

July 28, 2024

Esther 4:1-17

The last few weeks, we talked about God doing great things through ordinary people. We talked about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Babylon refusing to worship anyone but the true God, and we saw how God worked through their courage and even non-Christians had to admit that God was powerful. We talked last week about Paul and Silas, how they did God's work in Philippi and how through the preaching of the Gospel and repaying evil with good, God worked through them and brought people into his family. These examples of God working through people make a lot of sense. These people were brave, moral, honest, and refused to compromise the truth of God's Word. Today, not so much. Unlike Paul or Silas, the people today are not preachers, missionaries, or even particularly devout Christians. Unlike Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they hide their identity as God's chosen people and abandon God's law for power and prestige. And unlike every other book of the Bible, this book has no miracles, no prophecies, no mission work, in fact, the book of Esther doesn't actually mention God's name at all. Not even once. And that's the beauty of it- because we are going to see today that God's will is being done during the darkest of times, in the strangest ways, through least godly of all people.

Esther is a brilliantly written historical account that takes place during the reign of King Xerxes over the Persian Empire, which was from 486 to 465 BC. About a hundred years earlier, God's people Israel, the "Jews," were captured and taken into exile in Babylon, but decades after, the Babylonian empire was defeated by the Persian Empire led by king Cyrus, and he allowed the Jews in captivity to go back home to Israel. Many, many went, but many people also stayed because they'd built a good life for themselves in several parts of the empire, one of those parts being the city of Susa, the winter capital city of the Persian empire, in modern day Iran. Esther and her cousin/ adoptive Father Mordecai were the descendents of some Jews that decided to stay. Mordecai had made a good living for himself serving as a mid-level government official in the court of King Xerxes- and likely because he hid his Jewish identity. Notice- "Mordecai" is not a Jewish, but Persian name that's related to god Marduk. Esther is also a Persian name related to the goddess Ishtar. And this is where the history gets interesting. King Xerxes, the king with unlimited power, who rules everything between India and Ethiopia, decides he wants to show off his wife, queen Vashti, wearing her royal ring- and only her royal ring in front of all his royal court. She says no, and for that she's deposed as queen and now Xerxes needs a new queen. The beauty scouts go throughout the empire finding the most beautiful young women, and Esther is chosen. And she sleeps with Xerxes just like all the other women, and she performs so well that she's chosen as queen of the Persian Empire. Yes. That's in the Bible. Mordecai, meanwhile, hears of a plot to assassinate Xerxes and he exposes it, so he is honored. Things seem to be good, until a man named Haman enters the picture. Haman is named as the top official of Xerxes, and he's given special honor and rides through the city and everyone bows to him- except Mordecai. Why? We don't know. It could have been him making his stand for God- he won't worship anyone but God- but it could just be petty, too. We don't know. But what happens is that Haman

is so bothered by one person refusing to bow to him that decides that not only should Mordecai be killed, but his entire race- every Jewish man, woman, and child in the empire needs to be killed. So he goes to Xerxes and tells him that there's this group of people who don't keep the king's laws, and if he kills them, 10,000 talents, about 340 tons of silver will be added to the treasury! Now, Xerxes doesn't ask, "Who are these people that you're asking me to kill, how many are there, what laws are they breaking, is my wife a member of this ethnic group," none of that. He hears the amount of money and says, "go for it." And then they go off and get drunk as if they didn't just decree a genocide.

And that's where we are. Mordecai, along with all the Jews in the empire, mourn publically as their enemies lick their chops and get ready to gang up on them, kill their families, and take their homes for themselves. They don't have an army or a king to protect them. They don't have anyone that can prevent this- especially since Persian laws were irreversible. How could God let this happen? Is there anyone who could stop this? There's one- an orphan made queen. Mordecai knows this and he tells her, "Esther, you need to go to him and beg him to not do this." Esther says, "I can't. Anyone who goes to the king's court without his invitation is thrown onto a spike and left there to bleed out. That's the law- unless he extends his scepter to me, which he won't because he hasn't summoned me for a month, and kings don't spend their nights alone- he's over me. If I go I'll lose everything." And what Mordecai says next is the central, most important verse of this book: "Esther, don't think that you'll escape. Once Haman finds out who you are, and it's only a matter of time, you'll die too. He's too powerful. Esther, if you don't do what's right, someone else will- deliverance will rise from somewhere else, but you'll be destroyed. Esther, is it possible that this is why you're here? Maybe it wasn't just a coincidence that Xerxes got drunk and Vashti got deposed and you were made beautiful and happened to be chosen out of thousands of girls and now you have a chance to save your people. Maybe this is why you're here" And Esther said, fast for me. Pray for me. If I perish, I perish." In other words, "I'm going to do what is right, and may God's will be done."

