

Esther 5-7 God at Work
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When we last looked at Esther,
Mordecai had issued her a challenge.
She needed to go into the king's presence,
and beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.
Esther had told Mordecai
that the penalty for going into the king's presence
without a royal summons is death.
And Mordecai had said to Esther, 4:14,
"Who knows but that you have come to your royal position
for such a time as this?"
For such a time as this.
Well Esther and the people have fasted and prayed for three days.
And the hour has come.
It's time for her to enter the king's presence.
Well she had done what she could do.
She'd interceded before the Lord.
She had put on her royal robes
so that she looked like the queen that she was.
And then she walked into the court where Xerxes could see her.
And we collectively hold our breath.
How is Xerxes going to respond?
And then we breathe a sigh of relief.
He extends the gold sceptre to her.
That was the sign that her life was spared.
Esther had done everything she could do.
But Xerxes was an unpredictable fellow.
She had no guarantees that things would turn out.
But now she knows that God has prepared the way before her.
Her prayers have been answered.
Now Xerxes knows that Esther hasn't approached him on a whim.
She's not looking for a walk around the royal gardens after dinner.
No one risks their life for that.

Esther must have approached with a very serious request.
And so he says to her with great liberality,
5:3 "What is it Queen Esther? What is your request?
Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you."
Now bear in mind, this is a turn of phrase.
Xerxes doesn't mean to be taken literally.
In fact it's the same turn of phrase that King Herod used
when Salome danced for his birthday guests,
and she requested the head of John the Baptist.
Xerxes means that he's very favourably disposed towards Esther,
and he's inclined to give her what she asks for.
And no doubt he's gratified that she's thrown herself on his mercy.
It makes him feel important.
But Esther is not in a rush.
There are some things in life you only get one shot at.
You might have proposed marriage to someone.
You might have had a crucial job interview.
You only get one shot so you want to get it right.
By this stage in the story,
Esther is more than the winner of a beauty competition,
she is a wise player in the affairs of state.
And she is going to get Xerxes
into the absolute best frame of mind possible before she pleads her case.
Xerxes doing what he loves to do.
And she's going to have Haman present,
so that Xerxes doesn't say,
"That's a serious allegation Queen Esther,
I'll need to go and speak to Haman about that."
And then Haman gets to try to worm his way out of it
without Esther present.
And she's going to want Xerxes at his most pliable.
Xerxes where he will react instantly and forcefully
without stopping to consider more moderate courses of action.
So that is Xerxes with a belly full of grog.
So Esther has a plan to plead her case before Xerxes

when he's half drunk and feeling super well disposed towards her at a banquet.

She's not in a rush,
she's going to set things up exactly how she wants them.

Did she even need to worry herself with the elaborate plans?

It was clear that God was on her side

from the moment Xerxes held out the sceptre.

Well it's a mistake to think either God is on your side or you should make wise and discerning plans.

God often chooses to work

through the wise and discerning plans of his servants.

Think about Joseph in Pharaoh's court in Egypt.

God was certainly on his side.

He sent him dreams to tell him what was going to happen.

He made Pharaoh favourably disposed towards Joseph.

But Joseph still made detailed plans to serve God in that situation.

He mapped out how the Egyptians could store grain so as to avoid famine in the land.

So it is with Esther.

God is on her side.

Xerxes extends her the sceptre.

Xerxes can't sleep and just happens to hear about Mordecai saving his life at just an opportune time.

Xerxes happens to return from the palace garden at the right time to discover Haman

in what looked like a compromising position.

There's no question at all that God is on Esther's side.

All of the happy coincidences give a sure sign that God is with her.

But she never takes that as a reason to sit back and relax.

She makes her plans and she executes them.

And she does a beautiful job of it.

I think there's a message for us in that.

Like Esther, God is on our side.

As the apostle Paul says, Rom 8:31,
"What, then, shall we say in response to these things?
If God is for us, who can be against us?"

God absolutely is for us.

We are his children.

The ones he has redeemed out of the world
with the precious blood of his son.

There's no question that God is for us.

