

Sinners Step Forward (Esther 4:1-5:8, Part One) - 03.01.20 - Kevin P. Larson - KarisChurch.org

Pastor Aarik, our resident music scholar, knew this was coming. My favorite band for sometime has been a New Jersey-based group called Pinegrove. I don't know how I found them - probably through some streaming algorithm - but their combination of creative, catchy melodies and vulnerable, poetic lyrics grabbed me sometime ago, and I've literally been listening to their songs over and over for hours a day. Lead singer Evan Stephens Hall is a genius in my mind.

But he's also quite complicated as a person. Back in November of 2017, he posted on Facebook that he had been accused of "sexual coercion" by an unnamed woman. Later it was revealed that it was a member of the band's touring team. She says she felt pressured into a relationship with Hall due to his status of power on the team. This led to the band taking a hiatus - not touring for a year, at her request. As you might expect, this almost led to the end of Pinegrove, but Hall spent some time that year in counseling. They released a new album recently and have been touring again.

Now, I definitely decided a long time ago that I'd be boycotting a lot of musicians if I only listened to music by morally upstanding men and women. The same goes for actors and politicians - pretty much everyone. But I have to say it certainly bothers me. As I read through Esther where I see men over and over behaving badly. Treating women like objects. Using and abusing them.

I've spent quite a bit of time pondering how to think about this today. #Metoo has been a good thing - much needed - in our world. Right? Standing up for women. Holding men accountable. But, I also have wondered - should someone be "canceled" if they're accused of something improper? Or even if they do something really bad? Is it game over - even if they change?

I recently watched a house concert video from just Evan Stephens Hall that bothered me in another way. He sang one of his songs I hadn't heard and said this afterward: "That's a song I sing to remind myself that I have within me everything that I need to be cool and good. And that goes for everybody."

Now I think many would argue that Hall's not cool, not good, at all. But, if we think we're OK on our own, we're deluded. We're deceived. I don't have everything within me that I need. And that goes for everybody.

Today, we're continuing our walk through the book of Esther. We've entitled this series "When God Seems Silent." The people of God, the Jews, are in a desperate place. They don't know where to turn. They no doubt wonder, "Where is God?" But He is very much at work. He's not absent. He provides what they need in an imperfect, but brave girl-turned-queen named Esther. A sinner steps forward.

So as not to let these sermons get too long, I've decided to take two weeks on this passage of Scripture, **chapter 4, verse 1 through chapter 5, verse 8**. For this Sunday and next, I'll walk you through the passage, raising two questions each week in response. I'll also leave you two qualities we see shine through his courageous woman. And I'll end by showing how she points beyond herself to a greater deliverer.

A Sinner Steps Forward

Last week, we saw the evil Haman, who's called "***the enemy of the Jews***" in **chapter 3**, issue a decree to wipe out all of God's people. Word begins to spread, and Mordecai hears about it in **verses 1 and 2**. He tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, sprinkles ashes all over him. He expresses grief the ways people do in that day. And he goes out and wails. But he only does it at the entrance of the gate. That kind of undignified, ugly crying couldn't be done inside the king's court.

In **verse 3**, we see this news reach the entire empire. It says **“there was great mourning among with the Jews.”** A decree has been issued. Several months down the road, their neighbors would turn against them, killing them and plundering them. That’s the news they get. It’s no surprise grief engulfs the land.

Far and wide. Low and high, as we see, in **verse 4**. Word of this decree spreads. Esther the Queen hears about it. She is **“deeply distressed.”** She sends new clothes to Mordecai, the cousin who had raised her. She tries to get him out of the lament loop. Perhaps she’s trying to keep him from drawing attention to himself. And getting harmed in some way. We’re not sure.

That leads to the first question I want you to think about, as we get going today. Do you see the suffering and sin around you and mourn? Last week, we saw in Haman and his actions a picture of our archenemy, Satan. We talked about how he persecutes the people of God. About how he spiritually attacks all of us and everyone around us. Bringing pain and devastation everywhere. Can you and I see that all around us? Does it bring us to grief? To prayer? To action - as we’ll see here? Or are we so absorbed in ourselves and the things of the world - that we don’t notice or care?

