

UNIT 18

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FOR LOOK,

THE DAY

IS COMING

“We Have Acted Wickedly”

by Mike Brooks

Air travel with carry-on luggage is as much an art as it is a science. If done rightly, the carry-on is a strategic move that can save time and trouble. If done wrongly, well, that is another story. There is nothing quite like waiting in an airplane aisle as a weary traveler attempts to force an oversized carry-on bag into the overhead compartment. In most cases, what is immediately evident to onlookers soon becomes evident to the individual—the baggage just will not fit.

What is true in a physical sense often is true spiritually: We carry a lot of spiritual and emotional baggage, and the baggage does not fit. On account of our sin, feelings of guilt and shame can be a lot like the cumbersome carry-on item. We don't know how to deal with it. Guilt over wrongdoing has compounding effects that threaten to disorient us completely. Shame and regret, looming in the shadows of otherwise ordinary days, cripple us and cloud our judgment.

The baggage simply will not go away on its own and we are left with the question “What do we do with our guilt and shame?”

THE ORIGINS OF GUILT AND SHAME

Though not characteristic of the original or new, forthcoming creation, feelings of guilt and shame over sin serve a purpose. Recall, in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve's response to their own disobedience. Deceived into eating the forbidden fruit by the serpent, the pair immediately covered themselves, and as the Lord entered the garden, the two ran and hid among the trees. A pattern perpetuated throughout all of human history entered the world: humans sin, sense their guilt, and respond in shame.

In Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah, we see the effects of the sin cycle as it has been amplified over the course of several centuries. Though the people of Israel

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had some measure of joy and freedom in the promised land, those experiences often were short-lived, and the people eventually were exiled from their land and seemingly from God's promises. These three Old Testament books offer reflections from among God's people in captivity and on their return.

Amid the threat of pernicious enemies, the Lord used Mordecai and Esther as a way of reaffirming His promises and demonstrating His faithfulness to His people, despite their inclinations to wander. Along the way, God's chosen people learned what it means to rightly acknowledge their sin before God and to trust in His goodness and saving power. Ezra and Nehemiah encountered opposition in their attempts to rebuild Jerusalem while God's people remained tempted to jettison God's righteous rule in their lives.

Though God's people often were enveloped by guilt and shame on account of their disobedience, we are reminded through each narrative of God's supernatural ability to save, redeem, and provide. Importantly, we are reminded of both the consequences of sin and God's just and gracious response to His wayward children.

GUILT, SHAME, AND GODLY SORROW

Objectively speaking, all of us are guilty before God on account of our sin (Rom. 3:23), and for many, this objective sense of guilt produces a more subjective sense of shame, or perhaps embarrassment. On one hand, this response is proper. There ought to be a sense of guilt and shame that results from disobedience toward God. Sin is, after all, transgressing His righteous rule. It is spurning the very One who knows us best and loves us most.

Yet on the other hand, there are kinds of shame that do not lead toward righteousness. For instance, some may feel shame purely on account of the earthly consequences of their sin, whether that is the disappointment of others or embarrassment over the loss of reputation. These emotions stand apart from what Scripture refers to as true contrition, or "godly sorrow" (2 Cor. 7:10). Another kind of shame that does not lead toward righteousness is shame that entraps the believer. On account of offense toward God or perhaps the immense amount of suffering caused to others, believers are tempted to wallow in their shame, forgetting that there is One who has ultimately overcome sin.

A WAY FORWARD: PARDONED AND SET FREE

Reckoning with sinful disobedience often leads down two interrelated paths. On one hand, we can become overwhelmed with our guilt, paralyzed by the shame that accompanies our guilt, unable to assess the entirety of our situation in light of the truth of God's Word.

On the other hand, we can recognize that the gospel of grace provides a way out from beneath the weight of our guilt and shame. Though our guilt is certain and our shame may be warranted, neither are strong enough to diminish God's faithfulness to us. Through Jesus's sinless life, death, and resurrection, God has provided the way for those who trust in Him to be freed from their guilt (Rom. 8:1). Christ's saving work covered our shame and set us free from the penalty of sin (Rom. 6:23).

What do we do, then, with our guilt and shame? We carry them to Calvary and humbly lay them at the foot of the cross. We grow in confidence that the Lord helps us and that we ultimately will not

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be disgraced (Isa. 50:7). Jesus takes our burdens and dispenses with them for us. With a proper view of God's righteousness toward sin and His willingness to pardon and save, we acknowledge the reality of our sin against Him, humbly confess it to Him, and repent (1 John 1:9; Acts 3:19). We lean into the restoration and forgiveness offered to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Then we live from our new God-wrought, blood-bought identity as children of God: guilty, yet pardoned; once shame-filled, now set free.



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A RESCUING QUEEN

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God brings salvation at just the right time in just the right way.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Esther

+ **SETTING:**

In what is surely remembered as one of the darkest periods of Israelite history, the exile cast a pall over everything that set God's people apart: they were not in the promised land, they couldn't worship in the temple, and their distinct identity was being swallowed up in that of their captors. Worst of all, it was all their fault for turning their backs on their God. Yet He hadn't turn His back on them. The Jews were free to return, the temple had been rebuilt, and in the midst of a godless nation's rule, Yahweh was still arranging the situations and paths of His people to prove Himself faithful.