But like Esther, we can still be wise in carrying out God's work.

Just because we've been washed in the blood of the lamb
doesn't mean that we get a free pass
from the effects of foolish decisions we make.

Let me give you an example.

I saw a photo of a woman carrying a sign
in one of the anti lockdown protests in Sydney.

It read "the blood of Jesus is my vaccine".

Now I don't doubt for a minute that woman has had her sins forgiven.
She's been washed in the blood of the lamb.

But the blood of the lamb is a vaccine against sin,
it's not a vaccine against covid.

Now I know that some of you have some concerns about vaccines.

I have some concerns about vaccines.

They are not as thoroughly tested as most medications we are offered.

They have worse side effects than most medications we are offered.

But there's a reason for that.

We are in the middle of a crisis.

There hasn't yet been time to refine things as well as we usually would.

But with the delta variant spreading,

I think the risk reward equation

is tilted heavily on the side of being vaccinated.

I've had two jabs.

You are free to disagree with me.

We still live in a relatively free country.

Present me with your analysis of the risks of the virus
versus the side effects of the vaccine.

But please don't tell me that the blood of Jesus is your vaccine.

God is on that woman's side.

If her faith in Jesus, God is going to take her to heaven.

But he's probably not going to protect her from catching covid.

God is on our side.

But we still need to be wise.

He may protect us from facing the consequences of our foolishness.

That woman may be lucky and not catch covid.

But we have no promise that God will protect us from foolishness.

You would be foolish to rely on something

that hasn't been promised to you.

Eph 2:10 says, "We are God's handiwork,
created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do."

The verses prior to that verse speak of our salvation.

That we are saved by God's grace.

But then we are told what our response to that should be.

If God has been good enough to save us,

we ought to walk in the good works he has prepared for us to do.

I think that means we have a responsibility to be wise.

Or at least to try our best.

Wisdom is hard to come by.

But we do have a promise from the apostle James,

Js 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom,

you should ask God,

who gives generously to all without finding fault,

and it will be given to you."

If Esther's handling of the situation impresses you.

Then ask God to make you wise like Esther.

And trust in the promise made to you through the apostle James.

Another question you might have when reading the story of Esther
is about the moral uprightness of her behaviour.

In today's passage, her strategy is to have a couple of banquets

to get the king in just the right frame of mind
before she asked for the saving of her people.

Now banquet sounds very nice and innocuous, doesn't it?

But we know from chapter 1 about Xerxes fondness for a week long
boozy party with unlimited grog for the guests.

I think you can be sure that Esther's banquets for Xerxes and Haman
were not of the orange juice and lemonade variety.

And her participation in the beauty pageant
clearly involved sex outside of marriage.

And her marriage to Xerxes
clearly violated the commands of the Old Testament
against marrying someone not from God's people.

Can we hold up Esther as a model of wisdom,
when she wasn't a model of righteousness?

Well that's a thought worth pausing on
because it shows some of the riches of God's grace.

The book of Esther is not saying
that God wants us all to throw boozy banquets
just because Esther did.

But it is saying that Esther was wise
to get King Xerxes in the right frame of mind
before she presented him with her request.

So that boozy banquet at least was OK in God's eyes.

Should a faithful Jew have even been in Susa at this point in history?
Probably not.

The Persian king before Xerxes was Cyrus.
And Cyrus had allowed the Jews to return home.

While the book of Esther is taking place,
many Jews were back in Israel
working hard to re-establish themselves
in the promised land that God had given them.

They were sitting squarely in the promises of God.

Jews who were still in Persia
had made some questionable decisions at some point.
Maybe they preferred the faster pace of life

in the capital city of the Empire
rather than the back breaking work
of starting from scratch in a devastated Israel.

Who knows?

They ought to have gone back to Israel.

But should this be held against Esther?

Her parents maybe.

Perhaps they should have gone back to Israel.

But by the time this story starts,

they have died and Esther is living as an orphan with Mordecai.

So Esther is living in the place that's not ideal
from the point of view of being a faithful Jew.

But that's where she was born.

