

NAVIGATING DIFFICULT TIMES

(Book of Esther)

When Evil Overflows

INTRODUCTION: We live in difficult times.

- The president of our nation is threatening our schools with a loss of federal funds if they do not open the doors of the girls' locker room to boys who say they ought to be there.
- We are in a presidential election year, and 60% of Americans do not like either of the two leading candidates.
- We have reached the place in our own country where more than half of the population has come to the conclusion that God is wrong about same-sex behavior, saying it is "not wrong at all."
- Some are experiencing more strain and pressure on the job than ever before.
- Right here in Bay County, a primary concern for many people is being able to feed their family this week.
- Families are stressed.
- Marriages are in trouble.

We live in difficult times.

But we are not the first to live in difficult times. King David did also, and God spoke to him in the middle of his trouble. God also spoke through David and the Spirit of God gave David words to write down for others navigating difficult times.

Some of those words are in Psalm 11.

Psalm 11

1 In the LORD I put my trust; How can you say to my soul, "Flee as a bird to your mountain"?

2 For look! The wicked bend their bow, They make ready their arrow on the string, That they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart.

3 If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?

4 The LORD is in His holy temple, The LORD's throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men.

5 The LORD tests the righteous, But the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates.

6 Upon the wicked He will rain coals; Fire and brimstone and a burning wind Shall be the portion of their cup.

7 For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright.

We do live in difficult times.

But do not give up.

- Do not give up on doing what is right.
- Do not give up on standing upon the truth.
- Do not give up on God.

The Lord has not abdicated His throne. He still rules the universe. His will remains absolute and His purposes are sovereign, even when evil overflows.

The Lord IS righteous!

The Lord LOVES righteousness!

The face of God smiles on those who trust in Him as He works in our world today.

TEXT: Esther 1

INTRODUCTION: **GREAT ARE YOU, LORD!** He gives light. He gives hope. Great is the Lord!

But in all honesty, sometimes when difficult times come into and around our lives, instead of singing Great Are You, Lord,

we sing

or say

or think

Where are You, Lord?

Where is Your Light?

What has happened to Your Hope?

As we are not the first to live in troublesome times, we are not the first to seek answers to these questions. We are not the first trying to learn how personally to navigate the difficult times of life that come upon us.

While God has much to say in His Word about this topic, do you know that there is a whole book of the Bible that addresses these issues, and offers us very practical help for what to do in our own lives when we find ourselves in the midst of troublesome times?

I see panic in some of your eyes. You are saying, “Oh no, we are going to spend the whole summer in the Book of Job!”

No, the book of which I speak is the wonderfully delightful Book of Esther. Now, we are going to spend the summer in its ten chapters, basically a chapter per week, because this lovely portion of the Word of God is of a story of people living in exceedingly difficult times, times in many ways like our own.

And as **those people of God wrestled with** problems brought on by

- **the culture of the land** in which they lived
- **their wicked rulers** who rebelled against all heavenly lawfulness
- **self important bureaucrats** who cared for nothing but their own self importance and wealth

Sometimes instead of singing GREAT ARE YOU, LORD they said or thought

Where are You, Lord?

Where is Your Light?

What has happened to Your Hope?

Times when evil overflowed.

Among this people of God who lived some 25 centuries ago in Persia was a young Jewish woman whose name was Hadassah. Hadassah lived in difficult times.

- Hadassah, who had been given the Persian name **Esther**, which means star, **was a descendant of refugees.**

Nearly 100 years before she was born, Esther’s great, great grandparents had been taken from their home in Jerusalem to the city of Babylon by the forces of King Nebuchadnezzar. They had been deported from their homeland, their temple had been utterly destroyed, and they had been forcibly relocated to the outskirts of this famous pagan city known for its idolatry since its earliest days of existence.

When the rule of the Babylonians was ended by Darius, the King of the Medes and the Persians, Babylonia became a part of the Persian empire. Darius was followed by Cyrus, who let those Jews who wanted to return to Israel go back to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Esther’s grandparents, like most of the Jews now living in the expanding Persian empire, declined the offer of the king. For though they were Jews in heritage and faith, they had been born in Babylon. They knew little of the land that had

been left desolate by the marauding armies of King Nebuchadnezzar. They preferred to raise their families in what they hoped would be the safety of Persia.