DAY 1

READ:

Esther 1–2

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Esther 1:12

NOTES

The story of Esther begins with two people whose egos were too big to fit in the same palace.

For starters, we have the illustrious King Ahasuerus, known as Xerxes to the Greek world. His father, Darius the Great (see Ezra 4–6), had begun fighting against the Greeks, but upon his death, he left the task to his son. Early in his reign, Xerxes exerted his power and destroyed Babylon,¹ and at some point he threw himself a party to display his own wealth and the splendor of his greatness (Esther 1:1-4). But at the moment of highest celebration, when he invited his beautiful queen to join the party, he was insulted by her refusal to attend.

Granted, there is much debate as to why Vashti said no. Some scholars think the king may have invited her to attend wearing only her crown, which the queen found insulting. Others say she was busy with her own party for the women and found answering the king too much of an inconvenience. Ahasuerus was deeply insulted and so kicked Vashti out of her crown and made the edict for women to obey their husbands (1:9-10). Then the “Project: Rebuild the King’s Ego” began, which paved the way for Esther as queen.

As much as we might find fault with Ahasuerus or Vashti, we can see ourselves in this passage. When we’re operating at the edge of stress and at the end of our wits, we don’t see situations rationally. When we’re insulted or have our feelings hurt, we overreact. When life isn’t going as we think it should and everything seems out of control, we assert control in such a way that offends and makes the situation worse.

How can you rely on the Bible so that you are refreshed and renewed by the Lord even in the midst of crazy days?

DAY 2

READ:

Esther 3–4

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Esther 4:15-16

NOTES



ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #29:

GOD'S PLAN AND HUMAN ACTION

God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says human beings have many plans, but only the plan of the Lord will stand. In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

In ancient times, mourning was public: sackcloth and ashes, fasting, weeping, and more. When Mordecai heard the decree written by the vile Haman—prescribing the destruction of all the Jews throughout Persia—he and the other Jews mourned. And they should have; this was completely devastating.

We're not comfortable with outward mourning in our world today, though. Many of us act more like Esther, sending better clothes and encouraging the mourner to get it back together. We avoid mourners because we don't know what to say, and when we do spend time with them, we try to keep our focus on happier times.

But sometimes we just need to mourn. Tears can be cathartic, and tears with a friend or family member truly wash over us in a wonderfully beautiful way. When my grandfather died, my family and I sat with my grandmother, helping her “hold it together” in the days following. But one of her favorite home health nurses simply walked in, hugged my grandmother around the neck, and wept aloud. We all joined her, and we were all a little closer to healing after those vocal tears.

When you struggle to mourn, the Psalms are a good place to give words to your grief. In Psalm 6, David mourned over his sin, weakness, and fear. In his mourning, he poured out his heart in tears over evil and believed that God heard his prayer. When our mourning is turned heavenward, we find a renewed confidence in God: He hears, He knows, He will act.

Esther didn't go through Mordecai's outward mourning, but she did choose to fast with her people. With fasting and praying, she wanted to hear God clearly and find strength to obey His instruction. When others are mourning, we can pray for them with the same fervor and devotion as Esther, believing God to guide them and us.

How do you deal with grief? How can you pray passionately for someone who is mourning?

DAY 3

READ:

Esther 5–7

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Esther 5:7-8

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"That is what our sacrifice of ourselves should be—'full of life.' Not desponding, morbid, morose; not gloomy, chilly, forbidding; not languid, indolent, inactive; but full of life, and warmth, and energy . . . filling every corner of our own souls and bodies, filling every corner of the circle in which we move, with the fresh life-blood of a warm, genial, kindly Christian heart. Doubtless this requires a sacrifice; it requires us to give up our own comfort, our own ease, our own firesides, our dear solitude, our own favorite absorbing pursuits, our shyness, our reserve, our pride, our selfishness."²

—Arthur P. Stanley (1815-1881)

There are two types of cooks: those who like to follow a recipe and those who like to wing it. Recipe-following cooks usually prepare amazing desserts, perfect turkeys, and beautiful breads. For cooks like me, who fly by the seat of our pants, we take pride in making a meal to feed our entire family out of what we already have in the pantry.

It takes both skills to walk in obedience. Sometimes we know exactly what we should do: "Go sit next to that woman." "Go buy that family some diapers." "Go hand him the trail mix you just bought." Like following a great recipe, we are led by the Lord and our job is to obey immediately, without taking time to debate with ourselves or consult others.

But there are other times when our leading from the Lord is less specific. I have a friend who, sitting under a sermon that had nothing to do with raising children, got a definite yet unspecific word from the Lord: "Foster children." She and her husband set out to seek God more fully: Were they to help a foster organization? Donate? Accept children into their home? It took time, prayer, and continual re-commitment to hear God clearly and take that next step of faith.

We see this going on in Esther's story. At her first dramatic scene in front of the king (Esther 4), when he offered her whatever she wished, she simply invited him and Haman to a banquet. At that banquet, she invited them to another one. On the surface, it might seem that Esther was leading them on a wild goose chase, yet eyes of faith can easily imagine her pleading with the Lord for guidance and instruction.

