

Grounded Testify

Esther 4:5–14 (NRSV)

Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. **6** Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, **7** and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. **8** Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. **9** Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. **10** Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, **11** "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days." **12** When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, **13** Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. **14** For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Introduction. One afternoon while making hospital call, I preparing to get on an elevator when a member of the church I was serving stepped off. It was obvious that something was wrong. I asked her how she was and she proceeded to tell me her daughter had just miscarried and was in a room. I asked if it was alright if I went to visit with her and pray with her. She said, “Yes,” and the two of us went to the room.

On that day, I sensed it was not some historical accident that I had been in front of that elevator door at that given moment when that woman exited. I knew God had directed my steps.

There are moments in all our lives when we sense God has placed us at the right place and the right time. Then there are other times such as times of challenge, when we wonder why we are there. Why do we encounter events and seasons of difficulties?

The story of Esther is one that involves an extremely difficult and threatening period of time not only for her but also for her people. I think her story may give us some insight and direction for our stories when we encounter difficult times. Let’s look at her story.

The setting.

In the ancient capital city of the Persian empire lived a Jewish family – Mordecai, his wife and his orphaned niece, Esther whom he adopted. Over a century earlier, their ancestors had been taken captive by a Babylonian invasion and none of the decedents had returned home. Mordecai had gained some respect and influence in the city.

Esther had a special gift – she was beautiful. Her beauty gave her an opportunity that ended up changing not on the course of her life but also her uncle and her people.

Xerxes, the Persian King, had gotten so upset with his queen on one occasion that he removed her from her position as wife. Needing another queen, a system was developed where the most beautiful women of the empire were to go through a year of beauty preparation and then be presented to the king. From these women, Xerxes would choose his queen. The king was so taken by Esther’s beauty; he chose her as his bride. This gave her royal privilege like no other in the kingdom. She had a favored status.

In Chattanooga area, I long ago discovered a unique feature of this culture. When a native of this area asks another native, “Where did you go to school?” it is a very different question than where I have lived. In the Tri-Cities, Knoxville and in Virginia, that question is answered with the college or university one has attended. But here, the answer is the High School attended – Ooltewah, Tyner, Central, Baylor, McCallie.

I have also learned that if attended the two latter schools I mentioned, it will most likely give them a leg up in the business arena here in the area. Those schools carry a status for its alumni here. A student from McCallie may not be smarter than a particular student from Ooltewah but it often gives an advantage.

We live in a world where many, including some of us, enjoy privilege and favored status. Often it has little to do with our accomplishments but is part of where we were born, to whom we were born, where we live, the color of our skin and the beauty of our complexion. Most of us have some level of favored status that gives us advantages over others in particular circumstances.

Recently I was listening to an online conversation about the issue of race relations. A statement was made that got my attention. One of the persons said that an extremely small % of the fortune 500 companies are headed by people who are not white. Then he went on to say that we should not be surprised by this because most people are hired/selected based on “who you know.” We tend to select people out of the pool of people we know or are known by those we know who give them a good reference. The problem is we tend to just know people who are “largely like us.” Having connections in business with others give one an advantage.

Esther had a natural advantage – she was beautiful. Again most of us have certain advantages and privilege. In the environment of our world today, we can easily be made to feel guilty of those advantages. But in the story of Esther, her advantage was used by God in a powerful way.

Hatred and Prejudice.

In Xerxes cabinet, there was a man who rose to a high position named Haman. He was really high on himself and was an arrogant man. He had gained not only high levels of influence but he had accumulated wealth. He, too, had gained favored status in Susa.

Residing within Haman was a deep seated prejudice – a hatred for a particular group of people. He had a particular conflict with a member of that group, Mordecai, that had intensified his hatred. Unfortunately, there were others throughout the Persian Empire who shared a similar disdain for Jews.

