



JESUS IS A BETTER MEDIATOR

Part 5 of Esther

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Esther 4:1–17 | October 14, 2012

NOT PERFECT, BUT MAKING PROGRESS

So, I had a great, interesting, helpful, hopeful, painful conversation with a woman recently. She came up and was visiting one of the Mars Hill churches, and she couldn't look me in the eye. She was really discouraged, and when she started speaking, she started crying, so it was obvious something was troubling her.

And I asked her, "What's wrong?" She said, "I'm so frustrated. I'm so discouraged. I'm so sad." I said, "Why?" She said, "There's so much sin in my life and there's so many idols in my heart, and the more that I study, and the more that I read, and the more that I pray, the more that I realize all the problems that I have." And she seemed really sweet, and sincere, and tenderhearted, and seemed like she loved the Lord and her intentions were good and noble.

So, I asked her, "Could you please look at me?" She looked at me and then she just started really crying. I have that great gift of making people cry. And so she starts crying, and I said, "Is there any progress in your life, looking at, let's say, the last year? Anything to be encouraged by? Anything that you should celebrate?"

She said, "Well, my husband left and I had to go find a job, but I found a job, and I became a Christian." I'm like, "Well, that's a big deal." "And I got baptized to identify myself with Jesus, and I went through the membership class at Mars Hill, so I'm part of the church. And now I have Christian friends, and I'm in a Community Group, and they're helping me with my struggles and kids. And I'm praying every day and I'm reading the Bible every day."

I said, "How's that going?" She said, "I love the Scriptures and I love Jesus, and I'm talking to him a lot and I'm learning a lot." She said, "So, I've signed up for Redemption Group to work through some real abuse issues in my past." I looked at her, I said, "Why are you discouraged? You are growing so fast. Like, you're making so much progress so quickly." She said, "Yeah, but Jesus says we should be perfect."

I said, "Oh. Let me tell you why he said that. He said that to frustrate you. So that you would try for a while and then come to a place where you realize, 'I'm not perfect and I can't be perfect,' and then you would realize that he's your perfection and that you'd receive grace from him and rest in that. You wouldn't be like the Old Testament Jews who were looking for every speck of dust in the house. 'I know it's here somewhere! Where is it? There it is! There's always something that's unclean.' We tend to do that with our own soul. 'I know there's dirt and filth here somewhere. Let me find it! Let me find it—I did. I knew. I knew I wasn't clean.'"

I said, "Jesus was perfect. You're not. And Jesus told you to try to be perfect so you'd realize you can't do it, and that you'd receive his perfection, and his grace, and his mercy." And I looked her in the eye and I said, "Hear me in this. Jesus is so pleased with you. Jesus is so pleased with you." She said, "But I'm not perfect!" I said, "Neither am I, but he's pleased because he sees progress." He's pleased because he sees progress. Until we die, and rise, and see Jesus face to face, we're not going to be perfect.

It doesn't say in the Scriptures that we should have a lackadaisical attitude toward our sin, or not deal with it, or give ourselves lots of excuses. But we need to understand that Jesus alone is perfect and he is our perfection, and we need to celebrate progress in our life and progress in the life of others.

Well, I had this great honor of serving this woman. She looked at me, she said, "Do you think he's really pleased with me?" I said, "I'm sure he is. I'm your pastor; I'm really pleased with you. I mean, look at all of this progress in one year. It's amazing. Your heart's very tender." And she smiled and I got to hug her and pray for her.

Here's the big idea as we get into Esther 4, as we look at "Jesus is a Better Mediator" in Esther 4:1–17. As we look at the story of Mordecai and Esther, they're not perfect. Despite what they might have told you in some class, or study, or curriculum, these are not perfect people. But starting in chapter 4, it's like a hinge, and the whole story swings on it, they start making progress.

ARE YOU MAKING PROGRESS?

And I'll give you an analogy. I'll just preface it by saying it's a terrible analogy, and Grace pointed this out last night, but it's all I have. And so think of a 100-yard field, okay? And it can be a soccer field or a football field. Whatever. It doesn't matter to me. We don't judge or evaluate someone by where they are, but by where they started and what direction they're going.

I've got a friend. He's a pastor. I won't use his name, but he was raised in a poor family; sexually assaulted repeatedly as a young man; grew up to be obese, way over three hundred pounds and had heart problems as a result; was addicted to pornography; living in his car. And then he met Jesus, and now he's got a beautiful family and pastors a very wonderful church.

And every once in awhile, he'll say something he shouldn't say, not nearly as bad as things that I say regularly. And people will really freak out. "He shouldn't say that." I'm like, "This guy, he didn't get the ball on the one. He got the ball in the parking lot." Right? I mean, his life started in a horrible—and now, look at all this progress. Look at all this progress in his

life.

Some of you, you were born on the fifty; some of you were born on the one. The question is, are you making progress and what direction are you going? And today, with Mordecai and with Esther, we're gonna see that they got the ball, let's say, on the two. Life is hard, circumstances are rough, it's not easy, and for many years, they don't make any progress.

At this point in the story, Esther has been married to Xerxes for five years, and the reason it doesn't tell us anything is nothing really happened. Not a lot of progress, but then in Esther 4, for both Esther and Mordecai, progress starts. For those of you who haven't made progress in awhile, spiritually speaking, it's a great encouragement and hope. For those of you that are making progress, don't get discouraged by judging yourself on the standard of perfection, but look at yourself through the eyes of progress. Are you making progress?

MORDECAI MAKES PROGRESS

Here's where the story begins. First, we're going to look at Mordecai, and we're going to treat Mordecai, Esther, Haman, and Xerxes, the four major characters in the story, as kind of like case studies. Two of these people, they don't make any progress. They're not God's people, they don't change. That's Haman and Xerxes. Two of these people are God's people, they do make progress. It takes them awhile, but they do start going forward spiritually in chapter 4. That's Mordecai and Esther.

