

“An Exile’s Story”

Esther 4:12-17

July 17, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

As we continue in our series on a theology of work, I want to point out that last week’s sermon and this week’s are intended to go together. In last week’s passage, Jeremiah gave instruction to the Jews living in exile in Babylon. According to the New Testament, all Christians are also exiles (1 Peter 1:1). That means that we are citizens of two kingdoms. We referred to those two kingdoms last week as the “common kingdom” and the “redemptive kingdom.” Those phrases are from David VanDrunen’s book, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*. The common kingdom was formed by the covenant God made with Noah, and it includes all humanity, both believers and unbelievers. The redemptive kingdom was formed by God’s covenant with Abraham, and its citizens are only those who believe. The redemptive kingdom in the Old Testament was found in Israel, while today it is found in the Church.

As Christians, we are citizens of both kingdoms, just like the exiles were in Jeremiah’s day. God told these exiles, and he is telling us as well, that we are to seek the welfare of the common kingdom, even though it is not our permanent home. Since much of our work lives is spent in the common kingdom, this means that God commands us to seek to bring good to believers and unbelievers alike through our work. Jeremiah gave us the command, and in today’s passage Esther gives us a real-life story about life as an exile. She lived in the Persian kingdom and ended up as Queen of the entire land. She neither separated from the Persians nor assimilated to their values, but remembered that she was first of all a citizen of Israel. Her life supplies us with three important principles for our work in what we are calling the common kingdom.

I. Expect Opposition

There are times when doing our jobs in the common kingdom will be accompanied by opposition. The Bible seems to commend to us a practice of keeping our heads down and avoiding needless conflict between the values of the common kingdom and those of the redemptive kingdom. Paul advises the Thessalonians to **“aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one”** (1 Thess. 4:11-12). That same counsel can be seen in Mordecai’s advice to his cousin Esther when she was being considered to replace Vashti as Queen of Persia. Esther had

been orphaned and was being raised by Mordecai. He told her not to reveal her Jewish identity (2:10).

There are times, though, when conflict between these two kingdoms cannot be avoided without sacrificing one's faithfulness to God. Esther was in just such a moment in our passage. The crisis she was experiencing here was prompted by the rise in power of a man named Haman. He was something of an advisor to the King of Persia and was promoted to a position over all the other officials in the kingdom. His power was second only to that of the king himself. The king had commanded that everyone should bow down and pay homage to Haman, but Mordecai refused to do so. This refusal infuriated Haman, especially when he was told that Mordecai was a Jew. He concocted a plot to destroy not only Haman, but all of the Jews in Persia. He lied to the king and told him that the Jews defy his laws, and then bribed the king with a huge sum of money to allow Haman to appoint a day when any Jew could be murdered and his property seized.

The conflict between Haman and the Jews was an ancient one. We are told that Haman was an Agagite. Agag was the king of Amalekites who had opposed Israel following their exodus from Egypt. They attempted to destroy Israel, but God intervened, and the Israelites were able to defeat the Amalekites in battle. In Deuteronomy, God told Israel that when they were settled in the Promised Land, that they were to remember the evil of the Amalekites and blot them out completely (Deut. 25:19). Israel's first king, Saul, was commanded to fulfill this task. But he did so incompletely in that famous passage in 1 Samuel where we read that he kept the best of the spoil for himself. We learn in Esther that Mordecai was a descendent of King Saul (2:5). So this was an ancient conflict. Its roots go even further back to that word from God to Eve in Genesis, a word that there would be perpetual conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. That's a reference to these two kingdoms, the common kingdom and the redemptive kingdom. There may be times when the two can coexist peacefully, but there will be inevitable times of conflict.

The practical application of this is not to be surprised if such conflict arises. As noted earlier, we are to do our best to live peacefully in the common kingdom, but the time may come when that proves impossible. We may think that if we bring enough value to our place of work that we will be insulated from this conflict. That wasn't enough for Mordecai. At the end of chapter 2, we read about a time when Mordecai learned about a plot to assassinate the king. He told it to Esther, who passed along the information to the king. Upon investigation, it was discovered to be true, and the would-be assassins were executed. Saving the king's life would not have saved him from Haman's fury.

II. Don't Be Afraid of Powerful Opponents

If we are to expect opposition in our work in the common kingdom, how do we prepare for it? The answer of our passage is that we fear God and not those who seem to have power. Let's consider first that second point about not fearing powerful opponents. Two figures in the story possess power: King Ahasuerus and Haman. The story is masterfully told in a way that reveals their power as being not so great after all.

Let's consider first the way the story portrays King Ahasuerus, as it seems to mock his power. It opens with a great feast, one of many drinking bouts throughout the book. The king has hosted this feast to show "**the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness**" (1:4). The king is portrayed throughout the story as a figure primarily interested in drinking, asserting his power, and sex. On the final day of the feast, he called for his wife, Queen Vashti, to be brought to the feast. His motives for doing so were completely vain and self-serving, "**In order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at**" (1:11). It seems that the king's marriage was not a model of marital harmony, because Vashti refuses to come. The king is furious and summons his advisors to help him decide what should be done. They all agree that Vashti should be deposed as queen and that a new queen be found. The reason for this is a fear that her insubordination should spread around the kingdom and that all the wives will feel the freedom to follow her example.

