

Courage When it Counts

Texts: Esther 4:11-14, 15-17; 7:3-6

General Direction

To learn lessons in courage from the life of Queen Esther. [Deliver this message after the reading for Week 6 is completed.]

Back Story

Esther lived around 470 BC, toward the end of the Babylonian captivity. The book of Esther spans ten years, between the first return from captivity led by Zarubbabel, and the second return led by Ezra. The vast majority of Jews chose to remain in Persia rather than return to Palestine. King Xerxes was a boisterous man of emotional extremes, and his huge empire stretched from Western India (East) to Ethiopia (South) to the edge of Greece (West).

Sermon Purpose and Outline

This message finds truths from the life of Esther about the link between faith and courage. God's power indwelling committed people can accomplish major feats.

Sermon Question: How can I find courage when I need it?

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| 1. In the crisis find your calling | Esther 4:11-14 |
| 2. Use your fear to find your faith | Esther 4:15-17 |
| 3. Lose yourself to find your courage | Esther 7:3-6 |

Sermon Introduction

The book of Esther reads like a good news/bad news story. You know those jokes?

Doctor: I have some good news and I have some bad news.

Patient: What's the good news?

Doctor: The good news is that the tests you took showed that you have 24 hours to live.

Patient: That's the good news? What's the bad news?

Doctor: The bad news is that I forgot to call you yesterday!

Well, for Esther, her story starts off like this...

Bad News: She was born into slavery in a foreign land

Good News: Her family is together

Bad News: Both of her parents die, leaving her an orphan

Good News: She gets to have her kind cousin, Mordecai, raise her

Bad News: The selfish king is scooping up all the beautiful girls for a royal beauty pageant

More Bad News: If she doesn't satisfy the king, she still has to stay in his harem for the rest of her life. She'll probably never be married and have a life of her own.

Good News: She's the winner! She pleased the king more than anyone else!

Bad News: Wicked Haman is so mad at her cousin that he gets permission to have all her people, the Jews, killed.

I could go on like this through the rest of the book. But have you ever felt like that? You are just going along fine, life is grand, and suddenly you find yourself in a crisis you never asked for. And this crisis forces you to face your deepest fears. Maybe you found out someone you love is dying. Or you had a serious car accident and are facing months of recovery. Or there's a crisis pregnancy center about to be shut down and they need help at city hall. Or you have to resist carrying out unethical practices at work. How do you find courage at times like that?

Connection to the Overarching Theme: The Journey of Faith

Courage is the strength to take risks, face danger, endure difficulty, or withstand fear. Courage is not an *absence of* fear. Rather, it *withstands* fear – you need the fear in order to call it courage! And the strongest source of courage in the face of fear is faith. When you place your faith in God, you find courage to face the threats and problems that are bigger than you can handle, because now you are tapped into the only power that can overcome them. Esther did exactly that in her journey of faith.

Sermon Question: How can I find courage when I need it?

1. In the crisis find your calling

Esther 4:11-14

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?**"

Textual Explanation

Esther feels the circumstances closing in around her and is trying to avoid it affecting her directly, but she can't. We see the providential hand of God in bringing her to her strategic position, but all Esther can see is that she's in big trouble! We may have a hard time feeling her desperation, because we do not know what it is like to live in a tyrannical kingdom!

"Cousin, what you're asking me to do may kill me!"

But notice something here. *The opposite of courage is not cowardice, but conformity.* Esther's temptation is not just a temptation to remain silent. Esther is tempted to try to blend in with everyone else in the palace, to distance herself from her people, her identity. We often do the same. "I'm not a Christian!"

Mordecai is not going to let her do that. He reminds her that whether she admits it or not, her identity would still get her killed. His immortal words ring with destiny:

"Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this!"

Application

Sometimes it is in a crisis that we discover our calling.

- Perhaps the death of a child from a disease launched you on a crusade to fund research for a cure.
- Maybe your prayer group getting kicked off of the school premises caused you to fight for freedom of speech.
- Or, did the plight of women caught in the modern-day slave trade inspire your calling?

It's often a threat of danger, fear for the future, or suffering from pain that arouses us to take on a big cause. It's that "rising to the occasion" that we see in Esther, and she is going to have to take on this cause single-handedly.

Cross References

The Bible tells us that God is on the lookout for people who will stand up for him, who will allow themselves to be indwelt by his spirit and empowered to do things beyond their own abilities or strength.

Ezekiel 22:30

I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.

2 Chronicles 16:9

For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

Illustration

Pastor's Note: You could print this poem by St. Francis of Assisi as a handout, or have the song sung as a special music transition to the next point.

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*

You can find courage by discovering your calling in the midst of a crisis. You may have to stand alone, stop conforming and stand out from the crowd, and fight against forces more powerful than yourself, but God is waiting to empower the person who will stand in the gap against evil.

