

FOR LOOK,

THE DAY IS COMING

“We Have Acted Wickedly”

by Mike Brooks

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Air travel with carry-on luggage is as much an art as it is a science. If done rightly, the carry-on is a strategic move that can save time and trouble. If done wrongly, well, that is another story. There is nothing quite like waiting in an airplane aisle as a weary traveler attempts to force an oversized carry-on bag into the overhead compartment. In most cases, what is immediately evident to onlookers soon becomes evident to the individual—the baggage just will not fit.

What is true in a physical sense often is true spiritually: We carry a lot of spiritual and emotional baggage, and the baggage does not fit. On account of our sin, feelings of guilt and shame can be a lot like the cumbersome carry-on item. We don't know how to deal with it. Guilt over wrongdoing has compounding effects that threaten to disorient us completely. Shame and regret, looming in the shadows of otherwise ordinary days, cripple us and cloud our judgment.

The baggage simply will not go away on its own and we are left with the question “What do we do with our guilt and shame?”

THE ORIGINS OF GUILT AND SHAME

Though not characteristic of the original or new, forthcoming creation, feelings of guilt and shame over sin serve a purpose. Recall, in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve's response to their own disobedience. Deceived into eating the forbidden fruit by the serpent, the pair immediately covered themselves, and as the Lord entered the garden, the two ran and hid among the trees. A pattern perpetuated throughout all of human history entered the world: humans sin, sense their guilt, and respond in shame.

In Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah, we see the effects of the sin cycle as it has been amplified over the course of several centuries. Though the people of Israel had some measure of joy and freedom in the promised land, those experiences often were short-lived, and the people eventually were exiled from their land and seemingly from God's promises. These three Old Testament books offer reflections from among God's people in captivity and on their return.

Amid the threat of pernicious enemies, the Lord used Mordecai and Esther as a way of reaffirming His promises and demonstrating His faithfulness to His

people, despite their inclinations to wander. Along the way, God's chosen people learned what it means to rightly acknowledge their sin before God and to trust in His goodness and saving power. Ezra and Nehemiah encountered opposition in their attempts to rebuild Jerusalem while God's people remained tempted to jettison God's righteous rule in their lives.

Though God's people often were enveloped by guilt and shame on account of their disobedience, we are reminded through each narrative of God's supernatural ability to save, redeem, and provide. Importantly, we are reminded of both the consequences of sin and God's just and gracious response to His wayward children.

GUILT, SHAME, AND GODLY SORROW

Objectively speaking, all of us are guilty before God on account of our sin (Rom. 3:23), and for many, this objective sense of guilt produces a more subjective sense of shame, or perhaps embarrassment. On one hand, this response is proper. There ought to be a sense of guilt and shame that results from disobedience toward God. Sin is, after all, transgressing His righteous rule. It is spurning the very One who knows us best and loves us most.

Yet on the other hand, there are kinds of shame that do not lead toward righteousness. For instance, some may feel shame purely on account of the earthly consequences of their sin, whether that is the disappointment of others or embarrassment over the loss of reputation. These emotions stand apart from what Scripture refers to as true contrition, or "godly sorrow" (2 Cor. 7:10). Another kind of shame that does not lead toward righteousness is shame that entraps the believer. On account of offense toward God or perhaps the immense amount of suffering caused to others, believers are tempted to wallow in their shame, forgetting that there is One who has ultimately overcome sin.

A WAY FORWARD: PARDONED AND SET FREE

Reckoning with sinful disobedience often leads down two interrelated paths. On one hand, we can become overwhelmed with our guilt, paralyzed by the shame that accompanies our guilt, unable to assess the entirety of our situation in light of the truth of God's Word.

On the other hand, we can recognize that the gospel of grace provides a way out from beneath the weight of our guilt and shame. Though our guilt is certain and our shame may be warranted, neither are strong enough to diminish God's faithfulness to us. Through Jesus's sinless life, death, and resurrection, God has provided the way for those who trust in Him to be freed from their guilt (Rom. 8:1). Christ's saving work covered our shame and set us free from the penalty of sin (Rom. 6:23).

