

FAITH AT WORK

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Today's message arises from the pages of the brief book of Esther, found in the heart of the Old Testament. As I begin, permit me to read from Eugene Peterson's introduction to that book in *The Message*.

"It seems odd that the awareness of God, or even of the people of God, brings out the worst in some people. God, the source of all goodness and blessing and joy, at times becomes the occasion for nearly unimaginable acts of cruelty, atrocity, and evil.

"There is a long history of killing men and women simply because they are perceived as reminders or representatives of the living God, as if killing people who worship God gets rid of God himself. [The years of our lives have been] marked by an extraordinary frenzy of such "god" killings. To no one's surprise, God is still alive and present.

"The book of Esther opens a window on this world of violence directed, whether openly or covertly, against God and God's people. The perspective it provides transcends the occasion that provoked it, a nasty scheme to massacre all the exiled Jews who lived in the vast expanse of fifth-century B.C. Persia. Three characters shape the plot. Mordecai, identified simply as 'the Jew,' anchors the story. He is solid, faithful, sane, godly. His goodness is more than matched by the evil and arrogant vanity of Haman, who masterminds the planned massacre. Mordecai's young, orphaned, and ravishing cousin, Esther, whom he has raised, emerges from the shadows of the royal harem to take on the title role.

"It turns out that no God-representing men and women get killed in this story—in a dramatic turnaround, the plot fails. But millions before and after Esther have been and, no doubt, will continue to be killed. There is hardly a culture or century that doesn't eventually find a Haman determined to rid the world of evidence and reminders of God. Meanwhile, Esther continues to speak the final and definitive word: You can't eliminate God's people. No matter how many of them you kill, you can't get rid of the communities of God-honoring, God-serving, God-worshiping people scattered all over the earth. This is still the final and definitive word." (Introduction to Esther, *The Message*)

The systematic imprisonment, torture, and execution of Christians generally takes a back seat to complaints about questionable police actions and political rants, but it is creeping into the headlines today. From the Middle East to North Korea, Christians have been explicitly threatened. In a less violent stream, even a United States presidential candidate has declared the necessity for Christians to "adjust their beliefs" to suit what is politically correct. This is one of the currents of our times.

Though most of us may not face such danger directly, we all must consider it, for it is no longer a “seeming impossibility” and our brothers and sisters around the world are paying the ultimate price for their confidence in Jesus Christ.

The 10-chapter story of Esther, in which the name of God does not appear even one time, is a dramatic account of God’s sovereign love and influence in a world fraught with violent evil. In this way, it is a story for our time. From the human side, it is a revealing look at the operation of faith in a godless society. From this point of view, it offers sound instruction for us all.

Godly Reactions

Esther 4:8 Then Haman approached King Xerxes and said, “There is a certain race of people scattered through all the provinces of your empire who keep themselves separate from everyone else. Their laws are different from those of any other people, and they refuse to obey the laws of the king. So it is not in the king’s interest to let them live. ⁹ If it please the king, issue a decree that they be destroyed, and I will give 10,000 large sacks of silver to the government administrators to be deposited in the royal treasury.”

¹⁰ The king agreed, confirming his decision by removing his signet ring from his finger and giving it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ The king said, “The money and the people are both yours to do with as you see fit.”

News of this decree was quickly circulated to all the provinces of the Persian Empire. The fear unleashed in the hearts of Jews everywhere is easily anticipated by the reader. But the resulting actions of the Jewish people is worth noting, as a testimony of their faith in God.

Esther 4:3 And as news of the king’s decree reached all the provinces, there was great mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, and wailed, and many people lay in burlap and ashes.

They fasted and prayed! They took their fear and their complaint to God. They invited divine intervention.

When things seem to go awry in life, what is your knee-jerk response? Is it prayer? Do you tend to lean on God’s influence, or on man’s influence to right the wrongs you have experienced?

Of course, we all should do what we can—what is appropriate—to restore righteousness. If your front door falls off its hinges, you may pray for protection, but you should also get some tools and some longer screws. However, as the saying goes, “You can often do more than pray, but you cannot do more until you have prayed.” This underscores the primacy of prayer, and thus, of God.

Jesus said, “Seek the Kingdom of God first of all, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need” (Matthew 6:33). Everything you need.

If contrary circumstances do not press you to pray and seek God, then God is not the center of your life. Some of our best praying is done in the midst of contrary circumstances!

Such a Time

Esther had been unknown and unnoticed—a nobody (except in her uncle’s eye)—until adverse circumstances forced a change. The queen was deposed and a new queen was sought to take her place. Esther, and many other young women, were taken into the king’s harem, from which he might choose a suitable companion. Had the story ended here, no one would have recognized these events as the “hand of God.” To become the sexual plaything of a foreign king was hardly the aspiration of a godly Jewess.

And just here is a vital lesson for us all: Do not judge your circumstances before you have seen their outcome. First responses are important, but not more important than your successive responses.

Hebrews 10:36 Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God’s will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.