2. Use your fear to find your faith

Esther 4:15-17

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.*

Textual Explanation

Esther finally realizes her unique call. If she goes in to see the king she **may** perish. If she does not go in she will **surely** perish! Nothing like an ultimatum to clear things up!

Look at the end of chapter 4, and beginning of chapter 5. What do you see? There's a blank! What was in that blank? What was Esther doing between the time she heard the challenge from Mordecai and the time she boldly walked into the king's presence?

She fasted and prayed! She was waiting on the Lord.

Timeless Principle

Don't miss this powerful pause in the drama! Don't rush on to the next scene! Soak in what she must have been going through. She's so desperate for God to intervene that she will go without food so that she can wait upon God and hear from him.

If Esther had heard about the royal decree to kill the Jews and said, "No problem! I'll just pop on in to the throne room and set Xerxes straight," we wouldn't have called her courageous – we would have called her foolhardy, reckless, rash. Instead, Esther's legitimate fear caused her to put on the brakes and approach with caution. In her fear, she connected with God and found her faith.

Where did Esther get her courage? Was she born that way? Is it just that some people have that courageous personality? No, courage is not a personality trait; it is a character trait! Courage is choosing to be indwelt by faith in God, in spite of feeling fearful.

Cross References

Are you facing down a powerful person or a threatening situation right now? Here are some verses about what happens when you place your faith in the One who is more powerful than any worldly force or problem.

Psalm 56:3-4

³ *When I am afraid, I will trust in you.* ⁴ *In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. **What can mortal man do to me?***

Proverbs 21:1

*The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; **he turns it wherever he wishes.***

Psalm 27:1-3

¹ *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

² *When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh,
when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.*

³ *Though an army besiege me, **my heart will not fear**; though war break out against me, even then will **I be confident**.*

The contrast in scripture between our own strength and what we can do in God's strength is always striking. Courage blossoms when we take God at his word, believe he'll do what he says, remember his protection in the past, and place ourselves in his care. The more faith we have in God's power, the more courageous we'll be. We'll be able to say with the Psalmist, "What can mortal man do to me?"

Application

When you are afraid, what is your first response? Do you hide? Maybe you are in a "white space" in your life where you need to wait upon the Lord. You need to fast and pray.

"Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway!" John Wayne

Your fear can be the impetus for seeking God and renewing your faith in his power. Let your fear direct you to seek God, shift your faith to him, and ask for his power and courage to indwell you.

3. Lose yourself to find your courage

Esther 7:3-6

³ *Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life – this is my petition. **And spare my people – this is my request.**"* ⁴ *For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."* ⁵ *King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?"* ⁶ *Esther said, "**The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.**"* Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

Textual Explanation

Esther had shifted from self-preservation to concern for her people. Once Esther got her eyes off of herself and thought about the greater issue – the preservation of the Jews – she found a reservoir of courage for speaking boldly to the king. When she was worried about her personal safety, she was hesitant, fearful. But once her perspective changed, she rose to the occasion and found the courage to put her own safety on the line, make a courageous decision, establish a bold plan and carry it out.

Cross Reference

We see this type of courage in the apostle Paul, who time after time put his own safety aside for the sake of reaching one more city for Jesus:

1 Thessalonians 2:2 NLT

*You know how badly we had been treated at Philippi just before we came to you and how much we suffered there. **Yet our God gave us the courage** to declare his Good News to you boldly, even though we were surrounded by many who opposed us.*

We have all seen news stories that feature a brave hero who rescued someone in danger. Sometimes, when asked how they found the courage to jump in the water or climb the tree or give CPR or yell for help, they shrug it off as something anyone would do. To the newly-minted hero, their act of bravery feels not so courageous as it does kind or caring, or simply a human act of reaching out. Bravery is ignited when they see someone in need and lose all thought about themselves.

Application

When you feel fearful, what is at its source? Are you focused on yourself?

- Does self-consciousness keep you from sharing your testimony at church?
- Does your fear of possible embarrassment prevent you from inviting a friend to your home?
- Are you so afraid of rejection you don't reach out to welcome a new neighbor?

Stop obsessing about what people might think of you, and develop a love for people that is stronger than your self-consciousness. Haven't you experienced a time when you got so caught up in helping someone else you forgot all about your fear and inhibition and self-consciousness? In losing yourself, you will discover courage you never knew you had.

Matthew 16:25

*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but **whoever loses his life for me will find it.***

Closing

- What crisis are you facing? Is God calling you to a new cause because of it?
- What fears are you feeling? Is God inviting you to come and put your faith in him?
- What self-consciousness are you fighting? Is God prompting you to die to self and find courage?

Courage withstands fear to fight for a cause because of faith in a big God.