

Esther 06-04-04A

This is the 4th of April, 2006. We continue tonight our study in the book of Esther. Let's take a moment as we begin to go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we are always grateful for the opportunities that you have given us to exercise faith, to lay hold of righteousness, to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We especially enjoy these times of assembly and fellowship and encouragement that come from the consistency and the faithfulness and the positive attitude of believers who recognize the greatness of your grace and the wondrous nature of our salvation through the Lord Jesus. We thank you for the opportunity to study this book this evening.

We pray that God the Holy Spirit will illuminate it in such a way that each one of us will find in this passage truths, promises, principles and doctrines that will guide us and challenge us in the days ahead. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, this is starting to pick up the pace in terms of the forward movement of the story here in Esther. In the first couple of chapters we had a lot of background. We learned about Esther and Mordecai, her cousin, who is also her guardian.

We learned about King Ahasuerus and his campaign against the Greeks and his dalliances outside his marriage and the friction and increasing lack of harmony and good fellowship between him and Vashti, his queen, culminating in her banishment and the search for a new queen. Esther is scooped up in the Persian Idol show, if you will, where she's brought in and given a tryout and passes the test with the preliminary screeners and judges and then is put through this rigorous year of beauty enhancement and deportment training and so on. She comes in and she earns the favor of the king.

She seizes and lays hold of his favor and he chooses her to be the queen. She has now been the queen for some five years and a crisis has arisen because in this five years also, Haman, the Agagite, has risen to power and favor with the king because the king is somewhat unstable and unreliable in his policy decisions and Haman has developed an intense hatred for Mordecai and everything remotely associated with Mordecai, which basically covers the entire nation of Israel. All of those who can be identified as Jews are now in the crosshairs of Haman's political machine gun here and he wants to cut them all down.

So, when Mordecai finds out about this, he goes into high gear spiritually. He fasts, he puts on sackcloth and ashes and he cries aloud, he broadcasts the fact of his distress to others who are alerted that there is a crisis. The Jews are in great consternation and the hidden agenda in this somewhat poorly worded decree is made manifest.

If Mordecai had not spoken up, this decree would have gone sort of unnoticed. It was sort of quietly put out without directly naming the people against whom it was directed and Mordecai blew the whistle. Now, many times there is pressure against rocking the boat, there is pressure against speaking up when there is wrongdoing, when there is evil afoot.

Many times we risk ostracism, we risk rejection, we risk being given the cold shoulder and being repudiated and despised and mocked and disliked. And this is another case where we must discern what is essential and what is non-essential. Many things are inconsequential.

You're sitting in a classroom as a student, you look over and you see someone cheating, that's a wrong thing, they're not supposed to cheat. But it's really not our place to go up and rat the person out and say, oh, teacher, so-and-so cheated on this test and I felt it was my God-given duty to come and spill the beans about it. This is an obvious case where that's just inappropriate, and there is nothing really at risk.

That person is only hurting themselves. If they're getting a false grade and not learning the material, they will pay later on. But there is no risk to life, limb, property.

It's unfortunate, but there's a lot of unfortunate things that happen in the world. People are going to do wrong a lot. Now, there are other times when the unthinking behavior, the maladjusted behavior, the evil and sinful behavior, the rebellious behavior of people, the illegal behavior of people causes a risk.

It can damage many people. It can create a hazard. And we have to discern, is this a sufficient hazard? Is this a sufficient injustice? Is this a big enough problem that I need to speak up even though it's unlikely that anyone else will because there's a lot of social pressure? There is no set of rules for this.

There's not a hard and fast guidebook. We are supposed to think our way through life, aren't we? And sometimes we will find ourselves in a position where we have to decide, well, is this essential or is this nonessential? And if we're unsure, what's the answer? How do we figure this out? Go to God. Make it a matter of prayer.

Ask for wisdom. Say, Lord, what should I do? Sometimes you only have a short amount of time to make a decision about whether to speak or remain silent. Sometimes you may have a day or two days or whatever.

But in whatever space is provided, if there's not a clear answer, if it doesn't seem obvious whether to speak up or not, ask God. Think about it now. Think about it from God's perspective.

God's up in heaven looking down on you and on me. And we are really trying. We honestly want to live our life to please Him.

And we hit this situation and we try to meditate on the Word of God and we try to apply the things that we've learned in Bible class. We really want to please God, but we just can't. There are pros and cons in speaking up or in remaining silent or in any other kind of decision, really.

But it just seems like it could go either way and it's sort of foggy and unclear. Well, if God is up there looking down at us and He sees us wrestling with this, and we do our homework and we meditate and we think about it and we analyze it, we try to think of an analogy or a comparison in Scripture, we try to use the principles that we've learned and we can't solve it, we come and ask God. Now, how do you think God is going to view that prayer? Oh, no.