And moving that direction, do we see the sin and suffering in us? The people of God here are in this place because of their disobedience - Esther and Mordecai included. Do we see the consequences of what our hands have done and truly weep over it? We’re not sure if Esther’s really grasping this here. And do we see the results of our fallen world - how it’s impacted our world, our lives, our bodies? We’re not just sinners. We’re sufferers. Have we really allowed ourselves to grieve? So the Lord can draw us near and heal us?

In **verses 5 and 6**, she sends one of the king’s eunuch servants assigned to her. He’s to check on Mordecai and learn the ins and outs of what’s transpired. He meets him at the front of the gate where he stands and grieves.

Mordecai then tells this man Hathach, in **verses 7-9**, all that has happened. The details of Haman's scheme. He sends him back to Esther - with a copy of the decree. He tells Hatach to tell her about it all and command the Queen to ***"go to the King to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people."*** You may remember this is a departure from Mordecai's previous advice. He had told her before *not* to reveal that she's a Jew. Now, with annihilation at hand, she is to reveal it. She must reveal it. So she can advocate for them. The eunuch does as he's asked.

In **verses 10 and 11**, we hear Esther's response to her servant. She tells him exactly what to say to her cousin. Hear **verse 11**.

"All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

People don't just pop in and say hi to the king. He had an inner circle who could. And evil Haman is a part of it. But for everyone else - even the queen - there are only two results of breaking this protocol. He holds out his scepter, inviting you forward to talk. Or you're ushered out to be executed. Those are the options.

And Esther here isn't feeling too optimistic. We learned back in **chapter 2, verse 14**, back during the contest, that those in the king's harem wouldn't return unless he called one of them in by name. Now that hasn't happened for awhile with Esther - for the past thirty days. And it's highly doubtful he's sleeping alone. She tells this to Mordecai. Her response is basically, "Are you serious, bro?"

Well, her cousin hears her response in **verses 12 and 14** and makes a final plea. He basically says, "If you do nothing, what makes you think you'll be safe there? God's for us. He'll rescue us somehow. But you and yours will be judged. Could it be you're in that palace in this season for exactly this reason?"

In **verses 15 and 16**, Esther sends her reply to Mordecai. She hears his appeal. She'll do what he asks. She has him gather God's people to come together and fast. Those in her chamber will do it along with them. In the Bible, fasting generally goes with praying. Could it be that God's people are being aroused from their slumber? That they're turning back to their Lord again? That seems to be the case. Esther is at a desperate place. She's going in - even if it's against the law. She seems to put her life in God's hands. ***"If I perish, I perish,"*** she says. She listens to her cousin.

Here's the second question I want you to consider with me this morning. Will you hear the wisdom and counsel of others? Our default mode as humans - but especially in this culture - is to "follow our hearts." But the Bible is clear that this isn't the best path to follow. **Jeremiah 17:9** tells us that the heart - the core of who we are - is ***"deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*** Our hearts are prone to wander from the Lord. Our enemy feeds us dangerous lies. He preys on our twisted desires. And God protects us in community. By brothers and sisters. By wise friends like Mordecai. Will we listen?

Well, he listens to Esther's directions now in **verse 17**. Now he does what she says. The relationship changes from this point on. She is transformed here. She is emboldened. She's now plays the part of queen. But more importantly, she becomes the deliverer of her people.

In **verses 1 through 4 of chapter 5**, we see her live out that role. She readies herself and approaches the king. She puts on her royal garb. She stands in the inner court, just outside the king's quarters, where he sits upon his throne. He sees her. She wins his favor. He offers up to half the kingdom. Which is a way of saying, "Whatever you need." He holds out his scepter. Esther then approaches.

King Ahasuerus asks her what she wants. He responds graciously to her. And Esther gives him her request. And it's not really what we expect. Right? She invites her husband, the King, along with wicked Haman to a feast. Maybe she's working up the courage. Or setting Haman up for a fall. But she doesn't know the half of it. Her Lord, who may seem silent, is very much about to speak. Through her. And turn everything radically upside down.

In **verses 5 through 8**, we see Esther throw the feast. Haman and the King come. They enjoy themselves. Ahasuerus reiterates his desire to give her anything she asks. And what does she ask for? For them to come to another feast. And there, at that second feast, she says she'll then make her big ask. We'll get into the rest of **chapter 5** in a couple of weeks, but peek at **verse 9**. Haman leaves happy. But that's not going to last for long.