What do we do, then, with our guilt and shame? We carry them to Calvary and humbly lay them at the foot of the cross. We grow in confidence that the Lord helps us and that we ultimately will not be disgraced (Isa. 50:7). Jesus takes our burdens and dispenses with them for us. With a proper view of God's righteousness toward sin and His willingness to pardon and save, we acknowledge the reality of our sin against Him, humbly confess it to Him, and repent (1 John 1:9; Acts 3:19). We lean into the restoration and forgiveness offered to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Then we live from our new God-wrought, blood-bought identity as children of God: guilty, yet pardoned; once shame-filled, now set free.



A RESCUING QUEEN

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's salvation comes through a timely risk (Esth. 4:13-17).
2. God's salvation comes through a timely intercession (Esth. 8:1-8).
3. God's salvation comes through a timely victory (Esth. 9:1-2).

Background Passage: Esther

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God brings salvation at just the right time in just the right way.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Had the decree to wipe all of the Jews off the earth been fulfilled, God's promise to provide the Messiah through Abraham's descendants would have failed. Instead, God brought salvation to His people through Esther, who interceded for them at great risk to her own life. God would provide a greater salvation—one from sin and death—through Jesus, who interceded for us and laid down His life on our behalf.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because Christ interceded on our behalf, we recognize that God has placed us where we are at this time to share the gospel with others so they might be saved, even if it comes at great risk to us.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: In what is surely remembered as one of the darkest periods of Israelite history, the exile cast a pall over everything that set God's people apart: they were not in the promised land, they couldn't worship in the temple, and their distinct identity was being swallowed up in that of their captors. Worst of all, it was all their fault for turning their backs on their God. Yet He hadn't turn His back on them. The Jews were free to return, the temple had been rebuilt, and in the midst of a godless nation's rule, Yahweh was still arranging the situations and paths of His people to prove Himself faithful.

INSTRUCT: Invite group members to share some of their favorite movies with the group. Say: "In many great stories, whether they be movies or novels or actual history, there is a point at which all hope seems lost." Talk about some of those examples. For example, in *The Princess Bride*, Princess Buttercup is set to marry Prince Humperdinck, Westley appears to be dead, and Inigo and Fezzik are wandering hopelessly in the woods.

DISCUSS: What are some different ways characters in movies respond to hopeless situations? (some rise to the challenge, finding a new strength or confidence to face the difficulty; some shrink from the seemingly impossible situation; some look to another source for hope)

TRANSITION: We are drawn to powerful stories in which a miraculous victory bests a seemingly hopeless situation. That's no coincidence or result of great writing; we need those stories in our own lives because we want to believe there is hope in every situation. We know that sometimes the bad guys win, the innocent suffer, and evil prevails, but we desperately want to know that sometimes it all turns out all right. So we cling to the hope in our favorite stories, allowing it to remind us that hope is always a possibility.



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POINT 1

GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY RISK (ESTH. 4:13-17).

NOTES

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

14 For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish.

And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” **15** Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, **16** “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” **17** Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Esther 4:13-17** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Sometimes we are called to take a **risk** that challenges our **faith** and our expected life path.

DISCUSS: How had Esther’s life plan reflected a careful placing by God “for such a time as this”? (Esther was an orphan in the household of Mordecai, a respected Jew in the Persian capital; because of her beauty and favor, Esther had an audience with the king; Mordecai saw the threat to their people and saw Esther’s potential influence as being crafted by God)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-17** commentary to emphasize that Esther’s obedience revealed that she had chosen to submit to God’s plan and respond with action, exemplifying the following doctrine (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #29: God’s Plan and Human Action: God’s sovereignty over all of life encompasses the **free** actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says human beings have many plans, but only the plan of the Lord will stand. In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord’s plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God’s overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to **fulfill** His plan, even when we do not **understand** our present circumstances.