Students of human history and nature are not surprised by prejudice, hatred of groups and racism in our world. This story in ancient history shows a high level of ethnic hatred in some. It is not unusual for people to look down on others because of their background, skin color, accent, gender, etc. People can often pass quick judgments on other merely based on their dialect and how they use language. Sometimes we judge based on how others dress. This is a common flaw in many of us and most of us have to fight the urge to judge the others harshly. Unfortunately, there are some instances when this drives people toward harmful action.

Jesus calls not to look down on others was clear. He commanded us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. He took things a step farther when he said we were to love our enemies. Once when asked about loving one's neighbor, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan – a Samaritan who showed love to a Jewish man who had been mugged. (There was no love lost between Samaritans and Jews.)

Well, Haman used his favored status to strike out against those he disliked. By offering a sizeable amount of money and using his influence, he persuaded Xerxes to pass a law to annihilate all Jews from the empire. It would be a massive genocide.

Unfortunately, there are some who strike out against those they dislike. They use their favored status to bring harm to those they hate.

When Mordecai learned of the plans of Haman, he knew his people and all their families were in peril. If something did not happen, thousands of Jews would be slaughtered on the date the edict was to be executed. Those who hated the Jews would have open hunting season on their despised neighbors. What could be done? What could he do? Was there anyone to stand in the gap for his people?

Standing in the Gap.

In the decades that followed the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, things often grew difficult for those who followed Jesus. Many found themselves in being persecuted because of the faith. Their wellbeing was often at stake.

Their situation led Peter to write these words: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you* (1 Peter 4:12). When tough times come, we can be surprised by them. Most of us were caught off guard by this pandemic and we wonder why we are suffering through this time.

Well, Mordecai remembered his daughter-niece who was the queen. Perhaps she could have an audience with Xerxes and persuade him to reverse the edict. So he went to her to share with her what was happening in order to convince her to approach the King. Mordecai used the channel he had to use.

In the interaction between Mordecai and Esther, she reminded him of regal reality. *If anyone approached the King who had not been invited, that person would lose his/her life if the King did not stretch out his scepter toward that person.* She went on to inform Mordecai that it had been a month since she had been with the king. (I imagine she was wondering because of that long absence if she had lost favor with Xerxes. Was he mad at her? His anger could yield some rash actions.) By approaching the king, she would literally be placing her life in jeopardy.

Mordecai reminded her if she did not act, she and her family would still be in peril. The first person Haman would come after would be Mordecai. Because she was royalty, they would not be protected. Needless to say, she was in a tough place.

Mordecai went on to say to her something that has rung in the ears of people who love God for centuries – *“Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”* For such a time as this. Mordecai reminded her that where she was and the privilege she enjoyed was orchestrated by God for a divine purpose.

Solomon wrote these words of wisdom in Proverbs 20:24: *“All our steps are ordered by the Lord.”* Where we are and what we go through are not some arbitrary historical accidents. God’s providence directs our course of life.

It is no accident that you are alive during the Pandemic of 2020. God chose for you to be born and be alive when our nation would be rocked by racial tensions and riots. Your presence in Chattanooga in 2020 is part of God’s plan when one of the most devastating tornadoes ever tore through this area. If you are His and you have submitted your life to God, God directs your steps. You have been placed here for such a time as this. You may not understand or appreciate it but God wants to use you through it.

Esther’s position was no accident. So she was faced with a decision as to what she would do. Would she place her life at risk and approach the king? Would she remain silent?

Esther chose to stand in the gap and use her favored status to attempt to rescue her people. I encourage you to read the rest of this book to see what happened.

Mordecai and Esther were such a contrast to Haman who used his favored status to bring harm to those he despised. Mordecai and Esther used their favored status to stand in the gap, even when doing so placed their wellbeing in danger.

You and me were chosen for such a time as this – pandemic and all. Will we use our favored status, our resources, our influence to stand in the gap for others? We are not guaranteed a given outcome but we can make our stand.