

Ordinary Faith - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Esther 8:1-17** (#479)

Introduction: What is the biggest stumbling block in your faith? What prevents you from trusting the Lord in a deeper way? How can you have courage in what God's Word says even when His promises don't seem to be holding up?

These are the questions of life, aren't they? The questions that most every follower of Jesus has at some point or another. When life isn't going "according to plan," when you pray and serve and worship and it seems like things only go from bad to worse. When your best efforts seem to always fall short of what the Lord calls you to – what then? How are you and I to have faith when the plan seems to be falling apart? How can we have the courage to follow Jesus when we can't even see where we're going? What would it be like to trust in what God has promised long ago – and not feel like it's a spiritual cop-out, or some nice sounding but ultimately empty religious talk?

This morning, we will see a portrait in God's Word of what it means to meet those challenges, ironically, not from Christians and churches in the New Testament, but from Jewish people in exile in the Old Testament. They, too, had been called to live by faith. They, too, saw very little hope for God's promises actually holding up. They, too, were greatly surprised and undoubtedly delighted at what the Lord accomplished. Let's grow in our faith as we look to His Word in **Esther 8...**

8:1-2 The break between **chapters 7** and **8** is helpful – it shows the movement from one distinct part of the story to another – but it is potentially misleading. **Chapter 7** concluded with the king's wrath finally fading after Haman had been dealt with, and the threat to his queen – and to Mordecai – has now been turned aside. But, if we keep the bigger picture in mind, we'll remember that Haman wasn't just after Mordecai. In fact, the whole reason that Esther herself was at risk was because Haman had set his sights much larger: Mordecai was to be hung, yes, but the entire Jewish people were to follow him to the grave! And while Haman has been dealt with, the problem he created is not gone: the law which Haman wrote – and which the king gave his authority to – still remains. The

Jewish people are still scheduled to be slaughtered just as before. So, we arrive in **chapter 8** with questions, with worries and fears.

The very same day that Haman was hanged, Ahasuerus gave the house of Haman to Queen Esther. Historically, it was common to take all the possessions of an enemy and given them to the ones who had been mistreated. Likely, we should see this not only as a physical house, but also everything that Haman and his family had possessed or had authority over. Haman's legacy is being erased – and there will be more of that to come.

Throughout this process, Esther ends up telling the king about Mordecai and the family relationship that the two of them share. I suspect that Ahasuerus was nothing less than delighted at this news: his favorite queen and the man who saved his life are family – what a wonderful thing, what a remarkable truth!

Likely, it is because of these connections that Ahasuerus repeats something with Mordecai that he did with Haman – he takes off his signet ring, the symbol and seal of his personal power and authority – and he gives it to Mordecai. If giving Haman's house to Esther was a sign of his downfall and removal from power, then giving the sign of the king's favor to Mordecai only serves to complete the picture. Haman wanted to destroy the Jewish people, to take them from their homes – indeed, to loot and pillage their possessions. And what has happened? Haman's own home has been given to another, the very authority that he planned to use against the Jews has been given to the person he hated most – to Mordecai! Perhaps the final step is when Esther sets Mordecai in a place of power and authority over Haman's estate.

Friends, sticking with the text, we simply need to see that evil does not ultimately win. It is precisely when the clouds were darkest, that the Lord was at work. On the very day when Haman hoped to hang Mordecai, his plans were foiled. Don't we love stories like these – the "last second" rescue, the plot twist when everything seems to have failed? Have you ever wondered *why* we like stories with these elements? I want to suggest to you that it is built in to us – this is how

the Lord often chooses to work. As I've mentioned in previous sermons, the Bible is full of ironies. A poor carpenter's Son ends up being the Savior of the world. A persecutor of Christians ends up being one of its greatest spokesmen. Fishermen end up writing words that even the most educated and devout folks are still working to fully understand and apply. The God of the Universe reserves salvation not for those who can give Him the most money or follow His law the best – but instead it is for the criminals who admit that they have no hope and need God's grace and mercy. The Book of Esther is no different – this is the story of how the Lord works.

