

Behind the Waterfall – Growing up in Public
Esther 3:12-14, 4:6-16 – 1 Peter 1:1-2, 13-16

One of the themes running right through the Old Testament is how to live as God's people in an unsympathetic environment. Always, the question is, "How do I remain passionately faithful to God while at the same time manage to serve the people among whom I live?"

Growing Up in Public

So there was Joseph, sold into slavery, learning to adapt in a strange land, and rising up through the ranks to become second only to the Pharaoh. His faithfulness was mainly seen in wise, reliable service and the courageous interpretation of dreams. Later there was Moses. He didn't really do so well. He lost his cool in the Egyptian Court and had to flee after killing someone.

Then there was Daniel who was effectively a civil servant in the Babylonian government, having been taken captive by them. He showed faithfulness by praying to God when it was against the law; and he gained respect for God like Joseph, through his ability to interpret dreams. In 539BC the Babylonians were taken over by the Persians, so Nehemiah found himself cup-bearer in the royal court. He showed faithfulness in his campaign to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but he collaborated with the emperor on this.

Then just before Nehemiah, in the reign of the Emperor Xerxes I, we have Esther. She also served in the Royal Court as queen to the emperor, but showed her faithfulness to God by boldly interceding for, and saving the Jewish people from genocide.

Esther's Story

Let me run through the story of Esther.

Xerxes reigned from 486-465 BC across huge tracts of the Middle East. Having deposed queen Vashti on the grounds of insolence, Xerxes set about finding a new wife by way of a huge and lengthy beauty contest.

Mordecai was a Jew bringing up his orphaned cousin, Esther. He entered her for the contest but told her not to tell anyone that she was Jewish.

Esther won Xerxes' favour and became queen. Meanwhile Mordecai uncovered an assassination plot, told Esther, who reported it, (giving Mordecai the credit) and soon Xerxes began to realise she was more than just a pretty face.

Meanwhile Haman is a courtier on the rise, who Xerxes gives a position above all others – and Mordecai, being Jewish, refuses to bow before him out of faithfulness to God.

Haman decides to exterminate the Jews and gets the king weakly to agree. Mordecai tells Esther she's their only hope and Esther decides on a plan.

Although it's a capital offence to approach the king without invitation, Esther invites Xerxes and Haman to a banquet in order to tell him something. The men go along and Xerxes asks what Esther's petition is. She says, "Come to another banquet tomorrow." Meanwhile Haman continues his vendetta against Mordecai, preparing a gallows to hang him from.

They go to the next banquet, and are really enjoying it, (a bit like an Alpha course), when Esther tells him about the plot to murder all her people. The king's appalled, and when he asks who has planned this deed she points the finger: Haman.

The king storms out and Haman falls upon Esther for mercy, at which point Xerxes re-enters, thinks Haman is molesting his wife, and decides to hang him on the same gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai.

So Esther saved her people, the Jews are given favoured status and the right to worship God openly, and Mordecai's honoured along with his favourite cousin.

Strangers in the World

500 years later, when Peter likened Christians to the Jews, dispersed among unbelieving nations: "**Strangers in the world**" he called us. So what can we learn from Esther as to how we might live – faithful to God but serving those around us?

Esther's sometimes portrayed as simply a beautiful woman who worked her charms. That kind of characterisation does no-one any favours, especially in our image-obsessed, skin-deep culture. It's bad news for women, and bad news for men. Esther's deeper qualities are the ones I want to look at, and they're the ones we can learn from.

Esther's Qualities

Firstly, she was prayerful. Esther was an activist who took charge of the situation. She wasn't content merely to be thought of as a beautiful companion in a man's world. Yet as soon as she realised the gravity of the situation (4:15-16) she told Mordecai to gather all the Jews in the city to fast. The call to prayer was her first action.

Secondly, she was respectful. She knew the world she was entering. She took instruction from her guardian Mordecai (2:10) and withheld her Jewish identity until a time when it would matter. She went through a whole year of beauty treatment in order to satisfy the king, (2:12). Later on she realised how carefully she'd have to approach the king without him having called her in, (4:11). Show respect.

Thirdly, she was opportune. She had absolutely no political power but she used the opportunities and resources that were available to her – in this case, throwing a banquet and giving personal attention to her husband. What resources are available to you in your situation?

Fourthly, she was tactful. She didn't claim superiority on account of her Jewishness. She didn't scorn the king for his weak agreement to Haman's evil desire. In fact, she appeals to his sense of morality by telling him about the awful threat to her people. The difference between manipulation and tact is that manipulation keeps the other person in a place of weakness whereas tact invites them to step into their strength.

Fifthly, therefore, she was enabling of the king. Haman cajoled Xerxes to do what he wanted, but Esther enabled him to understand what he really valued. The truth was that he really valued *her*, and through that he saw the consequences of exterminating a people,(7:3-6). Every political decision has personal consequences somewhere.

Sixthly, she was strong. Esther wasn't a strong woman in the sense of throwing her weight around – that was more the style of Vashti her predecessor, (1:9-12). But she had good self-esteem. She knew what she was worth and traded on that value. She couldn't be sure her plan would succeed – we don't even know that she *had* a plan beyond the next step – she knew that with one false move she could face execution. But Esther was courageous: **“If I perish, I perish”** she said. (4:16)

Seventhly, she was truthful. **“The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman,”** she tells the king in 7:6. Esther does nothing to trick anyone. She's simply truthful from beginning to end. We need tact; we need to show respect; it's not always right to disclose everything, or to express all our opinions, but we need to be grounded with a central, deep-rooted core of truth, and at the right time it's that core which will shine through.

Jeremiah the prophet said, **“Seek the welfare of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”** (Jer 29:7) Both Esther and Mordecai demonstrate true loyalty . They are loyal to their people, loyal to the king, loyal to each other, and loyal to the Lord. Loyalty doesn't mean covering over the truth or showering with unnecessary compliments. It means building personal trust through acting on the other's best interests.

Our Situations

So what situations do *you* face? Do you ever wonder whether you in that situation for a purpose? That's exactly what Mordecai said to Esther: **“Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”** (4:14)

As Christians – God's people – we are in this world with a mission, with a viewpoint, with a purpose to serve God and save lives. That means we live in *contrast* to much of what's around us, in Peter's words, **“as strangers in the world”** yet we're here for the benefit those around us, because **“God so loved the world.”**

A Spiritual Exercise

So like last week, I'd like to offer a spiritual exercise: You can begin to do this now, or you can do it at home as well. I want to suggest three questions you can ask of yourself: "Where is my place" "Who are my people?" and "What is my purpose?" (Where, who, what).

Where is my place: we all have different places – the home, the extended family, the circle of friends, work, and so on. Think about *your* place. Draw a circle on a piece of paper to represent one of your places. It might be Home. Draw another and it might be work; Another place might be your friends. You can do this exercise with more than one person – some circles might overlap.

Then ask, Who are my people: action happens between people, so who are the people *in* your places? Again, write them down: not all of them, but those God places on your heart. Pray for them and consider them.

Lastly, ask what is my purpose? "Seek the welfare of the city" said Jeremiah. How will do you do good, serving those people and doing God's will? As you pray, as you consider, as you engage, as you serve, your purpose will become clear.

Where is my place? Who are my people? What is my purpose? What qualities do I need to serve God in this situation? Let's think about that now, prayerfully.