

Where is God? The Story of Esther, Part Two If I Perish

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This morning we continue with our series of messages on the book of Esther. I hope you are reading this short, ten-chapter book. Let's review some of the highlights of the book we talked about last week.

The story of Esther takes place around 480 BC during the period when the Persians have emerged as the greatest world power around. The Persian King is Xerxes. He invites the nobles of 127 provinces to come to the capitol city of Susa for festivities lasting six months. Each day he parades his possessions to impress them with his wealth and power. At the end of the festivities, Xerxes held a banquet lasting seven days. Wine flowed freely and near the end the 1,000 male guests were rather intoxicated including the King. He had one final possession he wanted to show the nobles—his beautiful queen, Vashti. He sent for her and she refused to come into the room with 1,000 drunken men. The king ordered her crown taken away and banished her from his presence forever. A search for a new queen followed. The most beautiful single women in the Empire were brought to the palace. After a year of beauty treatments each one would spend a night with the king. The one who pleased him most would be selected as the new queen. Among the contestants, was a drop-dead gorgeous Jewish woman named Esther. She pleased the King the most and was selected as the new queen.

The book of Esther is unique because it is the only book in the Bible that does not mention the name of God. In most of the books of the Bible, God is very

visible revealing his power and glory. We prefer God to work in our lives in very dramatic and visible ways. The story of Esther proclaims that many times God is working invisibly—behind the scenes to accomplish his purposes. He often works unseen through a sequence of events in our lives that do not appear to be directed by God. Only looking back over those events do we realize that God was working all the time even when we were unaware. There are times in our lives when God is silent and we wonder where he is. The story of Esther reveals that God is working even when we cannot see him.

Esther's story also reveals that God can use people who are flawed and compromise their faith and moral standards. In the first few chapters of Esther, we see that she is not an exemplary person. She hides her Jewish identity while she is in the palace. She does not acknowledge the God of Israel as her God. She compromises the moral standards of the Ten Commandments by sleeping with King when they are not married. Then she marries the King. Jewish persons were not supposed to marry anyone who did not believe in the God of Israel. We will see as the story unfolds that God uses Esther to save the Jewish people—the very people she refused to identify with. The story of Esther encourages those of us who are flawed and who have compromised our faith and our morals. Even though we have messed up in the past, God can still use us. Let's look at more of the story of Esther to see how God uses her to accomplish his purposes.

Even though Esther has become Queen through dishonesty and moral compromise, God is going to use her position to save his people. Esther is one of those who literally slept her way to the top. But we will see that when the moment of decision comes, Esther is more than just a pretty face. The depth of her character and courage will rise to the challenge.

While Esther is enjoying all the benefits of being a Queen, a plot is unfolding to exterminate all the Jewish people in the Persian Empire. The primary target of this plot is her older cousin, Mordecai, who raised Esther when she became an orphan. One of the high ranking officials in the Persian Empire named Haman required everyone to kneel down before him when he passed by. Mordecai refused to kneel down to Haman's inflated ego. Someone called Haman's attention to Mordecai's behavior. Haman was furious. When he discovered that Mordecai was Jewish, Haman decided that he not only wanted Mordecai dead, he wanted all Jewish people to be eliminated. We are not told why, but apparently Haman considered all the Jewish people a threat. He convinced King Xerxes to issue an edict that all Jewish persons were to be killed on a certain day: men, women and children. The edict was written and distributed throughout the empire.

Mordecai along with his fellow Jews put on sackcloth and ashes as a way to call attention to their plight. He stood outside the king's gate and wailed loudly. Word got to Queen Esther that her cousin was upset. She sent a messenger to find out why. Apparently she was so insulated in the palace that she did not know about the plot. Mordecai sent a copy of the edict to her and urged her to go to the king and plead for the lives of her people.

Let's read this part of the story from Esther 4:9-17

Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹"All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

¹²When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴For 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?"

¹⁵Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶"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."

¹⁷So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

How does God use Esther to save his chosen people? Even though she has become Queen through a series of compromises, God will use her position to help accomplish his purposes. Esther has a special place in the palace—the power center of the Persian Empire. She is in a unique position to influence the King. One of the themes of the story of Esther is not only can God use us when we are flawed; God can use us even we are not clergy or missionaries. Dick Lucas, a British minister said: "If you were to go to a book table and see a biography titled: The Person God Uses, who would you assume it is about? A missionary like Mother Teresa? Or an evangelist like Billy Graham? Or a pastor like Rick Warren, author of The Purpose Driven Life? The message of the Bible is that God does not just use clergy persons and missionaries. He wants to use each of us to serve his purposes through our work. Whether we are a farmer, banker, doctor, business person, teacher or homemaker—God wants to use us.