Here's Mordecai. Mordecai makes progress. Esther 4:1-3. "When Mordecai learned all that had been done." Alright, if you're new, I've got to catch you up on the story. There's a king named Xerxes, rules over a kingdom called Persia. He's the most powerful, influential, affluent man on the earth in his day. He sits on a throne. He rules like a god. He gets upset with his wife because she disobeys one of his orders to parade before a drunken party that he's hosting, so he divorces her.

And then some four years later, he holds an enormous competition. Hundreds of women are in it, and they are given a year of spa treatments, and the winner becomes the queen of Persia. It's a really horrible, sick man that oversees this entire process. One of the young women that was in the competition to become the queen of Persia was a young woman named Esther. She's Jewish by descent, but she's not necessarily walking with God. And she was an orphan girl. Her parents died when she was little and she was adopted by her older cousin, Mordecai, who served like a father figure in her life. That's Mordecai.

Mordecai, at this point, is kind of a coward. Nobody knows that he's Jewish, he's one of God's people. He's working for a pagan king, and when it comes time to hand off his adoptive daughter, he does so without putting up a fight, which is a horrible sin of omission. What he does do, however, is he decides that he's going to die on the hill of not bowing to a ruler named Haman.

So, there's Xerxes, the king, and one of his right-hand men is Haman. And Haman's this egomaniac, loves power, glory, and public recognition, and the decree is made from the king everyone needs to bow down to Haman. Now, Haman likes this, as you and I would as well, right? Wouldn't it be awesome if everybody bowed in your presence? I'm not saying they should, but it would be nice. All of a sudden, you would walk into a room and everyone would bow. Anyone came to meet with you, they would bow. This was an official recognition of his power and authority. It's kind of like a curtsy in the British Empire, or like bowing in an Asian culture, or saluting in a military context. Everybody bows to Haman except for one guy, Mordecai. Mordecai won't bow.

So, you have these enormous events where lots of people are bowing and one guy's not, and it's a bit obvious, right? He's just sort of giving Haman the stink eye, like, "I'm not bowing." We don't know exactly why, but we do know, historically, these two families, Haman's family and Mordecai's family, hundreds of years prior in the Old Testament, they're fighting and feuding. In fact, Haman's family is the first people group to attack the family line of Abraham, of which Mordecai is a part.

Well, what happens then, Mordecai keeps doing this. He keeps instigating the seething rage of Haman. Doesn't bow, doesn't bow, doesn't bow. This goes on for a long time. Finally, Haman escalates and says, "I'm going to have Mordecai killed, and everyone who's of the Jewish race with him. All of God's people." The historians will tell you, at this point, this is maybe 15 million people. So, the punishment does not fit the crime. One guy doesn't bow, so 15 million people die. Haman's going to become Hitler and he's overseeing genocide and a holocaust. It's really escalated.

"When Mordecai learned all that had been done." Now everything is out of control. "Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. And he cried out with a loud and bitter cry." This is public mourning, public weeping. This is also a bit of a public protest. The decree's been sent out, death sentence has been put into effect. The date has been set and Mordecai is powerless, but he's going to protest. He's going to publicly identify himself with God's people.

At this point in the story, he's only privately counted among God's people. He's going from silent to speaking. He's going from passive to active. We're seeing him make progress. At this point, Mordecai—I don't know when he gets saved or becomes a believer. Up until this point, he's not walked faithfully with God. He's far away from Jerusalem, no praying, no Scripture reading, no tithes and offerings, no sacrificial system, nothing that indicates he's walking with God. And he's very, very passive. He comes off as a cowardly, timid man who worships comfort and convenience, not God. And now he gets active. Right?

There's hope for those of you who've been passive. There's hope for those of you who've been cowardly. There's hope for those of you who've been silent. And some of you, it's been a long time. Mordecai, at this point, he's already raised Esther. She's been married some five years. I mean, this has been a long time coming. Some of you, it's been that way. It's been a long time coming.

But there's hope here. He does get active. He starts making spiritual progress, and he does so publicly, and he does so through mourning. "He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth." You can't be sad before the king. The king only wants good news, not bad news. "Tell me all the victories, not the defeats."

Some of us are like that. We don't like bad news, we only like good news. That's why some of you don't even watch the news. Like, "Oh no, if I turn it on, they're going to tell me something bad, so here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to flip over and watch a comedy. That's what I'm going to do." We tend to be like the king where if it's unpleasant, then we don't want to know.

So, only good news and happy people get to see the king. And so Mordecai is not allowed entrance into the palace because he's grieving, and wailing, and mourning. "And in every province," verse 3, "wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in

sackcloth and ashes.”

Now, let me say one thing briefly, pastorally and practically. In the west, particularly men, we don't grieve well. Right? We don't. In the Bible, it's a more eastern than a western culture, particularly in the Old Testament. When something bad happens, they let you know, right? They change their clothes, they put ashes on their head, they go out in public, they scream, and cry, and wail. The Psalms, the majority of which are psalms of lament, are words of song and prayer for God's people to express their grief, and their sadness, and their hardship.

We don't do that, right? I mean, here's how we do it in the west: “How are you?” “Fine. How are you?” “Fine.” “We're both fine. Great. Have a nice life.” And then we each go a separate direction. Meanwhile, he's getting divorced and she's got cancer, and they're “fine.” They're not fine.

“Well, I don't want to lose it.” Why? Where in the Bible does it say, “Thou shalt not lose it”? There are lots of people in the Bible who lose it. “Well, I don't want to get all emotional.” Why not? It doesn't say, “Thou shalt not get emotional.” “Well, I don't want to burden other people.” Well, what you're not allowing them to do is know you or love you.

