

Women's Bible Study

Women in Transition: Esther: Unexpected Queen

Dealing with Unexpected Responsibility

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I had already written my introduction last week before I heard Gretchen speak. As she talked about her vacation I was reminded of my very first lecture for Women's Bible Study close to 10 years ago. Gretchen and I at that time were the only two teachers. She carried most of the load and I simply filled in when she needed me. I was terrified to follow in her footsteps because of her incredible teaching gifts and her years of experience. Not much has changed; I still find it difficult to follow her.

In that first lecture I felt the need to contrast our teaching and personal styles right up front by explaining that there would be no rustic camping stories from me. After last week's lecture I feel compelled to reiterate that unless I undergo a major personality change in the next eight years before my 50th birthday, there will be no backpacking or rustic camping stories from me.

This summer however, I did do something I never thought I would do. I took my family on a vacation to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the settling of Jamestown. We were part of a conference put on by Vision Forum to study the Christian heritage of this nation.

As long time attendees of Women's Bible Study know, as a child my mother took me on countless historical vacations. We spent several summers touring Presidential homes and birthplaces. On a tour of Henry Clay's home, a famous Kentuckian whom my mother thought should have been president, I actually said to my mother, "Mom, why do we have to keep doing this? "After all, if you have seen one old house and one old set of dishes you've seen them all."

That was actually a miscalculation on my part. She just doubled her efforts to impart to me a love of history. It is quite an irony that I would subject my four children to an entire week learning about history.

As we were standing at Yorktown, an important battle in the Revolutionary War, I begin to revert back to my childhood attitudes. Battles are not my passion and so I found it a bit hard to concentrate on the technical aspects; but there was one theme presented in that on-site lecture that I have pondered all summer. The speaker Dr. Geoffrey Botkin and his son said that the actual battle of Yorktown was a relatively short encounter; but the years and decades of philosophical underpinnings, citizen attitudes, and style of military training

determined the outcome that day. I found that incredibly intriguing that the actual battle was relatively short but the preparation determined the outcome. That concept has implications for our study today as we examine the topic: Dealing with Unexpected Responsibility.

Scripture Passage

Let's begin our study by turning to the book of Esther. The book is 10 chapters long so we will be reading selected passages to give us a basic framework of the life of Esther. Let's begin with Esther chapter 1, verses 1-7. I am reading from the New International Version.

¹ This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: ² At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³ and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

⁴ For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. ⁵ When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. ⁶ The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. ⁷ Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality.

Timeframe

Let's take a moment to place the events of Esther in their proper time sequence. Xerxes ruled the Persian Empire for 21 years from 486 to 465 B.C. This is after the call of Abraham, after the taking of the Promised Land, and after the reign of the Judges. It is also after the reign of the Kings because both Israel and Judah have been conquered; Israel by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and Judah by Babylon in 586 B.C. The world empire, Babylon, has been conquered by the Medes and the Persians and now Xerxes rules the Persian Empire.

From the descriptions in these opening verses we learn that this kingdom is luxurious and opulent, note the mention of expensive fabrics, gemstones, and stemware. In the third year of his reign, Xerxes throws a huge party in Susa, lasting 180 days, which is 6 months. This was probably because Xerxes planned to wage war against Greece and is seeking to build coalitions and win support.¹

But as the party is winding down a crisis is building. On the last day of the feast Xerxes orders the Queen to appear before him in her royal splendor. Queen

¹ Women of the Bible: God's Word for the Biblically-Inept. Starburst Publishers. page 138.

Vashti was entertaining the women with a feast in the palace. Vashti refuses, perhaps she felt the appearance to be inappropriate, unsafe (given that it was a large drunken party), or merely inconvenient. But in any case she refuses. The King is first humiliated and then furious. Vashti is dethroned and loses her access to the king.

Let's continue our reading with Chapter 2, verses 1-7:

¹ Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. ² Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. ³ Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. ⁴ Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

It appears the King now has some regret about his previous decision and misses his Queen. He of course has access to other women in his harem; but apparently His preference is for his wife. His advisors recommend a plan and we are now introduced to Esther.

⁵ Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, ⁶ who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. ⁷ Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

During this time in history many of the captives from Jerusalem had been allowed to go back to their homeland. The Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah give an account of the activities of those who returned to Jerusalem. Mordecai and Esther were among the Jews who stayed in Persia.

