

If I Perish, I Perish

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[0 : 00] During my 20s, I was living in Boston. I had just finished grad school and desperately needed to pay bills and start repaying school loans, and so I really needed a job, and ideally I wanted a job as a counselor.

That's what my training was in. And so I was looking for jobs and interviewing, and I interviewed and finally got an opportunity to come work at this one clinic just north of the city.

But one of the things I learned pretty quickly after starting work there is that this clinic, and in particular a number of other clinicians who worked at this clinic, it was pretty biased against what they called born-again.

And according to them, a born-again was a Christian who actually believed in Jesus as being a real person, who really died on a cross for sin, who really rose from death and all of that.

And there was a pretty strong kind of open bias against born-again. And I picked up on this pretty quickly, and being the new guy and the low man on the totem pole, I just sort of flew under the radar for a while, and people knew I had a seminary in my background and all of that, but I just kind of hoped it didn't come up.

[1 : 15] And so some time passed, and I started to make friends and started to, you know, build a little credibility as a new clinician. And I had lunch with one of the other clinicians, and this woman I knew was particularly hostile toward born-again.

And we're sitting there talking about something, and all of a sudden, just in the middle of the lunch, with no warning whatsoever, she just sort of stops eating and looks at me and says, So you're a Christian? And I said, Yeah.

And I almost choked, you know. And she said, Well, what does that mean? And I said, What do you mean? And she goes, Well, what kind of Christian are you? What do you actually believe?

And it was this golden moment. You know, it's the kind of moment that comes along once or twice in a lifetime, where somebody just sort of opens up and says, Okay, hit me. You know, what's the gospel all about?

You know, why do you follow Jesus? Why do you follow Jesus? But I demurred. I mumbled some kind of non-answer, looked down, concentrated very hard on the sandwich I was eating, and changed the subject.

[2 : 25] Because in that moment, I was afraid. I was afraid that if I really admitted what I believed, I would lose her respect. And she was one of the most respected therapists in the clinic.

She was very much my senior in terms of experience, and I was simply afraid of losing face. And I went home that night, and I was just filled with shame.

And I thought, You know, that's the kind of opportunity that comes along once or twice ever. God really probably wanted to use me in that moment, use me in that woman's life, and I blew it.

I sold out. And, you know, that was my chance. And I don't know if, you know, some of you here who are Christians, I don't know if you've ever had an experience like that or feel like that where you work or feel like that around the people that you live next to or your college friends.

I don't know if you can identify with that, but that experience is one of the reasons I'm so glad the book of Esther is included in the Scripture. Because Esther's an amazing character in an amazing story.

[3 : 34] It's this story about this beautiful young woman who is essentially forced into a beauty contest. And then against all odds, she wins the beauty contest.

And then she gains the favor of the king after sleeping with him. And then against all odds, she rises to the height of power in the Persian Empire. It's this amazing ascent to power.

She's at the very center of culture and influence and power. But there's a problem. And Karen Jobes, the commentator, points this out in her commentary.

She says, you know, kind of Esther gets it from both sides. People on the left criticize Esther because she was too compliant with the patriarchy of the Persian Empire.

She didn't stand up for herself when she was forced into this beauty contest, when they tried to force her to sleep with the king. She didn't start a Me Too movement and stand up for the rights of women throughout the Persian Empire like her predecessor did.

[4 : 37] She capitulated. Right? And some might argue she slept her way to the top. But then people on the right criticize Esther because she didn't stand up for her faith.

Right? She's the only character in the book who has two names. And up to this point, she's concealed her Jewish identity. She's concealed her Jewish faith. And she's lived as a Persian.

She's taken a Persian name. And we can assume she's taken on Persian lifestyle habits. And so people on the right say she's compromised her faith. She's compromised her morals.

She's compromised her values. And so it's very easy from multiple vantage points to make the case that Esther is a sellout. And if God wanted to use Esther, he, by this point, has probably given up.

Because it's obvious she's not going to stand for anything. And so you look at a story like this and it sort of begs the question, has Esther sold out? And if so, can God still use her?

[5 : 40] More broadly, can God use people who have compromised in their faith, who have compromised in their morals or ethics or values?