Esther's parents had sought refuge, along with many other Jews, eastward in a city of Persia, called Shushan, a town that would be on the modern day border of Iran and Iraq. There they lived trying to blend in with the local Persian population, making a living and caring for their families.

What peace and joy Esther enjoyed in the home of her parents was sadly broken when

- **Both of her parents died.**

Thanks be to God that Esther was quickly adopted by her older cousin Mordecai who loved her and treated her as his own daughter. Mordecai was a godly man, who loved and trusted the Lord. He worked as a low level bureaucrat in the palace of the king. Esther grew to be a meek, gentle, and beautiful young woman under the tender care of Mordecai, and she loved and trusted him like a father.

Then, just when it seemed that things might at last be getting better

- **A new and very wicked king named Ahasuerus came to power.**

Ahasuerus is known in secular history as King Xerxes I.

Ahasuerus was great in power but not noble in character. Among his first acts as king was to re-conquer rebellious Egypt where he first demonstrated his cruelty, a cruelty that he would bring home and use against his own people. The Book of Esther opens just after Ahasuerus has returned from subduing the rebellions Egyptians.

Esther 1:1–4 1 Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia), 2 in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the citadel, 3 that in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and servants—the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces *being* before him— 4 when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days *in all*.

Ahasuerus was known for the drunken parties that he would host for his friends and government officials, parties characterized by lewdness and debauchery. In the year 483 B.C. King Ahasuerus summoned the governors of all of the provinces of his kingdom to come for a six month stay in the city of Shushan. During that time they were indoctrinated into the greatness of the Persian empire and of their king and taken on tours that they might see glorious displays of the might and power of Ahasuerus. These six months concluded with a seven day feast held in the palace

courtyard and open not only to government officials but even to the citizenry of Shushan. Banquet tables covered with linen cloths were set up in the midst of the beautiful marble columns that established the splendor of the surroundings. For seven days the men of Shushan came and went through this extravaganza of food and drink.

Verse 8 offers an interesting insight into the value system in Washington, I mean Shushan, under this wicked king.

Esther 1:8 In accordance with the law, the drinking was not compulsory; for so the king had ordered all the officers of his household, that they should do according to each man's pleasure.

Actually, the wording sounds like those who wanted to abstain from alcohol were free to do so, but that is not the meaning of the text. Normally in a Persian banquet, people drank when the toastmaster instructed them to do so. The point here is that no one had to wait. He could drink any time and any amount he desired. And so was the life of the king and many who followed his example in the kingdom that they should do according to each man's pleasure.

While Ahasuerus was thus entertaining the men, he had his queen Vashti doing the same for the women, though probably in a much more subdued, nevertheless elegant manner. Then came the last day of the feast, and the king was drunk. He decided that in addition to showing off the wonders of his empire, he also wanted to show off his wife, Queen Vashti, for she was known far and wide for her exquisite beauty. So the king sent his servants to fetch the queen with the intent of parading her before his equally drunken guests.

Jewish commentators on this passage preserve Jewish tradition that the drunken king demanded that his wife appear before his guests wearing only her crown. We cannot know if this is the correct understanding of the text, but at the very least, the king's demand would have required his wife to remove the veil customarily worn in public for her beauty to be revealed.

But when the servants presented the king's demand to her majesty, she refused to come and be the object of the lustful glares of the drunken men of the city. The Scripture says,

Esther 1:12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command *brought by his eunuchs*; therefore the king was furious, and his anger burned within him.

When his servants brought back the word of his wife's refusal, Ahasuerus allowed his volatile temper to explode. He had surrounded himself with men whose character and temperament was as depraved as his own. So the king and his counselors decided to remove Vashti from the throne and seek for the king a new wife, one even more beautiful than Vashti herself.