I'm not going to give you a clue. You just sit there and run around in circles and wait until it's too late and make the wrong decision. Do you think God is going to let us do that? If we

honestly want to know and we honestly can't figure it out, God is going to... Good teachers will do this.

If they know that you're a willing student and you've done your homework and you've done your studying, but you've misunderstood a question or you're really focusing on the wrong element of a problem during a quiz or a test, and you raise your hand and you say, you know, Mr. Smith, I just honestly don't understand what this question is asking me. A good teacher isn't going to lay it all out for you in black and white, but, I think all of you have probably had this experience, they'll point you in the right direction. They'll give you a little hint.

They'll say, well, what is the question? They'll give you a little prompt and a little push because they know that you're not a ne'er-do-well who's just trying to weasel the answer out. You're honestly trying to solve it. You're honestly stumped.

And they'll give you just that little bit of help to get unstuck and overcome the friction and then your mental machinery works. God is the same way. If we are truly having difficulty understanding what we need to do, we go to God in prayer.

That's one of the reasons we have prayer. And we say, Lord, please help me see this clearly. Help me remember and apply your word that is relevant to this situation.

Now, how confident are you that God will answer that kind of prayer? You don't look very confident, some of you. You think God will answer that prayer and give us the help we ask for? I think so. Why would he not? Is God glorified by our confusion? If we're doing what we're supposed to do, God will answer our prayers.

The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. You find that in the end of James. So, Mordecai knows that this decree is dangerous.

The lives of thousands and thousands and thousands of Israelites depend on whether or not this decree gets thwarted. It's a subtle plot. But there's no question in Mordecai's mind.

Now, how popular do you think this is going to make Mordecai with Haman and with those who have great power? Do you think Mordecai's life could be at risk now? Because he has uncovered this plot. He's exposed it. He's gone about crying out with a bitter cry and alerting everyone to the danger.

Haman thought he would kind of get this done on the quiet. He's making himself a huge target. He's probably persona non grata up in the government now because here's the king's command that has come out.

Now, Mordecai's saying this is a goofy command and should not have been given. And it's embarrassing to the king because he didn't think it through. And it's exposing his lack of wisdom and it's exposing this plot.

So, we can look at Mordecai and realize that when we can see that a thing is essential, it is important that the truth be known. It's important that the truth be spoken. It's important that people be informed that something sneaky and something hidden and something evil is going on, we speak up.

This seems like a really obvious point. Is it obvious? Does it seem obvious that if something evil is going on, you'd point it out and bring it up? Well, it may seem obvious when I'm talking about it, but many people get in situations where there is abuse, where there are secret things that go on that should not happen, and they don't speak up because they're afraid. They're afraid of what others will think.

They're afraid of consequences. They're afraid. And we cannot be afraid in situations like this.

Mordecai had plenty to worry about. He could imagine, oh, if I bring this up, why, this could expose the queen and there might be a big scandal about her being Jewish and all of that. But Mordecai knows that this is important and he brings it up.

We have to do the same. God has not given us a spirit of fear. If we do what we do out of fear, I guarantee you it's wrong.

We never make decisions based on fear. If you say, well, when I look at this in the cold light of day, the reason I'm doing this is because I'm afraid. That is a crummy reason to do something.

I'm afraid I'm going to lose money. I'm afraid I'm going to lose a friendship. I'm afraid I'm going to lose someone's goodwill.

I'm afraid something bad is going to happen if I make this decision. That is a rotten, terrible, unbelieving, unbiblical reason to do something. No believer in the Bible who is claiming God's righteousness by faith is acting in fear.

What does it say in the New Testament? Perfect love casts out fear. If you love God and you're living your life to please God, then you're not going to be making your decisions based on fear. And it is love for God that will cast out our fear.

That's the only perfect love there is. Love between people is always imperfect, isn't it? Because we're imperfect. The lover is imperfect.

The lovee is imperfect. Perfect love is the love for God. God is the perfect object.

There's nothing about God not to love. We love His righteousness. We love His compassion.

We love His knowledge. We love His wisdom. We love His power.

We love His justice. We love His punishment of the wicked. There's nothing about God not to love.

It's perfect love. And perfect love casts out fear. When you are fully loving God and when you are operating in love for God and motivated by it, you're not going to be afraid.

What's our memory verse? What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. So, this is what Mordecai does. Now, Esther sends clothes out to him.

She doesn't know what's up. She's sort of insulated. The women have limited circulation in the palace and she doesn't know anything about this.

And she hears that Mordecai's out there ripping up his clothes and wailing with bitter cries. So she says, well, maybe somebody spilled something on him and he just tore up his clothes. I'll send him some fresh ones.