Can God use people like that? Can God use people like me? Can God use people like me? Can God use people like me? All of this comes to a head in Esther chapter 4 when three major things happen.

A crisis becomes real. A choice becomes necessary. And then a girl becomes queen. So let's pray and we'll look at this story together.

Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for these stories. And it would be so tempting to look at them as these kind of ancient fairy tales. But we know that there's a great cosmic intentionality behind your word, behind every letter.

We know that there's a reason that you've given us this account of Esther's life. And we pray that you would use it for whatever purposes you intend this morning, Lord.

[6 : 49] That we might grow more fully into an understanding of what it means to know and love you and what it means to be human beings. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.

Amen. So we're looking at Esther chapter 4. And the first thing we see is that a crisis, a looming crisis, finally becomes real. And I'll tell you what I mean by that.

By the end of chapter 3, there's a man named Haman. And he's a very wicked man. And he has convinced King Ahasuerus, also known as King Xerxes, to set a date on which all of the Jews living in exile throughout the Persian Empire.

There are lots of Jews that are scattered throughout the empire. Many of them are living in hiding. And they've set a date on which all of the Jews living in the Persian Empire will be killed.

So the king writes this down, makes a bunch of copies, and sends this written edict out to every village throughout the empire in every language available. And it essentially says, on this date, if you know a Persian family living down the road, it will be perfectly legal for you to go murder that entire family and plunder all of their goods.

[8 : 05] And in fact, if you do that, you'll be doing a service to the empire. So it's understandable that everyone throughout the empire knows this. And an existential dread has sort of fallen over the Jewish people.

And Mordecai is Esther's foster parent. He's also Jewish. And Mordecai is so distressed by this that he has torn his clothes, and he's wearing sackcloth and ashes, which is a sign of public grief and lament.

Everybody is dreading this day. But here's the thing that we need to tune into. In verses 4 through 9, Esther hears that Mordecai is wearing sackcloth and ashes.

So she's up in the palace, and she hears that he can't come into the king's gate. That means he can't come into the place where all of the influencers do business. He can't come into that area because he's wearing sackcloth and ashes.

She hears this, and she's like, what's going on with Mordecai? So she sends some clothes down and says, tell him to take that off and put on some proper clothes. And then she sends her servant

down and says, find out what's going on.

[9 : 17] Now, what does this tell us? Well, this is pretty noteworthy. Everybody in the empire knows what's about to happen to the Jews except Esther.

Esther doesn't know. And Esther lives right there in the palace. This is where the decision was made. It's where the edict came from. Everybody in the empire knows what's going on. And servants talk.

So even if you hadn't read the edict, you would know. And yet Esther doesn't know. She says, find out what's going on. And so Mordecai sends Hathak back with a copy of the written decree.

And he says, take this to Esther and explain it to her so she'll understand exactly how dire our situation is. And then beg her to go on our behalf before the king to plead for our lives.

Genocide's about to happen. So this is a real crisis. But here's the thing I want to zoom in on. It's a real crisis. But until this point, it has not become real to Esther.

[10 : 21] See, when a need becomes real to you, it means you feel connected to it. It means you feel responsible to do something about it.

So there are a lot of needs out there. But for a need to become real, it becomes your need. It becomes a concern that you share. And you start to feel responsible. I have to do something. I have to respond in some way to this. That has not happened. Now, we don't know why. It could be that she's truly ignorant, truly doesn't know.

But as I said before, servants talk. People talk. People gossip. People whisper. It's really hard to imagine Esther truly not knowing. It might be willful blindness.

Right? It might be something she just chooses not to acknowledge. Maybe she's been living so long in the center of power and wealth and influence that she simply has become out of touch with the suffering all around her.

[11 : 25] It's very possible not to see suffering if we don't want to see it. We can not see it. Right? Every day when you go to work and all of the people that you pass who are homeless on the street, it's very easy to not see that.

As we're going to work or to eat or to our homes. Right? So this is the first point I want to think about for just a moment. There are real crises in the world.

There are real needs. There are real people who are really suffering. And yet the question we need to ask is, are those needs real to us? I don't think it's because we're ignorant.

I think especially these days when we have something like the internet, one of the things that comes out of being connected instantaneously to every corner of the world is that we are connected instantaneously to much of the suffering all around the world.