KING AHASUERUS

King of Persia during the time of Esther, also known as Xerxes in Greek, reigning from 486-465 BC. He was the son of Darius I (the Great). He ruled over 127 provinces from India to Cush/Ethiopia (Esth. 1:1).

VOICES from THE CHURCH

“Queen Esther demonstrated that being faithful to God involved being faithful to His people. Thus, faithful to the meaning of her name, she became a shining ‘star’ for her people in a time of darkness.”¹

–Janice Meier

COMMENTARY

VERSES 13-14 / Of the sixty-six books in the Bible, the book of Esther seems odd. It contains no reference to God, prayer, the temple, or Jerusalem, staples of Old Testament writings. But these omissions reflect the precise setting of the story: the heroic Jews in this narrative are some 800 miles away from the land God gave them as a nation, and they probably felt 80,000 miles away from Him spiritually.

Esther was an orphan girl who had been raised by a relative, Mordecai, who had found respect and honor in the governmental offices in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire under King Ahasuerus (aka Xerxes). The king had been embarrassed by his queen (Esth. 1) and suffered an embarrassing defeat in fighting the Greeks.² He replaced his queen with the beautiful Esther after what appears to have been a confidence-building beauty contest for the downtrodden king (Esth. 2).

But the antagonist of the story, Haman, had a hatred that came from a long ancestry full of hatred for the Jews. He had offered his own resources to rebuild Ahasuerus's coffers in exchange for ridding the world of these Jews. When Mordecai realized what had been planned, he mourned, for it seemed certain annihilation awaited God's people. In his mourning, he also realized there was one person in a position of influence to help: Esther. Yet when he pointed out to her that she was the only Jew with access to the king, her response came from a position of fear: she would risk her own life by appearing in Ahasuerus's presence unbidden. His point was legitimate; her response was rational (Esth. 3-4).

There was no easy solution for the problem the Jews were facing. Esther's people faced annihilation if she didn't speak; she faced death if she did. On top of that, remaining silent would not guarantee Esther's safety; too many people knew of her relationship with Mordecai, and the truth of her heritage was sure to come out. Both paths seemed to end in death.

But Esther's ancestors were known for taking risks: Abraham left all he knew to follow the God who called him and blessed him (Gen. 12:1-4). Ruth remained with her mother-in-law and traveled to the territory of the Jews (Ruth 1:19). David, though anointed king, refused to kill his predecessor and instead waited for God to provide the peaceful path to the throne (1 Sam. 24:10). Risks taken in obedience to God's instructions and in light of God's promised hope are called faith.

VERSES 15-17 / Esther knew what the voice of wisdom sounded like. Mordecai had helped her grow into adulthood and find favor in the eyes of the Persian court. Mordecai's initial command for Esther to approach the king was met with resistance (4:8-12). But with his challenge in verses 13-14, she realized he was once again speaking wisdom to her—she must act.

But Esther would not act impulsively. She and her maids would fast for three days, and she asked for the support of other Jews in their own fasting. Regularly throughout the Bible, fasting and prayer are used together: Ezra (Ezra 8:23), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4), and Daniel (Dan. 9:3), all exiles, fasted and prayed in order to seek the Lord. Esther knew the power of humble fasting and walked in obedience to the commands of the Lord.

Esther's closing words to Mordecai—**"If I perish, I perish"**—reveal her realization that she just might die for this step of faith. The risk of following God is not always safe; in fact, some of the mightiest heroes of God's story lost their lives. But the salvation that is promised through God on behalf of His committed followers always trumps the risk. When considering Esther's brave words, we also should consider that Christ knew He would have to die (Matt. 20:19; 26:2). Esther's bravery pointed to an even greater sacrifice that came through Jesus—He was willing to die and bear our sins to save us forever.

POINT 2

GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY INTERCESSION (ESTH. 8:1-8).