And when she's summoned to kings' harem she was only a girl.

She probably didn't have much opportunity to resist or say no.

Sexual compromise was pretty much thrust upon her.

Faithfulness to God's people by marrying a fellow Jew,

well that wasn't really an option for her.

The point is, you have to play the cards you are dealt.

Sometimes the cards you are dealt

contain all sorts of compromises embedded in them.

But what God expects of us is not to change the cards we were dealt,
he expects us to do the best we can in the situation he's put us in.

Esther was made a queen in the godless Persian Empire,
with a drunk, promiscuous, volatile husband.

And she did her best to serve God in that situation.

And God used her mightily in that compromised situation.

It's the same for people today as it was for Esther.

Sometimes people think,

"God could never use me,

my situation is so compromised.

I've stuffed my life up."

But God can use all of your experiences for his glory.

Even the experiences that came from your wrong and sinful choices,
he can use even those.

A life of compromise can put you in situations that a squeaky clean Christian person would never be in. I know of Christian women who share love and the good news of Jesus with prostitutes in brothels. How do they have an entry into that deeply compromised situation? They used to be prostitutes. Now God is using that terrible experience for his kingdom. Eph 2:10 says, "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." God's preparation in advance includes our stuff ups, and the messiness of life that we have no control over. God is using those things to prepare in advance good works for you to do.

Let's give this a concrete application. We have numerous people in our congregation who have served or are serving in the military. It's one of the things about being close to HMAS Cerberus. Is there compromise embedded in serving in the military? Yes there is. Your government might send you off to kill people, and you don't get the luxury of examining the ethical justification for their decision before you go. That's a compromise. It might be a decision that most Christians would agree with like fighting Hitler. But it might also be something ethical questionable like spraying agent orange on the jungles of Vietnam. You don't get a choice. Part of the deal with being in the military is that you obey orders. But there are more compromises than that. You get moved around lots. That could make it hard to be the kind of spouse God wants you to be, or the kind of parent God wants you to be.

It makes it hard to be a key contributor to a local church.
You become comrades with other military personnel
who don't share your Christian convictions.
That's a bond that is far stronger than being workmates.
Your lives depend on one another.
You've got to be totally loyal to each other.
Your survival might depend on it.
But they might make some decisions along the way
that would be very displeasing to God.
Some of the stories coming out recently
of Australian soldiers in Afghanistan executing unarmed civilians.
It's horrifying stuff.
What if you were a Christian
and others in your platoon
who you depend on for your survival were doing that kind of stuff?
It's horribly compromised.

But what does God expect?
He expects you to play the cards you've been dealt for his glory.
In this messy world, they may not be the cards you would have chosen.
But they are your cards, and you play them.
So if you are a Christian in the military,
there are people who you would have contact with in that situation
that won't ever know a Christian personally if they hadn't known you.
And to them you are not just a person,
you are someone they respect because you are a comrade.
You might have opportunities to make decisions in your work
that affect thousands of lives.
The decisions of military officers
can be far more significant in shaping the earthly destiny of other people
than many other jobs.
Those who have to follow your orders
and those who are affected by your orders.
And you can give those orders knowing that you are God's handiwork
created in Christ Jesus to do good works

that God prepared in advance for you to do.

What's the message?

A messy compromised background
doesn't stop you doing the good works that God has for you.
It didn't stop Esther.
It doesn't need to stop you.

Well we are getting towards the end of our time.
I've haven't even mentioned Haman and his sticky end.
There's plenty that could be said about that too.
But there's really just two points about Esther from this sermon.
First, Esther's wisdom.
God is on her side.
No question.
That's clear from all of the coincidences that work in her favour.
But wise planning and God's favour are not an either or.
They are a both and.
Both God is for us.
And we must be wise in serving him.
Second, Esther's messy life.
Esther didn't get to be what my teenagers would call a GCG -
that stands for good Christian girl.
That wasn't an option open to her.
But what she did was live to God's glory
in the situation that God put her.
Don't waste your time lamenting where God has put you.
Embrace where God has put you and live to his glory there.