

Put to the Test

(Esther 4:1-17)

(preached 1/121/14; Pine Grove BC Wed PM)

Introduction

Locker rooms are famous for the speeches that are often given in them.

I remember one speech that our coach gave at halftime.

It was my first game as part of the JV basketball game at our high school.

I was in 7th grade, and at halftime of that game, we were losing 33-5 or something like that.

It was real bad.

Now, I hadn't even played in the whole game.

I was pretty bad.

But we were sitting there in the locker room at halftime..

And our coach walked in...

I remember looking up at him...

And he said, "Moss, wipe those tears out of your eyes. This game isn't over yet."

Now, the funny part is that I wasn't crying.

Actually, I don't even remember being overly concerned about us getting beat so bad.

It wasn't my fault.

I hadn't missed one shot.

But for whatever reason, my coach called me out as someone who was crying...

So he could give this incredible inspirational speech about not crying and not giving up...

And he talked for almost 10 minutes in that locker room...

Pulling out every trick in the book to motivate us to go out and play hard in the second half....

Well, whatever he said worked.

In the second half, we scored 7 points, which was 2 more points than we scored in the first half...

And I think we lost 55-12.

It was ugly, but I have never forgotten that speech in the locker room at halftime.

There are also other very inspirational speeches that have been given in locker rooms...

Knute Rockne, the coach of Notre Dame, had a famous speech where he told the team to go and win one for the Gipper.

The Gipper was George Gipp, a Notre Dame football player who had passed away and asked the team to win a game in his memory...

There are also other famous motivational speeches...

The Gettysburg Address given by Lincoln

John Keenedy's Speech to go to the Moon

Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death speech by Patrick Henry

All of these addresses motivated people to action.

They were also defining moments in the history of the world.

We will also see one those moments tonight in the book of Esther.

In what is probably the most famous verse of the entire book of Esther.

Mordecai will deliver a rousing speech to Queen Esther to act on behalf of the Jews.

It will only be two verses, but it will be enough motivation for Esther to change her mind and casue her to take action.

And we are going to learn one very valuable lesson for every believer tonight in the book of Esther...

Though we have heard this before, we will see it again tonight..

God's plans use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.

Look, I get it when people say that doing ministry is unrewarding.

In many ways, it is.

You teach Sunday School for 30 years, and all you get is a yearly thank you from the Sunday School director.

You work to keep the church grounds looking good, and everyone takes it for granted.

You plan for a church event and only a few people show up.

You study hours for a lesson and no one offers you any encouragement.

You faithfully share the gospel with people, yet no one notices.

Let me tell you, that is par for the course for most Christians.

And it causes people to stop working in the church.

It leads to discouragement and frustration and burn out.

And how do we explain that?

First, we understand that our flesh is the enemy most of the time.

We crave praise.

We want to be noticed.

We want to be recognized.

WE want people to see what we do.

And though encouragement is a good thing, it must not motivate us.

Because I can assure you of one thing, encouragement from other believers will not always come.

That's why our service to the Lord must be motivated by something else.

And I would say that the primary motivation for serving the Lord must be a deep love for Christ.

The primary motivation to be obedient and useful in God's kingdom is out of love for what Christ has done on your behalf in saving you.

Service is never payback for Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

For you could serve the Lord for the next 1000 years and never repay Him for the forgiveness that comes through Jesus.

Rather, we serve to show our thankfulness for salvation.

Service is the overflow of a heart that is full of gratitude to Christ.

That must be the reason we wash the dishes, teach the 4 year olds, trim the bushes, set up the tables...

Visit the sick. Plan the event.

But there is also another underlying reason to obediently serve the Lord.

HE uses you to accomplish his purposes in the world.

Maybe while you are tearing down tables after an event, you strike up a conversation with a lost person who came.

Maybe you are able to share the truth of the gospel with him.

And maybe that is the first and only time he hears it in his life.

Maybe God has put you in that place on that day to share that truth with that man.

These are the ways of God.

Who works through ordinary circumstances to accomplish extraordinary things.

Maybe you teach the 4 year olds and you spend 50 minutes showing those 4 year olds that God judges sin.

Maybe it takes all that time for them to see that one truth.

And maybe one of those 4 year olds only comes that one time when you are teaching.