Here are a couple of reasons why learning to mourn and be honest is good, letting people know, “It's a hard season, I'm not doing well.” Family, friends, Community Group, whatever the case may be. Number one, it's just telling the truth. I mean, the Bible says, “Thou shalt not lie.” If all you ever say is, “I'm great,” or if you always turn the question to, “Well, how are you?” you're lying. You're not telling the truth.

Number two, God himself weeps. We see this as early as Genesis 6, that God was grieved in his heart that he made man. We see Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. God weeps. God expresses his sadness. When Jesus' friend dies, Lazarus, the shortest verse in the whole Bible is that Jesus what? He wept.

Some of you go, “Well, that's not very tough.” Well, that's because you went to Mars Hill and I've not done a very good job teaching, so let me round it out. Jesus is a very masculine construction worker dude who cried when his friend died, okay? So you can grieve and cry in a masculine way. Like, when Grace miscarried and we lost a child, I grieved and I wept, because I'm a dad and I miss who was supposed to be our sixth kid. Somebody's missing at the dinner table every night.

In addition, if you don't grieve, you will break. When hard circumstances come—it's cancer, you lost your job, I want a divorce, our kids have betrayed the faith. What? Your friend undermined you. There's a lot of stress and pressure that comes with that, and if you don't have a release valve, you'll explode. We call it stress. It's why people in the west are very depressed, because they internalize all of their hardship. Then we go to a counselor and we get a prescription and we medicate. And I'm not saying it's always a sin, but I'm saying lamenting is sometimes a much better route to take. And if you don't have a release valve, you'll break. So much pressure. Lamenting, grieving, crying, singing out to God, doing so with others, it helps to relieve the pressure.

And thirdly, it invites other people to know you and love you. To know you and love you. And you may not know this: it's a gift for them. I just had a friend of mine recently sit down and explain a cancer battle in their family. It allows me to know and love them, and for me it's a great gift because it becomes very clarifying because we can get so myopic and narrow with our life, and our issues, and our troubles. All of a sudden, what we're dealing with seems cataclysmic, and you know, someone tells us what's really going on in their life, and all of a sudden reality gets adjusted, and what we're dealing with is not apocalyptic, it's a minor trouble.

As a church, let me encourage you, it's good to learn to grieve together, and that's an act of worship as much as singing and rejoicing. The Bible says that God rejoices with those who rejoice and he weeps with those who weep, and God's people, similarly, need to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

Where Have You Been Passive and Need to Get Active?

And here, Mordecai's faith gets activated in mourning and weeping. And here's the big idea in faith: faith is an internal conviction that leads to an external action. Faith is not just what you believe, it's how you behave. Sometimes you can really tell who has faith by what they do.

I'll give you an example. You go to a pool, you see a little kid on the ledge, you know, swim diaper, looking nervous. You see dad in the pool, “Trust me, I'll catch you. Jump!” How do you know whether or not the child has faith in their father? Not if they do a theological tome on the Greek word “faith.” If they what? Jump. If the kid jumps, they trust their dad. Faith is demonstrated in action.

You see a young man and a young woman. When they show up to their wedding day, right, the doors open, she walks down, and he's there. Him being there is an act of faith, her walking toward him is an act of faith. The two of them standing together, holding hands, it's an act of faith. It's each of them saying, “I trust you,” and everybody gets to see it, because faith is demonstrated in what you do.

I don't know whether or not Mordecai had faith at this point. I don't know. He may be like some of you. He's not an atheist, he would say he belongs to God, but he's not really walking with God. We don't know where he's at, like some of you.

This is how I was up until age nineteen. When I met Grace at seventeen, she asked me, “Are you a Christian?” I said, quote, “I believe in God.” What does that mean? Not very much, just so you know. It says in James, “Demons believe in God.” I mean, so, that's not a huge bar to jump over. Amen? You're like, “And I believe what the demons believe.” That's not a huge accomplishment. “I believe there's a God.” Are you a Christian? “Uh, I don't know. Yeah. I try to be a good person.” That was it.

At nineteen, I met God in a saving way. I went into a new season of life. Like a hinge, my whole life swung in that season. Some of you are like that. You don't know when you became a Christian. You don't know when your faith got activated. You don't know if you were a believer living hypocritically or you were an unbeliever and then became a believer. You don't know.

We don't know that with Mordecai. But here's what we do know: something changes in him here, and it starts with him mourning, and grieving, and lamenting. And for some of you, that's where you need to start. Looking at your sin, looking at your situation, grieving, mourning, weeping, wailing. “I need to talk to God. I need to talk to his people. Life is hard. I'm not going to lie. I can't fix it by myself. I'm in real trouble.” That's okay. That's okay.

So, the question for you to think about and discuss with your Community Group: Where have you been passive and need to get active? Nobody knew he was a believer, now everybody

knows he's a believer. We was silent, now he's speaking. He was passive, now he's active. There's progress.

Now, admittedly, you know, he got the ball on the two. He's living far away from Jerusalem, you know? The prophets haven't spoken in Susa. There are no miracles, there are no angels. It's a dark time. He's multiple generations of lukewarm-at-best, kind-of-spiritual-but-not-red-hot-for-God people. But now he's making progress. Now he's moving.

For you, where have you been passive and need to get active? You say, "I know I'm supposed to read the Bible, but I don't." Get active, start reading it. "I know I need to pray, but I don't pray." Then get active and start praying. "I know I need to be in community with God's people and join a group." Then do so. What is it?

I'm trusting, I know for a fact that Jesus loves you and he sent the Holy Spirit to provide you opportunities to make progress spiritually, and if you'll avail yourselves to them, you will make progress spiritually. And it's not about perfection. I don't want to talk about all the things you haven't done and all the ways you've failed. Let's acknowledge those, but let's mourn those and let's move beyond those in the grace of God.