When the Babylonians conquered Israel, they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and tore down the city walls. They carried off most of the Jewish people into exile throughout the Babylonian Empire. When the Persians conquered the Babylonians, they believed that persons would be better subjects if they lived in their own land. So they allowed the Jewish people and others who

were exiled to return home. During the time of Esther many of the Jewish people are returning to the Holy Land to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. There are three consecutive books in the Bible that tell the story of this rebuilding process. The first one is Ezra. He is a priest, a minister, who proclaims the principles of scripture that people had forgotten during the Exile. He encouraged them upon return to the Holy Land to shape their lives by the word of God. He was a preacher. Ezra was a great preacher, but he had no clue how to rebuild the city. But there are two other persons who are vital to the rebuilding process—neither are ministers. The next book is about Nehemiah, a layman who was an urban planner and developer. He possessed the management and construction skills needed to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The protective walls were essential to restoring order, commerce and safety to the citizens. God used Nehemiah's building skills to save his people. The last book is Esther. She is the Queen of a secular Empire. She lives in Susa, the capital of Persia. But her influence in the palace will save the lives of the Jewish people in Jerusalem and throughout the Empire. It is fascinating that we have all three of these stories together in the Bible describing how God brought his people back to the Promised Land and rebuilt it. Two of the persons God used were lay persons—only one was a minister. Without the contribution of all three, the land would not have been rebuilt.

Jesus told us that God is rebuilding his kingdom right now. He is restoring and renewing the world to what he intended in the beginning. He cannot bring about the fullness of his kingdom only through ministers and missionaries. He wants to use all of us to accomplish his purpose of redeeming the world. If we are willing to serve God through our work, he will use us. No matter what your

job, God can use it for his glory. Begin each work day with a dangerous prayer: “God, use me today to accomplish your purposes.” He may use you to speak an encouraging word to someone who is about ready to give up on life. He may use you to help influence a decision that will enable a company to do what is right and just for employees and customers. How will God use you? I don’t know, but I know if you are willing to serve him and pray for him to use you, he will. He will use you through the course of ordinary events of the day even when you are unaware.

The moment came for Queen Esther to make a decision if she would let God use her. That decision sometimes involves risk. For her it was a matter of life or death. Mordecai asks her to approach the King and ask him to save the Jewish people. To approach the King without being summoned was punishable by death. The only exception was if the king held out his scepter and granted you an audience. Esther was scared about approaching the King. Queen Vashti was banished because she offended the King. For Esther to approach the throne uninvited was to risk throwing away her crown and perhaps even death. She had not been summoned by the King for 30 days. The King selected a woman from his harem every night and sent for her. If Esther had not been summoned for a month, she wondered if she had fallen out of favor with the King.

Mordecai responds that he knows what is at risk. He reminds her that she is Jewish. Someone will find that out, and she will be killed anyway. Or Mordecai says that God will use someone else to save his people and when the Jewish people find out that she refused to help them, she will be killed as a traitor. Mordecai gives her a little reality check. If she approaches the king, she risks

being killed. But if she does not approach the king she will almost certainly be killed one way or the other.

Tremendous freedom comes when we realize that one way or the other we are going to die. Are we going to die while trying to protect ourselves and play it safe? Or are we going to die risking our lives for God and doing something that matters?

You have probably heard the country western song “Live Like You Were Dying.” The man in the song has discovered that he has a terminal illness and only a few months to live. What does he do?

VIDEO or PowerPoint CLIP OF CHORUS FROM “LIVE LIKE YOU WERE DYING”

When Esther decided to live like she was dying, she was free to risk it all to serve God. When the “reality check” hits us and we begin to live like we are dying, we are free to risk everything to serve God. We are free to be used by him to accomplish his purposes. This statement sets us free: “If I perish, I perish.” To stand up for what is right. To speak out for justice. To refuse to compromise truth and integrity for the sake of the bottom line. We may not die physically if we do those things, but we may die to our career, to a vested pension or to relationships with colleagues who disagree with us.

Esther got off to a rocky start, but when she came to the realization that “If I perish, I perish” she was free to live a life that matters for God. Next week, we’ll see how the king responded when she approached him without being summoned.

God will use us even if we are flawed and have compromised our faith. God will use us where we are if we will just make ourselves available. God will

use us if we are willing to risk everything for him. Are you ready to live like you are dying?