Yet, when he is 15, he remembers that he was born with sin...

And then he hears that Jesus is the only cure for sin.

And maybe on that one day, he takes something he remembers from children's church and calls upon the Lord to save him.

These are the testimonies of 1000s of saved people in the world.

How that one conversation with that one person lead them to salvation.

How that one lesson in that one Sunday School class as a kid was so instrumental in the Lord saving them.

And what gets lost in all those testimonies so often are the people behind the scenes in all of them.

The guy folding the table who just happened to be there.

The teacher who had studied all week to teach the kids that God judges sin.

Yet, those are the ones who get lost in the stories, and you know why that is?

The glory of someone getting saved all belongs to God.

God has designed it that way to prevent anyone from boasting but Him.

Otherwise, we would get puffed up and proud about what we had done in setting up those tables or teaching that lesson.

And we would point to our faithfulness and wisdom.

And it is good that God works that way, but it is also wonderful that we get to share in the joy of seeing those things happen.

And it is even greater that we can participate in seeing God's will get accomplished.

So that is also why we serve even in the smallest of roles.

Because we know that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

That is why we are faithful even though we may be forgotten.

That is why we are willing to work when everyone else wants to rest.

That is why we do the little things well even when the big things seem more important.

Because we know that God uses it all to accomplish His purposes.

And we will get another look at that tonight in chapter 4....

We are going to look at this chapter in 5 parts that are characterized by the emotions of the people involved.

We will begin with.....

I. The Sadness (1-3)

Verse 1...

***4 When Mordecai learned all that had been done,
[a]he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes,
and went out into the midst of the city and wailed
loudly and bitterly.***

If you were here when we looked at Mark 5 a few weeks ago...

WE talked about the Middle Eastern customs when it came to mourning...

Families would hire professional mourners who would go into the streets and scream...

And we talked about how even today, Middle Eastern funerals are loud events....

Where crowds will often hoist caskets and run through towns yelling and screaming.

Well, we see a picture of this in the time of Esther.

King Ahasuerus has issued a decree that all the Jews be killed on a certain day that was 11 months away.

The king was pushed into that decision by Haman, who we met in chapter 3.

Haman had a deep hatred for Jews because they had murdered his great grand father Agag almost 500 years ago.

But the flames of his hatred were fueled by Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him.

Mordecai was a Jew who was living in this area, even though most Jews had already departed for other parts of the kingdom.

And when Mordecai refused to bow to him, Haman didn't seek to kill only him but every Jew in the empire.

So, Haman went to King Ahasuerus and was given permission to do just that.

And now that the order to carry out this execution is given here, we see in verse 1 that Mordecai's rips his clothes...

Puts on sackcloth and ashes and cries loudly in the streets of the city.

And I think this reaction reveals the real motivation behind his refusal to bow to Haman.

Rather than being an act of devotion to God as some have suggested, I think we find out here that it was personal.

And when Mordecai realizes that his sin has led to this decree by the king to kill all the Jews, he mourns bitterly.

Which serves as a simple reminder to us all that our sin has far-reaching effects at times.

Sometimes our sin affects those that we love dearly.

And it is tragic when that happens.

And that is seen in the extreme sorrow that we see in Mordecai here.

Verse 2...

² He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth

Though Mordecai would want to grieve with those closest to him, like Esther, he was permitted to enter the king's gate in sackcloth.

The simplest explanation is this...

The king never wants to see grief in the empire.

He wants to think that all is rule in the land that he rules.

So, even if there is mourning in the empire, he simply won't let it in his presence.

Verse 3...

³ In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.

As the command to kill every Jew spreads throughout the empire....

So does the grief of the Jewish people.

There is sackcloth and ashes everywhere.

By most estimates, there were probably 15 million Jews in the Persian empire at this point...

So, we are talking about all the people in NC and all the people in SC.

That is a large number of people, and they all have received the news that they will be killed in a few months.

Obviously, there would be much mourning and prayer.

But it was so unified among the people.

It is interesting how tragedy or the threat of persecution will unify a people like nothing else.

Remember how folks in this country rallied after 9/11?

Remember the shows of solidarity in Paris just recently after the terrorist shootings?