And that can become incredibly overwhelming. It can be exhausting. It can be the kind of thing that shuts us down. And so as a coping strategy, it's very tempting to just tune it all out.

[12 : 38] To just recognize it's out there, but just to tune it out. It's out there, but it's not real to me. It can't be real to me because it would crush me. But like it or not, even though no person, no community can handle all of the need in the world, there are needs that we can't ignore.

As the church, there are needs that we can't ignore. When we look at something like climate change, when we look at something like racism, when we look at something like poverty, these are issues that the church cannot ignore.

These are things that we have to talk about, that we have to respond to. In our own community, in our midst, there are marriages that are on the brink.

People who are struggling, who are fighting to stay together. There are people who are grieving, grieving loss, grieving the death of people they loved, family members, grieving the loss of jobs, grieving the loss of all kinds of things.

There are people who are silently grieving. Certain things like miscarriage or infertility are things that are grieved often secretly and silently, so that there might only be one or two people in your life who even know you're grieving.

[14 : 04] Everybody else assumes things are okay. There's pain like that in our midst. There are people who are struggling desperately with loneliness, who feel disconnected.

These are real needs that we can't ignore. And then there's the greatest need of all. The greatest need of all, believe it or not, bigger than all of these needs, is the need for people to hear the truth and the hope of the gospel.

The need for people to hear that there is a God who made them, who loves them, who desires to have a relationship with them, who has died in order to make that possible.

People who need to know that that is true and that it's possible. So there are real needs all around us, and we can't possibly handle all of them. But here's the thing I think we do need to recognize. Sometimes, like Esther, we are in a position to do something about some of these needs. Right? Sometimes we look and we realize, I actually have something to offer here.

[15:10] Because of my job or who I know or my family or my community, because of what I have, because of my resources, because of my money, because of my connections, I can actually do something about this need.

I can't fix all the needs, but I can do something about this need. But in order for that to happen, the need has to become real to me. I have to feel a sense of connection to it. I have to take it on. Right? And so sometimes God is nudging us.

Right? Maybe right now God is nudging you and putting a need on your heart because he wants you to do something about it. And the question is, do we allow that to happen? So this is the first point.

The crisis has become real to Esther now. And here's the thing. When that happens, then you have a choice to make. A choice becomes necessary. Mordecai sends Hathak to explain everything to Esther, to plead with her to go to the king, to beg the king to call off the genocide.

And Esther's first reaction is fairly understandable. She says essentially this. She says, listen, I would love to help, but here's the thing. There's a law, and we know this was actually a law in the Persian court.

[16:20] There's a law that says that unless you're formally summoned by the king, you are not allowed to approach the king. There are only seven people who are considered friends of the king who could see the face of the king without prior permission.

And if you try to approach the king without a formal summons, you would be executed on the spot. The only thing that would keep you from dying immediately would be if the king just so happened to have favor on you and to extend his scepter, which was a sign to the guards, don't kill this person. Right? And so Esther says, but I have not been summoned for a month. At one point, Esther may have been the king's favorite, but you know how Persian kings are.

Esther, you know, there's probably a new, young, pretty girl who has his attention. And Esther has maybe fallen out of favor a bit. And she says, if I go, and he hasn't summoned me, I'm going to die, and then I won't be any use to anybody.

So I'm sorry, I can't help. And Mordecai says, don't fool yourself. He says, it's only a matter of time before they find out that you're also a Jew.

[17:38] What do you think's going to happen then? You know, this is one of the challenges of building relationships where we conceal the fact that we're followers of Jesus, is that you're building a relationship on a kind of false foundation.

And it's as though a clock starts ticking at that point. And at some point in the relationship, you're going to be found out. And Mordecai says, you know, at some point, they're going to figure out who you are.

And what do you think's going to happen then? You think you're going to be spared? And then Mordecai says something pretty amazing. In verse 14, he says, for if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place.

God promised long ago that one day he would deliver his people. God's going to deliver his people. He's going to do it. And she says, but you and your father's house will perish.

And then he says one of the famous lines from the book, and who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Now, notice what he's not saying.

