

Risk is Right

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Welcome to St Paul's. My name's Steve. I've not met you. I'm a senior pastor here. And we, this term, what we're doing is we're looking back on what has been called Follow 25.

That is our five-year ministry plan as we draw that to a close. And we are, at the same time, looking forward into what God is leading us into as a church and planning our future together, particularly to see lives transformed by Jesus in our society, particularly in a society that nowadays doesn't see the Christian faith as true, as good, or even beautiful.

And so the Old Testament book of Esther that we're working through is really just helping us see what it means to follow God, what does it mean to trust Him in times like this, a time when Christians are a minority, where Christianity has been sidelined.

So what does it mean to be that people in our society nowadays? And what Esther is helping us to see, particularly today, that what we need is we need an element of boldness and courage and something that really, for us on the North Shore, is not something that we have in a great deal of amount.

That is, the culture of the North Shore is settled. You might have taken risks to get here, but once you're here, you're not going to take risks to lose it. And so the North Shore is famous for that.

[1 : 41] It's famous for it's being settled. The risk, don't like change, doesn't like too much risk. Don't want to put at all, any threat, what we have attained for ourselves.

And so how do we be bold and courageous in a culture right here that tells us not to? So if you've got the St. Paul's app, open it up. Keep the Bible passage there in front of you.

These are our points for today. First of all, risking nothing and losing everything. So if you've just joined us, Esther is the story of a young Jewish woman living as an exile in the Persian Empire. And through a series of events that God is sovereignly and silently working in the background in all of this, all these events, she is picked out of obscurity and chosen by Xerxes I, the most powerful man in the universe at that point, to be his new queen.

And the whole time that she has kept her Jewish identity, her culture and her God hidden. She's kept that hidden away, screwed away secretly.

[2 : 52] In chapter three, as we looked at last week, an edict goes out of the whole Persian Empire that on a particular set date, the Jewish people are to be exterminated within the Persian Empire.

And so we pick up the story with the aftermath of that edict going out. And so chapter four begins with Esther's cousin Mordecai.

He's in sackcloth and mourning in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. See how it reads there. Chapter four, verse one. He wasn't allowed to go inside the king's gate into the palace center because you're not allowed to have sackcloth and mourning in the palace.

So what we, when it's king's gate, Mordecai is at the gate, the palace gate. Chapter one, verse two, names that palace as the citadel of Susa.

The citadel of Susa was a strongly fortified, elevated palace in the center of Susa, the center of the Roman Empire, sorry, the Persian Empire.

[4 : 20] And it was designed, the whole palace was designed to elevate the importance of the king and to guard the king.

It was to elevate the importance and to protect the king, his court and anyone who resided within the palace.

And in other words, to be in the palace, to be in the citadel was to be at the center of power and influence. And Mordecai is at the gate of that complex.

Esther is inside that complex. And he's trying to get her attention so that she might do something to save her people, God's people.

Now what we see here as in the first section of chapter four, is that there is an enormous amount of danger of being settled in the palace, of living in the palace.

[5 : 33] We see it in Esther's response in verse four. When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.

So Esther, her response to hearing about Mordecai is to send him clothes. She's in great distress because potentially he's making a spectacle of himself, embarrassing himself, maybe even embarrassing her by relationship.

Mordecai is distraught with the fate of God's people, but it seems Esther is isolated entirely from the impending tragedy.

Every Jew from Ethiopia to India was mourning because of this edict, and she did not have a clue. Well, she didn't care because she was in the palace. Perhaps she didn't have time between the manicures and pedicures and the facials.

[6 : 45] In any case, she has done a brilliant job, a brilliant job by Mordecai's instruction at concealing her identity.

So why would anyone in the palace be concerned to inform her of the edict? It is so easy when we exist in our palaces of security and comfort to be isolated from the needs of the world around us and God's concern for his world and for people when we live the good life in the palace.