So she sends them out. And Mordecai tells the messenger, I won't accept these clothes. The messenger goes back and says, Esther, Mordecai won't take the clothes.

So she sends Hathak, the trusted messenger, out there. And Mordecai tells Hathak all that had happened to him. The sum of money that Haman had promised to put into the king's treasuries by wiping out the Jews and taking all of their property and taking all of their villas and their bank accounts and their furniture and their possessions.

And he's going to put this big hunk of money into the king's treasury and make it really attractive. It's an offer the king really can't refuse. The king's treasuries are probably down after fighting this war and so on.

So he also had a copy of the written decree and he gives that to Hathak to take in to Esther. Makes you wonder if Esther could read. Think Esther could read? I don't know if she could or not.

Women, it would have been highly unusual in that day. But she would have had a scribe or somebody in there, the duty letter writer and letter reader who could read it to her. So, Hathak returned and told Esther the words of Mordecai in verse 9. Esther spoke to Hathak and gave him the command, For Mordecai, all the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king who has not been called has but one law to be put to death except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter that he may live.

I told you this has been documented in Herodotus and extra-biblical sources. It goes way back before the time of Ahasuerus where this was a custom and a law in the Medo-Persian court. The Median king actually first put this into place because he was afraid somebody was going to assassinate him.

And, of course, it isn't ultimately going to save Ahasuerus. He's going to be assassinated some years down the road. But, she says, I have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days.

Esther doesn't really know if the king still likes her or not because it's been a month since she has seen him. So, Mordecai told the answer to the messenger to give to Esther, Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all other Jews. If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place.

But you and your father's house will perish. Remember last time? That was our main point. These challenges and opportunities, we don't have to worry about someone else's blood

being on our hands or whether our actions are going to mess up someone else's deliverance.

It's our participation in God's plan. It's our opportunity to exploit the grace of God and the provision of God that is at stake. Mordecai says you don't have to worry about the rest of the people.

God's going to save them regardless. You need to worry about your place in God's plan, your opportunity. Because if you try to rely on human wisdom and a human scheme to survive, you'll perish.

But if you risk your life and seize this opportunity in God's plan, then you're in God's hands. Who knows whether you've come to the kingdom for such a time as this. And we can tell ourselves this every single day.

We have come to the potential for participation and for service in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and the kingdom of the Father beyond that. We have come to the kingdom. That's our opportunity.

That's your opportunity. And my opportunity. So the question is, are we going to step up to the plate? It involves some risk.

Doesn't it? Esther says I can't just go waltzing in there. King hasn't talked to me in a month. And if I go uninvited, all he has to do is sit still and do nothing and they'll haul me off and execute me.

So Esther in verse 15 told Mordecai, go gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan and fast for me. Neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. Now, I'm trying to make a tough decision over here, and so I call all of you all up.

And I say, look, I'm facing a really tough decision, so I don't want you to eat anything for three days. How does your not eating anything help me? If all it is is that you're going to skip nine meals for me, what does that do for me other than get you kind of grouchy at me? I wish you wouldn't have called up this week. I just made a big roast and now I can't eat the leftovers.

I just got coupons for Arby's and I can't go down there now. What good does people not eating do for you? Zero. If you call me up and say, Sam, don't eat for three days.

I'm thinking about something real hard. I'm going to say, well, think away, but I'm having my peanut butter sandwich for lunch. Why would me stopping eating do anything? We know that fasting in Israel is always associated with prayer.

It's always associated with appeal to God. What is Esther basically asking for here? But she's not saying so. Why? They're sort of under siege here.

They're living in a foreign land. They are under the thumb of the Medes and the Persians and they don't talk about God openly. You can get in trouble with the powers that be.

So things are sort of in code. When Esther says fast on my account, it's understood that this means petition God on my behalf. Now, in case you're starting to go to sleep, someone mentioned this day before yesterday on Sunday, and so I looked it up and printed it out for myself.

There has been a study, it was just released four days ago, called the Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer. Scientists have put prayer on the scale and weighed it and found it wanting. Christine Cassatelli, the senior editor at Science and Theology News, wrote this article.

And I'm going to give you quite a bit of this. The largest ever study of prayer offers discouragement to religious believers hoping for evidence that prayer for God's intervention in the natural order is effective. Isn't that what we're talking about here? Esther's saying everybody pray, I've got a big problem.

So everybody pray. Three days, nobody eating, everybody in shushan. This is a pretty big effort, right? Well, science says it was a total waste of time.

The study of third-party prayer, also known as intercessory prayer, says that praying for the health of patients from a distance is not effective in reducing complications after heart surgery. This was their little test case. We'll find people that have had heart surgery, open heart, crack the chest, go in there, repair valves, do bypasses.