NOTES

1 On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. **2** And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. **3** Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. **4** When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. **5** And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. **6** For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" **7** Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. **8** But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Esther 8:1-8** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-4** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God puts people in positions of **authority** and **knowledge** so that they might intercede on behalf of others in need.

DISCUSS: How did Esther and Mordecai use their knowledge and authority for God's purposes? (Esther had garnered favor from all who knew her, and specifically King Ahasuerus; with her influence, Esther was able to unseat Haman and make the king sympathetic to the cause of the Jews; Mordecai had an upstanding place in Persian society even though he was a Jew; because of his connections and relationships, he unearthed Haman's plan and was able to see a successful, albeit risky, path forward)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-8** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Esther had **favor** with the king and used it to **intercede** for her people.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-4 / In this passage, Haman is identified as **“the enemy of the Jews.”** The same description is used of him in 3:10; 9:10; and 9:24. He wasn’t simply a person who disliked the Jews; rather, his entire heritage, as recorded in Scripture, hated them as well. In Esther 3:1, Haman is identified as the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite. King Agag was the leader of the Amalekites at the time of King Saul, over five hundred years before Esther. God had instructed Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites for what they had done to the Israelites “in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt” (1 Sam. 15:2). This was more than enough to start a long-lasting feud between the two peoples.

Haman’s plan to eradicate the Jews had been thorough. A day was set to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, and to plunder their possessions (Esth. 3:13). The Medo-Persian government had been established such that any royal edict could not be revoked (Esth. 1:19; Dan. 6:8,12). Because of this, the death of Haman did not undo the law he had carefully crafted. So even though Esther had exposed Haman’s plot and Ahasuerus had overseen his death, the threat to the Jewish people remained.

Yet Esther and Mordecai now had authority and influence they hadn’t had before. Ahasuerus had given Esther Haman’s estate and had given Mordecai Haman’s authority in the form of the king’s signet ring. Esther and Mordecai were serving the king personally, having revealed they were both loyal servants and Jews. But Ahasuerus still held the power, and for this reason, Esther implored his favor again. She begged the king to revoke the evil plan of Haman. Ahasuerus extended his golden scepter to her a second time (the first time accompanied her initial plea to him after her three days of fasting [Esth. 5:2]), giving honor and protection to Esther once again. But because of Medo-Persian law, revoking the edict was impossible.

VERSES 5-8 / Esther reminded the king of the favor he had for her. The Hebrew word for **“favor”** may point either to a subjective aspect (such as kindness or favor) or an objective one (like the beauty of a woman or a precious stone). Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8), as did Moses (Ex. 33:12-13), and Joseph found favor in the eyes of Potiphar and the prison warden (Gen. 39:4,21). We know that Esther won more favor and approval from King Ahasuerus than any of the other candidates for queen (Esth. 2:17). It was this very favor that endeared Esther to the king, and it was upon this favor that she based her requests to him.

There seem to be contradicting renderings of King Ahasuerus’s response to Esther in these verses. Some think he was responding with kindness and support; others think Ahasuerus seemed a little tired of the ordeal and ready to move on. Many historical sources record Ahasuerus as being a man who made rash decisions, once having a sea punished with three hundred lashes when the bridge his army was building collapsed into it. Esther may have been aware that her husband was losing patience and needed his ego soothed. Regardless of his intent, authority was given to Mordecai and Esther to respond legally to the edict set in motion by Haman. Esther’s favor and Mordecai’s legal understanding combined to form the perfect intercession needed to save their people.

Since the edict couldn’t be overruled, a new, additional edict would need to be created to counteract it. In the verses following this passage, Mordecai used his newfound authority—the king’s ring and permission to use his name—to save the Jews. He summoned royal scribes and was careful to write the new edict in the precise language needed for each ethnic group of Jews. He sent the new instructions to all of Abraham’s descendants, scattered all over the massive Persian Empire, instructing them to prepare for battle.

POINT 3

GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY VICTORY (ESTH. 9:1-2).