So Mordecai begs and pleads for her to use her connections, to use her position, her favour with the king to do something, to work for God's justice and to save God's people.

But notice Esther's first response in verse 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 they be put to death unless the king extends the royal scepter to them and spares their lives.

But 30 days have passed since I was called to go to the king. What she's communicating to Mordecai here is, you don't understand what you're asking of me.

[8 : 22] For me to go to the king is very risky. And let's put this into context. Esther's in her position as queen because Vashti was just a bit too bold with Xerxes.

It's very fresh on her mind. She was a little too courageous. And notice too that Esther says here, Xerxes hasn't asked me to come to him for 30 days.

So if he hasn't called her for 30 days, then that's either a sign that he's had a month-long headache or that he's entirely out of favour, that she's entirely out of favour.

Because Xerxes does not sleep alone. In other words, what Esther is saying here to Mordecai, you do not know what you are asking of me.

I might lose everything. And at this point, Mordecai sends back a message that is, in fact, the high point of the book of Esther.

[9 : 40] This is the turning point of Esther. Verse 13. Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape.

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 your royal position for such a time as this. So, to paraphrase Mordecai, if Esther doesn't risk losing the palace, she will lose everything.

If she does risk losing the palace, she might lose everything. That's the choice that's in front of her at the moment.

If all the Jewish people are killed, she will be discovered as a Jew, and she too will be killed. If the Jews aren't killed, then she will be discovered to be a traitor.

[11 : 00] Now, there are two remarkable principles, I think, that flow out of here that really have powerful applications for us.

The first principle is that unless we use the influence we've got, the credentials we've got, the resources we've got, the position we've got, the skills we've got, for the service of others, as opposed to personal advancement, personal security, personal comfort, then those things don't result in security, in comfort.

They actually result in slavery. I've talked about this many times in the past. Esther was queen to Xerxes I.

She lived in the palace in Susa. But if she loved the palace and she loved its comfort and its security and its power and its influence, so much so that she would not risk losing it, then the palace becomes nothing more than death row for her.

Nothing more than that. She's as dead as anyone else. In other words, if we are unwilling to jeopardise our place in the palace, the palace that we might have built for ourselves, our identity that we're built for ourselves, then the palace has in fact taken over us and it controls us.

[12:44] We live to keep that comfort and security and it's never enough. And we're always looking over our shoulder. We are consistently questioning whether it's enough.

Mordecai seems to be saying here that if you can't throw away the palace or at least risking throwing away the palace or risk your place in the palace to do good for other people, then you are owned by the palace.

You actually don't have comfort. You don't have security. You are owned. You're enslaved. You're enslaved. The second implication here is that the only way we would in fact be prepared to risk everything is if our identity has its foundation somewhere else apart from what we have built for ourselves.

So how do we do that? How do you get an identity that is not something that we have built for ourselves, something that we've achieved, but it's in fact something that we receive?

And there is an answer to that and it's hinted at in verse 14. Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

[14:14] Now, the word come there in that verse is in the passive form in the original Hebrew language. And so a better way to understand that or to paraphrase that verse is who knows but that you have been brought to the palace, to your royal position for such a time as this?

In other words, you did not make yourself queen. You've been brought there for this moment.

This is your moment. Esther got to the palace by grace. Her beauty was something that was a gift to her.

She didn't create that for herself. No one ever does. It's a gift. She didn't produce the door of opportunity that saw her rise to the position of queen.

God has been silently and sovereignly working to bring her for such a time as this. This is her purpose.

[15:28] This is her moment. And that is the turning point for Esther. This is where we get Esther stepping up.

And this is where she utters what are the most remarkable words in this entire book. Verse 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 attendants will fast as you do. And when this is done, I will go to the king even though it is against the law.

And if I perish, I perish. That is the remarkable turning point of this book and the remarkable turning point in Esther's life.

We go from Esther living the high life in the palace to Esther risking everything else in her life in order to save others.