There's two major points we can take out of this: the first: God's will is inevitable. Ultimately, God's will is going to happen, it's only a matter of time. Consider this, I don't have to convince you that the Ten Plagues, the burning bush, Jesus' miracles, and a preacher baptizing a baby are "acts of God" that he works through, but what about king Xerxes getting drunk and divorcing his queen? What about a king deciding that this young woman is more sexually pleasing than another? What about that king coincidentally having a good day when she approaches him uninvited and he extends his golden scepter to her and listens to her? God may not be the one who wills or causes bad things, but he certainly works through them- good actions or bad, good people or bad, good times or bad, all things are working toward God's will whether we realize it or not. Mordecai knew this- notice what he said: whether or not you rise to the occasion, deliverance for the Jews will rise from somewhere! How can he say that? Because he knew God's promises, that through this Jewish nation all people would be blessed, that there would be

a king from David that would reign forever, that God would protect his people. God's will is always going to be done. Why, then, should we pray, "Thy will be done?"

Point two- because our actions matter. Sometimes, people think that since God's will is inevitable, our actions don't really matter. Sometimes, people think that because our actions matter, God's will isn't inevitable. But the Bible teaches both: God's will is sure, and our actions matter. So, why did Jesus tell us to pray this prayer? Because it's not something we would have prayed unless told to. Out of all the things in the Lord's prayer, I'd venture to guess that the one we don't really mean is this: "Thy will be done." Why not? Because it is the most difficult prayer to pray. When you say, "thy will be done," you are giving God permission to take away your spouse, your children, your wealth, your job, your beauty, your reputation, your friends, your health, your life. You are submitting to God and admitting that you are not in control, and God can do whatever he likes, and you will trust him anyway. You are saying, along with Esther, I'm going to do what's right, and if lose it all, so be it." You're saying, "Lord, I'm going to be honest about everything with my spouse and my boss, even if it gets me in trouble." "I'm going to speak well of my coworkers, even if it means they get promoted. I'm going to speak hard truths to my loved ones, even if they hate me. I'm going to create boundaries with my boyfriend or girlfriend, even if they leave me. I'm going to discipline my children, even if they say, "I hate you." I'm going to be honest with my clients and customers, even if it means I lose money. I'm going to serve and respect and repay evil with good, even if people think of me less. I'm going to forgive, even if it makes me look and feel weak- because that's God's will." Easier said than done... Why? Because deep down there's something within us that says, you can't trust God, you can't let his will be done, you have to protect yourself, you have to put others down, you have to cheat or else you'll perish, you'll suffer." And I'm here to say that voice is wrong. How do I know? Because centuries fter Esther said, "thy will be done," someone greater than Esther did the same. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus the perfect Son of God realized how deeply he had to suffer to pay for evil and atrocity of all humanity, and he asked his Father if there way any way to do this other than what was facing him, and said, "but not what I will, but what you will. Your will be done, if I perish, I perish." And he did. Jesus prayed the prayer we are too weak to pray. Jesus perfectly submitted himself to God's will in our place, and perished in our place, so that we can submit ourselves to God's will and know that we never will. Is there a risk? Sure- you might lose the crown, the palace, the honor, but you won't lose him, and you will not perish, and the cross is proof of this, and the resurrection of Jesus means this: do you think that there's anything you could lose here on earth, a relationship, a paycheck, a country, a house, a car, a status, that Jesus isn't powerful enough to repay beyond your imagination in the glory of his new Heavens and Earth? So what if I perish- I'll live forever because that is God's will for me- his will be done, and if it's done through me, even better.

That's actually what happened to Esther. Haman thought that he won, he even made a big pole outside of his house just for Mordecai to be impaled on. But Esther approached Xerxes, Xerxes

listened, and Esther even exposed Haman, Xerxes' favorite right hand man at the risk of her life, and Xerxes was furious with Haman, so furious he had to leave the room. After that, Haman fell on his knees begging Esther for mercy, and he actually tripped and fell on Esther just as Xerxes walked back in, and Xerxes thought he was violating her, and immediately wanted to have him impaled, and a servant chimed in and said, "there's a perfectly good stake pole right outside Haman's house!" You can't make that up, and you can't say God doesn't have a sense of humor. Ultimately, there are two kinds of people in the world. There's Esther, who says, "your will be done," and Haman, to whom God says, "okay, your will be done." Because of what Jesus has done for you, because his will is so much better than anything we could have dreamed up, we can joyfully proclaim, "Thy will be done." Amen.