

Where does courage come from? How can a man or woman stare certain death in the face and cast his or her own well-being aside?

In 1956, five missionaries in Ecuador faced this question as they reached out to the Auca tribe with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, knowing that this tribe had so brutally attacked and murdered **Shell Oil** company employees that they withdrew from the area and abandoned their settlement. Just when Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian and Pete Fleming thought they had made an inroad with the Aucas, the tribe turned on them. They were ambushed and murdered, though on the beach of the river where they were killed they had a loaded gun. They chose not to use it. They knew that their death meant that they would be with the Lord Jesus for eternity, but to use that gun as a weapon against the Auca would mean another person had been separated from Jesus forever in Hell. Their goal was not to preserve their lives, or they wouldn't have even been there. With Jesus and His life-giving sacrifice as their focus, they risked it all to **reach** the Aucas.

Two years later, the blood spilled on the river shore had led to the first Christians in that vicious Ecuadorean tribe. The wives and children of some of those men had taken up the call. Half a century later, that same tribe is risking their lives to reach other Ecuadoreans with the Gospel.

If you want to know more about that, you can read the books or watch the movies: "Through the Gates of Splendor" and "End of the Spear."

They risked it all. So again I ask: where does this **courage** come from?

I would suggest to you that the same Jesus who gave these five missionaries the courage to say, "If I perish, I perish" is the One who gave Mordecai the **wisdom** to lead Queen Esther in the bold step she needed to take to save her people and to say, "If I perish, I perish."

Let's read the Scripture portion for ourselves right now. It's Esther 4:9-17, on page 491 in the pew Bibles. And by the way, again we would encourage you to read through this short book this week as we finish up our series next week. Now **please stand** for the reading of God's Word.

⁹ Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹ "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." ¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" ¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for

three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." ¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

This is God's Word. Let's pray. [prayer]

[Esther's Dilemma: The Jewish Girl Hadassah who Became a Persian Queen]

To summarize some of what Pastor Gary spoke about last week, Mordecai has offended Prime Minister Haman, and as a result not only Mordecai but also the rest of the Jews are facing imminent death. Mordecai has confidently asserted that in light of **God's covenant promises**, help will certainly come for the Jews facing this genocide. He states plainly that if Esther does **not** rise to the occasion, she and her father's household will certainly be killed. Rather than thinking of her own safety in the palace, she should see the reason that had brought her into the palace. The message from Mordecai leads Esther to wrestle with that reality, and finally she comes to the point of accepting the task that stands before her. With it, she faces the possibility of her own death, knowing that even if she dies, God's people will somehow be saved.

Imagine the things that Esther is trying to wrestle through right now. She reminds Mordecai that to go before the king without invitation means death unless he extends to her his golden scepter. She knows that this king has deposed Queen Vashti for violating his command. She maybe feels out of favor with this king because it has been a month since she has been called in to him. Perhaps Xerxes' desire for Queen Esther has cooled off. As one commentator says, "Whatever [Esther's] fears, it seems likely that Xerxes will **not** extend the golden scepter if the queen's death would somehow be expedient to his other interests." [Karen Jobes, *Esther* (NIVAC), p. 132]

Furthermore, she might not even feel like she can rely on her identity as one of the Jews – God's chosen covenant people. After all, even though she *may* have lived as a devout Jew before this **turn of events** in her life, she has hidden her identity during her time in the palace. To hide her identity really means that she hasn't been living as a Jew should live. Though some of the Jews have returned to Israel, she has not. She and all the other Jews since the exile have had to try to live as proper Jews without the temple and without sacrifices. They might wonder where God's promises to them stand. She has been taken as the wife of a pagan king for his sexual exploitation, and maybe she feels conflicted about that. She has had access to untold riches and comfort, and maybe she's gotten used to them.

Let's hear a bit more about what might have been going on in Esther's mind as she considered the challenge of Mordecai.

[*Esther* monolog]

There is a struggle in Esther to decide who she is going to be. Will she identify herself as one of God's covenant people and rise up in defense of her people, or will she hide her identity and try to escape as the wife of the king?

This is the part of the message where I'm supposed to challenge you to take hold of the opportunities that God has put in your path. It's a **ready-made sermon**. I'm supposed to ask you what privileges and gifts do you have that God wants you to use for His Kingdom. That's a **good thing to think about**. Typically there would be a challenge that I would make to ask you to commit to live that out in your life. It's a **reasonable thing** to do. And I will make that challenge, but **not yet**.