And that's what happens for Mordecai. He could spend the rest of his life just sitting in "I haven't walked with God. My dad didn't walk with God. My granddad didn't walk with God. We said we were believers. We're all hypocrites. I didn't get married. I don't have kids. I'm a total coward. I raised one girl that I got to adopt, and I handed her off to a guy who thinks he's God and is a total nasty pervert, and now 15 million people are going to die because I'm an arrogant, stubborn man." Right?

If he wants to just sit there, and "Pour me another drink," and "Somebody please find the country western station," he could do that for the rest of his life, right? Lots to be bummed about, but instead, progress. What opportunities has God given you for progress? Avail yourself to them and God's grace will show up to help you make progress. That's the story of Mordecai.

ESTHER HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE PROGRESS

Now, what about Esther? Well, Esther has an opportunity to make progress. Chapter 4, verse 4: "When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed." Here's what's going on outside of the palace: Haman has decided to be Hitler 1.0 and commit genocidal holocaust on 15 million Jews. Meanwhile, Esther is in the palace and has no idea.

Here's the big point: don't assume the leaders know much. Alright? A lot of times, people are like, "I can't believe they made that decision." They didn't have the information. A death sentence goes out, this is big public news, people are in the streets wailing, mourning all over the Persian Empire, and she's in the palace, clueless. Don't assume, if you're in business, that your boss knows everything that's going on. Don't assume, if you're in ministry, that the pastors know everything that's going on. You need to do what Mordecai does and that's let people know what's going on. And sometimes, leaders don't know all that's going on.

So, word comes to Esther. "They're going to kill your cousin, your adoptive father figure, and 15 million Jews." Here's a crisis, but a crisis becomes an opportunity. A crisis becomes an opportunity. Most of the time, our spiritual progress is during seasons of duress. You get that? Spiritual progress usually happens in seasons of duress. There's a crisis.

This is why, when people will go through hard, difficult, arduous seasons and circumstances, they'll say things like, "I wish it never happened. I wouldn't pick it. I wouldn't want it on anyone, but I never grew so much in my life. I never felt closer to God in my life. I would have never learned the lessons I learned had I not gone through cancer, divorce, betrayal, suffering, poverty, unemployment, bankruptcy, you name it, the tragedy." Oftentimes, our opportunities for spiritual growth are in the hardest, most desperate seasons.

And she learns that there's a crisis. "So, she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them." Now, this sounds weird to us. We're like, "Millions of people are going to die. Would you like a new suit?" I mean, it's like—it seems a little off-topic, right? "Let's go to the mall."

What this really is is she has not been in contact with Mordecai. She's in the palace, he's out in the city of Susa. He's weeping, wailing, mourning, protesting, right? The media's showed up. He's got a little bit of a crowd. He's trending on Twitter. They've started a Facebook page, right? It's getting a little traction, and so she tells him, "I want to meet with you, but you can't come into the palace in mourning attire. You need to get changed to get access, so let me send you some clothes."

And what he says is, "No, it's too premature." Right? "The cameras finally showed up. We're finally starting to get a little attention here for our 'Please don't murder us all' cause. It's too early for me to sort of put down my mourning and to pick up my relationship with you." So he says no.

"Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. And Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate." This was all very public. "And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money," it was a large amount, "that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews."

Now, behind all of this, it's demonic. Satan always wants to destroy God's people. He just does. He does it with sin in the Garden. He does it in Sodom and Gomorrah. He does it in Egypt with the Pharaoh. He does it in Babylon with the exile. He does it here in Susa with Xerxes. It's why Herod tried to destroy the Baby Jesus. It's why there's persecution of the early church in the book of Acts. It's why there's martyrdom into the Christian era.

Our war is not against flesh and blood, but powers, and principalities, and spirits, and Satan, and demons, and power, whole groups of people to destroy God's people. This is two kingdoms colliding. This is darkness declaring war on the light.

"Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said."

Mordecai is active with his faith. He's making process. The intermediary is sent, this servant who has access to Esther, and he says, "Haman's going to kill us all. Haman is going to pay off the king. It's going to happen soon. The day is set. Here's the decree that was sent forth. Here's our execution date. Tell Esther to do something. Tell Esther to say something."

And here's the key: at this point in the book, Esther has been passive, not active. She's been silent, not speaking. Others have made decisions for her, she's not made decisions for herself. How easy is it for us to look at the circumstances of our life and say, "It's out of my control. Everything's big, I'm small. The current of culture is like an enormous river and

I'm just a little leaf being carried along by the current. There's nothing I can do."

Esther appears like that up until this point in the story. Everything's happening around her, decisions are being made for her, people are speaking on her behalf. She's not active. She's not making progress spiritually. There's no indication at this point, no hint that she's prayed, read the Scriptures, worshiped with God's people, none of that, offered a sacrifice for her sin. None of that.

Again, she's like so many of you and us. She knows things that she doesn't do, and her faith is a private matter, not a public matter. Nobody knows that Esther is among God's people. It's a secret because she doesn't want her life to be inconvenienced. And Mordecai informed her, "Let's not tell people that we belong to God. Let's just try and fit in and go with the proverbial flow."

How many of you, that's your story? And now, circumstances have you in a position that's very difficult. You shouldn't have married them, you shouldn't have gotten pregnant with them, you shouldn't have taken out that debt, you shouldn't have got into that business or regimen, you shouldn't have bought that house. You shouldn't have, and now you're in a really complicated, difficult, hard place, and the answer is: you need to get active. It's time to go public with your faith. It's time to say something. It's time to do something. It's time to get moving.

Now, let's be reasonable with Esther and say she's born far away from the really devout Jews who are living up in Israel. She's still part of the not-so-devout living down in Susa in disobedience to Isaiah's commands to go to Israel. Her parents died. She's an orphan girl, probably poor, and Mordecai's not getting "Dad of the Year" nominations. Okay? So, she gets the ball on the two. But she's been married five years, she's still on the two. No progress. Mordecai's saying, "Tell Esther to get going. I'm making progress, she needs to make progress."

