

NAVIGATING DIFFICULT TIMES

(Book of Esther)

When Evil Captures You

INTRODUCTION: As we prepare our hearts for worship, I want you to consider a portion of Scripture with me. It culminates in two verses what we will learn this week in Vacation Bible School. And because in VBS, the kids will be learning it from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, I am going to read from that version.

Stand with me as we meditate on these glorious truths from God's Word.

Psalm 139 (HCSB)

1 LORD, You have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I stand up; You understand my thoughts from far away.

3 You observe my travels and my rest; You are aware of all my ways.

4 Before a word is on my tongue, You know all about it, LORD.

5 You have encircled me; You have placed Your hand on me.

6 This extraordinary knowledge is beyond me. It is lofty; I am unable to reach it.

7 Where can I go to escape Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?

8 If I go up to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.

9 If I live at the eastern horizon or settle at the western limits,

10 even there Your hand will lead me; Your right hand will hold on to me.

And here are the verses we will memorize during VBS:

23 Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns.

24 See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way.

TEXT: Esther 2

INTRODUCTION: We began last week learning how to navigate difficult times by considering God's Word to us in the first chapter of the Book of Esther. We saw that Esther herself was a young Jewish single girl, an orphan of refugee parents, raised by a

cousin in a foreign land ruled by a new king named Ahasuerus who quickly proved himself to be both cruel and capricious.

I told you we would find each chapter of this fascinating, true story would bring to us a single instruction on how we can navigate the difficult times in our own lives. And we learned **last week** that

when evil overflows around us, we should

watch for God to act, watch for God to move, because God loves the righteous and He loves righteousness. He knows everything, past, present, future, and He intervenes on behalf of His children when the time is right according to His purpose.

So as we come to chapter two, we are watching, watching to see what God will do for this young woman who loves the Lord but around whom wickedness flows like a river in flood stage.

Remember when we took note last week that God knew everything about Esther, about Mordecai, her cousin, and Ahasueres, the king of Persia through whom perversion flowed like and uncapped gas well. And one of the things God knew was that for Esther, and for hundreds of other beautiful young teenage girls of the empire, things were going to get worse, much worse, before they got better.

Things will get worse, because up to this point, while Esther is surrounded by all encompassing evil flowing around her, she remains on a little island, threatened but not inundated. But the tsunami of iniquity is about to wash her away, and she will be taken captive by the giant waves of wickedness,

- not because she herself chose to participate in the unrighteousness,
- not because she delighted in watching it from a safe distance while being entertained by it,
- not because she even dared to dabble in tiny portions of it.

No, in this she was innocent.

She had no part in it.

She gave no approval, but it became so overwhelming in the culture around her, that it took her captive. You will see what I mean when we read her story.

Esther 2:1–4 1 After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her.

2Then the king's servants who attended him said: "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king;

3and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel, into the women's quarters, under the custody of Hegai the king's eunuch, custodian of the women. And let beauty preparations be given them.

4Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This thing pleased the king, and he did so.

Esther 2:8 So it was, when the king's command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, under the custody of Hegai, that Esther also was taken to the king's palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women.

The bad thing about too much alcohol and too much anger is that both can leave you with very undesirable consequences, even if you are the king. The even sadder thing about both alcohol and anger is that they often bring grievous consequences to others around you as well.

King Ahasuerus was feeling the pain. His hangover was gone, but in his drunken temper tantrum he had divorced his wife and sent her away. His mood around the palace was probably foul and those closest to him, fearing his cruelty and unpredictability sought to appease him. They were no doubt well acquainted with his fleshly appetites, and suggested, "Oh king, let's replenish your harem."

The text clearly shows that the harem already existed. There were quarters for women captured who had not yet been used by the king and separate quarters for those who had. While these quarters did not look like jail cells with bars, an uncomfortable bed, open toilet, and a sink, they were a prison none the less. No one came voluntarily, and no one left alive. Each of the separate parts of the Harem was supervised by a eunuch. The name of the first was Hegai. The second was Shaashgaz.

Normally young virgin women were gathered from the local area or perhaps from a region recently conquered. In this case, the king commanded that the governor of each province should search for the most beautiful virgins in each of the 127 provinces of the empire. These, mostly teenage girls, were taken captive and transported to the citadel of Shushan, where they were imprisoned in the harem quarters, where they would undergo beauty treatments until such time as their appointed hour to be raped by the king. After her initial night with the king, the young woman would be taken to the second harem and never see the king again unless he called for her by name. She would never have a husband or a family of her own. She was a concubine whose sole purpose was to be used by the king if he ever chose her for a night as one his new toys ever waiting to be brought to him.

This was the sentence pronounced upon Esther.

- Yesterday evil overflowed all around her.
- Today evil captured her.

Esther 2:8 So it was, when the king's command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, ... that Esther also was taken to the king's palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women.

Folks, we must understand that

I. **GOD SOMETIMES ALLOWS EVIL TO CAPTURE US.**

I am not talking about when we choose to sin. When we willfully disobey God and walk in the ways of sin, we invite evil to capture us, and the devil willingly accepts our invitation. Praise God, even then, we who trust in Christ can repent of our sin, yield anew to the filling, the control and empowering of the Holy Spirit, and be set free from prison houses we voluntarily entered.

That is not what happened to Esther. I am not saying she was perfect. She was a person like you and me, a sinner in need of a Savior. But her capture and imprisonment in the harem of the king was not a consequence of her own rebellion against God or a chastisement for personal sin.

Sometimes we are captured

- **because of the evil of others**
- **because of the evil of the culture around us**
- **because of the wickedness of those who govern us**

Sometimes men or women are forced into a divorce by the unbridled iniquity of their spouse. This is not the most common of divorces, but it happens.