Here we see Esther the queen - who has thus far been quiet and subdued - complicit and compromised - rise up. She begins to live as a true queen. A queen of sorts even over the people of God. And the Lord is about to use her in powerful ways.

Two Ways to Be Like Queen Esther

I want to give you two exhortations - and I'll again give you two more next week - as we look at what Esther does in this passage. **Here's the first thing I want to encourage you toward: own your identity and stand.** Back when we first met her in **chapter 2**, we learned that she is a woman with two names. Hear **verse 7** again. Mordecai, it says, is *"bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother."* There we see her two names. *"Hadassah,"* which is Jewish. *"Esther,"* which is anything but. It's a pagan name. She's likely named for the Babylonian goddess of love and war named Ishtar.

Now those two names show the difficult situation Esther is in. With Mordecai. Really along with all of God's people. Caught between two different worlds.

Remember, she goes through with this really terrible contest. Maybe she's compelled and enters reluctantly. More than likely she willingly complies. But she goes along with a despicable, ungodly thing. Remember Queen Vashti, the woman she replaces, puts her foot down before the King. Esther could have, too. But she doesn't. And remember, also. With her cousin's counsel, she doesn't reveal her Jewish identity. She keeps it hidden. She's Esther, not Hadassah.

Now isn't it our tendency to do the same thing? Isn't it so much easier to just keep quiet the fact that you're a Christ-follower? To keep your primary identity secret? And not rock the boat? Maybe people in class are talking about an issue, and you don't share your opinion. Maybe someone at the office shares some gossip, and you go right along with them. Or someone tees up an amazing opportunity to share the gospel. And you keep your mouth closed. You don't want to make enemies. You want to maintain peace. But as you and I do that, a little part of us dies. In an effort to keep hold of that ring of power in our lives, we look a little bit more like Gollum and a little less like Smeagol.

Now maybe your tendency to hide reveals that you're not one of the people of God. Jesus put it this way in **Matthew 10:32-33**.

Matt. 10:32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,

33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Maybe you won't reveal who you are because it's *not* who you are. But on the other hand, so many of us are like Esther. We may hide our light under a basket, but it's not who we are. It's not what we want. And we hear the Lord calling us to come out into the light, into his arms, where He awaits. There is hope for traitors and cowards. The apostle Peter is, of course, the best example. If Peter can be restored - if He can be used by God - we can be, too.

There's a push in our culture to be who you really are. To let all of that hang out - no matter what anyone thinks. But so much of the time, that's leaning into an identity apart from Christ. Into Esther. Away from Hadassah. But hear me, church. That's not who we are. Standing for Christ may seem constraining. But it's really freedom. We're no longer slaves to what the world wants, where the world goes. We're free. And we're no longer orphans, floundering and flailing, trying to prove ourselves. We're children of the King. And that's liberating. He has made us. He has redeemed us. Sending His Son to die for us on the cross. He's brought us together into the fellowship. Let's stand. And let's trust Him to defend us. And protect us. And deliver us.

But I want to insert a challenge right here. So much of the time, we keep quiet, because we're trying to prove ourselves to people. We're trying to impress them. We're fearing man more than the Lord. But it's easy for us to decide, "Well, I'm gonna be one of those who stands." And we do it in a self-righteous way. An abrasive way. We try to make a point to those around us. And really, we're still every bit trying to impress. Maybe God? Our Christian friends? Maybe we're even trying to prove ourselves to ourselves. But that can be every bit as damaging - you know, making the Lord look terrible instead of not mentioning him at all. He wants us to speak the truth, but in love, and with lots of grace. Let's stand in that way.

It'll result in freedom for you. And honor to your God. How does your dad feel if you don't acknowledge you're his? But beyond that, we miss out on opportunities to serve. Esther stands before the king. She tells him she's a Jew. And that leads to my next point.

Here's the second thing I want to encourage in: leverage your position and serve. Where does Esther find herself? In the palace. It's where God has called her, placed her. It's her vocation. It's where God has elevated her. It's a high place.

We've lost this idea of vocation today, I'm afraid. It refers to the callings we have from God. The Reformation rightly shouted, "This isn't just for people in ministry. It's for everyone." There's some debate. But this quote has long been attributed to Luther.