And here's the truth: some of you, your community, your family, friends, the people you spend time with, you're all stuck, and if one of you gets going, you can help motivate the others to get going. Mordecai gets going and he is here encouraging Esther to get going and to make spiritual progress.

What Opportunity Has God Given You Today to Make Some Progress?

So, here's the next question for you and for your Community Group: What opportunity has God given you today to make some progress? Today. There's a sense of urgency that's in the Scriptures here. There should be similar sense of urgency in our lives. Some of you are like, "It's on my to-do list down." No, relationship with God should be at the center of everything, not at the top of a to-do list. Not something that is completed, but something that is constant and affects everything else.

What is it for you? I know the Holy Spirit's been telling you something. Is it time to start reading Scripture? Is it time to start confessing sin? Is it time to start praying? Is it time to pursue the people that are godly and you have an opportunity for friendship with? Is it time to serve and use your gifts? Is it time to start reordering your budget and your schedule so that your relationship with God is not just internal and personal, but it's external and public? What is that for you?

ESTHER MAKES PROGRESS

And so Mordecai's getting active and he's making progress, and he's urging Esther to get active and to make progress. I want to urge you to get active and to make progress. The question is: What will she do? She has a decision to make. Well, this is a great encouragement and hope for all of us because Esther makes progress.

Esther 4:10-17: "Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say—" Let me just say this: Esther commanded somebody. We haven't seen that. She's taking charge. She's acting as a leader. She's taking initiative. She's no longer just concerned with herself, she's concerned with God's people. She's really coming into an—I don't know when she gets quote unquote "saved." I don't know. Again, like Mordecai, like some of you, like me, it's hard to say, "She was saved here."

Because some of you are going to have these dramatic experiences. You'll be like, "I was walking down the street, Jesus showed up, said, 'Knock it off,' and I have never been the same." That's your day. Put that on the calendar, circle it, buy yourself a muffin every year. That's your big day, right? You got that one nailed.

Some of you, you're like, "I don't know. I kind of went to church, and my parents kind of believed in God but kind of not, and I wasn't an atheist but I wasn't walking with God, and then I started changing. But I don't—it's in there somewhere." That's more her story. If she were to stand up, you know, in church, what she'd say is, "Here's what I do know. I really started growing here. I really started changing here. I really started making progress here. It was that season of my life." She starts commanding people.

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 "that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

Here's what she's saying. "I want to do something but it's dangerous." That's what faith is. Faith is action in the face of opposition. And she's looking at her situation. She's saying, "Okay. The only way to get the king to reverse Haman's decree to kill all our people is this: I need to go before the king," her husband. She says, "Here's the problem. He sits on a throne. He tends to drink while he sits on the throne a lot." That's what we've learned so far. And if you just go up to the king, they kill you, and so there are no repeat offenders with this situation. You're not like, "Yeah, three times I—" Nope, just once.

There was an ancient archeological dig that showed this with an ancient picture. It showed the Persian king sitting on his throne, and behind him was a soldier with an enormous axe. Can you imagine that? You're like, "I've got to see the king, but no. No, no, no." Whatever your issue is, it's not that big. A guy with a hood on, and a big axe, and a place for your neck. You're like, "I'd like to meet with the king." "Well, okay. First, put your head there." "Why?" "We're going to take it off your body. The king doesn't like to be interrupted while he's sitting on his throne drinking his wine."

Now, this is wrong, but very effective. Right? How many of you are in management positions at your job and all of a sudden, I just lost you. You're like, "What a policy that might be. My workload would go down so fast, and no more office politics or 'I have a problem.' No, nobody has a problem big enough to lose their head for." Okay? It's wrong, but effective.

The king can't just always be interrupted, and so they make this rule. You're only allowed to see the king if he invites you. So, let's say you wanted to meet with the king and you got entrance into the palace, you would stand off at a distance, and if he lowered his staff—this is signifying his sovereign rule. If he lowered his staff toward you, you would walk up to it

and you'd put your hand at the end of the scepter, and that meant that he welcomed you and you were welcomed to meet with him. If he kept his scepter up, then they would chop your head off and kill you.

Is this a risk? Yeah. See, it's amazing how cowardly we get. We're like, "What if I lose my job?" Well, you still got your head. You know? Like, "What if I lose my boyfriend?" You still got your head. Right? Like—I'm just saying.

"And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. 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.'" This may be a thinly veiled threat. At this point, there's only one person who knows she's a Jew. That's Mordecai. Mordecai says, "If they kill all the Jews, you're Jewish, they'll kill you too," but they would only kill her if he told them. I'm not saying he's manipulating the situation, but this is not a very nice thing for a dad to say. He may be manipulating circumstances saying, "You'll die too," and he's putting her neck on the line. I don't know.

"For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place." We'll get into that in a moment. "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?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai. She's active. She's making progress. She's got a hard decision to make. It's like some of you. You've got a hard decision to make. "Am I going to take the risk to live out my faith and endure whatever consequences might come to me?"

And let me say this: I'm not some naive, rosy, it's all bunnies, hugs, and muffins preacher. I'm not going to tell you, "Do what God says and it's going to be great!" There are other guys in the Bible who get beheaded, like John the Baptist. And even if you read the rest of the story—and I don't want to give it away too fast, but it's not like it all ends, "And they lived happily ever after. Xerxes got saved, went to Bible college, planted a megachurch, and Esther ran the Women's Ministry, and they had twenty-seven kids who all grew up to be missionaries to China, who are bilingual, and they can speak Persian and Hebrew and Greek, and oh, you'll find them in the concordance." It doesn't go like that. It doesn't go like that.