We have seen people lose jobs or even their businesses because of the permissiveness of our culture towards the abomination of homosexuality, people who were not hateful or hurtful toward gays, but who refused to contradict God and call evil good and good evil.

And without question, the ungodliness in our government, from our president down through the lowest levels of bureaucracy multiplies the number of innocent lives killed while in the wombs of their mothers and puts our living children and teens at great risk of abuse.

And while it is okay to call a spade a spade (can a Baptist preacher say that?), and point to the ones responsible for sin, ultimately folks, we cannot deal with these things properly

in our own lives unless we acknowledge the truth here taught in the book of Esther and elsewhere in the Holy Scriptures. That truth is

GOD SOMETIMES ALLOWS EVIL TO CAPTURE US.

Immediately, we want to scream why?

- Why would a God who is good, loving, and all powerful allow evil to capture us?
- Why would a good God let a God fearing young woman be abducted and kept in a harem awaiting the violation of a pagan king?
- Many are the skeptics who tell us that because such things happen in our world means that a good, loving, all powerful God does not exist.
- But I challenge you to listen instead to the voice of Esther, who today resides not in the harem but in the home of another King, the King of Kings who loves and cares for her. And Esther would say to you, “Read my story. I did not write it, but it is altogether true. And no, I did not enjoy what I had to endure. And no, at the time I did not understand why God would let this happen to me. But now, that I can see Him face to face, I am telling you God was and is good. There is nothing He cannot do. But God allowed me to be captured because He had a grand purpose to be accomplished, just as He did Joseph in Egypt, and Daniel in Babylon before me.”
- **Esther says to us** out of the portion of God’s Word that bears her name, **“Even when I was in despair, even when I did not understand, I put my trust in God.”**

So, what do we do when evil has captured us, even while we trust in God?

Sometimes we are held captive for a long time. Esther was in the harem undergoing preparation for at least a year, and very likely up to four years before she was ever taken to the king.

So, how do we endure, while we trust in God?

II. MEEKNESS IS THE BEST GARMENT FOR THE CAPTIVE.

Esther 2:8–15 ... Esther also was taken to the king’s palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women.

9 Now the young woman pleased him, and she obtained his favor; so he readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance. Then seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king’s palace, and he moved her and her maidservants to the best place in the house of the women.

12 Each young woman's turn came to go in to King Ahasuerus after she had completed twelve months' preparation, according to the regulations for the women, for thus were the days of their preparation apportioned: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and preparations for beautifying women.

13 Thus prepared, each young woman went to the king, and she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the women's quarters to the king's palace.

14 In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned to the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who kept the concubines. She would not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and called for her by name.

15 Now when the turn came for Esther ... to go in to the king, she requested nothing but what Hegai the king's eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her.

The character quality demonstrated in Esther's life is meekness.

Meekness is strength under control. This word is used to describe a strong horse which uses its strength for the good of its master.

- **Esther did not whine and complain.**
- **She did not rebel and throw a fit.**
- **She cooperated with her supervisor and found favor in his eyes.**
 - He gave her handmaidens!
 - He gave her the best quarters.
 - He gave her his best advice.
 - She honored him and listened to him.
- **She could do all of this because of her trust in God.**

Dear brother, dear sister, if you are captive because of your own sin, the chief characteristic of your life needs to be repentance, confession, and surrender anew to the Lord.

But if you are held captive because of the sin of others, or of our culture, or of our government, repentance is not the key. You cannot repent for others, and while you can pray that they repent, your focus does not need to be on them but on yourself.

What can you do? **What should you do?**

Practice meekness!

- **Use the strengths God has given you to advance His purposes.**

- **Not to lash out at others.**
- **Not to threaten or intimidate.**
- **Cooperate with those in authority in your life.**
 - **Do everything they ask that is not contrary to God's Word.**
 - **Do it willingly with a gentle spirit not with resentment.**

Proverbs 16:7 When a man's ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

So, the one instruction we are given in Esther, chapter 2, is that when the evil around us takes us captive, we are to trust in God. We are to allow that trust to lead us to live out meekness as the character of our lives.

And now, with this instruction comes the motivation.

Why should I respond like that to my own captivity? Well, we have already seen the immediate blessings that came to Esther as she cooperated with Hegai. She not only found favor with him but with everyone around her.

But that is not the primary motivation. The overriding reason is

III. GOD WORKS FOR, IN, AND THROUGH THOSE WHO TRUST HIM.

Esther 2:16–18 16 So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

17The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

18Then the king made a great feast, the Feast of Esther, for all his officials and servants; and he proclaimed a holiday in the provinces and gave gifts according to the generosity of a king.

Here in chapter 2, we only see the first part of this promise fulfilled.

GOD WORKS FOR, IN, AND THROUGH THOSE WHO TRUST HIM.

We see God working for Esther. At this point in the story, God is already working in her and through her, the story just does not reveal it yet, but it will.

In the providence of God, Esther is chosen by Ahasuerus to be his wife. She is made the Queen of Persia. The whole country celebrates a day of holiday in her honor.

Now, let's be clear about something.

Esther is still captive.

- She is no more free to leave the palace than she was the harem.
- Ahasuerus is still a cruel and capricious man.
- He has no intent to become a follower of God.
- He has no desire to become a faithful husband to Esther.

But **God has certainly worked for Esther.**

- **It is better to be queen than concubine!**
- **It is better to live in the queen's quarters than the harem.**

For these great blessings, Esther is grateful.

And **when you and I have been taken captive** by evil and are suffering in prison houses built **by the sin of others** and not by our own,

- **We trust in God.**
- **We act in meekness.**
- **As we watch what God does,**
 - **We respond in gratitude for everything great and small He does for us.**
 - **We yield ourselves to Him to let Him work in us and through us.**