[The Non-Applicable Action of Esther: Finding Jesus in the Old Testament]

Lately I've been compelled to see something else happening in the Old Testament first. It's what I would call the "non-applicable action" of Esther. By "non-applicable," I don't mean that there isn't something for us here, because there is something very important for us here. It's just not about us first. It's about Jesus. When Jesus taught about who He was, He defined Himself largely in the words and prophecies of the Old Testament. When the first Christians explained the Gospel, they talked about Jesus in light of the Old Testament. The message of the Bible isn't first about being brave or courageous, but about our fallenness and our need for a Savior. Even the people who were good examples in the Bible needed a Savior because they all had a sin issue to deal with.

When we read Scripture, from the time we are very small children, we imagine ourselves as young David, rising up against the Philistine Goliath. As we get older, we wonder if we would have the courage and faith of Moses to stand up to Pharaoh and to trust God to do what He has said He will do to deliver His people. And we might put ourselves in the place of Queen Esther, facing the possibility of whatever ill might come our way, knowing that we were put here "for such a time as this."

From the beginning of the story, though, there is a mystery unfolding that culminates in the revelation of Jesus, as Romans 16:25-27 says. There is something bigger happening than just a boy defeating a giant, than getting a nation out of slavery, than an orphan girl named Hadassah who became queen. After the fall of mankind into sin in Genesis, God promised in Genesis 3:15 that the Seed of Adam and Eve would crush the head of the enemy Satan, that ancient serpent. In Genesis 12:1-3, God promised that Abraham would be a great nation and that through him all of the earth would be blessed. In Deuteronomy 28, God warned that if His people that if they did not keep His decrees that they would be carried off into exile and be scattered over the earth. Yet in Jeremiah 30, verse 3, when Israel and Judah face the exile, God says this:

"The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess,' says the LORD."

Furthermore, in Isaiah 9, God declares that the people walking in darkness will see a great light when a Child born to the house of David will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. He will set up a new kind of government that will bring man peace with God.

On and on we could talk about the promises that God has made concerning His people Israel. So what does this have to do with Esther? Am I overstepping to find Jesus in a book that doesn't even mention God, much less Jesus?

Almost every week we ask our children what they learned about in Sunday School & church, and nearly as often as I ask, our 3-year-old son Calvin replies, “Ummm... Jesus.” I take a look at his take-home sheet, and I see a picture of Cain killing his brother Abel. Similarly, we were reading the story in the Bible of King Ahab chasing after Elijah to kill him, and at the end I ask the question, “Who was trying to catch Elijah?” “Ummm... Jesus?” No, not Jesus. “God?”

So in reality, I’m just giving my son a chance to answer this question correctly when we get home from church today...

Is this like the story of the little boy who was learning about the beauty of God’s Creation? The teacher says, “It climbs trees and collects nuts. What is it?” No answer. “Okay... it’s red and furry and has a bushy tail.” Still nobody answers. “Anyone?” Finally little Tommy raises his hand. “Yes, Tommy, do you know what the answer is?” “Well, I know the answer is **supposed** to be Jesus, but it sounds kinda like a squirrel to me.”

No, we’re not grasping blindly to find Jesus in the Old Testament. He is the Word who was in the beginning, and all things were made by Him.

So how is this text about Jesus? I’m glad you asked.

I think we can see Jesus in at least two places here. The ***first way that we see Jesus is the confident hope and assurance of Mordecai’s courage that he gives to Queen Esther in the unfolding of God’s covenant promise to His people that I mentioned in the previous verses.*** If Haman is 100% successful in carrying out his plan, then God’s plan is over. No, Haman **will not** carry out his pogrom against the Jews! Mordecai had **confident hope** that it would not happen. He had **confident hope** that God would save His people. And that’s what faith is – not being naïve, but having **confident hope in the unseen.** (Hebrews 11:1)

Now, Mordecai doesn’t state this part explicitly, but we can ask and know the answer: what is God’s purpose in saving His people? Did God save the Jews solely for the sake of the Jews? No. Galatians 3:16 points out that the promise is to Abraham and to his Seed – one Person, not many. When God promises the Seed, He is speaking of Christ. Whether Mordecai realized all of this or not is up for debate, but what Mordecai knew for certain was that God would save His people one way or another. The hope of the Messiah about whom we sing that somber tune, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” during this Advent season gave courage to Esther in a phrase (and a book) in which God was not even mentioned. They “mourn in lonely exile.” This is where Esther gets the courage to say, “If I perish, I perish.” It’s God’s Covenant Promise.

The second way we see Jesus in what I’m calling the non-applicable action of Esther is this: You and I are in need of a Savior, and Esther gives us a foreshadowing of what the Messiah will do and what He will be like. It’s a glimpse; a preview; one of the many brief snapshots in the Old Testament that shows us what the True Messiah would be like. Throughout the Old Testament, we as the readers should try to put ourselves in the minds of those who knew that God had promised to defeat evil once and for all. → crush the head of the serpent. Some likely candidates had come and gone. King David, King Josiah, King

Hezekiah. Great leaders, but they all fell short. They all pointed to Jesus, but none of them were the Messiah. And Esther didn't even know all of what we know about what Jesus came to do, yet in her action we see a picture of Him.

Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York points out that first Esther identified with the people, and by her identification she was able to mediate for them. Look at Esther 7:4. She identified with them by proclaiming her Jewish heritage. Then she mediated for them by putting her own life on the line to save them. She identified herself with the cursed people, and so was able to stand in the gap for them. [Source: Tim Keller, *If I Perish, I Perish* sermon, http://sermons.redeemer.com/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=product.display&Product_ID=18634]

Sound familiar?

1 Timothy 2:5-6 says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men-- the testimony given in its proper time." Jesus identified with us by taking on human flesh in the event of Christmas. But He went one step further than Esther or Isaac who **only almost** died as a foreshadowing of Christ. Instead of saying "If I perish, I perish," He said, "When I perish, I perish." Esther shows us what the Messiah will be like, and before we can try to emulate Esther, we have to put on Christ. Indeed, we are called to be like Christ, and in that we can also try to be like Esther, but not without having Christ first.

Again, quoting Keller:

"If you see Esther as an example and say 'be like Esther,' it'll crush you. You'll never live up to it. But if you see Jesus as your Savior, not as an example, doing something for others, but as the Savior doing it for you. And you know you're that valuable to Him, and you know that your future is that secure, that changes your identity. There's your identity. There's your security. Everything else becomes just stuff." [ibid.]

To try to be Esther without Jesus is **moralism**. That is, it is a works-based solution to our problem with sin. It foregoes the grace that God wants to give that Jesus has earned for us, and it claims to try to earn that merit on our own – **which we can't!** In reality, like with Moses, and David, and Esther, we are much more like the mass of people who need to be saved. We need someone to come and rescue us. We need David to defeat that giant, and we're not Him. Jesus is. We need Moses to deliver the people from our bondage to sin and the devil, and we're not Moses. Jesus is. And we need Esther to step up and save the covenant people, and we're not that Esther. Jesus is. I call this point "the non-applicable action" because these characters point us forward to Jesus, who did what we can't do. There is great comfort to us in knowing that Jesus was the One who was truly there at just the right time... for such a time as this.

Romans 5:6 says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."

[The Applicable Action of Esther: Yielding our lives to the LORD]

So now to **applicable action** of Esther: just like those five men who gave their lives to **reach** the Auca tribe, we are called to give up our lives for the sake of Christ. Romans 12:1 says that we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices. The Apostle Paul says as he faces his own death, "To live is Christ, to die is gain."

Matt Chandler says,

"I've never met a man that's as free as Paul is. You can't touch him. Like if you tell him, 'We're gonna kill you.' 'Alright, it's time to go home.' 'Okay, we're gonna let you live.' 'Alright, to live is Christ.' 'Okay, we are going to beat you.' 'Well, that's sharing in the sufferings of Christ, I welcome that.' 'Well we'll put you in prison' 'I'll convert all your guards and most of the prisoners.' He's an untouchable man. How do you get untouchable like that? You keep going back to the Gospel over and over again." End quote. As Paul Hofrichter reminded us a couple of weeks ago, Jesus is coming again, and that gives us great hope! We know that if we are in Christ, He is coming with our victory over this sin, death, and the devil, so whether we meet Him in our physical death or in His return, just like Mordecai and Esther, we can have great courage as we look forward to Jesus. [Source: Matt Chandler *Youth* sermon from The Gospel Coalition Conference, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/youth>]

What were the conditions of Esther's decision? When Mordecai says "for such a time," the time to which he refers is a crisis. I think that when we apply Esther to our lives, one key idea is to think about how we respond to crisis. In fact, there is some parallel language between Esther 4 and a chronologically earlier passage, Joel 2, that supports this thesis. Look up the page to see how all of the Jews respond to Haman's plan. In verses 1 and 3 of Esther 4, Mordecai and the people are fasting, and weeping and wailing. To this Mordecai asks the question in verse 14, "Who knows..."

Keep your finger there and turn over to **Joel 2** [on **page 901** in pew Bibles].

¹² 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' ¹³ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. ¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing-- grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

In verse 12, God calls the people to return to Him with fasting, weeping and mourning, and then down in verse 14, Joel says, "Who knows?" The crisis in Joel is the beginning of the very judgment that has brought Esther and Mordecai to Persia. The same language being echoed a couple of hundred years later leads me to believe that Mordecai views this crisis as an opportunity to turn to the Lord. Mordecai has clearly torn both his garment AND his heart in contrition.