Esther's situation seems very stark in contrast to the description of the King and his empire. We read here a very simple and plain account of her life. There are no descriptions of great wealth, influence, or power. In fact, it is logical to assume that as a captive from Jerusalem their financial resources were limited. We also note sadly that Esther was an orphan, both her mother and father had died. Indeed it is interesting that she is not taken in by a close female relative or family member; but rather by a male cousin who loves her as his own daughter.

While Esther does not possess the power or influence the King enjoys; she does have some resources. She receives wise Godly counsel from Mordecai. She has

a Godly Heritage as a Jew. She is lovely in form and features and she enjoys the favor of those in authority.

Before Esther is taken to the Palace she is instructed by Mordecai to keep her Jewish heritage a secret. She is given beauty treatments for a year, and when it is her turn to spend a night with the King, she is selected to be the New Queen. She, a young orphaned Jewish girl, is the wife of the most powerful monarch in the world. Things go well for Esther for a while, but conflict eventually arises. A historically rooted feud between Haman, a high official in the Xerxes empire, and Mordecai erupts.

Esther 3:8-11, 13

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. ⁹ If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."

¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."

¹³ Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

Esther 4:1-3; 6-14

¹ When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³ 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.

The people knew what the decree would mean to them personally and to their race. Esther seems to be insulated from this decree. However, she sends one of her messengers to get more information.

⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. ⁷ Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

⁹ Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, 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."

Esther is worried. Mordecai is asking her to risk her life. Even though she is the King's wife, she lives with the harem. The King has not requested her presence in 30 days, who knows she may have lost his favor. .

¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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?"

Dealing with Unexpected Responsibility

Esther was a woman confronted with unexpected responsibility. Never in her young life could she have conceived of this moment and yet I think in a way she had been preparing her whole life for such a time as this. How can we prepare to deal with unexpected responsibility?

Remember Who God is and How He Works.

First, we must Remember Who God is and How He Works. Esther's story is not unique. God for centuries has been developing plain and ordinary woman into extraordinary women who accomplish great things for His Kingdom and His Glory.

There was **Hannah**. She struggled with infertility. God met her in her sorrow and granted her a son whom she gave back for the service of God. His name was Samuel, one of the great prophets of Israel.

There was **Lois and Eunice** a Jewish grandmother and mother who imparted the truth of God and a love of the scriptures to a young man named Timothy.

There was **Rahab** a pagan and a prostitute living in Jericho; but even she could recognize the presence of the living God. She hid the spies in Jericho and was rescued when the army invaded. She became the great great grandmother of King David and thus an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

There was **Mary** a young poor Jewish girl. She was doing the activities young girls do; just ordinary and plain; but she was a worshipper of God. She was called to be the mother of the Messiah.

There was **Mary and Martha** women who possessed the gift of hospitality and so had the privilege of providing a place of rest and refreshment for their Lord.

These were ordinary women living lives that seemed unremarkable. They would have been unnoticed by society. Most of them had no idea during their earthly stay that they would have a significant role in the drama of history.

God uses the same principles to work today that he used in Biblical Times. He does not change. He is still in the business of taking ordinary individuals and transforming them into extraordinary people who bring honor and glory to himself. Whatever your work, whether caring for small children, teaching in a school, taking care of the sick, serving food, raising money, selling products, caring for an aging parent, entering data into a computer, volunteering in a community organization, being a grandparent, or a prayer warrior. Your work cannot be anymore ordinary than many women of the Bible. You too have no idea of the significance of your role in History, so execute the role you have well.

Remember Who We are in Christ

A second strategy when confronting with unexpected responsibility, is to Remember Who We are in Christ. We have the tendency to view ourselves in extremes. Either with an arrogance that says I am so skilled and important there is none like me or the opposite, but equally unhealthy for the child of God, I am worthless, unskilled, and unusable.

Neither of those describes who we are in Christ rather; consider these verses:

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Romans 8:16

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Eph 2:10

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

You are a child of the King, a princess actually. You are loved by your Father. He treasures you. He will supply all your needs and grant you many of your desires. He sacrificed the life of his one and only Son to pay for your sins and to give you eternal life.