NOTES

1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. **2** The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Esther 9:1-2** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

We can find **confidence**, **power**, and **victory** in God's plan and perfect timing.

DISCUSS: What are some things in your life that happened "in the nick of time?" Looking back, how can you see God's perfect timing in that exact moment? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 2** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God fights **for** us, and often He will call us to **fight** as well.

DISCUSS: How should our fighting look different from how the rest of the world fights? (we shouldn't fight battles according to our own hurt, pride, or desires; rather, we follow the Lord in His directions to stand up for truth, justice, and righteousness; we know that our struggle is against evil, not people; therefore, we fight for others to see and know Jesus; we maintain love, truth, and compassion even as we find ourselves engaged in battle; we understand that the loss of an earthly battle can lead to a spiritual victory)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 1 / Mordecai's protective edict was written precisely to offset the annihilation prescribed by Haman. It allowed Jews in every Persian city to gather together and protect themselves by using force against anyone who would cause them harm. Mordecai sent the edict on swift horseback approximately eight months before the designated day of destruction (8:10). The final verses of Esther 8 reveal the effect that Mordecai's edict had on the Jews: The Jews "had light and gladness and joy and honor" (8:16), and all over Persia "there was gladness and joy among the Jews" (8:17). The timely risk by Esther and the timely intervention at Mordecai's pen had given all the dispersed Jews joy, confidence, and boldness.

Because of this timely deliverance, "many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them" (8:17). The Jews weren't the only exiled people group in Persia at this time. Beginning with the Assyrians and followed by the Babylonians, as cities and nations were conquered, their inhabitants were transported to different areas in order to quell future rebellions. Like the Moabite Ruth, who chose to adopt the people, homeland, and God of her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17), some of the neighbors of the Jews saw their faith and how their God had provided salvation to them. The same can be true for believers today. As we walk in confidence because of our knowledge of the Lord and share our hope for the future in Christ, others will see, hear, and believe.

Mordecai's edict went into effect the very day that Haman's destruction had been arranged. No preemptive strikes were allowed; the Jews had permission to defend themselves on exactly the day they would be attacked. And throughout Persia, the **"Jews gained mastery over those who hated them."** This was a total change of outcome—those who had hoped to overpower the Jews instead were overpowered by the Jews.

The word translated **"hoped"** in verse 1 is rich. It can mean to inspect, examine, wait, or hope. The imagery is of carefully looking at something, as when Nehemiah examined the broken-down walls in Jerusalem (Neh. 2:13,15). It's the same word used in Psalm 119:166: "I hope for your salvation, O LORD, and I do your commandments." This godly hope is based not in desire or in selfish expectation, but in the careful examination of something and finding confidence in something solid. The enemies of the Jews, however, hoped in Haman's plan, and it let them down. The Jews hoped in the Lord for their salvation, and He is faithful.

VERSE 2 / The Jews were ready to fight, and they weren't called to fight alone. In each province, they assembled in their cities **"to lay hands on those who sought their harm."** Glory to God for giving us fellow believers to come alongside and fight with us. Throughout their heritage, the Israelites had long known that the Lord would fight for them (Ex. 14:14; Deut. 1:30; 20:4). And though there were times when God alone fought on behalf of His people (2 Kings 19:35), more often than not, the people also were called to fight. Particularly in Joshua and the conquests of David, we see that God led His people to fight for the victory He had already promised (Josh. 10:25). Nehemiah also challenged the returning Israelites to fight for their families and homes even as God was fighting for them (Neh. 4:14-20). And when God's people fight as He has directed, they find victory. On the thirteenth day of the month Adar, **"no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples."**

For Christians today, our fighting looks a little different, but we are still called to fight the good fight of faith (1 Tim. 6:12). Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against evil (Eph. 6:12). Because of that, we take the armor of God and fight daily, courageously, faithfully, and dependently, knowing that God directs our battles and has promised the victory in His time.

