

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. In one sense this episode depicts a family matter. But every royal palace is also a political workplace, so Vashti's situation could 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.

A young Jewish woman named Esther joins the royal harem and becomes the new wife of the king. The fact that Esther, a Jew, would set out to marry a pagan king is striking, given the emphasis in both Ezra and Nehemiah on the wrongness of intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles. Esther does not share the religious morality of Ezra and Nehemiah. To get ahead, she is willing to take advantage of another woman's misfortune and submit herself to exploitation.

This sort of moral compromise is present in many workplaces today. Examples include keeping silent when the mistreatment of another person

gives you an advantage. Or watching the dirtiest, most dangerous job fall once again to an ethnic outsider.

Although God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, that doesn't mean God has no plan or purpose for Esther in the king's palace. As it happens, her cousin Mordecai is more scrupulous in keeping Jewish law, which puts him in conflict with Ahasuerus' highest official, Haman. Haman responds by plotting to kill not only Mordecai, but the whole Jewish population.

Mordecai learns of the plot and sends word to Esther. Initially, Esther refuses to help, as it could jeopardize her position and even her life.

Mordecai responds with two arguments. First, he explains that her life is at risk, whether or not she intervenes. "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews" (Esther 4:13). And second, he calls on her sense of purpose. "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). Together, these arguments lead to a remarkable about-face, and Esther is suddenly willing to risk her life on behalf of her people.

Notice that Mordecai's two arguments appeal to different instincts. The first argument appeals to self-preservation. The second argument appeals to destiny. Perhaps both arguments were essential steps in Esther's change of heart. First Esther identifies herself with her people. In this sense, she takes the same step Jesus was to take at his birth, identifying himself with humanity. After identifying with those in peril, Esther takes the next step

towards service. Her high position can now be used for others, rather than solely to serve herself.

For Esther and the Jews, the story has a happy ending. Esther employs a clever scheme to curry the king's favor and to manipulate Haman into exposing his own hypocrisy. The king revokes the judgment against the Jews and rewards Mordecai and Esther with riches, honor and power. They in turn improve the lot of Jews throughout the Persian Empire.

Esther's story relates to today's workplace in four key ways:

One. Many people — Christians or not — make ethical compromises in their quest for career success. Because we all stand in Esther's shoes, we all have the opportunity — and responsibility — to let God use us despite any past moral failure. Did you cut corners to get your job? Even so, God can use you to call an end to the deceptive practice in your workplace. Have you made improper use of corporate assets? God may still use you to clean up the falsified records in your department. Prior misuse of your God-given abilities is no reason to believe you cannot employ them for God's good purposes today.

Two. God makes use of the actual circumstances of our lives. Esther's position gave her unique opportunities to serve God. Mordecai's position gave 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."

Three. The more powerful your position, the higher spiritual danger you may be in. Many people come to equate their value and even their very existence with a job title. Esther ceased to see herself as a Jew when she became the queen of Persia. If becoming CEO or getting tenure becomes so important that it cuts us off from the rest of ourselves, then we have lost ourselves already.

Four. Serving God sometimes requires risking your position. Yet you are also at risk if you don't serve God. Esther's case was extreme. She risked losing her life if she intervened as well as if she didn't. 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.