You have a position of respect. You have a position of responsibility. You are being trained to behave and think like Christ. You are aware that as you grow and mature your Father will often call on you to step up and accept unexpected responsibility. But do not fear, your Heavenly Father will always be with you, never leave you, and will equip you for the work to which he has called you.

Not If or When, but How

The third strategy I want to leave you in dealing with unexpected responsibility is this: Remember the Question is not **if** or even **when**; but how. How will you deal with unexpected responsibility?

You **will** have to deal with it. Some times it will be just a little stretch for us; sometimes we will be pushed to the very brink of our lives. But at some point and probably at many points in many seasons of your life you will have to deal with unexpected responsibility.

So how will you deal with it? I want to talk about three major responses we can have to unexpected responsibility. At various times I have responded in each of these ways.

Three Responses

Response #1 Refuse It

One way we can respond to unexpected responsibility is to refuse it. When my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1989, we were very hopeful that she could be cured. She went through a mastectomy, intensive chemotherapy, and a bone marrow transplant.

She eventually entered a period of remission and returned to her beloved teaching position; but the cancer recurred with a vengeance. I could not provide for her physical needs and my parents did not expect that; but I could have provided more for her spiritual needs. My mother was a Christian so I was not worried about her salvation. However, I am sure looking back she would have loved to talk about spiritual issues and eternity more with me; but I felt that would have been admitting defeat to the illness and I did not take that opportunity. I lacked the spiritual maturity, the scriptural knowledge, and the boldness and so I responded to that unexpected responsibility poorly by refusing it.

Maybe you too can look back over your life and find areas where you have refused to accept unexpected responsibility that God laid before you. So what do you do when you have failed the test. You handle it just like other sin: You confess it, you ask God for forgiveness, and you take actions not to make the same mistake again.

Response #2 Fail to Recognize It

A second way we can respond to unexpected responsibility is to Fail to Recognize It. This is different than refusing; this is the response where we are oblivious to the spiritual realities around us. Perhaps we don't consciously refuse to take on the responsibility; but we just don't get it; we fail to recognize it as a divine appointment placed squarely in front of us.

I am a planner. I don't like surprises for the most part; unless they are extremely pleasant and very well planned. I have mellowed over the years; but not much.

The year was 1994; I was working for the Minnesota Extension Service and the mother of a 15 month old daughter. I was very committed to my career. I was also very committed to our daughter. Those two projects as well as being a supportive wife to my husband who was finishing his residency consumed most of my time.

One evening my husband came home from work laid the Post-Bulletin on the counter and pointed to the headline, Duane Benson will not seek re-election. At that point in my life I knew almost nothing about politics; and frankly I didn't want to learn. Duane Benson was a state senator from Lanesboro who had held the position for 14 years. It was a little more than two weeks before the primary election. Think about that 2 weeks! Two weeks to raise money, plan a campaign, put together ads, cut radio spots and so on.

So I said completely clueless, "What can that possibly have to do with me?" And he said, "I think I'll run for that position." I was not ready for that, I didn't sign up for that. Even though I did tentatively come on board to support my husband; for the most part I failed to recognize the divine opportunity that was set before me, even if my only responsibility had been to whole-heartedly support my husband in his dreams.

You must train yourself to recognize divine opportunities to step up and deal with unexpected responsibilities. These often begin as very small tests and it has been my experience that they grow in intensity and frequency. So you will have multiple chances to learn to recognize them.

One of the best ways that I have found when confronted with say a husband who wants to run for public office, or a request by a child to invite 40 of her friends and parents over for a cookout, or a request to serve in a new ministry capacity is to stop and pray. Before you even answer or react to the person in front of you, take the time appropriate for the situation, sometimes you need only a few seconds, sometimes you have only a few seconds, sometimes you need and have days, to ask, "Lord is this a responsibility that you are asking me to step up and take?"

Response #3 Rise to the Challenge

The third response is the one to which we should all aspire and that is to Rise to the Challenge.

On Wednesday August 22 Scott's parents, our family, and a family friend from Kentucky were all dining together at our home. His parents were in town for a series of medical appointments for his father and were planning to leave for home on Friday or Saturday. The family friend had come with them to help with the long drive from Kentucky and to help Scott's father with medical issues since he sometimes has trouble physically getting around.