As the Lord's followers, we must be ready for either situation: immediate obedience or careful seeking. He may set one or both before you.

When have you attempted to wait and seek God when you already knew His instruction?

DAY 4

READ:

Esther 8

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Esther 8:1-2

NOTES

I've heard my dad tell the following story dozens of times: "If you came home from work one day and there was a teenage boy sitting on your couch, eating your food, watching your television, you'd immediately throw him out. You don't know him, and he's not welcome. But if your teenage son brought this same boy over and said, 'Dad, this is my friend David.' You'd say, 'Come on in, David. Have some food. Have a comfy seat. Want to watch some television?'" One person's connection helps bridge the gap between two people.

We see this very thing happening in Esther 8. Mordecai had already proven his allegiance to the king in reporting an assassination attempt (Esther 2:21-23) and had been acknowledged with honor (Esther 6), yet he had not been officially introduced to the king. But after Esther's risk to save her people and reveal Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews, she connected the king with the man who had saved many, many lives. Undoubtedly, Esther explained Mordecai's insight, good judgment, and allegiance to Ahasuerus and the Jews.

As Christians, we understand that the same thing happens in helping introduce others to Jesus. An unbelieving person can read all about Him, but the truth of who He is may never enter his or her heart and mind. However, if you or I befriend that person and they see that He is truly our Savior and Lord, it's much like bringing a friend over to meet family. The connection helps bridge the gap from unbeliever to child of God.

In what ways do you feel a personal relationship with Jesus? How are you communicating and demonstrating that relationship to others?

DAY 5

READ:

Esther 9–10

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Esther 9:16-17

NOTES

We are called to fight, but we don't fight as the world does.

Haman's edict was the result of the lack of respect he felt from Mordecai, one man who would not bow to him. Instead of letting it go or forgiving the Jewish man in Susa, he instead chose to eradicate Mordecai's entire people scattered into clusters all over what we know today as the Middle East. The bloodshed of an entire people group over the slight of one person seems to be irrational, but sadly, this is the kind of fighting we see in our world today.

Many people find justification in fighting over slights, a differing view, or a lack of respect. Generational and inter-family hatred grows over years, eventually to the point that no one even knows why the conflict began or how it escalated to such rage. One comment on social media can ruin friendships and long-standing respect between people.

This should not reflect us. We are called to fight the good fight of the faith, making a good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:12). The Jews did this very thing in the story of Esther. Though Haman's edict gave permission to kill and plunder the Jews (Esther 3:13), the Jews did not retaliate similarly: they fought and they defended themselves, but they did not take any plunder (Esther 9:10,15,16). Their fighting was not so that they would prosper but so that they would survive.

The good fight of the faith involves choosing to live and fight while maintaining righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11). We choose to hold our tongue, forgive, and pray for our enemies.

Where are you fighting like the world when you should be fighting the good fight?

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

“Queen Esther demonstrated that being faithful to God involved being faithful to His people. Thus, faithful to the meaning of her name, she became a shining ‘star’ for her people in a time of darkness.”³

—Janice Meier

POINT 1: God’s salvation comes through a timely risk (Esth. 4:13-17).

Sometimes we are called to take a _____ that challenges our _____ and our expected life path.



How had Esther’s life plan reflected a careful placing by God “for such a time as this”?

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #29: GOD PLAN AND HUMAN ACTION

God’s sovereignty over all of life encompasses the _____ actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says human beings have many plans, but only the plan of the Lord will stand. In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord’s plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God’s overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28), we trust in His promise to _____ His plan, even when we do not _____ our present circumstances.

POINT 2: God’s salvation comes through a timely intercession (Esth. 8:1-8).

God puts people in positions of _____ and _____ so that they might intercede on behalf of others in need.



How did Esther and Mordecai use their knowledge and authority for God’s purposes?

Esther had _____ with the king and used it to _____ for her people.

POINT 3: God's salvation comes through a timely victory (Esth. 9:1-2).

NOTES

We can find _____, _____, and _____ in God's plan and perfect timing.



What are some things in your life that happened "in the nick of time?" Looking back, how can you see God's perfect timing in that exact moment?

God fights _____ us, and often He will call us to _____ as well.



How should our fighting look different from how the rest of the world fights?

MY RESPONSE

Because Christ interceded on our behalf, we recognize that God has placed us where we are at this time to share the gospel with others so they might be saved, even if it comes at great risk to us.

- **HEAD:** Where might God be calling you to take a risk in His name today?
- **HEART:** What fears holding you back from walking in confident obedience to the Lord will you confess to Him today?
- **HANDS:** What aspects of your life will you use to help others and glorify God in this season?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Insistence on security is incompatible with the way of the cross. What daring adventures the incarnation and the atonement were! What a breach of convention and decorum that Almighty God should renounce his privileges in order to take human flesh and bear human sin! Jesus had no security except in his Father. So to follow Jesus is always to accept at least a measure of uncertainty, danger and rejection for his sake."⁴

—John Stott (1921-2011)