[18:43] On the one hand, he is not saying, Esther, it all depends on you. If you don't come through for us, we are lost and we have no hope. That would be overwhelming.

That would be crushing. That would be what you would say if you believe there's no God. If you believe this is all there is. Esther, it's up to you. It's all hinging on you. It's not what Mordecai says. Nor does Mordecai say, you know what? God's going to take care of it. Just let go and let God sit back, relax. I know this is a big ask.

You've got a lot on your plate. You've got a lot of queenly things that you've got to worry about. So you just go worry about that. God will take care of us. I'm not worried because I have faith. He

doesn't say that either.

Right? So he doesn't say it's all hinging on you. Nor does he say, let go and let God. See, one crushes us. It all hinges on you. That would crush a human being.

[19 : 40] No human being can endure that kind of pressure. Right? When you look at the needs of the world, when you kind of look at all the suffering around the world, if you think this is all hinging on us, that will crush you.

It will overwhelm you. You'll shut down. But on the other hand, if we just sit back and say, you know, I got my own stress. Because God will take care of all that. That leads to apathy.

So we're either crushed or we're apathetic. Mordecai says neither of those things. He says, listen, God has promised to deliver his people. That's going to happen one way or another. And yet, by all accounts, he has chosen to do that through you.

By all, everything we can tell, you're the one that he wants to use to do that. And so here's the choice that Esther has to make. It's a choice of identity. Is she going to go on keeping her faith private and living a double life and focusing primarily on her own needs and self-preservation? Or is she going to publicly identify with God and his people once and for all? The only way she has a chance of saving her people is if she goes before the king and says, I'm one of them too.

[20 : 51] If you kill them, you're killing me. Because I'm one of them. All right, so here's what this means. You know, God's ultimate purpose in the world, God's ultimate reason for working in the world, is to heal and restore everything that has been broken.

We saw that in our recent study of the book of Revelation, the end of Revelation. We see the culmination of human history. God has restored and rebuilt the world and human beings.

And he's built a great city, the new Jerusalem, the coming together of the heavens and the earth.

So that there is justice, so that there is peace, so that there is prosperity for all people, and so that all people know him and love him and are known by him and loved by him.

And that is going to happen, the Bible says. And that's a certainty. And there's nothing anyone can do to stop it from happening. But then the question is, how does God accomplish this?

And the amazing unexpected answer is, through his people. Now that's the amazing part. The fact that God can do it isn't amazing. God can do whatever he wants. The fact that God does it through us, that's amazing.

[22 : 09] Because God doesn't need us at all, right? He doesn't need us at all. But he chooses to work through us. I love that quote from Blaise Pascal, that in prayer, God gives human beings the dignity of causality.

The dignity of causality. And I think this is true when we look at how history unfolds. The way God's providence works is not just to do things and humans sit back and just sort of watch God do his thing.

God actually invites us into the process. To paraphrase Pascal, God gives us the dignity of co-authorship.

So that our choices actually matter. We get to decide what role we play in the story. Our choices affect how history is written down. God invites us into the authoring of history.

He shares that role with us, which is amazing. So Esther's choice is a real one. She's not an automaton that's simply doing what God is making her do with no free will.

[23 : 20] She's meaningfully having to choose, am I going to be the one through whom this deliverance comes or not? And I fully believe that if she had chosen not, that's how events would have played out.

So this is what God does. And because God works through us to do this work of healing in the world, it means that he needs all of us. It takes all of us.

Right? It takes pastors and missionaries. It also takes lawyers and doctors and artists and architects and city planners.

And it takes entrepreneurs and people in the medical profession and people in education and academia. And people like Esther who are political leaders. Right? It takes all kinds of people.

It takes us building healthy, godly homes and starting thriving, godly, gospel-centered churches. But it also takes us investing in and building other institutions that hold society up and infusing them with a kind of gospel DNA.

[24 : 22] It takes everybody doing everything that God has gifted them to do for the kingdom.

That's what it takes. That's how the world gets fixed. That's how the world gets fixed. That's how the

world gets fixed.

And so we recognize this. And then we recognize there's a choice that we also have to make. Which is the same choice as Esther. You know, there are plenty of circumstances in our jobs. There are plenty of circumstances in our lives where it might make sense to keep quiet. As we'll see later in the story, Esther is amazingly shrewd.