So, **Here is Esther,**

- **Living in a foreign land, a Jew in Persia.**
- **Still a young woman, not yet having a husband, and both parents are dead.**
- **She lives with** her kind hearted older cousin **Mordecai, whose employment is in the palace** of a wicked, capricious, cruel king who seems to have no standards or regard for right or wrong.
- Now, **the one person of influence who ever exhibited an ounce of morality or propriety has been removed from office** and sent to exile.

She lives in difficult times.

And it is hard to sing GREAT ARE YOU, LORD.

It is tempting to ask, “Where is Your Light? Where is Your Hope?”

Have you ever been there? Are you there now?

How do you navigate in times like these? What do you do?

Each chapter of the book of Esther will bring us a single instruction. Here is the instruction from chapter one:

When evil overflows, watch for God.

Now to be honest, I do not know if Esther had learned this truth yet.

- She could have.
- I hope she did.

She could have learned it as she went to the synagogue with her fellow Jews in Shushan where they often read together the Psalms. Many of the Psalms would have revealed this truth to her that

- when things are bad,
- when evil overflows,
- when times are tough,
- when difficulty is everywhere present

that the child of God should watch, because God is going to intervene. God is going to do something.

In fact, she could have learned it from Psalm 11, the Psalm of David we read at the beginning of our worship. From that psalm alone she could have seen why in difficult times the child of God should watch for what God is going to do because

I. GOD KNOWS WHAT IS COMING.

The Holy Spirit said through David

When the upright are being targeted

When the foundations are being destroyed

When even righteous people don't know what to do

The Lord is in His holy temple

And His eyes see!

God not only knows everything about the past, He understands the hidden things of the present, and He sees every detail of the future!

Esther knew things were bad. God knew they were about to get even worse. But God also knew what He was going to do to make them better.

So Esther, when the evil overflows, watch God because **GOD KNOWS WHAT IS COMING.**

Dear suffering brother or sister in difficult times, evil overflowing around you, in faith watch God. Be watching what He does because He knows what is coming and

II. GOD'S WILL AND PURPOSE WILL NOT BE FRUSTRATED.

Remember? In Psalm 11 David said

Psalm 11:5–6 5 The LORD tests the righteous, But the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. 6 Upon the wicked He will rain coals; Fire and brimstone and a burning wind *Shall be* the portion of their cup.

God is in control! No matter how bad it gets, God will cause evil to lose and good to win.

On Wednesday nights we have been studying through the Revelation. And chapters 4 all the way to 18 are about the tribulation which goes from horrible to indescribable. Finally, last Wed. night we got to chapter 19 where Christ comes back at Armageddon and wins the war over Satan and antichrist and all wickedness.

And our newest church member, Alexis, asked a good question, "What does this mean for us here and now?" She did not know that she was making me reveal the heart of Sunday's sermon.

It means when evil overflows all around us we are to

- Hang on
- Persevere
- Wait on the Lord with faith and confidence and watch for God
- Because He is going to make things right!

When evil overflows, watch God because

III. GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF THOSE WHO TRUST HIM.

Again we see it in Psalm 11

Psalm 11:7 For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright.

Or, as I paraphrased it, God's face shines on those who trust Him.

Oh my, are we going to see God do that for Esther.

In fact, you know those four things I said to describe Esther's difficulty?

Here is Esther,

- **Living in a foreign land, a Jew in Persia.**
- **Still a young woman, not yet having a husband, and both parents are dead.**
- **She lives with Mordecai, whose employment is in the palace**
- **The one person of influence who ever exhibited an ounce of morality has been removed from office.**

Do you know what God is going to do? He is going to use every one of those valleys of difficulty to be a road of deliverance and victory, not just for Esther but for all of her people as well.

Because GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF THOSE WHO TRUST HIM.

CONCLUSION: Dear child of God, is evil overflowing your life? Are you besieged by trouble? Are you laboring to navigate difficult times?

Pray with me.

Lord I am nearly at the point of being overwhelmed. But I am Your child. I believe the promises of Your Word. I believe You know what's coming, that Your will and purpose will not be frustrated, and that You will take care of me. So God, I am going to wait and watch, trusting in You, believing, knowing You will keep Your word as You did to Esther.