

MESSAGE FROM THE MASTER

This is Pastor Wayne Mueller. The following is the Message from the Master sermon broadcast April 27, 2008. The sermon theme is "The Lord Directs" based on Esther 4:12-14. Part of series: "The Lord Provides."

When the Lord Jesus taught us to pray for daily bread, he had more in mind than the choice between wheat and white bread. In many languages "bread" has the wider meaning of being the basic sustenance for daily life. The hippies of the sixties and seventies spoke of bread as a synonym for spending money. When Jesus told the crowds that he is the "Bread of Life," he meant that he was the basic essential food for our spiritual lives without which we could not survive. When Jesus reminded the devil that man cannot live by bread alone, he used bread to refer to the material aspects of life. There must, Jesus was saying, also be the spiritual.

That's important to remember when we are praying the Lord's Prayer. God's provision for our life extends way beyond making sure there is enough food on our table and enough money in our retirement account. Repeatedly the Bible pictures God as the ruler of heaven and earth. St. Paul told the Colossians that Jesus sustains all the natural laws he put in place at the creation of the world. God is the manager of history. God is the true ruler over the temporary kings and rulers of this world. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke about how God provides for the birds of the air, then reminded us that we are more valuable to God than the sparrows. It's like the old song says, "He's got the whole world in his hands."

The Bible is full of stories about how God intervened big time in the history of the world to change the course of events. The story of the Flood in Genesis, the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus, the military victories of King David, Elijah's showdown at Mt. Carmel, and of course the entry of his own Son Jesus to this earth are obvious examples. What we do not always see in the Bible, however, or even in our own life, is how God does little things which change the course of life on this earth and benefit the believers in his kingdom.

A case in point is the story of Esther in the Old Testament. The Book of Esther is unique among all sixty-six books in the Bible in this respect: it is the only book of the Bible in which the name of God never occurs. Yet it is easy to see in reading this book how the hand of God is behind the events described, how God is managing the little events of daily life, and how God—even when we do not notice—is making all things work together for the good of those who love him.

The events in the Book of Esther take place about five hundred years before Christ. The setting is Persia, the most expansive, most powerful, and richest empire the world had ever seen up to that time. Among the Persian conquests was the little land of Judah, the land where God had established his people, and the people through whom God had promised to send the coming Messiah. When the Persians conquered Judah, they took most of the craftsmen and educated people back with them into exile in Persia. Among these exiles was a beautiful young woman named Esther.

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Sitting on the throne in Persia at this time was Xerxes. One day Xerxes' wife refused to come to him when summoned. Flying into a fit of rage, Xerxes declared that queen could never again come into his presence and ordered a empire-wide search for new, beautiful young women to be added to his harem. Among the women chosen for the new harem was the beautiful Esther. Immediately Esther was recognized by the king for her outstanding beauty. She was assigned seven attendants and moved to the most prominent place in the harem. Shortly after that Xerxes put a crown on her head and made her queen. She solidified Xerxes' trust in her when she warned the king of assassination plot against him.

Esther had lost her parents as a child, and was raised by a Jewish man named Mordecai. Mordecai accompanied ester to the palace when she was chosen for the king's harem. There he was able to keep an eye on her, and it was Mordecai who uncovered the assassination plot and reported it to Esther. Mordecai told Esther not to let on that she was Jewish, but he himself continued to practice his Jewish faith openly.

When one of the nobles in Xerxes' court was elevated for honor among his peers, the king ordered everybody in the palace to bow to him. Mordecai refused to honor this noble, Haman, because it would have compromised his worship of the true God. When Haman heard that a man had refused to bow to him and found out he was a Jew, he sought revenge. Killing Mordecai, however, was not vengeance enough for him. He began plotting for a way to kill all the Jews throughout the kingdom.

Haman went to King Xerxes and told him that the Jews in his kingdom were refusing to acknowledge the honor that Xerxes had elevated him for. Haman talked the king into financing a bunch of thugs who would go through all the kingdom and kill all the Jews. The king then gave Haman the royal signet ring so that Haman could officially carry out the slaughter of the Jews. Haman issued the royal edict for the slaughter of the Jews and prepared a gallows on which to publicly hang Mordecai.

When Mordecai heard the royal edict he began weeping uncontrollably for his fellow Jews. Then, suddenly, Mordecai realized that in Esther's position God had given him an opportunity to save his people. He went to Esther and asked her to approach the king with a request to spare her people, the Jews. Esther prepared a fabulous banquet for the king where she intended to pose her request to save the Jews.