Persecution unites people but materialism divides people.

At times, I am tempted to pray for persecution of the church.

A lot of the problems with the church in America today is the prosperity of it.

We live in a day where it's easy to call yourself a Christian.

It doesn't cost you anything to make that claim.

In fact, many people make that claim to gain popularity in this country.

In some circles, it is fashionable to be a Christian.

And that has made the church fat with false converts.

Let real persecution come today and you will quickly find out who the real Christians are.

People won't die for something they don't truly believe in.

If there is any benefit to persecution, it is the fact that it purifies and unites those who are being persecuted.

And I am sure that the Jews were very unified and probably more prayerful after hearing this news than they had been in recent years.

Then we move from THE MOURNING to...

II. The Curiosity (4-8)

Verse 4....

⁴ Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept them.

Esther is shielding from all the news.

She lives inside the king's gate.

News reaches her that Mordecai is grieving and she begins crying.

What is interesting is that she doesn't know why Mordecai is upset.

She simply starts crying.

Some of you are like that.

You will simply start crying if you see someone crying.

And if someone says "What's wrong?"

You will sob, "I don't know. I'm just crying too."

Well, that is what is happening here.

And she even sends clothes to Mordecai.

As a Jew, she knew that he would have torn his clothes as he mourned.

This would be to the effect of when my dad used to tell me, “Dry up those tears.”

And Mordecai replies with, “I don’t want to stop crying. So don’t make me.”

And that is a little lesson for all of us.

Though we don’t want to see people upset and mourning, sometimes we just to let them cry.

The Bible says “mourn with those who mourn.”

Sometimes, people don’t need someone telling them to stop crying, they simply need you to lend a shoulder for them to cry upon.

And Mordecai refuses the clothes, which is very important in God’s plan.

Because if he had accepted them, Esther may never have asked the question of verse 5...

⁵ Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king’s eunuchs, whom ^[b]the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. ⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king’s gate. ⁷ Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order

her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people.

Esther wanted to know what was going on, so she summoned Hathach to be her go-between...

Hathach goes to Mordecai in verse 6, and Mordecai tells him of the evil plot to kill all the Jews that the king has ordered.

He even told her of Haman's role in all this and the amount of money involved, which suggests that Mordecai had an inside source for all this information.

Then he sends a copy of the law for Esther to see and he makes an important request of Esther in verse 8..

She needs to go in and plead with him to change his order.

Something important to see here is that the eunuch, Hathach, would now know that Mordecai and Esther were Jewish.

But also notice how important this unknown man is to the outcome of the situation.

The survival of 15 million Jews is dependent upon Hathach's reliability and accuracy in what he transmitted between Esther and Mordecai.

Further proof that God can use anyone to accomplish his purposes.

IT is often said that big doors swing on tiny hinges,
and that is true in this case as well.

And now Esther's curiosity has turned into...

III. The Fear (9-12)

Verse 9...

⁹ Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther. ¹⁰ Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him to reply to Mordecai: ¹¹ "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days." ¹² They related Esther's words to Mordecai.

Simply put, if Esther went to see the king without an appointment, it was certain death for her.

Even though she was queen, you must remember the low view that Ahasuerus had for women, even for his wife.

He took away Vashti's crown because she wouldn't obey his request to dance.

Esther would have been aware of that, so she knows that she wouldn't be spared from his laws, even though she was queen.

The strange twist is that she is going to die either way.

It seems that she has forgotten that she is a Jew.

And so with her courage wavering, Mordecia reminds her of her destiny in verses 13-14...

And in this famous speech, he gives Esther...

IV. The Motivation (13-14)

Verse 13...

¹³ Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not imagine that you in the king’s palace can escape any more than all the Jews.

Mordecai quickly snatches Esther’s thinking out of the clouds and pulls her back to earth with this comment...

Look, Esther, you are dead either way.

If you go in, he will kill you.

If you refuse to go in, he will kill you.

I can’t help but draw out a practical application from this.

How many people do you know who think they will escape God’s judgment by who they know?

Well, Mama taught Sunday School.

Daddy was Men’s ministry director at the church.

Me and the preacher were best friends.

My granddaddy started a church.

There is but one association in the whole entire universe that will save you from God’s judgment.

And that is a person’s relationship with Jesus Christ.