Some people have people praying for them, got a whole church praying for them. Other people rank pagan, godless pilgrims out there and they're not having anybody pray for them. The \$2.4 million study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer or STEP, Study Therapeutic Effects Prayer.

STEP, that's what they're going to call it. It is the sixth and most expensive study to find that intercessory prayer has no real effect on the well-being of patients. There have been five previous studies that also came to this same conclusion.

The nine-year research project was partly supported by the John Templeton Foundation which also funds this magazine, Science and Theology News. Another important yet unexpected and even disturbing finding of STEP is that the group of heart patients who knew they were receiving prayers from strangers did not do as well as those who didn't know. So, if you're going to pray for somebody according to the study, don't tell them.

Because if you tell them, they won't do as well. I think maybe this made them worried. Wow, 14 people have called up saying they're praying for me.

I must really be sick. And then they get depressed and they don't do so well. The study used a sample of 1,802 bypass patients from six hospitals who were randomly assigned to one of three groups.

Group 1 received intercessory prayer after being told that they might or might not receive it. We've got a group of people over here. They might be praying for you.

They might not be praying for you. Group 2 did not receive intercessory prayers after being told that they might or might not receive it. So, in the first group, they actually did get prayed for, but they told people, come see, come saw, maybe yes, maybe no.

The second group, they told them the same thing. Well, we might have a big room full of people praying for you. We might not.

And nobody prayed for them. How would you like to have been in that study? You've just had open heart surgery and come to find out they told everybody, well, don't pray for him. He's a part of a study and it's important for us to find out whether prayer works or not.

So, nobody prayed for Sam. Group 3 were told they would be receiving intercessory prayer and they did receive it. We're going to pray for you.

And they actually did. So, different variables in each one. Step findings scheduled to appear in the April issue of the American Heart Journal.

So, if you get the American Heart Journal this coming month, they'll have it all in there. Those receiving blinded prayer, meaning they didn't know if they were getting it or not, fared the same as those who were not prayed for, said Dr. Charles F. Bethea, Principal Investigator at the Integrus Baptist Medical Center in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Paradoxically, those who were indeed aware that prayer was being provided to them actually fared worse.

Methodology may be the issue behind the unusual group 3 result. The step researchers speculate that perhaps the introduction of the prayer protocol itself, confiding in some that they were selected for prayer, for instance, might have induced a form of performance anxiety. I'm a part of a study.

People are praying for me. If I don't get well, it's going to make prayer look bad. And then they got worried and they didn't do so well.

This just goes to tell you when you worry about something, you're going to do worse. Sit down for a piano recital. If you practice and you know your piece, and you're relaxed, you'll do fine.

If you tense up, you do horrible. Right? So, they tensed up. The reputation of prayer depends on me getting well.

Oh no. And then they pop the stitch or something. So, it might have induced performance anxiety or made the patients feel doubtful about their outcome.

Why are they praying for me? One line we considered in this study was, did the patient think, am I so sick that they had to call in the prayer team? Said Bethea. Another question is the subjects themselves. I wonder how free enrollees were in our study to say no to being prayed for.

Especially when asked by a caregiver at such a crucial time. So, with these types of unresolved issues, investigators said it's possible that intercessory prayer may not be amenable to randomized control methodology and that a large-scale study like this may not

be replicated. Well, what is the problem with this whole study? What is it that these people have missed about intercessory prayer? What do we know about prayer? And, God help us if we don't know it after 10 years of studying God's Word.

What do we know about intercessory prayer? What do we pray for? If you go to the hospital and get heart surgery, what are the rest of us praying? We pray for our spiritual well-being. That God's spiritual goals and objectives will be accomplished. That the light of Christ will shine through the life of the person who is in that situation.

That those who surround them will be comforted and encouraged. That those who need the gospel will find it. That those who have an opportunity to exercise faith and hope and love and lay hold of eternal righteousness can do so.

Now, how much of this study do you think measured God's righteousness being laid hold of and appropriated and woven into linen garments for the future? None. Zero. Zilch.

They're measuring the complete wrong thing. Sometimes science is just as stupid as it can possibly be. And, unfortunately, many of the Christians who participated in this study also are unaware of the priorities and the goals and the objectives in God's plan.

Of course, it's not going to make a measurable difference in the outcome because God has already ordained the outcome. It makes a difference in the outcome in our soul. It makes a difference in whether we are full of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, humility, self-control, or not.

This is the realm where we pray. This is the realm where we have a choice, where God the Holy Spirit operates. We don't expect miraculous healings from prayer.

It's absurd. Those things haven't gone on for 2,000 years. Well, how about Mordecai? How about Esther asking for this prayer? What is the nature of this prayer? What is the nature of this fast? Well, we're going to pause here and take our break, and when we come back, we'll see.

Oh, at least two.