And so sometimes, through our sin, and the sin of others, and the difficulty of circumstance, we get ourselves in a situation where it's like, "I'm in a bad place, and if I make a decision to obey God, it could get worse," and sometimes it does, or it could get better for awhile and worse forever, or it could get better for them or worse for me. That's where Esther is. This is where we live, and faith is action. It's doing, risk-taking.

What's she going to do? Well, she matures. She makes progress. Whether or not she knew the Lord, I believe here, she's demonstrating faith in the Lord. She's demonstrating faith in the Lord. So, here's what she says.

"Then Esther," verse 15, "told them to reply to Mordecai, 'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa.'" She's bringing God's people together like a church. You need God's people. Sometimes we in the western world, we read the story, it's like Esther, this lone figure. She's not. Mordecai's there. She'll say in a moment the gals that are with her are there. God's people are there. Here's the truth: there are leaders, but we're all in it together. You need God's people. We're in it together.

"Gather all the Jews to be found in Susa and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, day or night." She's saying, "I need God's people to help me. I don't know what's going to happen. I'm scared that I could be killed. The only reason I am queen is Vashti didn't obey a rule, and now I'm going to disobey a rule."

In the Scriptures, when God's people fast, it's usually preparing their hearts for something that could be difficult: a ministry calling, a mission opportunity. That's why the Lord Jesus himself spent forty days praying and fasting before his public ministry began.

And almost every time the Bible speaks of fasting, it does so by including prayer. Here, prayer is curiously omitted. Maybe we're too infer it or maybe these are not really mature believers. Maybe these are just kind of spiritual folk whose faith has been dormant for a really long time. Maybe they've even been regressing. They were born Jews, God's covenant people. They got the ball on the twenty, but they've slipped back to the five, and now they're starting to make progress. But it might not be this eruption of complete, total, perfect obedience immediately. Maybe like us, it's one step at a time, a little bit, let's get started.

And she says this, "Then I will go to the king." That's faith. I don't know when Esther comes to faith, but by this point in the story, she has faith, and faith is action. And when people meet the God of the Bible, they change. So, what you're going to see in chapter 4, Esther changes, Mordecai changes. They're not perfect, but they're making progress. That's a believer. That's a believer.

You can't meet God and not change. As they did, you might have a season of rebellion, you may have a season of backsliding, but ultimately, God's people make progress. The only characters in the book who don't make progress are Haman and Xerxes. They don't make any progress. They're the same at the end as they are in the beginning. That's how it is with people who don't know God. They don't change. People who do know God, they change, there's progress. Esther here is changing.

"I'm going to go to the king." She's getting very brave and very courageous. There's great faith here. "Though it is against the law." We believe that over human laws, which Romans 13 says are to be obeyed, is God's unchanging, perfect, and timeless law, and when the government is telling us to do something that violates God's law, we need to practice what is called civil disobedience and say yes to God's law and no to wrong laws instituted by men.

Here, the issue is "Thou shalt not murder." Haman's going to murder 15 million innocent people because he's bitter against one Jewish guy. The punishment does not fit the crime, and so Esther is going to disobey the law in an effort to obey the law of God, which is "Thou shalt not murder."

And here's the line: "'If I perish, I perish.' Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him." Now Esther is making decisions. Now Esther is acting with wisdom. Previously, she didn't share her faith, she didn't let anybody know she was one of God's people because Mordecai told her not to. Here, she assumes her own faith. She comes into her own public relationship with God, and she's making decisions and she's leading. She's taking responsibility.

STATEMENTS OF FAITH

Two very important statements in this section, the hinge section for the whole book. One is by Mordecai, one is by Esther. These are the most quoted, memorable, beloved Scriptures in Esther. The first is from Mordecai. He says this in Esther 4:14, "For if you keep silent at this time," he tells Esther, "relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place."

Mordecai's basically saying this: "I don't know how we're going to get out of this. I don't know how we're going to be saved and spared. I don't know. Here's what I do know: If you don't do something, Esther, help's going to come from somewhere."

Now, some would say that this is the first intimation of God in the book. God's name is not mentioned, nobody prays, nobody reads Scripture, nobody repents, nobody sings, nobody offers a sacrifice, no angel shows up, no miracle occurs, no prophet declares. They would say here, "another place" is a reference to God. Maybe, or he could be saying, "God always shows up for his people."

Here's the truth: God will never leave us nor forsake us. That's what he says. Friends, you may not walk with God, but if you're a believer, God walks with you. You may say, "I've walked far away." I'll tell you what, you turn around in repentance, he's right there because the Bible says even when we're faithless, he's what? He's faithful.

The most common command in the whole Bible is "Fear not," because there are a lot of reasons to be afraid. Mordecai here has a lot of reasons to be afraid. His stubbornness could lead to the murder of 15 million people. And every time that I have studied that the Bible says, "Fear not," it immediately then says why? "For I am with you." God is with his people. God is always with his people.

God is with his people when they're in sin. God is with his people when they're in rebellion, when they're in Susa and they should be in Israel, when they're working for King Xerxes and they should be working for the King of kings, when they're private with their faith and they should be public, when they're disobedient and they should be obedient, when they're in circumstances that they shouldn't be in like married to a Gentile pagan who thinks he's God.

Esther's in a hard place too. She says, "I've not even seen my husband for thirty days." They've only been married five years. Don't be under any sort of Christian Sunday School illusion that this is a loving marriage, and they're holding hands, and singing songs, and going for walks every day. She hasn't seen him in thirty days. She can't even come into his presence. He's busy with a harem. He's moved on.

Mordecai and Esther are both in very dire, very difficult, very distressing circumstances, but God is with them. Even though they're where they should not be, doing what they should not do, God is there. And this is our hope, not that you're going to get principles to fix your life and it's all going to be great, and you can be a conqueror and everybody can be an Esther, but that God is with us, that God never leaves us, God never forsakes us, God never betrays us, God never abandons us. God is not a Father who walks out on his kids. Dad's always there.

