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STAND DOWN



Who are some of your favorite heroines?

QUESTION #1

Surrendering to God leads to greater things.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

We typically associate heroism with grand and glorious acts. Such actions often come with great risk. Heroic acts also can occur with little outward notice—but that certainly makes them no less grand and glorious.

Take the heroes of the International Justice Mission (IJM). Their goal is to rescue boys and girls who are enslaved by trafficking. They employ thousands of lawyers who work in dangerous parts of the world to pry vulnerable children from the hands of their masters. Yet before they pick up a phone, write a legal brief, or ride along with local police to apprehend traffickers, they pray. IJM also takes their staff on spiritual retreats four times a year, and they gather in Washington, D.C., for a Global Prayer Gathering.

With so much work to do, why don't they just jump into the fray? IJM knows that biblical justice begins not with actions or words, but in lament and worship before God. People often look to Esther as a great heroine in Scripture. And she was—but before she and Mordecai stepped into a risky, life-threatening moment of justice, they did something just as heroic. They sought God in prayer.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Esther 4:1-3

¹ When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³ In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

King Xerxes approved and funded Haman's ruthless plan to thoroughly eliminate the Jewish people and plunder their possessions. (See 3:10-11.) The edict was published throughout Persia, sentencing all Jews to annihilation on a single day. This was, by all accounts, an irreversible decision that would affect thousands of innocent people. It was truly an unjust law.

When Mordecai learned of the edict, his first response was deep and vocal lament. The original Hebrew language describes Mordecai's crying out as a deep and guttural wailing. As a part of his grief, Mordecai also tore his clothes and wore sackcloth and ashes. In the ancient Near East, this was common practice for mourning. Throughout Scripture, when individuals or groups lamented, their cries of deep distress were directed to God. We can reasonably assume that Mordecai's actions also reflected a deep call to God.

His grief went deep into his heart and soul. Mordecai's grief was profound, keeping him from his duties inside the king's gate; that would have been a violation of palace decorum. His lament and dress were known, though, and word of his actions reached the queen. (See 4:4).

Mordecai wasn't the only one in mourning. The Jewish population throughout the Persian Empire received the news and lamented their fate. Surely their public acts of weeping, fasting, and wearing sackcloth and ashes disrupted daily life in the empire. We can only wonder how others might have

When was the last time you were moved to mourning over an injustice?

QUESTION #2

viewed this behavior. Were they stirred by the impending doom that faced their neighbors? Did any of them lament with the Jews?

Lamenting—calling to God in deep distress—should be an important part of our own reaction to injustice. Expressing such grief is neither nonspiritual nor reflective of a lack of faith. Far from it! Prophets like Jeremiah and Habakkuk lamented the spiritual state of Israel, and Jesus wept over Jerusalem. (See Luke 19:41-44.)

God calls us to step into the experiences of those who suffer and weep with those who weep. If we don't see injustice, we won't grieve over it, and if we don't grieve over injustice, we won't act on it. We must ask the Lord to open our eyes to the vulnerable so that we might grieve and pray—and then act. When we do this we show the world a glimpse of our Savior, who entered into our injustice, who weeps with us in our suffering, and who acted on our behalf.



Esther 4:10-14

¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹ “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.” ¹² When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Mordecai's cries against the impending injustice against the Jewish people did not go unheard. Mordecai sent a copy of Haman's edict with Esther's servant so that he could explain the situation to her and tell her to go and plead with the king on the Jews' behalf. After seeing the edict, Esther sent her servant to communicate with Mordecai that, even though she was the queen, her power to act was limited. This was Xerxes's kingdom, and he had total power.

Esther could die if she went before the king, but Mordecai wanted Esther to understand the reality of what faced the Jewish people—her people. To be silent in the face of this injustice would not be enough to save Esther's life. If Haman's genocide happened, Esther's heritage would be discovered and she would not be spared.

Mordecai ended with a strong appeal that alluded to the providence of God: "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" This one statement reminded Esther of the unlikely path she had been on and the potential power she held in her hands.

Each of us must make a choice whether to "seize the day" for God or not. Esther had just such a pivotal decision. Everything she had experienced in her life would come down to this one singular choice.

Few, if any of us, will face a choice like Esther faced, but we are called to count the cost of our own lives. (See Luke 14:26-33.) Injustice is all around us. We, like Esther, have come to where we are "for such a time as this."

What's your reaction to the exchange between Mordecai and Esther?

QUESTION #3

What are some fears that often keep us from doing the right thing?

QUESTION #4

Esther 4:15-16

¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶“Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

When Mordecai’s appeal reached Esther, she could have selfishly remained silent and hung on to her position, rationalizing that she could possibly avoid death herself. Yet, even though she was settled into the palace and married to the king, Esther was still, at the heart of the matter, a daughter of Israel.

Before she acted, Esther called for a fast by as many Jews as Mordecai could assemble and tell quickly. People typically fasted for one day—and then only during the day—but Esther asked for an unusually long, unbroken, three-day fast. Although Scripture does not mention that the people prayed, the purpose of fasting was to seek God in prevailing prayer. Esther would not take action and go before the king until the people first went before God.

And then Esther left the matter in God’s hands: “If I perish, I perish.” She was under no illusion that God would allow her to enter the king’s presence unharmed. She didn’t subscribe to the false idea that we can manipulate God’s hand by the fervency of our faith. Like the three brave young men who faced Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace (see Dan. 3:17-18), Esther trusted in God’s ability to deliver, but ultimately trusted His sovereign will. Today, many Christians around the world face imprisonment, torture, and even death for being followers of Christ. Few, if any of us, may ever have to face the choice of denying Christ or dying, but we are all called to give up our lives, die to ourselves, and follow Jesus. We do not live for ourselves; we live for Christ—and we should stand up for those who have no voice. Let’s bring the good news of God’s kingdom to the world by proclaiming the gospel and by the witness of our acts of mercy.

What can we learn from Esther about following Christ?

QUESTION #5

PRIORITIES

List the important actions Esther and Mordecai took in order of priority.

___ Fasting ___ Praying ___ Enlisting others ___ Appealing to the king
___ Grieving ___ Defining the problem ___ Other: _____

Why did you list them in this order?

Consider a problem you are dealing with or may in the near future.
How does evaluating Esther and Mordecai's method of dealing with this situation help?

*"When Christ calls a man,
he bids him come and die."*

—DEITRICH BONHOEFFER

LIVE IT OUT

As you surrender to God, consider what He is leading you to do “for such a time as this.” Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Read.** Learn about the needs of a vulnerable people group in your community or some place around the world. Websites like imb.org, compassion.com, and ijm.org can give you insight into the plight of others. Let the weight of the injustices sink in and impact you.
- ▶ **Pray.** Ask the Lord not only to open your eyes to specific injustices but to move your heart to pray on behalf of the vulnerable. Pray consistently. And pray with fervency.
- ▶ **Act.** Consider ways you and your group can speak out on behalf of the vulnerable. You can also partner with organizations meeting a need, using both your time and resources to get involved.



There are many kinds of heroes in this world, but none who make as significant an impact eternally as those who act in partnership with God. Before acting, be sure to get down on your knees in prayer.

My thoughts