[16:41] Which brings me to the second point, risking everything and losing nothing. Now there is a danger here, let me say first of all, in seeing Esther primarily as an inspiration to be copied.

For instance, for the Christian, you might read this and inspired to taking risk and getting more interested in justice and mercy in the world and to start speaking up about your belief in Jesus. All of a sudden, you've got this boldness and I'm going to, Esther, God came through and saved Esther and it was a massive moment for her and look at her, we're talking about her thousands of years later and I'm going to be like Esther and brah!

out there into the world. There is always a danger in being inspired by another because it tends not to last because the basic motivation is one of self-centeredness or guilt.

Motivation by guilt wears off because guilt doesn't actually change you on the inside. When guilt is our motive, then we're still getting our identity from our performance.

[18:16] I want to be great like Esther and therefore I will do like Esther so that I can be great. It's performance-driven. Self-righteousness is always the fruit of performance.

I'm not going to be like those other half-hearted Christians who won't risk everything. I'm going to be principled and outspoken. In fact, I booked my airfare right now and I'm going to fly to Susa, I'm going to go to Iran and I'm going to be in the public square and preach Jesus and distribute Bibles. It's not going to be like the rest of these North Shore Christians. But there's not actually change in the heart at that point which is often revealed when we are confronted by others not having our same values.

We become judgmental of their choices. Overreaction is the danger. That's where we give to anything, where we will do anything without any thought of wise stewardship.

It's a misunderstanding of how God has brought us to the place where we are. It's a misunderstanding of how God has made us and so by guilt and by self-righteousness we will do anything and absolutely everything and we don't understand who we are in Christ at that point.

[19 : 51] Now there is a time to throw abandon in the air and there is a time to pull back and regroup. Notice that it takes Esther a little while before she approaches Xerxes and not without calling together her people in three days of fasting for her which is three days of searching God for her.

Reliance upon God. That's the idea of fasting. It's a reliance upon God in this moment. The danger of Esther chapter 5 tells us she was very careful, she was considered and she was deliberate in how she went about approaching Xerxes.

Now the danger of Esther being an example of risk-taking will be a tenderness towards fickleness, doesn't last, self-righteousness and potentially downright foolishness.

but what if we saw Esther not so much as an example to be admired but as a sign post guiding us. Notice here that Esther in the end saved God's people here by doing two things in chapter 4 and chapter 5.

[21 : 28] She did two things. She identified with them and she mediated for them. Identified and mediated. Her people were condemned and she identified with them in their condemnation and so came under the same condemnation.

they are condemned to death as Jewish people. She identifies as a Jewish person and she says if I perish I perish.

She identified with them but it's only because she identified with her people that she was able to mediate for her people.

That is she could go before the throne of power in a way that no one else could in that moment. That no other Jew could in that moment.

The first time that Xerxes understands the gravity and the implications of the decisions that he has made in condemning the Jewish people was when Esther the one to whom he has extended his scepter the one who he had favoured stands before him as favoured and says I'm Jew too.

[23 : 14] I am your favoured one and I am condemned. That was the first time that he saw the Jewish people in an entirely different way.

Esther went before the throne of power and her favour with Xerxes was attributed to the Jewish people.

She saved them through identification and mediation. Now as I've said a couple of weeks ago and I'll say it again Esther was a flawed saviour but she does point us to a flawless saviour.

She points us ultimately to the king of the Jews the true Israelite. Jesus is the one who lived in the ultimate palace.

He lived for all eternity in the very presence of the throne room of the universe in the presence of God in the kingdom of God as the second person of the Trinity the Son of God.

[24 : 36] And as the second person of the Trinity the Son of God he had ultimate beauty and glory and he left it to one side. No one had to manipulate him.

No one had to put pressure on him. No one backed him into a corner in order to do it. Philippians 2 in the New Testament says that he had equality with the Father but he did not hold on to that equality in order for it to be used for his own sake to feather his own nest to secure his own comfort for advance his own purposes his own identity or glory.