MY RESPONSE

Because Christ interceded on our behalf, we recognize that God has placed us where we are at this time to share the gospel with others so they might be saved, even if it comes at great risk to us.

HEAD:

A blessing of being in small groups is the sharing of prayer requests and interceding for one another before the throne of grace. Many times our prayers focus on our own desire for safety: good health, safe travels, comfortable homes, etc. But Esther's story reminds us that God's goal is not for our safety but for His glory and our good. And that can come through a great risk to our normalcy, our comfort, our safety net, or our situation. As a group, don't be afraid to encourage one another to take the risk of faith when God's plan requires that giant leap.

Where might God be calling you to take a risk in His name today?

HEART:

The word "fear" appears five times in the book of Esther: the queen was overcome with fear (4:4); Mordecai didn't tremble in fear at Haman's presence (5:9); fear of the Jews overcame other people groups (8:17); and fear fell on the enemies of the Jews (9:2) and Mordecai (9:3). Fear is highly motivating and causes us to step away from God's plan for our lives when we fear people, situations, or dangers more than we fear the Lord. We are wise to check our own hearts: What fear is compelling me here? Am I responding in the fear of the Lord or fear of something else?

What fears holding you back from walking in confident obedience to the Lord will you confess to Him today?

HANDS:

When first approached by Mordecai about taking a stand for the Jews, Esther felt that her hands were tied. However, Mordecai helped her to see that God had placed her in that perfect time and place for His people. For each of the followers of Jesus, we see that the same is true of our own lives—we have come to our positions in life for such a time as this. Our jobs, our finances, our homes, our talents, our knowledge, and all that we have and are can be used for God's work in our world if we are willing to follow His call.

What aspects of your life will you use to help others and glorify God in this season?

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Insistence on security is incompatible with the way of the cross. What daring adventures the incarnation and the atonement were! What a breach of convention and decorum that Almighty God should renounce his privileges in order to take human flesh and bear human sin! Jesus had no security except in his Father. So to follow Jesus is always to accept at least a measure of uncertainty, danger and rejection for his sake."³

—John Stott (1921-2011)

POINT 1: GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY RISK (ESTH. 4:13-17).

+ COMMENTARY

"In this passage we see an interesting study of character traits of the main personalities in the story. Mordecai's courageous non-conformity needs to be repeated by men today. Romans 12:2 commands, 'Be not conformed to this world.' Mordecai was one of those who had courage to resist the popular patterns of action and stand by his convictions. The arrogant vindictiveness of the politician, Haman, is another study in character, warning us against the folly of egotism . . . The quiet and humble bravery of Esther is the highlight of the story . . . How often God may bless a person with opportunity for one reason—so he may use that opportunity for God."⁴

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Give each learner a piece of copy paper and a pen. Instruct them to spend about five minutes making a brief timeline of their lives, beginning with their birth date and ending with today's date. Encourage them to include any monumental moves, celebrations, tragedies, opportunities, and loss. Be sure to complete your own life timeline as they work on theirs.

Ask if anyone knows about Elisabeth Elliot. She was the wife of Jim Elliot, a missionary who was killed by the people he was trying to reach for Christ. Most people know that part of the story, but there is much more to her life. In fact, her life timeline is found online here: <https://elisabethelliot.org/about/timeline>. Share the link with learners and invite them to look at Elisabeth's timeline. Say: "According to her website, the resounding theme of Elisabeth Elliot's life was the boundless love of Jesus, and her greatest commission was to tell others of His saving grace" (<https://elisabethelliot.org/about>). Point out that she lived her life with much risk, choosing to go to a place in which she and her husband would not be particularly safe and even choosing to return to that place with her young daughter after her husband's death.

As a group, consider how the events in Elisabeth's life—both good times and bad—provided her the opportunity to share Jesus with others. Say: "We are no different from Esther or Elisabeth. Every item on our timeline has led us to who and where we are today and opens up the opportunity to faithfully serve God through our lives."