"The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays-not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship."

Work isn't something that came from the fall. It existed in the garden, when God gave Adam and Eve the charge to work and keep the ground. Now the fall made things harder. That's why our jobs now often don't feel like callings. The floors never seem to stay clean. Our hammers always seem to hit our thumbs. But they're still callings and God wants to use us there.

Now hear me. There's another danger I want you to think about. There is something good, even holy, in doing good work for His good glory. And we can often try to make it just a means to an end. We just work at the office so we can throw gospel tracts over the cubicle wall. We don't care so much about the quality of our work as we do the influence we make for the gospel. I don't think those attitudes are good and healthy. But at the same time, God has put us in strategic places for gospel advance. As we repair those shoes, we can make a difference for the kingdom. I think of my wife - who is an amazing nurse. She just works one day a week. Her patients beg for her to come back. Her coworkers try to persuade her to work full-time. She's good at it. But at the same time, she's always ready to share her story, to point the person to Christ.

I use that word leverage. What does a lever do? It's a bar usually - that's pushed or pried to cause movement of something. That's how God can use our vocations.

And for some of us, like Esther, He's given us bigger levers. He's put us in places of power, of privilege, of influence, of responsibility. We have a kind of access that others simply don't have. Where we can make a difference. Where we can stand up for the weak, the oppressed, the depressed, the hurting. Where we can do two critical things: stand up for those overwhelmed by suffering and sin. And share our hope in the gospel for the eradication of both.

You've heard it said that middle-class Americans actually make up some of the richest people in the world. But I'd also argue that we have significantly more power than most of the world's population. And most of us in here have so much more than most Americans - of even many in our city.

The question is: what will we do with it? It seems like most people today just don't want to be bothered by or blamed for anything. I didn't do that. I'm not responsible. It's on them. When our Savior took on the struggles and offenses of the world. Will we choose to look like Him? This is what our Lord calls us to. And it's what He holds us accountable to.

The man Mordecai says these famous words in **verses 13-14**. We really need to hear them again. We'll also come back to them next week.

Esth. 4:13 Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.

14 For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Now you can hear in Mordecai's voice the two truths I talked about last week. That we'll keep coming back to. God's really on the throne. He's really for His people. Mordecai is confident that, if Esther doesn't do what she should, God will still come through. He knows God is sovereign over the whole thing. But he also knows God is sovereign over where He has Esther.

The Lord has put her in that calling, that palace, for a specific reason. To deliver God's people. He asks a famous question. But it's really a rhetorical one. ***"And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"***

Sorry to keep bragging on my wife. But I do have the mic. She's always talking to our kids about looking for the kids at school who are struggling. Who are sitting at the lunch table alone. She tells them, "If you don't, who will?"

Have you thought that maybe it's the same for you - and for me? Yeah, maybe we're not going to deliver many nations from genocide in your lifetime. But you're positioned by Him with possibilities. To stick up with someone who's weak. To share good news with someone who's broken. We can make a difference that lasts for eternity. If we'll step up and serve. God gives us positions for our good and His glory. We just have to leverage them. Not to further our status - as most people do. But to lift up others. To serve.

Before I move on, there a couple of important things I need to say. First, here in Karis, we believe it's clear from God's word that He has made men and women differently. Even giving us different callings and responsibilities. But here we see God using a powerful woman to do critical things. Women haven't been valued and utilized in society. That's also been seen in the church. And friends, that has to change. We see here that the Lord loves to use powerful women. He sees them worthy of the biggest of assignments.

Second, when we're talking about leveraging our places and using them to speak up, we've got to look in the mirror, men. We can't be silent about the mistreatment and abuse of women in our culture and even in the church. Stuff like we see here in Esther. We can't tolerate misogynist speech or behavior. When women cry out for help, we have to hear and act. It tore me up to see so many men dismiss and even mock the #metoo movement. Seeing it as an attack on guys. When it allowed long-silent ladies to speak and be heard. Let's give them a voice, men. Let's listen. And serve.

