to wicked Saul of Tarsus when He met him on the Damascus Road. But Saul had to touch the scepter when Ananias told him *"And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."* When one hears the gospel and feels the guilt of his or her sin and, as it were, sees Christ in mercy extend the scepter, the desire is to have a clean conscience. To be washed and cleansed. Peter plainly says in *1 Peter 3:21* that baptism is the answer or the appeal for that good conscience. When, in faith and repentance, we confess the name of Christ and submit to Him in baptism, we are touching the scepter that He by grace extended. We earn or merit nothing. But, by obedient faith, we reach out and receive that which He has extended by grace.

In view of the greatness of His grace, do we have the humility and the eagerness to "touch the top of His scepter?" Are we willing to submit to His power and His authority in humble obedience to His simple commands? In the words of the Hebrew writer in Hebrews 4:16, in view of the sacrifice that He in love and grace has offered for us and now that He not only sits upon His throne as King but functions as our

High Priest, *“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”* He is a wonderful and benevolent King. But he is also a holy and righteous King. In His great love, He has extended the scepter of His grace to you today. Will you reach out and touch in by obedient faith?

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