POINT 2: GOD’S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY INTERCESSION (ESTH. 8:1-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“The king knew, and informed the queen, that, according to the constitution of the Persian government, the former edict could not be revoked (v. 8): What is written in the king’s name, and sealed with the king’s ring, may not, under any pretence whatsoever, be reversed. This was a fundamental article of their magna charta, that no law or decree, when once it had passed the royal assent, could be repealed or recalled, no judgment vacated, no attainder reversed, Dan. 6:15. This is so far from bespeaking the wisdom and honour of the Medes and Persians that really it bespeaks their pride and folly, and consequently their shame. It is ridiculous in itself for any man, or company of men, to pretend to such an infallibility of wisdom as to foresee all the consequences of what they decree; and therefore it is unjust, and injurious to mankind, to claim such a supremacy of power as to make their decrees irrevocable, whether the consequences prove good or bad.”⁵

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

As a group, consider the different aspects of Esther and Mordecai’s lives that led them to the place where they had the opportunity to intercede for their people. For example, Esther had an audience with the king and she had favor with many people in authority. Mordecai, with an entirely different skill set, had been promoted because of his understanding in helping the Persian crown, had a strong grasp of how to write laws, and was wise in leading others.

Say: “Each of us, just like Esther and Mordecai, have a skill set that is meant to benefit this church and this class.” Engage a few learners in sharing what they know, skills they have, and life experiences that they use for the benefit of your church. Point out that there are several lists of spiritual gifts in the Bible: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Ephesians 4:11-13; Romans 12:6-8. Help learners understand that there are certain aspects of Christianity we are all expected to do (obey; share the gospel; help the needy; serve others), but we also have a particular gifting from the Holy Spirit in certain areas. Those are our spiritual gifts.

Ask: “Has anyone ever taken a spiritual gifts assessment? What did you discover about God’s work in your life?” If your church uses a spiritual gifts assessment, have that resource available for any who have not taken it. Otherwise, print out or point learners to the free spiritual gifts test at this link: <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/women-leadership-spiritual-gifts-growth-service>.

POINT 3: GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY VICTORY (ESTH. 9:1-2).

+ COMMENTARY

“The Jews of all the provinces, having had ample time to prepare themselves, ‘gathered themselves together in their cities,’ as the day fixed by the first edict approached (Esther 9:2), and made their arrangements. Their ‘enemies’ no doubt did the same, and for some time before the 13th of Adar two hostile camps stood facing each other in each of the great towns throughout the empire. Mordecai’s position at the capital being known, and his power evidently established, the Persian governors of all grades understood it to be their duty to throw their weight into the scale on behalf of the Jews, and lend them whatever help they could (Esther 9:3).”⁶

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Ask: “Does anyone know how the Jewish people remember this victorious story today?” (They celebrate the Festival of Purim.) Use the following link to explain how Purim is celebrated: https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/1362/jewish/How-to-Celebrate-Purim.htm.

Take note that the festival is intentionally prepared and celebrated to commemorate the story: the book of Esther is read aloud, they give to the needy, they send food gifts to others, they enjoy a feast, they say special prayers, and sometimes they even dress in costume. Before the feast of Purim, they read about Amalek, Haman’s ancestor, and some fast to remember Esther’s fasting before entering the presence of the king. Say: “The Jews remember that they faced annihilation, yet they remember it with solemn prayers, fasting, celebration, helping, and joy!”

Challenge learners to consider a difficult time in their own lives. Ask: “How do you look back at that time? Can you see the hand of the Lord with you? Can you see a victory that came out of it? Do you push those memories aside or do you intentionally bring them up and choose to commemorate them?” Encourage learners to consider celebrating the feast of Purim or to start taking time to remember their own difficult times that turned into a display of God’s perfect plan and power. They may want to journal their memories, write a prayer or poem to be read as a memorial, or gather with others who journeyed with them through that season. Whatever the means of celebration, remind learners to focus on God’s faithfulness and power in their lives, both in the past and in the present.

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