So, for you and I, one big reminder is that the timing of the Lord's work usually doesn't match our own, but that doesn't make His work and His promises any less real. We like to have our problems solved immediately – or maybe not even to encounter them in the first place – yet the Lord's way more often involves rescuing us from the midst of them or guiding us through them. We want to avoid all trials and discomforts – yet God often uses those very things to grow us the most. This is the truth of **1 Peter 4**: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” Pray and ask the Lord to make you content with His plans and His care for you.

Of course, part of our problem is that we don't often see – or believe – God's plans for His people. Like here: what will happen with the Jews?

8:3-8 Esther speaks again to the king, pleading with him to find some way to save her people. She calls for the king to use his power to rescind the law that Haman wrote. Yet, this is precisely the problem: in **chapter 1** we learned that the laws which the king makes cannot be revoked. The law was made with his full authority, and the way that Persian society – and Persian kingship – worked meant that Ahasuerus couldn't simply negate or remove a law. So what can be done?

In this case – and for once in this book – King Ahasuerus is the one to come up with the solution. He does so in a subtle and politically savvy manner: he reminds Esther that Haman has fallen and that Mordecai has his signet ring. The solution comes, then, not from the king removing a law, but from another decree being written. A new order, which, like all others, cannot be revoked...

8:9-17 This, then, is the plan: a new law is written and published just as broadly as before. More-so, in fact, since it is written in the Hebrew language also. Mordecai is the author of this order, and it is sealed with the authority of the king's signet ring. Just as before, swift couriers then take this new law out across the kingdom. What is the new law? That the Jews should prepare to defend themselves.

Perhaps that seems like an odd order: wouldn't we expect them to defend themselves in the first place? But remember, there is no Second Amendment in Persia. And even if there were, certainly exiled Jews wouldn't be able to possess the means to defend themselves. What's more, apparently the Jewish people could easily have been overwhelmed and picked off by the crowds who were planning on massacring them. But now, all that has changed. Mordecai's order calls the Jews to gather into groups – certainly more powerful and better able to defend themselves than any individual. Implicit in this order seems to be that the Jews would be allowed to arm themselves. And, what's more, the Jews would also be allowed to plunder their oppressors – much like what we saw with the Egyptians in the Exodus. The order is sent out and the Jewish people rejoice.

One might have thought that the Lord would supernaturally protect the Jews, or use fire and lightning to wipe out the Persians. But the Lord *is* acting supernaturally – He has been all throughout this process – and He will use the Jewish people to defend themselves, just as He so often has in the past.

The final two scenes of our chapter show Mordecai being dressed in fine robes. In effect, taking over the high position that Haman once held. And one other scene, this one crucial to what we will read later in the book: many in the country started to side with the Jews. Remember how Haman had called upon all Persians, almost

as a civic duty, to attack the Jews on a certain date? Apparently, Mordecai's new law was seen as giving permission to switch sides. Not all will, there are still battles to come; but many will. A supernatural fear of the Jews had taken hold – yet another subtle but important work of the Lord in a book full of them.

Dear church, the lesson here is simple, perhaps even hard to see because it seems too obvious: what God calls His people to do is to act in faith, even when you don't see that there is any hope. To walk not by what you can see – not even by what you can fully understand or explain – but by faith in what the Lord has promised and in what He will accomplish.

Some in our society would call that kind of living hypocritical, saying that what you really believe and what you are doing aren't the same – that you are just going through the motions of being faithful because that's what religious people are supposed to do. But stepping out and trusting that what God has said is true, even when you can't see how, doesn't make you a hypocrite. It makes you faithful. It sets you right where Christ has called you to be.

To return to our initial questions: how can you have that kind of faith? Answer: trust God's vision, Christ's sight, the Holy Spirit's work, more than your own. I am using the word *trust* very specifically, because that's what it is. We often reserve our trust for ourselves, thinking that we know best. But the call of the Christian life is to trust our Maker even more than we trust ourselves. The big picture is true: under Christ's reign, the wicked shall fall. There is no doubt. So why do we often act as if it weren't true? In our fallen, sinful nature, it is easy to doubt and easy to not trust. Yet Christ's words for us are not words of condemnation: "trust more!" "Try harder!" "Just believe!" He didn't die for those who think they have it all together and who never have doubts. Instead, His words are words of care, of love, and of forgiveness – is it any wonder that again and again and again, His message is "do not fear," "be not afraid," "I am with you, even to the end of the age." Let's praise Him for the Good News that, indeed, He truly is!