There is irony in this whole matter. The culture of this era was one in which men, not women, had all the power. And no man had more power than the king. And yet notice who prevails throughout the story. Vashti doesn't want to be in the presence of her husband, and he ends up insuring that she gets exactly what she wants through his royal decree. The king is concerned that all the wives of the kingdom will dishonor their husbands, yet he can't even control his own wife. And then there's Esther. The story begins with her as an exile and an orphan. It would be hard to find someone with less power. But by the end of the story, this powerless young woman ends up outmaneuvering the king and getting exactly what she wants. The king who is so concerned to preserve male dominance gets outmaneuvered at every point by women.

The other character with power is Haman, the king's second in command. If this story were to be made into a movie, the musical score would be playing dark, foreboding music at 3:10. "**So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews.**" He was being given the power of the king to do whatever he thought best, a power he planned to use for his genocide against the Jews. Everything is working out as Haman wanted it to. And then it gets even better, or so he thinks. He is invited to a very private feast with only the king, Queen Esther and himself. Further, he is assured that another identical feast will

happen the next day, with the same intimate group attending. Haman has all power and honor, or so he thinks. We read in 5:9, “**And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart.**” But at the precise moment things couldn’t have been better for him, they start to unravel. That very night, the king couldn’t sleep and ordered that the book containing the chronicles of the kingdom be brought and read to him. It just so happens that the reader began reading with the account of Mordecai’s act to save the king from assassination. When the king asked what reward had been given to Mordecai, he is told that nothing has been done. Haman has just entered the palace, and the king asks him what should be done for the man the king wants to honor. In his vanity, Haman is confident that he is the one the king wants to honor, so he answers with the honor he wants to be shown. He wants royal robes, a ride on the royal horse through the streets of the capital, with the accompanying proclamation: “**Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king delight to honor**” (6:9). Imagine Haman’s shock when the king orders Haman, “**Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew**” (6:10). Shortly after that, less than 24 hours after Haman’s elation at his prestige and power, he would attend his final fateful feast with the king and queen and be hanged on the gallows he had erected for Mordecai.

III. Fear God

Should opposition arise, we need not fear any human, no matter how much power that person may have. But we are to fear God, and the text we read earlier from chapter 4 shows us what constitutes such fear of God. First, it means to trust God’s promise that the redemptive kingdom will endure. Mordecai tells Esther, “**For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place**” (4:14). Nations come and go, but God himself promises that he will deliver his people. We fear God by regarding his promise as the most secure thing in the world. Mordecai believed that promise, though he confessed his uncertainty about the precise means of God’s deliverance of his people.

Second, we see the providence of God at all points in this story. Mordecai said to Esther these famous words: “**And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?**” (4:14). His assumption is that the hand of God had been guiding these events concerning Esther’s ascendancy to her royal position. One of the most striking features of this story is that its main character is never named. The main character is clearly God, but the name of God is never mentioned. The ones thought of as having power, the king and Haman, end up not being in control. But the God who is not even named turns out to have all control. Notice God’s control over many small details, the failure of any one of which would have changed this entire story. Through a series of events, beginning with the deposing of Queen Vashti,

Esther comes to be selected as queen. Then Mordecai just happens to overhear of the plot to assassinate the king. He was at the right place at the right time to come to this knowledge. When Esther risks her life by approaching the king, he happens to be in the mood to extend his scepter toward her rather than killing her. On the night between Esther's two feasts with the king and Haman, the king has a bout of insomnia. It just so happens that the part of the chronicles read to him concerns Mordecai's act to save the king's life. Note the important first two words of Mordecai's question to Esther: "**Who knows?**" The providential ways of God are often hidden to us. We can see all these factors of God's providential dealings with Esther and Mordecai after they're done, but not as they're happening. Mordecai didn't claim to know all the details of God's plan, only that God was in charge and that God can be trusted.

Has it ever occurred to you that the same is true of your work? The providential hand of God has been working behind the scenes to place you exactly where you are. Like Mordecai, you may not know exactly what that purpose is. But you can know that God has a purpose. He gave you the gifts and abilities needed for the job you currently have. He gave you the opportunity and background to secure that job. God has been at work through all these details. We fear him by trusting him in these things.

Third, we fear God through prayer. Esther calls upon all the Jews to unite in prayer and fasting. They may have no control, but they know the one who has all control. And they know that he answers the prayers of his people.

Fourth, we fear God by a willingness to lose our lives if required to do so to be faithful to God. Esther said, "**I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish**" (4:16). The risks we often face in the workplace rarely threaten us with loss of life. But they are risks still. Perhaps the threat is the loss of a promotion or even the loss of a job. To fear God is to value faithfulness to God over any compromise of our faithfulness to him.

CONCLUSION:

Our story turns out well for the Jews. Instead of being slaughtered on the day Haman had appointed for their destruction, they end up turning the tables on their enemies. Centuries later, there would be a Jewish man for whom things didn't turn out like that. Unlike Esther, he did perish. Our Lord Jesus was crucified by the powers that be, but because of his death and resurrection, we now have forgiveness of sins and a bright future. And now God defeats his enemies not by slaughtering them, but by converting them to his friends. Perhaps there are people with whom you rub shoulders every day who are now numbered among those enemies who will be turned to God's friends.