It says he emptied himself and he came down and he came down to identify to take on human flesh and identify with sinful humanity under the just condemnation of God deserving of annihilation by God for their sins against God and he did not do that at the risk of his own life but at the cost of his own life.

Jesus did not come saying if I perish I perish he come and right from the beginning says when I perish I will perish he went to the cross and he died as our substitute the one of infinite perfection and holiness and moral beauty became cosmically ugly as I said two weeks ago cosmically ugly to make us the condemned imperfect ones beautiful acceptable in God's sight his atonement for our sin means that his that it means that as he stands before the throne of the universe right now as our mediator favor the favor that has eternally extended to him as the perfect son of

God is now attributed to us who are in him that favor extends to us the delight the love the approval of the praiseworthy God the power the most powerful one of the universe everything that Jesus always had and has is ours in him so if we see Esther as an example and say well you know I just need to be like Esther it will ultimately crush us because we will never live up to it but if we see Jesus Esther pointing us to Jesus as our savior not as an hour not even

[27 : 58] Jesus as our example to go and do likewise but as our savior doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves that ultimately changes our identity from the inside out he becomes our ultimate security he becomes our value he becomes our real worth he becomes our palace suddenly everything else in life becomes transitory stuff and we are set free to risk everything for him because losing everything for him means we lose nothing because we've already got everything we do not lose him we don't lose life we do not even lose ourselves and that's why Jesus says to his disciples in Luke 21 verse 16 as he sends them out to bear witness to him he says they will put some of you to death everyone will hate you because of me but not a hair on your head will perish what what are you saying

Jesus I may perish but not even a hair on my head will perish that's right stand firm he says and you will win life what a paradox your reputation can be damaged you can go even get as far as being killed but not a hair on your head will perish perish so that means there's a balance here right that means there's perspective it means that not every venture for Christ that we pursue will go well as we perceive it to go well but a promise here is that no venture for his glory will ever destroy us it will simply increase life and it will always be successful

God is sovereignly silently working so the apostle Paul puts it like this in Philippians 1 to live is Christ and to die is gain as American pastor John Piper famously put it it is better to lose your life than to waste it for Esther to stay in the palace was a wasted life which would result in a lost life for her to risk her life was to gain life so let's wrap this up bit risking everything and gaining everything if we see what Jesus done for us in losing his ultimate palace for us so that we might gain his ultimate palace for all of eternity then and only then do we have the freedom to risk everything for God's glory and the sake of others it's only then and there are at least four implications in that statement I think from Esther if I perish I perish firstly if I perish I perish it's the language of calling God's people to identify with the poor and the oppressed in the world that we ought not to be existing in our palaces of comfort like Esther did in the early part of chapter four oblivious to what's happening in the world with the poor and the oppressed this is a call for all believers having seen what Jesus has done for us to identify with all people outside of the palace to not walk past them and ignore them but to work for their lifting for the work of their salvation in a holistic sense secondly if I perish I perish it's the language of exciting mission can I say God has been sovereignly and silently working throughout all of history including in recent history and that wherever you are right now right now in your life and I mean right now today this week stage of life whatever it is for you you have got certain gifts certain abilities certain experiences of hardness and suffering and joys certain stage of life life that make you uniquely ready to help certain people in the world that no one else can God has brought you to where you are not for your security and comfort but for others and for his glory that's why you are where you are with all the hardships!