And Mordecai's starting to come to his senses. He says, "I don't know what's going to happen, but he's going to do something because we can't do anything." And that's always the portrait of salvation in the Bible. People are destined for death, and they cannot deliver themselves, and God, God needs to come or he needs to send someone to serve.

And then his next line is: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" He's saying, "Esther, who knows? We're not supposed to be in Susa. You shouldn't have married that guy. I shouldn't have let you marry that guy. He shouldn't be the kind of husband you can't even go talk to. Haman shouldn't have put out a death sentence. I shouldn't have been so stubborn not to honor him. This is all a nightmare. It's a mess."

How many of you, emotionally, you're connecting with the story now going, "That sounds familiar." You look at your life and you're like, "It is really complicated. Some of it's my sins, some of it's their sins, some of it's our sin, some of it I don't even know what's going on."

And he pulls back and he intimates so subtly at the providence of God. He could have been in mourning, loathing, self-contempt, and shame, condemnation, and disgrace for his whole life and then just died. Instead, he lifts his eyes up. "Okay, let's assume that the God of the Bible really exists. Let's assume that the God who got all kinds of people out of terrible situations still loves us. Let's assume that maybe, even though we're not in the place we're supposed to be, we're part of his plan, and that he might use us. And in the providence of God, Esther, maybe you being queen is the key to this whole crisis."

Let me tell you a little bit about the providence of God. The providence of God is not fatalism or determinism. Fatalism and determinism is where you would believe that everything that happens is just as God wants. I don't believe that. I don't believe that.

I had a young woman come up to me just in the last two weeks, "Pastor Mark, why did God have me sexually assaulted?" I looked her in the eye, I started crying, I said, "I'm a dad who loves his kids. God's a Dad who loves his kids. Just like I don't make those plans, God doesn't make those plans. Just as that destroys me, that devastates God." She was under this misunderstanding of fatalism and determinism.

When the Bible says that there's sin, that means that's not what God wants. That's why God grieves. That's why we grieve. But providence is this: despite all the sin, God is still in control and he's good. God is sovereign, he's in charge, he's good. If you only think he's good but not sovereign; he means well but he can't help. If you only think he's sovereign but not good; he's in charge but like Xerxes. He's sovereign and good.

A. W. Tozer has an analogy. He was an old Bible teacher. He said, "Envision a ship where there's a captain determined to get that boat to port, to take it on a long journey across a very rough sea, but he's determined to get it into its destination port. Ultimately, that captain is in charge, he's in control, he's the sovereign. Now, on the ship, let's say there are many, many passengers. Those passengers make lots of decisions, and they're free to make those decisions. They interact and they can do all kinds of things, but ultimately, that captain will get that ship to its intended port. It means that all the decisions that are made by those who are along for this voyage, they're morally responsible. If they're sinning, rebelling, causing mutiny, harming one another, whatever they do, they're responsible for that, but the captain's will cannot be overtaken, that the captain will get the ship to its intended port."

When we talk of the providence of God, that's what we're talking about. People make decisions and we're responsible for them. So, Esther and Mordecai are going to make decisions. They're going to make some bad ones that they're responsible for; they're going to make some good ones that they should be thanked for. But ultimately, God's will will be accomplished. God will get us home. He's going to get us to his kingdom. He's going to get us to Jesus. He's going to get us to his Son. He's going to get us to the place that he intends for us to be.

What he's saying here is, "Esther, God's still in control. And there's been a whole bunch of bad decisions made, and there's a lot of sin, but if God's still in control, maybe he would

use you and you could be part of his plan.” Is that not hopeful to you? How many of you, you look at your life, you say, “Yeah. “It feels like that, like I’ve got myself in a situation that is horrendous, or difficult, or compromised?” God could use you, and God’s providence is still in tact.

Esther’s statement. Esther 4:16. We just read it. We’ll read it again. Esther says, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, hold a fast on my behalf.” This is like a big church service. “And do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.” Isn’t that interesting? It takes three days to deliver the people. How long was Jesus in the grave? Three days.

“I and my young women.” So, she’s got her Community Group with her, okay? You always need your Community Group. Yes, I’m encouraging you to sign up for one. It’s right there in the Hebrew. “I and my young women in our Community Group will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and,” what? “If I perish, I perish.”

Here’s what Esther is saying: “My greatest treasure is my life, but my greatest treasure is no longer my greatest treasure. My greatest treasure is God, and I’m willing to lose my life because they can’t take from me my greatest treasure.” If your life is your greatest treasure, all people have to do is threaten you to control you. “I will take your life,” or “I will make your life very hard.” “Oh, then you be like a sovereign God, tell me what to do, and I will obey you because my greatest treasure is my life.” Once the God of the Bible becomes your greatest treasure, people can’t threaten or bully you into obeying them. You’re free. Esther just got free. “If I live, I live. If I die, I die. I just want to do what’s right.”

WHAT IS YOUR PART IN GOD’S MISSION?

Here’s what God is doing at this time: he’s working in two places. He’s working with his disobedient people in Persia. He’s working with his a little more obedient people up in Israel. And there are three contemporaries at work at this time: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. If you look at your Bible, they’re there, books named after them. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. And what God is doing at this point, he’s working in multiple nations through multiple people, with multiple backgrounds. This should be such a great hope for you and me.

There’s Nehemiah, he’s a business guy. He’s got an MBA, he went to business school, he’s a CEO of a company, right? He runs the numbers. He knows how to put together projects, and spreadsheets, and plans. He’s that kind of guy. He’s an urban developer. That’s what he does. He’s a land developing guy. That’s Nehemiah. He knows how to raise money. He knows how to recruit volunteers. He knows how to build an org chart. And so God has called him to be at work up in Israel rebuilding the city of Jerusalem.