And there are times when it might make sense to keep quiet. To not speak up. But at the end of the day, the gospel is a public truth. Meaning it is about public events that happened with hundreds if not thousands of eyewitnesses.

And it makes public claims about reality and God and about humanity. And it has implications for every man, woman and child on this planet. It's a public truth.

[25 : 26] And we are called to have a public faith. Meaning we are called to be witnesses to the truth of those events. Because we believe they have life or death implications for every single human being.

And so at the end of the day, we have to decide if and when we will stand with God and his people. It's a choice we all have to make. So then we ask the question, well, what does Esther choose?

And here's where we see, in Esther's choice, here's where we see a girl become queen. Now you say, well, I thought she became a queen years earlier in the story.

And you're right. So I'll show you what I mean. Verse 16 says, this is Esther's response. By fasting and praying and going to the king, Esther has made her decision.

Esther says, I'm going to pray. And if I perish. And if I perish, I perish. By fasting and praying and going to the king, Esther has made her decision.

[26 : 37] She's decided to identify with God's people, even though it may get her killed. She's decided to, in that, give herself fully to God's purposes.

Because when you say, if I perish, I perish, you're saying, I trust something more than my own self-preservation instinct. I trust in God's purposes. And even if I die, even if I lose everything, I would rather die knowing I'm a part of God's purpose and fulfilling it than continue to live being apart from it.

And then finally, she trusts in God's promises. God has promised deliverance, and I'm going to take him at his word. So she's identifying with God's people. She's giving herself fully to God's purposes, and she's trusting in God's promises.

And in doing so, she finally decides who she is. And listen, this is really amazing to me. Something inside her shifts. This is the turning point for Esther in the story.

Her character, the role she plays, changes. One commentator puts it like this. It is through this traumatic ordeal that Esther, initially a beautiful young woman with a weak character, becomes transformed into a person with heroic moral stature and political skill.

[27 : 54] Right? From this point forward, Esther stops being a passive victim of circumstance. She becomes the protagonist of the story.

She takes charge. She begins to inhabit her life. She begins to own who she is.

She develops a moral backbone. And she begins to exercise her authority. Right? Even though she got the title of queen years earlier, this is the moment when she begins to act like a queen.

And from this point forward, she and Mordecai trade places. No longer is Mordecai telling her what to do. She's telling him what to do. It's very telling that the very last verse of this chapter says, And Mordecai went and did everything that Esther commanded him to do.

She's the queen now. Now, this is the effect. This is the effect that making that choice has on Esther.

[28 : 58] Right? It's amazing to note that choosing to identify with God's purposes and give herself to God's purposes doesn't rob her of agency. It actually fills her with agency.

Now she knows who she is. Now she knows what life is all about. Now she knows what she's aiming at. See, the thing is, when you live a double life, you know, when you hide parts of yourself, or when you swap out different facades depending on whatever context you're in, or when you remain perpetually agnostic about your beliefs, when people say, do you really believe that?

Do you really think that? And you say, well, I don't really know. I've never really thought about it. I'm not really sure what I think. And when that's your posture over time, when you're continually downplaying those things, then your life is going to lack a certain integrity, meaning the pieces are not all going to be connected to one another.

It's going to lack cohesion. And instead, certain parts of you are going to become compartmentalized. You know, your identity is going to be a hallway with a lot of doors, and some of them are locked.

And you sort of forget they're even there. And as such, you're going to lack a true core. You know, some people, when you meet them, they have that core. You know, you can see it in their eyes.

[30 : 19] You can see it in their handshake. They have a core to them. They know who they are. They're grounded in the world. Other people don't have a core. They sort of seem soupy. They're hard to pin down.

They're like jello or smoke. They just sort of drift. But there's nothing solid to hold on to. Right? When you assert opinions, they sort of don't really agree, don't really disagree.

These sort of, it's like trying to push against vapor. If you compartmentalize long enough, you kind of lose a sense of who you really are.

You lose a sense of where the boundaries are between you and other people. You know, my boys brought home this book from the library, and it was kind of a scary story. And I read it.

