

## **Courage Under Pressure**

Psalm 124

Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9: 20-22

Sept 26, 2021

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

### *Psalm 124*

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let Israel now say—if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

### *Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9: 20-22*

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”

Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

--

Courage under pressure is something we have all seen since the pandemic changed the world, changed our lives. As many of us were restricted to our homes and our own little bubbles, the front line workers in healthcare, first responders, store clerks, delivery people, and many others, lived and worked under pressures the rest of us cannot fully comprehend. With the wonderful arrival of vaccines there had been some let up in the pressure they had been feeling, but the rise of the Delta variant and the political drama has again called for a renewed courage under pressure.

As we have each been impacted in whatever ways by the pandemic, we have all been living in a time that has required courage under pressure. Over and over we have had to—and will continue—to make decisions on how to balance our needs and wants with what we each consider safe and realistic for us, and there are also those types of decisions we make in the best interest of others, not our own.

As a writer and a man who for some time followed a complicated faith journey, Ernest Hemingway took the idea of courage under pressure one step further when he said that “Courage is grace under pressure.” We may not feel very graceful or grace-filled on this long, winding, extended learning curve, but the truth is we cannot be courageous without grace. Grace helps us to navigate the facts and the fears, it helps us to turn anxiety into action, it helps us to rest and think rather than retreat. Grace calls us to remember that the Lord, that God, is on our side, so that we are not swallowed up or swept away in the raging flood waters of a challenging situation. By the grace of God, we do have courage to carry on, to carry through, when we are confronted by burdens and situations that seek to stop us in our tracks and leave us in despair.

God’s grace and hand are not always immediately apparent or quickly obvious in our lives. Whether it is our ordinary day to day tasks or a challenging predicament or a painful crisis, we wonder, we can ask, “Why did this happen?” or “Where is God?”. So often it is only in retrospect that we can see how things had a meaning, a purpose, a path, when it all seemed loose, disjointed or unimportant. We often find God in the rear view mirror of our lives.

One way to explore this comes from the book of Esther and her experiences of courage and grace under pressure that show us that God is there all along using and orchestrating the events in our lives to bring about the purpose God desires, and to lead us to achieve what we have been created to be and called to do. It is as Paul would one day write in his letter to the Romans, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Our Jewish faith cousins celebrate a holiday, Purim, that came about because of one woman’s experience of courage under pressure, of courage and grace under pressure, when God’s hand was not apparent or obvious yet indeed present.

When King Ahasuerus banished his first queen, Vashti, he set about choosing a new queen from his harem. Esther, the niece of Mordecai, a humble servant in the royal household—perhaps a doorman or porter—became the delight of the king and he chose her to be his next queen. Both Esther and Mordecai hid the fact that they were Jewish, and that became one of the first ‘behind the scenes’ factors that God used as grace.

Haman, a royal insider, was promoted to a very high political office and this rank swelled his ego so that all but the king were to bow down to him. Mordecai would not, and revealed that he was Jewish, meaning he would not worship anyone but God. Haman was violently enraged and quickly plotted not only to kill Mordecai, but to carry out a pogrom to kill all the Jews in the 127 provinces of the kingdom.

Mordecai pleaded with Esther to intercede on behalf of the Jews in the kingdom, although to do so she risked her own life. She faced death either by Haman or by her own husband the king if she initiated a conversation with him as he must first extend his gold scepter as permission and invitation. Although she was the Queen, she was the least safest as her death was sure by either one of their hands. Esther fasted for three days and had the Jewish citizens do that as well. By fasting she felt and experienced the reality of God within her, inspiring and encouraging a plan. Requesting an audience with King Ahasuerus, Queen Esther invited him to a banquet at which Haman was also an invited guest. Her courage as grace under pressure allowed

her to invite the enemy to her table. One royal, one evil, she welcomed both of them to a meal in her private quarters where she would entertain the two most powerful men in the kingdom.

Haman, proud and boastful of this privileged invitation, became even further infuriated when Mordecai still refused to bow to him. How could he be so disrespectful to him—to one so important? Haman’s raging anger called for a gallows to be constructed immediately so that Mordecai would die by hanging the next day.

God’s grace and presence had been quiet in the background, but on this night before the banquet, all changed. The king had insomnia, and he called for the courts’ daily records to be read to him. In essence, a bedtime story of his kingly reign. He was not only reminded of the plot that had been against his life, but that it was Mordecai who foiled the plan and saved his life. The king then discovered that Mordecai had never been rewarded for this. The king consulted Haman on how to thank the man he wished to honor, and of course Haman believed that he was the one to be honored. He shared his idea with the king, and the next day was horrified to see that it was Mordecai paraded around in royal robes. God’s grace boldly showed what in time the world would see through Jesus Christ, that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Building up to this one night, God’s grace and hand were not apparent or obvious along the way, yet Mordecai had just happened to be in the right place at the right time to overhear the plot to kill the king, and although he had saved his life, there had never been any reward. The king then just happened to have a sleepless night and so could hear the lifesaving story of Mordecai in the perfect moment. What had seemed to be loose and disjointed experiences were God grace in action.

Haman’s humiliation was just the beginning. At the banquet with her husband and the enemy of her people, Esther revealed her Jewish lineage and Haman’s plan to execute all the Jews of the kingdom. By decree of the king, the gallows built for Mordecai become the gallows for Haman.

The day that was to be death for her people became an annual festival celebrating God’s deliverance because Esther was courageous under pressure, because she relied on God’s grace to give her courage under pressure as she was able to make decisions on to balance her needs and wants with the best interest of others. Courage and grace under pressure turned sorrow into gladness and mourning into a holiday.

As you hear the experiences of Esther and Mordecai, what are those seemingly loose, disconnected, unimportant moments in your life that only later were revealed as God’s grace guiding you to act in courage under pressure? .....Amen.