[33 : 49] with all the sufferings with all of it it's where you are Esther chapter 2 sorry Esther Ephesians it's in the New Testament chapter 2 verse 10 talking about those who are being saved we are God's workmanship created for good works that God has prepared beforehand for us to do the word workmanship there carries the idea of being God's artwork every single one of his children saved in Jesus are his unique artwork you're not a stenciled photocopied version of everyone else you are his unique artwork you have been uniquely crafted by God with gifts talents positions and strengths and weaknesses blessings and sufferings much resources no resources and uniquely placed by

God to do unique works for others you have not been brought to this place for yourself and you've been brought to this place in this church in wherever you are for such a time as this and so can I

say I want to implore you on this there is no sense at all anywhere in the Bible in the New Testament at all any justification for it at all for what you might call stable settled don't need to take further steps in the

Christian faith not at all nowhere if you have not taken deliberate intentional steps to move forward in trusting God in going further with him in rhythms of grace in any way if you're since we did this series at the beginning of this year if your church attendance patterns haven't shifted if you're serving if your devotional life hasn't shifted and nothing has shifted do not this is a warning sign God is not pleased with that you have been brought for such a time as this and so what is it for you to take this next step towards daily devotions corporate worship if no changes have happened no decisions have made if you're not serving others if nothing's changed that's not healthy take your next step if you've sat there even not as a

Christian but you've sat there and you've wrestled with the truth of the Christian faith and you've but you're just still sitting there you're still sitting there where you've heard it you heard it you heard it but you just won't take that next step risk it and come to Christ today be bold and say right I'm just I've got what I need to know I'm just going to take that step and I'm going to come to Christ I'm going to surrender to him today thirdly and this is connected to the second point if I perish I perish is the language of unconditional obedience it means I'm going to do everything he tells me to do and I'm going to accept everything he sends in my life that's unconditional obedience it is putting our lives into the hands of the one who gave us life in the one who controls everything in a world where I've got virtually no control at all and that's the reality of life when we think about risk let's just be frank here we don't have control and I am absolutely convinced that God intends for us to live and to realize the uncertainty and the risk of life and that is one of the core reasons why we want to seek him in life because he is certain and powerful James chapter four in the new testament puts it like this now listen you who say today or tomorrow we will go into this city or that spend a year here and there and carry on business and make money like most of the strategic plans I'm assuming in North Shore why you don't even know what will happen tomorrow what is your life you're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes instead you ought to say if it is the

[39 : 31] Lord's will we will live and do this or that that is the point of that passage is we're not God we do not know what tomorrow is going to happen tomorrow risk is in the very fabric of our lives every single moment and we cannot avoid risk even if we wanted to all of our plans for tomorrow's activities are shattered in a moment with thousands of unknowns that we face day by day we need to explode the myth of safety and security and to somehow be delivered from the seduction of security and comfort in our world it is a mirage it does not exist in our world at all and the tragedy is that in the myth of security we are paralyzed and we are paralyzed on the north shore to take risks for the cause of

God because we are deluded into thinking that it may jeopardize the security and the comfort that we in fact does not even exist so the point of that is put your hands in the hands of God and when we do fourth point if I perish I perish it's the language of greatness so many of us in our world do not take risks and we spend our life trying to build a reputation so that we are remembered we care about our legacy what we're passing on to others and yet it's those who take often the greatest risk are the ones who hand over the greatest legacy 14 times in the book of Esther 14 times Esther is referred to as Queen Esther the first time is when she's made

Queen Queen Esther her title the other 13 times she's referred to as Queen Esther when she utters the words if I perish I perish She's been queen for a while but 13 of the 14 occasions are after she utters those words she becomes a person of greatness by letting go of her life and placing it into God's hands for his glory and the good of others and as we look forward as a church here to the next stage of our life and our ministry together we're doing so in the most uncertain and unprecedented time in this church's 124 year history in Chatswood as I said

Christianity is not accepted as true good or beautiful in our society and the early church the first three centuries of the early church of the Christian church faced similar circumstances to what we are facing now that is where Christianity was minority where it was not regarded as true good or beautiful and yet within the first three centuries the Christian church transformed the Roman empire for its good because they were captivated by the gospel of the glory of the Lord Jesus their identity was attached to him and they risked everything for that glory including their own lives and they did so joyfully like them eternal greatness awaits those who take those risks!