It was a scary story for kids. And I read it to them, and I thought it was actually pretty scary. It was scarier than I thought a kid's story should be. Sadly, we didn't find that out until, like, after the scary part.

[31 : 17] But I was reading, and I was like, dang. I was just, you know, this kid goes and buys this, goes to the spooky store and buys this Halloween mask for Halloween.

It's the best mask that he's ever seen. And he takes the mask, and he puts it on. But it's, you know, of course, a haunted mask. And that means that the mask fuses to his face. And it becomes his face.

And then he can't take it off. Isn't that terrifying? And then you're all going to have nightmares.

That's a kid's story. It's not true. But he can't take the mask off. And then he starts to take on the characteristics of the mask.

Right? He starts to feel the feelings that the mask would feel. And it starts to change him. And, you know, it's a scary kid's story. But I think there's kind of a point here. You know, sometimes you get so good at putting on the mask that it starts to become harder and harder to take it off.

And the time comes when you start to wonder, who am I really? Is there a real me under this mask, or am I becoming the mask? And you begin to lose touch with who you really are.

[32 : 24] And people say, well, what do you really believe? And you say, I don't really know anymore what I believe. I've been pretending so long that I just, I don't know anymore. The only way to develop that core, the only way to take the mask off, the only way to have that kind of integrity of being, if you're a Christian, is to choose once and for all to identify with God's people.

To give yourself to God's purposes. Whatever they ask of you. And to trust in God's promises for you. And to believe that they're for you. That it's not just out there, a theological truth to contemplate over coffee.

It's real. And he's talking about you. But this can be much harder than it sounds. I mean, I think for some of us, for some of you, you're in positions, you're in jobs, you play roles where if you were to totally open up to everybody about all the things that you believe, it might be catastrophic.

And of course, it takes great wisdom to know how and when to be public in our faith. I think there's a great wisdom and shrewdness that we have to utilize to know how and when to allow our faith to be public.

For some of us, though, I think that we've already made so many compromises. We've already compromised ourselves in our faith and in our morals and our values. You know, maybe in order to get to where you are in your job, you've had to compromise so much along the way that you think, what's the point?

[33 : 55] You know, I've sold out so much that I'm no good anymore. I have nothing more to offer. God can't possibly use a person like me. And this is why we have to end by recognizing that our hope is not ultimately in trying harder, nor is it in following an example like Esther.

Our hope is in Jesus Christ. Right? If you look at Jesus and you compare Jesus to Esther, it's amazing what you see. You know, Esther spent years being willfully disconnected from the needs of her people.

But when Jesus saw his people in need, even though those were the people who had rebelled against him and rejected him, when he saw people in need, he took that suffering on himself by

becoming a human being.

And he didn't hesitate. It was always his intention to do that. And then Esther had to be convinced by Mordecai to identify with the Jewish people in order to save them.

But Jesus came for one reason only. It was because he came to identify with not just the Jewish people, but all of humanity.

[35 : 17] Jesus came to stand with all human beings. And to stand before the Father, to stand before the King, and to say, their sin is my sin.

Their struggle is my struggle. And while Esther said, if I perish, I perish, Jesus said, when I perish, I perish.

He did it knowing what it would lead to. He did it knowing that he would die. And he did it anyway.

And he did it with joy. And then when he rose, he became a king.

And he took the throne. Right? And so if we want the kind of integrity and solidarity that comes with having a public faith, we're going to need great courage to do it.

And that courage comes by looking at the cross. By looking to Jesus Christ, who stood with us and died so that we would be able to stand with him and live.

[36 : 21] And live for eternity. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your son. We thank you for Esther.

We thank you that in her failures, we see a mirror. Our own failures, our own struggles and shortcomings. And we thank you that when we see her victories and her success and this change that came about in her, we know that it wasn't just a force of her effort and will.

Lord, we know that it was you working in her life. And we know that you're the same God who is here who can work in our lives. We pray that through Esther, but even more so through your son, Jesus Christ, we would have the kind of courage we need and the kind of wisdom we need to respond to the needs that you put on our hearts, to be the kind of public witnesses that you've called your church to be.

We pray this for the good of this city, for our friends and neighbors, but ultimately for your glory. And it's in your son's name that we pray. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[37 : 39] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. I follow the next thing.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.