

The Unthinkable Happened When This Man Quit Church, But God

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When Darryl Burton stopped going to church, his grandmother warned him, "One of these days, boy, you are going to need Jesus. I hope you remember to call on Him." Burton didn't think much of his grandmother's advice at the time, but she was right.

In 1985, Burton was convicted of a murder he didn't commit and sent to prison. For the next 15 years, as he later recounted, "I was really angry and upset and really frustrated about my situation and being wrongfully imprisoned." Finally he remembered his grandmother's words and said to himself, "Well, I have tried everything but God; what do I have to lose?"

Several people had been persistently witnessing to Burton, and because of their influence, he gave his life to Jesus. Centurion Ministries, which takes on cases of the wrongly convicted, came alongside to help with his legal challenges. It took eight more years, but eventually, a judge overturned Burton's conviction.

Now Burton shares his testimony in the local church where he serves as pastor, and his ministry touches people around the world. He has an insightful way of viewing what happened to him: "God had to work something out of me (bitterness and hatred), in order to work something into me (love and grace), in order to do His work through me."

Everyone's life includes certain imposed confinements, which are sometimes as real as prison bars. We all face limitations—sometimes physical, sometimes financial, sometimes geographical, sometimes vocational. We must decide whether we're going to let our problems hem us in or whether we're

going to let Him enter our space for His glory.

How we deal with our limitations is at the core of our character. The same was true in biblical times. Some of the heroes of Scripture were hemmed in by massive problems; others weren't as confined. But all of them faced challenges that drove them to the Lord.

Take Esther, for example. Talk about limitations! She was an exiled and orphaned Jew living in the Persian city of Susa and being cared for by an older relative named Mordecai. Esther probably thought hers was a limited future, destined to obscurity. But God had given Esther the gift of physical beauty, and when King Ahasuerus needed a new queen, she became the unlikely candidate. Almost overnight, Esther, whose Jewish heritage was a secret, found herself in the corridors of power, caught up in a web of political intrigue that threatened the very survival of the Jewish people. She also confronted an evil archenemy, Haman, and had to overcome his plot to destroy her and her people.

The word "God" is found nowhere in the book of Esther, but the Lord's unseen hand is everywhere helping Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people in their moment of crisis. The fast-paced book of Esther shows there are no coincidences for the children of God. If we encounter problems, it's because God allows them. If we face limitations, it's because God wants us to overcome them. If we feel confined or trapped, we have an open channel above us and can approach the throne of grace.

When it comes to our problems, then, we have two choices. We can either let them confine our possibilities or we can let them clarify our potential.

Problems Can Confine Our Possibilities

Wouldn't it be interesting if we could chat with Esther about our problems? What if you could tell her about your limitations right now? You feel confined. You need more money,

more wisdom, more time, more recognition, more opportunities, more options, more relationships. Esther might reply by telling you of a time when she was beset by limitations—an exiled Jewish orphan, destined, it would seem, to a life of poverty. God overruled the circumstances of her life and opened the door for her to sit on the throne of Persia. Yet, perhaps to her surprise, Esther faced even greater limitations in the palace. Yes, she was the queen, but she couldn't approach the king whenever she wanted; only when he called for her. She had little authority on her own. She was hemmed in by powerful political enemies, especially the wicked prime minister, Haman. And Esther knew that if her people faced a bloodbath, she would not escape their doom.

It's easy to emotionally suffocate when limitations like those tighten around you. But Esther decided she wouldn't be confined by her problems. Though it took enormous courage, she made up her mind to turn the tables, expecting God to bring about deliverance.

As Haman's plot unfolded, Esther devised a plot of her own, but it took the prompting of her relative, Mordecai. He sent a warning, saying, "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13-14)

Problems Can Clarify Our Potential

Mordecai knew that it was not an accident Esther had assumed the throne just when the Jews were facing an existential attack. It was not a matter of luck or chance or good fortune. For children of God, there are no coincidences. God was moving the pieces on the chess board. He was making His move, and He was in absolute control, knowing well how to ordain His plan

and orchestrate His people. How important to remember that!

Esther fasted and planned, using God-given wisdom to arrange her next moves. She told Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!" (Esther 4:16) She invited the king and prime minister to a set of banquets, and she trusted God to be in the details. Her attitude was one of stoic faith and dogged faithfulness.

The story ends with Haman executed on the gallows he had built for Mordecai and with the Jewish people empowered to protect themselves in all their dispersed locations around the world.

Esther and Mordecai were ordinary people like us, born into uncertain times but born according to divine destiny. As we learn from their story, the lives of God's children are appointed by His sovereignty and orchestrated by His providence. We are not here by chance. We are born at just the right time in the will and wisdom of God; our backgrounds are known to God in advance; our gifts and abilities are bestowed by Him; and we'll go to heaven when He calls us home.

God has placed you on this planet for such a time as this, and when you run into problems and limitations you can be certain God wants to use them as occasions to clarify your thinking and show you a new set of possibilities. Our steps are ordered by the Lord (Ps. 37:23). Remember what Darryl Burton said: "God had to work something out of me (bitterness and hatred), in order to work something into me (love and grace), in order to do His work through me."

Helen Keller, who grew up both blind and deaf, said something similar: "The marvelous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome. The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful

if there were no dark valleys to traverse.”

Esther threaded the dark valley, illumined by the path-lights of God’s providence, until it led her upward to the throne and onward to the hilltop of God’s overruling grace. Let’s learn from that. Let your problems create new possibilities. Without the Lord, adversity would confine us, limit our moves and lessen our options. Imagine how trapped we would feel. But with the Lord, our problems don’t confine us; they simply lead us to new and clarified possibilities.

Even in the dark valleys, God will meet you in all your emotional, physical, and spiritual limitations and show you a purpose, plan, and a path forward. Decide to think of your problems as opportunities for God, and let Him turn your limitations into launching pads for His fresh work in your life. {eoa}

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