While Esther was preparing the banquet the king was reading through his official records. He noticed that no honor had ever been given to the man who had uncovered the assassination plot against him. When Xerxes learned that the man was Mordecai, he ordered Haman to carry out the official honor of Mordecai. Haman was mortified by the shame of having to dress Mordecai up in royal garments and lead him through the city streets on a horse.

Finally, the time for the banquet came and Esther made her plea to the king for sparing the Jews. Not only did the king spare the Jews; he also ordered Haman to be hanged on the gallows he had made for Mordecai.

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You cannot read the story of Esther without calling to mind Paul's promise the Roman Christians: "We know, Paul wrote, "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). The story of Esther is not just the account of how the Jews in captivity were spared from annihilation. Behind God's manipulation of history there was his promise that he would preserve a remnant of his people to carry out his promise of a Savior to be born as a direct descendant in the line of King David.

What is also significant in the story of Esther is the fact that Esther herself was probably not an especially religious person. Mordecai, on the other hand, openly practiced his faith. That is evident in the fact that he would not give the honor reserved for God to Haman. It is also clear at the end of the book where we hear that Mordecai helped initiate the Feast of Purim among the Jews to celebrate God's deliverance of his people. When Mordecai first heard about the official edict to exterminate the Jews in Persia, he came to Esther with this request: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). Mordecai's trusted that God makes things happen for the long term good of his people. He registered his faith in his determination to take advantage of an opportunity for a good work that God had put in front of him and Esther. Paul wrote the Ephesians, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). Mordecai knew that God creates the circumstances and opportunities for his people to act in faith for the good of the kingdom.

You and I are also surrounded by world and local circumstances in which God himself has placed us to act. It is not an accident of time or some indefinite force of fate that you are where you are. History is His Story, God's story. "My times are in his hands," the Psalmist confesses. Trust in Jesus is not only trust that we will eventually go to heaven on his merits. It is the trust that already now on earth God uses us as his instruments to change the course of human events for the progress of his church. As Paul wrote, faith makes us God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

To ask God for something in prayer without a Mordecai-like trust that God makes us a part of the answer to that prayer is hypocrisy. Too many times we do nothing with the excuse that we do not have the strength of faith or the talents to make a difference in God's world. Note how God used Esther to save his people, even though she made not have been a woman of great faith. Notice how God used Mordecai, who had great faith, but did not personally have access to the king's ear.

As a child of God, we get up every morning with Mordecai's question ringing in our ears: "Who knows but that God has put you in a position for just such a time as this?" God doesn't want us merely to pray for the souls of neighbors, friends and relatives. He has put us in the middle of communication vehicles to make us happen. He has given us telephones and emails and letters with stamps. He has created special occasions such as birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, births and deaths to give us opportunities to say what needs to be said about Jesus to somebody who hasn't thought about him for a long time.

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The story of Esther had the dramatic result of saving a whole people in exile from certain death and destruction. But St. James reminds you and me that bringing a soul back to Jesus is an even more dramatic outcome with more long lasting results. James writes, "My brothers, if any of you should wander from the truth, and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (James 5:19,20).

Mordecai and Esther lived in the richest nation of their day. They were every day basking in the excesses of the royal palace. But that did not keep them from doing the will of God. You and I live in the riches nation on the earth today. We are surrounded by the excesses of entertainment, money, sports, vacations, lottery winners, and glitzy shopping malls. Yet none of that must stop us from seeing ourselves as God's instruments for saving his people. Wherever you go, whatever you are, be God's instrument for changing the world and saving a soul. Your gentle word of reminder, your loving call back to the Savior, your email of comfort in Christ, your invitation to worship or Bible study, your personal faith-sharing letter, your arm around the shoulder of a

wayward soul, your come-to-Jesus talk with a grandchild, your Easter hope shared with mourners, your bedside Bible reading to a friend with terminal cancer—these are the bold actions of people who change this world for the better and bring an eternal world of joy to those who are drawn to the Savior.

Like Mordecai, we can wail and lament about what is happening to God's people, or we can come to our senses and realize that we ourselves may be the answers to the prayers we are praying. Amen.

PRAYER

We praise you, Lord, for at all times you work for the good of your people. In Jesus Christ, give us trust for the forgiveness of sins and our daily bread. By your Holy Spirit make us bold instruments of your will that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Turn the hearts and minds of our apostate nation back to Jesus Christ, cover us with your mercy, receive us back from the captivity of our own materialism, and let your kingdom come. In Jesus name we also pray:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and ever. Amen.**