We'll come back to this again in Esther, but we do see God's sovereignty all over the story. In a book where God seems silent, even absent, we can hear His voice, we can see His fingerprints everywhere. Mordecai points out the obvious. "Esther, dear cuz, you are the Queen of the Persian Empire. That's insane. How did you get here, other than by the hand of God?" But even though that's the case, she's still responsible. She still has to act. And so do we. We can try to use God's sovereignty as an excuse to just sit there, to not act. But that doesn't work. Yeah, God could use someone else. That could be His plan. We don't know His ends. But He always uses means. And if you're in that position - and not someone else - He calls you to be faithful.

Not too long ago, I had a conversation with someone who didn't want to acknowledge racism in his heart or really in our nation. He used this as a proof-text. **Acts 17:26** says, ***"And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place."*** So here was the rationale. God's put people in certain places according to His plan. So why push? In the words of Bruce Hornsby, made famous by Tupac: "That's just the way it is." But hear me: yeah, he's sovereign over people in suffering. No doubt. But He's also Lord over your life. And He has you in a time and place where you can do something about it.

That mentality didn't lead William Wilberforce to get slavery abolished in England. It didn't lead William Carey to go give us life as a missionary in Asia. Yes, the Lord is sovereign. But He calls us to action. His sovereignty emboldens and strengthens us. He is at work. He can do anything. It's not an excuse to sit on our butts and shrug our shoulders. Maybe God seems silent, and He wants to speak loudly through you.

Christian, like Esther, you're in a place, and even a place of privilege. A classroom. An office. A sports team. Esther if you didn't notice - she's a layperson. She's not Ezra, teaching the Bible. And she has a high calling. Every bit as much as him.

There are people around you suffering. Without hope. He wants you to leverage that position and serve. Esther has been quiet for too long. She's squandered the position she's been given. But it isn't too late for her to rise up. And that applies to us, church.

So let's go back to those two questions. Will you hear the suffering and sin around you and mourn? Will we act? And will you hear the wisdom and counsel of others? You say you don't know God's calling on your life? Where you're to serve? Here's my best advice. Ask the people around you.

The True Hero

One of the biggest errors we can make in reading the Bible is to see it as a book of heroes. A book of heroes we are to emulate. Now there are heroes in God's word. Yes. But, like Esther, they also do some pretty terrible things. Try to pattern your lives like them, as it's often taught, and you might end up in jail! The point of these stories is to point beyond themselves to the real hero. To someone who would rescue us.

That's Jesus. Think about this with me. Jesus came to earth to become like us. To fully identify with us as humans. He put on flesh. So He could reach us.

He could have stayed in heaven. He cast His glory aside. He left the palace. So He could save us.

He didn't just become a human. He identified with all of our weakness. He allowed Himself to become tired, hungry, and weak. He even went so far as to experience death. All so that we could be delivered.

A common question is why Jesus was baptized. He isn't a sinner. He doesn't need to be washed clean. The answer is that He chose to identify Himself with us fully. With the people of God, His church. When He didn't have to. When we didn't deserve it.

Even more, He willingly accepted the calling of God on His life. He knew He had been sent to earth to live, die, and rise for His people. He didn't turn away from that position God had given to Him. When Satan gave Him other options, He stood fast. When things got close and real in the garden, He kept His face pointed toward the cross. He identified with us. He accepted the position in which God put Him and served us.

That's what we call the gospel, good news, friends. We can stop trying to play the hero. We can never be strong enough. We can never be good enough. We can stop trying to prove ourselves. And accept what Jesus the true hero came to do for us. We can open our hands. We can drop our efforts to impress Him or others. We can receive His love. And raise our hands in worship.

A Sinner Steps Forward

God seems silent here. A sinner steps forward. She identifies with her people. She embraces the place God has placed her. A pretty awesome woman. But as we've seen here in the book, Esther is a pretty complicated person, too. She may be the hero of the story. But she needs salvation as much as anyone.

We don't have everything we need. Esther doesn't. We don't. Too much of the time we hide who we are. We squander opportunities God gives us. We're not good. We're not cool. But that's the point. The fact that we need help, need rescue, doesn't mean that God doesn't want us, that He won't use us for Him.

In fact, He wants to show Himself as great, as powerful in us - through us. He only uses sinners. Those are the only types of people that exist. It's not "game over" if we turn from sin and run to Him. He wants who He is and what He's done to move us and send us out and send us as lights of the world into the dark places around us. When we do, we put the spotlight on the true Rescuer, the only perfect One, King Jesus. In Him, we have everything we need. And that's goes for everybody.