Doesn't matter who you know in the political or financial world.

It all comes down to if you know the Lord and if He knows you.

And though Mordecai is reminding Esther that she won't be exempt from judgment because of who she is married to...

We need to beg people not to trust that they will be saved by anyone but Christ...

So, he reminds her of that...

And then he finishes his motivational speech with the most memorable verse of the book of Esther in verse 14...

14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"

And in this incredible verse, Mordecai touches on two very important biblical principles of living...

First, he affirms God's sovereignty.

Though Mordecai may have been weak in other areas of his life...

He has an accurate view of God's sovereignty.

He tells Esther....

Look, you don't have to do anything...

But even if you remain silent and don't...

God's plan will still go forth with or without your help.

And what an incredible summary of God's sovereignty...

God will do what God wills to do with or without your help..

Famous preacher AW Tozer put it this way...

“God's sovereign purposes are like an ocean liner, leaving New York City, bound for England. The people on board the ship are free to do as they please, but they aren't free to change the course of the ship. The mighty liner of God's sovereign design keeps its steady course over the sea of history. God moves undisturbed and unhindered toward the fulfillment of those eternal purposes which He purposed in Christ Jesus before the world began”

And Mordecai was right...

But then he adds...

Maybe that's why you became queen. For such a time as this.

I can't imagine that Esther didn't lie awake at night in the queen's room and wonder how this all happened to her.

She was a Jewish orphan and now queen.

Surely, she and Mordecai had some of those times when they got together and wondered...

“Why in the world did this happen to me?”

And I think Mordecai here is saying...

“We have found our answer.”

Your rose to queen to save the lives of 15 million Jews who are about to be slaughtered.

And I know we read this and see it as a wonderful story because it is glamorous to be queen...

And it is every girl's dream.

But is the opposite true?

Could you be in poverty to serve the Lord's purposes?

Could you be living in a normal house to serve the Lord's purposes?

Could you be in a dead end job to serve the Lord's purposes?

Could you be in declining health to serve the Lord's purposes?

Yes, yes, yes and yes.

God certainly promotes up to accomplish his purposes, but he also demotes to serve His purposes.

The important principle is this.

Wherever you are, be willing to serve the Lord with gladness.

Knowing that he uses queens and janitors to bring His plans together.

And the effect of Mordecai's speech was immediate...

As we move from the Motivation, and close with....

V. The Determination (15-17)

Verse 15...

¹⁵ Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ “Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.” ¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.

Esther has gone from a fearful queen to a fighting queen in a matter of minutes.

She has gone from valuing her life to being willing to risk it.

She knows the cost of going into the king if he receives her wrongly.

Yet, she says five remarkable words in verse 16...

“If I perish, I perish.”

Jesus said, “¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

John 15:13.

And this is the attitude of Esther at this point.

Her life is of little value to her.

And this is not a suicidal attitude.

It is far from it.

IT is actually the attitude that God uses the most.

Because it is the attitude that proceeds those who do great things for the Lord.

When we lay aside the value of our life, we become vessels in the Lord's hands.

Jim Eliot was a famous missionary who lost his life sharing the gospel with a tribe in Ecuador.

When asked about the value of his life in the face of a dangerous region of the world, Eliot's famous quote was this....

“HE is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

And that is exactly what Jesus taught in Luke 17:33..

³³ ***Whoever seeks to keep his ^[u]life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.***

And that is where Esther is at the end of chapter 4.

She is getting ready to lay it all on the line if it means saving her people from certain destruction.

Conclusion

And that is really the great lesson to us all in this chapter.

God uses people like you and me in his plan.

Esther was tasked with saving millions of lives.

You may be tasked with simply sharing the gospel and saving one person.

Yet, does that make you less valuable to the kingdom?

Absolutely not.

Your responsibility is to be obedient when your time arises.

Your responsibility is to be willing to sacrifice your life, your time, your comforts to serve the Lord.

All the circumstances and events in your life may be leading to that one point where God sends to a soul who needs saving...

And you simply obey the Lord and teach that class or share the gospel or put up that table...

And he uses your obedience to bring salvation to someone under a death sentence.

That's why we serve and obey at all times.

We never know when God is using us in that way, but we do know that He does.