Some have pointed out that not only does Esther not mention God, it only even hints at prayer. Notice that no one is said to be praying here, but only fasting, and weeping, and wailing. Esther calls everyone to fast, but not explicitly to pray. Is she missing something?

In Joel, like in Esther, prayer is not explicitly mentioned, but the attitude of prayer is present. What God seems to be concerned about is that the people should demonstrate not just an outward action, but truly have a humble and contrite heart toward Him. We have this repeated command to “return,” in the Hebrew שׁוּב “*bov*.” To stop going in the direction that they’re going, and to begin to move in the opposite direction.

This crisis in Esther’s life and the crisis to which Joel refers are the same as the crisis that will come in our lives. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying that crisis necessarily means that you have sinned. But crisis is always an opportunity to draw close to the LORD. And for some, it might just be the opportunity needed to turn away from sin as well.

Esther had a dilemma. As an orphaned child, she had submitted to the leadership of her older cousin Mordecai, who acted as a father-figure for her. Look back briefly in Esther 2:20. We see Esther doing what she had done growing up. What will she do now? Here in chapter 4, she submits herself to him again. This is where the story begins to take a surprising turn, but I’ll leave that for the right Reverend Hofrichter next week. I will point out though, that from this time forward, nearly everyone is doing what Esther says, rather than the reverse. This turn of events is called *peripety*, and it refers to everything that I can’t talk about right now. But you don’t have to hang in suspense. You can read the rest of the book this week before Pastor Paul preaches it. Notice when you’re reading, though, that from this moment of crisis in which Esther decides, “If I perish, I perish,” that she is now called “Queen Esther” 13 times. There was only one previous use of that combination in the first four chapters, in 2:22.

Esther’s Dilemma and ours... Should she do right? Or should she be safe? Let me assure you as Mordecai assured Esther – it is NEVER safe to do the opposite of what is right. And furthermore, God hasn’t called us to be safe, but to do His will.

And what is His will?

Matthew 28:18-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

What is His will?

James 1:27 ²⁷ "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Again, not to steal Paul’s thunder next week, but notice that in 9:15 one of the outcomes of the celebration of Purim is the giving gifts of food to each other and to the poor. Wherever we turn in Scripture, there are the poor, and the fatherless, and the widows, and the foreigners. God regularly includes their mistreatment of this list of the violations of God’s people in their walk with Him.

In our own congregation we have several families that have answered this call in the way of adoption. It may seem like a drop in the bucket, but it's a world of difference to a child in need. Think of the impact worldwide of Christian families adopting even one child. Just to cite a work in progress, Todd and Sara W. just got back from Ethiopia from meeting their adopted son who will come to live with them soon. There are many others; some have adopted much longer ago than others. This past week I met a pastor from Elm Creek who adopted a wonderful little boy with Down's Syndrome from the Ukraine. These children were sequestered from the other orphans, tied by their onesies to their crib rail, left alone and neglected to die of malnutrition. Friends, this is a crisis!

And this is just one area, it's not just about adoption. There are the foreigners who live among us. There is the issue of kidnapping and selling young girls in the sex trade... slavery is not dead, it's just muffled. There's the persecuted Church. Most importantly, there is the crisis of eternity.

What is God's will? That we "freely give" what was freely given to us. You and I don't have anything that originated from our own power or might." All the earth is the LORD's, and the cattle on a thousand hills." We were put where we were "for such a time as this." You have the access to people that you have for such a time as this. The choice and the challenge before us is the same as it was for Esther. Will you cling to the riches of the palace... the riches of living in the wealthiest nation in history, in the safety of your home, in the security of your job, in the love of your family...

You have been placed as a steward of some wonderful things and people. But they aren't things for your own benefit alone. *Will it cost you something to let them go? Possibly. But will it cost you something if you cling to them? As Mordecai tells Esther, definitely.* One of the missionaries to the Aucas, Jim Elliot, summed it up this way: "**He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.**" That's how we can say, "O Death, Where is your sting? O Grave, Where is your victory?"

My last application challenge is that we need to GIVE COURAGE. By that, I mean that we need to give Jesus. We need to lead other people to the truth of Jesus Christ, who died on our behalf that we might have everlasting life. You can do that as simply as inviting someone to come to hear the message of the Gospel at the Singing Christmas Tree. We still have tickets available for the next two weekends.

And maybe you need to receive courage by trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior for the first time this morning. We'd love to meet with you down front to tell you more about that.

Where does courage come from?

Courage comes from the confident hope that Jesus has come and is coming again. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Emmanuel, which translated means "God with us."

Let's close in prayer.

Our Father,
we have a great need for you and for the Son, Jesus Christ. Give us the courage to live for you by responding to a world in need of You, and in need of Your love. In Jesus' Name, Amen.