Now, working with him is a guy named Ezra. Ezra went to seminary. Ezra’s a Bible teacher. Ezra doesn’t know how to raise money. He doesn’t know how to make a chart. He knows the Scriptures and he’s a Bible teacher. He’s a Bible preacher. Now, Nehemiah doesn’t get up to preach. He’s like, “No thanks. That’s Ezra’s job. I’ll build the stadium, but he’s the yeller.” So, they work together. That’s how it works for them. So Ezra, at this time, he’s the Bible teacher, the spiritual leader, he’s the pastor.

Who else is God using? Esther. He’s using Esther to save his people. Here’s who God uses: old, and young, and male, and female, theologically trained, theologically untrained, those with business backgrounds, those who are orphans, those who are in positions of power, those who are in powerless positions, those who have been walking with God faithfully for a long time, and those who’ve been walking with God faithfully for a couple of days.

Wherever you’re at, you’re part of God’s plan, you’re part of God’s mission. How encouraging is this? So, here’s my question for you: What is your part in God’s mission? What’s your part? We’re seeing Esther’s part, there’s Ezra’s part, there’s Nehemiah’s part, there’s Mordecai’s part. They’re all part of God’s mission. What’s your part?

JESUS IS A BETTER MEDIATOR

And ultimately, the whole story, it leans, it yearns, it longs for Jesus. At the end of Luke’s gospel, Jesus, we are told, went through the Old Testament and showed how all of it was pointing to and pertaining to him. So, this story is a little story that’s part of a really big story. Here, 15 million people are going to be saved and it’s not an ultimate salvation. Ultimate salvation’s going to come with Jesus who saves not millions, but billions; not just from Xerxes, but Satan; not just from death, but from the wrath of God.

And the whole story leans and it yearns in the direction of the coming of Jesus. And this is where Esther, here, she’s a type of Christ. Because here’s the problem: there is conflict between a Persian kingdom and the people of God, and a death sentence has been decreed for the people of God. And so what they need is a mediator.

Now, the problem is no one has access to the king. No one has a right to come before the throne but Esther. She alone is the only possible mediator because she’s Persian royalty and the people of God. She’s both. So she can reconcile the Persian Empire and the people of God because she is both. And what she says is, “If I perish, I perish. If I have to die to save my people, that’s what I will do.” Sound familiar?

Here’s our problem. It’s worse than their problem. Now, they were under the judgment of Haman. We’re under the judgment of God. Haman wrongly judged, but God rightly judges. And we’re all under a death sentence because of sin and rebellion. We’ve not bowed down to God in worship, and honor, and obedience. We’ve rebelled against him, and the sentence is death and it’s sentenced for all. We can’t save ourselves. We can’t deliver ourselves. We have no access to the king’s throne.

So, what does God do? Well, he gets off his throne, the one thing Xerxes doesn’t do, and he comes down as the man, Jesus Christ, and he lives without sin. See, we can make progress because Jesus is our perfection. And Jesus says, “If I perish, I perish,” and he perishes. And he dies in our place for our sins, and what he does is he reconciles man to God because he’s God become a man. Jesus, being fully man and fully God, is able to reconcile God to men and men to God. He’s the bigger, better Esther.

That’s why it says this in 1 Timothy 2:5: “There is one God, and there is one mediator.” Just like there was one mediator for the Jews, there is one mediator for us. “And that mediator is between God and men.” How do we bridge this conflict? “The man Christ Jesus.” God became a man to mediate and reconcile God to men and men to God, and the whole story of Esther shows us the terrible plight we’re in.

So, I want you to read the story and ask, “How, apart from the grace of God, am I like Xerxes? All about control, and power, and fame, and comfort, and luxury. Apart from the grace of God, how am I like Haman? I love to be in charge, I love to be obeyed, and if anyone dishonors me, it’s wrath for them. How am I like Mordecai? A bit of a coward, a quiet believer, someone who’s not public with their faith and is not willing to do the right thing. But look, there is hope for me. Jesus is my perfection. I can make progress. Am I like Esther? Someone who, yes, the circumstances of life would give me plenty of excuses to justify disobedience and lukewarmness. But in the grace of God, I can change. I can make progress. I can, because of the perfection of Jesus, make progress in my life.”

And there's so much hope here for you, and I need you to have that hope. And the hope is not in Esther and the hope is not in Mordecai. The hope is in their God as he is the hope for us. So, let me close with this on why Jesus is a better mediator.

Esther identified with her people by disclosing her race, but Jesus identifies with us by joining our race. Esther had to come to King Xerxes on his throne, but our King Jesus got off his throne to come to us. Esther only had access to King Xerxes once, but Jesus gives us constant access to his throne of grace. Esther's cousin, Mordecai, could not conceal his grief, but Jesus actually sweated blood in anguish.

Esther's cousin, Mordecai, trusted that salvation would come, quote, "From another place," but Jesus, our great God and Savior, came down from another place. Esther served as a mediator between her people and Xerxes, but Jesus serves as a mediator between his God and his people. And Esther was willing to die for her people. Mars Hill, Jesus actually died for his people. Amen?

And he's alive. And he's alive and he's seated on a throne. And what we're going to do right now with tithes, and offerings, and Communion, and singing, we're going to do like Esther did. We're going to come before our King knowing this: he will not kill us. In fact, he's died for us and he welcomes us always into his presence.

Father God, thank you so much that I have the great distinguished, enjoyable honor of teaching the Bible at Mars Hill Church. It's a glorious, sacred honor. Lord God, on days like this where I get to teach the Bible, I am so happy, and so excited, and so overwhelmed at how much grace you give people like me. Lord God, I'm like Haman, Xerxes, Mordecai, and Esther, and apart from the Lord Jesus, nothing would change. Jesus, I thank you for being my perfection and our perfection. I thank you that because of you, we can make progress, and I ask that for my friends right now. In Jesus' good name. Amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.