Esther’s beauty and her demeanor made her the apple of the king’s eye, and so, a young Jewess became the Queen of Persia!

But for what advantage? And to what end? Such benefits were imperceptible at that point. No good outcome had been prophesied. No good outcome could be seen or imagined. And when a positive end is invisible to us, we tend to feel and think that God is uninvolved.

God. Is. Uninvolved.

But give it time. As time passed, the need for God became apparent. Not the “plan of God,” but the need for God. Most of the time, the plan of God is revealed by our need for God.

As Haman’s plot evolved, and the Jewish population among the Persians was threatened with extinction, the need for God became plain. God’s people had no other recourse. No possible help but God.

America may be in such a position today. Both foreign and domestic policies are faltering. People are hurting, and they are angry. There is no political resolution in sight. Human means fall short of what we need.

Only God's people could possibly go the second mile, and invite an alternate future.

The Esther Moment

"And who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

We call it "an Esther moment"—the confluence of need and opportunity that invites a divine response.

None of us actually have come to a "royal position," like the young Jewess did, but each of us comes to some position in life that provides a similar challenge and opportunity. "Who knows but that you have come to _____ for such a time as this."

You fill in the blank. Perhaps it is "this job," or "this family," or "this church," or "this challenge." Something about it is providential. The danger is real. And the opportunity is real. When both are grasped, it is "time to act."

Esther responded in four significant ways, which each of us may emulate.

Identify with Faith

Esther identified with her faith—her heritage, her people, and her God. Her unique position did not eclipse her heritage. Her uncle Mordecai reminded her of who she was as a person, apart from any temporal position.

Don't forget how far you have come! Remembering how God has helped you in the past is a great resource for confidence. Don't try to measure the help you know you have received against the struggles you have endured (positive vs. negative), just remind yourself of God's gracious power in your life. You may not yet be what you wish you were, but you are far from what you used to be!

Don't forget who you have come with! Christ has been with you (Emmanuel) through thick and thin, and He is with you now, no matter how dire the situation. Difficulties are not the result of Christ's indifference, but of sin's presence in the world. Jesus is with you.

Don't forget how you got here! Whatever you've put into your journey pales in comparison to the providence and power of God, who orchestrates your opportunities and empowers your responses.

Act with Courage

Esther acted with courage—she took a bold step of faith that could have cost her life. She was in position for a grand opportunity, but she would never see it without taking a risk.

She approached the king, unbidden. She risked his displeasure, and her own demise, in order to partner with God to create a chance to be useful.

Hold on to your comfort at your own risk! Comfort is short-lived and over-rated. Faithful obedience promises greater reward. When Christ is leading, step out of your comfort zone.

There comes a point when inactivity is disobedience! God commands rest for His people, but it comes at the end of six days of work. Don't get that ratio reversed!

In order to do more with your life, you must do something else! The definition of insanity is: Doing the same thing as before, yet expecting different results. Change is a necessary part of growth and fruitfulness.

Make a Sacrifice

Esther made a personal sacrifice—she and her closest friends fasted and prayed for three days, in order to hear from God, to have His wisdom for their future.

If your future is unclear, and your circumstances are troubled, it is time to fast and pray! That is, it is time to seek the Lord, apart from the normal distractions of everyday life.

You cannot generate wisdom on your own, but you can position yourself to receive it from God. Fellowship is interactive and responsive. Keep the flame of fellowship alive. Draw closer to Christ.

James 4:8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you.

Imagine a Response

Esther proposed an ingenious plan—she could not erase what had been set in motion, but she and her people did not have to give up or submit without a fight.

Many times, I have been unable to foresee the possibilities, because I have been wrapped up in the hurts of my past. You cannot make forward progress when you are constantly watching the rearview mirror. What has been done—no matter how painful or unjust—cannot be *un-*done. I am not suggesting that you minimize the abuse, or ignore it—only that you do not let it enslave you.

Bundle it up and put it on an altar; make it—that is, your pain and regret—an offering to God. Set it on fire and let it burn before God, so you can get up and move on. It is only when you can trust people's cruelties and injustices to a much larger plan of the Sovereign God, that you can begin to see the future God has prepared for you and others.

The king's decree to exterminate the Jews could not legally be reversed, but another law, permitting the Jews to defend themselves, could be enacted. And so it was.

Added to this were the famed influence of Mordecai, who had become the king's right-hand man (in the place of the evil Haman) and the sympathies of many of the Persian people for their Jewish neighbors.

God gave the Jewish people a mighty victory over all of their adversaries in the empire. It was so significant that it is still celebrated annually by Jews around the world.

In the face of overwhelming odds, Esther identified with her faith, she acted with courage, she made a personal sacrifice, and she imagined a God-honoring response. God gave Esther and her people a stunning victory!

I think He'll do the same for you! For God is *“able to do exceedingly above and beyond all that you can ask or imagine, according to His power that works in us.”* (Ephesians 3:20)

Seek the Lord, take courage, and act on it.