

Working Within a Fallen System

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Esther

The Book of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus (known to history as Xerxes) throwing a lavish party to display his glory. Having consumed ample amounts of wine, Ahasuerus commands his servants to bring Queen Vashti before him in order that he might show her off to the other partygoers. But Vashti, sensing the indignity of the request, refuses and is fired. Vashti's situation can be seen a workplace issue, in which a boss seeks to exploit a subordinate because of her gender and then terminates her when she fails to live up to his fantasies.

Esther was among those brought to the palace to undergo the year-long beauty treatment required before presentation to the king. At the end, Esther finished first in the pageant and was crowned queen of the realm. The one fact about her that remained hidden, at the request of her cousin and guardian Mordecai, was that she was a Jew. Although she is the apparent "winner" of the contest, she is nonetheless caught in an oppressive, sexist system, soon to face sexual exploitation at the hands of a selfish tyrant.

Mordecai later comes into conflict with Ahasuerus' highest official, Haman. Haman responds by plotting to kill not only Mordecai, but the whole Jewish people. Esther has to make a choice. She can continue to conceal her Jewishness and spend the rest of her days as first lady of Xerxes' harem. Or she can take her life in her hands and do what she can to save her people. Esther comes to understand that her high position is not just a privilege to be enjoyed, but a high responsibility to be used to save others. Her people are in peril, and their problem has become her problem because she is in the best position to do something about it.

Esther's service corresponds to today's workplace in a few ways. First, God makes use of the actual circumstances of our lives. Esther's position gives her unique opportunities to serve God. Mordecai's position gives him different opportunities. We should embrace the particular opportunities we have. Rather than saying, "I would do something great for God, if only I had the opportunity," we should say, "Perhaps I have come into this position for just such as time as this."

At the same time, our positions are spiritually dangerous. We may come to equate our value and our very existence with our positions. The higher our positions, the greater the danger. If becoming CEO or getting tenure or keeping a good job becomes so important that we cut off the rest of ourselves, then we have lost ourselves already.

Serving God also requires risking our positions. If you use your position to serve God, you might lose your position and your future prospects. This is doubly frightening if you have become self-identified with your job or career. Yet the truth is our positions are also at risk if we don't serve God. Esther's case is extreme. She may be killed if she risks her position by intervening, and she will be killed if she doesn't intervene. Are our positions really any more secure than Esther's? It is no foolishness to risk what you cannot keep in order to gain what you cannot lose. Work done in God's service can never truly be lost.