After supper I mentioned to Scott that his mother was having some trouble getting around at the clinic; I wasn't sure if it was her knee that was giving her problems or what. Later in the evening Scott and his mom took a walk down the driveway; she was short of breath after a few strides. She had had a heart attack 6 years ago, and my cardiologist husband was concerned about her heart.

She had various tests the next day, and the shockingly the next morning was told that she had lung cancer with a tumor the size of a grapefruit/cantaloupe and that surgery should be scheduled immediately. On Monday at 5:30 a.m. we took her to the hospital for surgery. She had a lung removed. At 3:30 p.m. that same day Scott checked his father into the hospital to try to stabilize some of his medical issues.

Since then Scott's mother, Betty Ann, who is here today, has been living in our home recovering from surgery and his father who is unable to care for himself is in a nursing home here temporarily. We are still hoping he can return to being cared for by his family.

Life was reasonably stable on Wednesday August 22; but by Friday morning everything had been turned upside down. Betty Ann still has her summer clothes in her suitcase. But with God's grace and his daily provision I think we are all rising to the challenge.

Your challenges may not look at all like mine. Sometimes our challenges seem very plain like trying to get through the day with three young children. Sometimes they may seem more of an irritation like being kind to a coworker who deliberately makes your life miserable. Sometimes we are called to respond to a tragedy in a family member or friend's life. Sometimes your response to the challenge is noticed by others; but many times only God sees it. It doesn't matter we must rise to the challenge.

We as Christian women want to do that. We don't want to refuse what God has for us or miss seeing it entirely, we want to be able to Rise to the Challenge. How can we do it?

We can build a solid spiritual foundation now. If you are in a period of relative calm in your life, do not waste it. Consider it a special gift that God has given to you. Use it to strengthen yourself spiritually. Study your Bible. Read the Bible through if you have never done it before. Read it again if you have. Spend time reading the passage through each week for Women's Bible Study and ask God what he wants you to learn from it. Take time to read and study a topic from the Bible yourself; there are many excellent resources in the bookstore and in the library.

Spend time in prayer. Pray for others who are in times of unexpected responsibility. Pray scripture. Pray some of the classic prayers used by the Puritans and church fathers. But pray and talk to God. Invest time in your relationship with Him.

Finally, practice a life of obedience. Often we have to learn to be obedient in the small things before God places before us a larger responsibility. Develop a life of consistent obedience.

Esther is a wonderful example to us. She did rise to the challenge. She does approach the King. He, in a picture of God's grace, surprisingly extends the golden scepter to her. She eventually tells him of Haman's plan to destroy the Jews. The King is shocked to learn that she is Jewish and that he has unintentionally issued an order for her destruction. He of course cannot change the order he has made, Kings were like gods in their culture, they didn't make mistakes. Instead the King allows Mordecai to come up with a plan to issue a new edict which permitted the Jews to defend themselves and they are saved. And we are the recipients of the account of a great woman of God; from whom we can learn to Rise to the Challenge of our day.

1 Corinthians 10:11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

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Intensive Study Questions

1. Read Esther 1:1-8. Describe some of the attributes of the king and his kingdom that made him "important and successful" in his day.

Are those attributes of leaders and nations also important in our day? Are there any attributes that you would add or take away from your list that define importance in our day?

2. Read Esther 2:5-7. Describe Esther.

Was there anything in her life that would have made her "important" in the eyes of the world?

3. List 3 respected Women from the Bible. Did their background make them more like the King or more like Esther (gender issues aside of course)?
4. What does an ordinary life look like for a modern day woman? What does a high profile life look like?
5. Overall would you describe your life as ordinary or high profile?
6. Depending on your answer above, how can you take your life as it is right now and offer it as a service to God?
7. Based on the lecture today, what are some changes you can specifically make in your daily life to prepare for unexpected responsibility?

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Discussion Questions

1. What does an ordinary life look like for a modern day woman? What does a high profile life look like?

2. Overall would you describe your life as ordinary or high profile?

3. Depending on your answer above how can you take your life as it is right now and offer it as a service to God?

4. What most impresses you about the life of Esther?

5. Based on the lecture today, what are some changes you can specifically make in your daily life to prepare for unexpected responsibility?