

A Different Kind of Thanksgiving

(sermon for November 20, 2011)

By Dr. David R. Mains

Text: Esther.

Subject: The privilege of being involved in a miracle.

Desired Response: Give thanks to the Lord.

How To: You decide on the extent of your involvement.

How Long: Between November 21 and December 31.

Sermon in a Sentence: This year, give thanks to the Lord for the privilege of being involved in a modern-day miracle.

It's not too often a minister turns to the book of Esther for his/her text on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. But I would be hard-pressed to find a passage more fitting for what I believe the Lord would have me preach.

By way of quick review, Esther was a Jewish orphan who had been raised by her cousin Mordecai. You need to locate them in Susa under the Persians, or what we presently call Iran. These two lived in the territory of the exiles taken captive from Jerusalem when it was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar.

In God's providence, Esther had become the new queen to King Xerxes. She had won the position because of her beauty, but it was hardly a secure spot. The previous queen had been dismissed simply because she had refused to come to the king when summoned.

Mordecai, Esther's legal guardian, was apparently a minor official of some kind who had angered a big-shot in the government. When others bowed and scraped before Haman, Mordecai stubbornly refused to do so. Even after being told it was required by the king, Mordecai still stood erect.

Here's chapter 3, verses 5-9:

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

A date was picked for when to do this. Verse 8:

... Then Haman said to King Xerxes, *“There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver [tons of money] into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business.”*

The imperial response was, “Keep the money, but do with the people as you please.”

We all know the story, how dispatches were sent by couriers with orders to annihilate the Jews—young, old, women, children, everyone—on the set date. I’m not sure, however, that we appreciate the sheer terror this elicited.

Imagine our government decreeing that all Koreans living in the United States are to be killed on a given date ... or all Nigerians ... or all Presbyterians ... or all Seventh-Day Adventists. This was something highly traumatic.

What Haman didn’t know was that Queen Esther was Jewish. Allow me to read to you the better part of chapter 4. Try to feel the emotion of what’s going on here:

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went into the city, wailing lonely and bitterly. ... 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.

When Esther’s maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.

Eventually Esther is told what’s going on and that Mordecai has insisted that she go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead for her people. She then tells her servant to say to Mordecai (verse 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 he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”

When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, 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. 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 royal position for such a time as this?”

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “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 maids 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."

We all know how this narrative ends. Esther and her people don't perish. When she goes before the king, he extends his gold scepter. Haman's sinister plot is foiled. He's hung on the very gallows he built for Mordecai. And though the king's edict cannot be rescinded, the Jews are allowed to defend themselves against those who attack them. So down through the centuries, the Jews have celebrated every year the Feast of Purim, as God makes even the wrath of man to praise Him.

My purpose, however, in retelling this story most of you already know quite well, was to underscore the critical part fasting and prayer played in it. It was Queen Esther and her maids fasting for three days with no food or drink, plus who knows how many thousands of deeply concerned Jews in Susa, joining with Mordecai in this serious call to fasting and praying for their very lives. And then the miracle occurred.

Would this perfect unfolding of events have taken place if Esther and her entourage quit fasting after a day and a half, because they were hungry? What if a large number of the Jews throughout the city of Susa had responded, "This is all a bunch of foolishness. What does fasting have to do with protecting us from slaughter?"

In my gut, the answer is that fasting and prayer were integral and essential to the victory that was won.

I'm not an expert on fasting and prayer, but I know enough to tell you that when these two elements are combined, something truly powerful results. You feel it deep within yourself. The more you fast and pray, including confessing your sins, the more spiritual power you begin to experience. It's uncanny! You become quite aware of being involved in a spiritual battle. You also begin to realize how great God is, and that He can do incredible things when His church cries out for Him to show His powerful hand. In fact, you soon start to rely more on the Lord than you do on yourself, and that's huge!

I believe this is what the Christians in Egypt began to discover as 2010 came to a close. And the truth is, they were amazed at the way God went far and beyond their early expectations.

Isn't this the too-long-lost secret we as American believers need also to rediscover?

This Thanksgiving Sunday, allow me to suggest that we approach the week ahead in a nontraditional way. I'm not saying no turkey and cranberry, no mashed potatoes or pumpkin pie. That's all well and good, and I look forward to these dishes along with the rest of you. But what I'm also saying is that this year, let's give thanks to the Lord for the privilege of being involved in what could well be another modern-day miracle. Along with the traditional Thanksgiving meal, which we have all come to appreciate, let's come to an understanding this week regarding how we will each start to include prayer and fasting in our end-of-the-year schedule.

Maybe it's one day this week and then every week between now and the end of the year—or a total of six fasting days. That's not really all that much. Some of you could double that total and more.

I also want you to seriously consider attending the special prayer times we have scheduled for our congregation starting on _____.

Once again, this challenge is not just about refraining from eating, but along with that discipline, also spending more time than normal in prayer.

I would strongly suggest that you write out this week, if not this afternoon, a list of the reasons why you are entering into this time of prayer and fasting.

- I'm doing this because I want to see my brothers and sisters in the faith in Egypt be able to worship without fear of bombs or beatings or reprisals of any kind.
- I want this for the people of Libya as well.
- I'm concerned about Israel...
- and about the Palestinians, and am praying that a miracle peace could somehow be discovered there, please, God.
- And I long to be a part of another time of spiritual awakening in America. Lord have mercy, please.
- Then I have a deep personal concern that's bigger than I know how to handle. In all humility I confess that on my own I can't bring about what I'm asking You to do. Lord, please hear my prayer.

Write down all your reasons for fasting. Add to the list as you come up with additional items. "Here's my list of 9 requests" ... "of 14 matters about which I'm concerned" ... "the 21 requests that I need Your help with, God" ... "my list has grown to 29; it would have been 32, except You have already answered three big ones, thank you Jesus!"

Why go to all the trouble of fasting if you can't put into words what it is you're concerned about?

I believe you will find yourself going to that list time and again between now and the end of the year. And if my expectations are correct, you will also know the joy of crossing items off your list, because God has answered your prayers in miracle fashion.

Finally, let this be a time of great joy and delight—not one of anguish and misery. We're not interested in who can be the most abject and spiritually wretched, pathetic and pitiable. This is a privilege we have of showing our love for America, and for individuals we hold dear.

That's why in our church bulletin I worded your potential involvement the way I did. Can you turn to that fill-in-the-blank statement now? **(pause)**

It reads:

"I sincerely thank the Lord for the privilege of being involved in a modern-day miracle by _____ *(blank)* _____ during the designated fast days of November 21 to

December 31, 2011.” And what you do is write down the commitment you believe the Lord would have you make.

We’re not collecting these. Everything is between you and the Lord.

I’m not a queen like Esther was. So I can’t write down that “I and my maids will...” do such and such. I fill it out for myself, and you just fill it out for yourself. I will fast every Tuesday ... or because I have a medical condition, I will fast from any media input on Tuesdays ... or I will be there every time our church meets for prayer ... or whatever.

This is not an obligation you take on reluctantly. You sincerely thank the Lord for the privilege of being involved ... of being involved in a modern-day miracle.

I believe I need to give you time just to be alone with the Lord, and for Him to whisper His desires into your heart.