



ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON:

# MAKING CHOICES...TAKING RISKS

KEY PASSAGE: ESTHER 4:1-17

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**CENTRAL BIBLE TRUTH:** Making good choices is often difficult and requires us to take risks even when we don't know the outcome. Sometimes we have to do what is right, take the risks and trust God for the results.

### SETTING THE STAGE

Corrie Ten Boom was born in 1892 into a Christian family in Holland. Her parents owned a small jewelry store in the heart of the Jewish section of Amsterdam. Corrie and her older sister, Betsie, were living with their father when Holland surrendered to Nazi Germany. The family's love for their Jewish neighbors was tested as entire families were marched off to concentration camps. In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie tells of an incident in which she asked a pastor who was visiting their home to help protect a mother and newborn infant. The pastor emphatically declined to help, noting that they could lose their lives by helping a Jewish child. Corrie's father took the baby into his arms and declared that losing their lives for the sake of the child would be his family's greatest honor.

Thus began the Ten Booms' involvement in the Dutch underground. Their home developed into the center of an underground ring that daily managed to spirit Jews out of the city to safer places. Corrie dealt with hundreds of stolen ration cards to feed the refugees. She had a false wall built in her bedroom so that there was a hiding place in case of a raid.

In 1944, a fellow Dutchman turned them into the Gestapo. The Ten Boom home was raided and Corrie and her family were arrested. Corrie's father died within ten days of his arrest. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, endured a series of prisons and concentration camps in Holland and Germany. Finally, they were sent to Ravensbruck, one of the most notorious of the concentration camps. Betsie became ill and died there. Because of a clerical error, Corrie was released one week before all the women her age were killed.

After the war ended, Corrie established a home for those who had survived the concentration camps—a place of healing. As Corrie traveled all over the world telling her story, she became an instrument of healing for many people who had experienced the atrocities of the war. (*Recommended reading: *The Hiding Place* and *Tramp for the Lord*, both by Corrie Ten Boom.*)

Corrie Ten Boom's story may seem a great deal more exciting than our humdrum, day-to-day lives but it is instructional in its message about choices. We all are faced with making choices in our lives – some are easily made because we are certain of the outcome while other choices can place our very lives at risk. Every choice comes with consequences. The challenge to our faith is to risk making just and loving decisions and trust God with the results. If our fear prevents us from taking a risk, then God will do what God needs to do without our help but we will have missed the blessing of participating with God in Kingdom work.

The threat of annihilation of the Jewish people is an age-old story. Adolf Hitler was not the first person in history to try it. More than two thousand years before Corrie Ten Boom was born, another woman chose to risk her life to save the Jews. Unlike Corrie, Esther was herself a Jew but that did not make her decision any easier. Hopefully, her story will lead 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to risk everything for the sake of the Gospel.

### THE DRAMA

The best way to read the book of Esther is from beginning to end like a well-written novel. It is a story full of palace intrigue, lavish parties, a beauty contest, treachery, revenge and, at the end, celebration of deliverance from enemies. It is set in the third century BCE during the Persian Empire. The events revolve around the winter palace of the Persian monarch, Ahasuerus.

The story begins with the description of a great feast at the palace. Queen Vashti refuses the drunken king's command to be shown off to the male guests. Livid at the queen's refusal of his command, Ahasuerus has her deposed and organizes a Miss Persia contest to find a replacement. Among the beautiful young maidens brought to the palace for inspection by the king is a young Jewish woman named Hadassah, the cousin and adopted daughter of Mordecai. Two events occur in quick succession: Hadassah (renamed "Esther" to protect her Jewish heritage) finds favor with the king and is crowned queen and Mordecai discovers a palace plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai tells Esther who tells the king and the plotters are quickly done away with.

Meanwhile, Haman, the villainous prime minister, becomes enraged because Mordecai is the only person in the kingdom who refuses to bow down to him. Mordecai remains loyal to God's commandment not to bow down to anyone or anything except God. Because Haman feels it is beneath him to deal directly with Mordecai, a plot is hatched to punish Mordecai by destroying his people...the Jews. As a trusted and close confidant of the king, Haman had no trouble getting Ahasuerus to sign an edict against the Jews.

When Mordecai heard about the plot, he went immediately to Esther to enlist her help. After all, she had access to the king and certainly was in his favor. The problem was that if she approached the king without his invitation, she could be put to death. She was completely reluctant to place herself in such danger. Mordecai reminded her of her responsibility to her people and the opportunity that was hers alone to save them. Esther approached the king, was granted an audience, and invited the king and Haman to a banquet.

At the banquet, Esther pleads for the lives of the Jewish people. The king, confessing ignorance about the edict he has signed, demands to know who is trying to do such a terrible thing. Esther reveals the enemy to be Haman. Shocked, the king leaves the room. Haman falls on Esther's couch, pleading for his life. When the king returns, he thinks Haman is making advances on his queen. The king orders Haman to be hanged on the gallows that had been built for Mordecai.

Esther and Mordecai convince the king to issue an edict reversing Haman's plot. The Jews are given official permission to defend themselves. Thousands of their enemies are killed and thousands more become converts to Judaism.

## BIBLE BACKGROUND

### THE PURPOSE OF ESTHER

Esther is probably the most "secular" of biblical books. It makes no reference to God's name, to the Temple, to prayer, or to any distinctive Jewish practices. Yet, Esther is highly esteemed in the Jewish canon because it describes the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim. Still celebrated by Jewish communities in February or March, Purim is a festival of freedom, remembering the time when Jews scattered throughout the world were given respect and recognition and the power to defend their way of life.

Purim can be a raucous celebration. The book of Esther is read in the synagogue and whenever the name of Haman is said, children shout and stamp their feet and shake noise makers. Special cookies called hamantaschen ("Haman's hat") are eaten in disdain of the villain. Adults are supposed to drink so much wine that they can no longer tell the difference between "Blessed is Mordecai" and "Accursed is Haman".

Nationalistic in focus, Esther has a definite "us" versus "them" feel. Esther and Mordecai were clever enough to overcome a terrible threat to their people. The salvation of the Jews involved the execution of Haman and the slaughter of thousands of people. Many Bible scholars believe that reference to God is omitted from Esther because of the overt violence described and/or because of the way the festival of Purim is celebrated.

Other scholars explain the omission as "the hidden face of God". That is to say, God plays a crucial role in the Purim story, but it is behind the scenes. God's name may not be mentioned, but God seems to be at work at every turn of the story.

### THE FOCUS PASSAGE - ESTHER 4:12-14

In light of the grave consequences of approaching the king without a proper invitation, Esther's reticence to reveal her identity as a Jew is understandable. In fact, she is embarrassed and perturbed at her cousin Mordecai for making such a public display of himself. When he heard of Haman's edict to kill the Jews, Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes and walked through the streets wailing out his grief. Mordecai had placed himself in mourning over an event that had not even happened. His torn garments stood in stark contrast to the beautifully refined and festive garments that Esther wore inside the palace. She had become acclimated to palace life and saw Mordecai's behavior as an embarrassment, even though no one knew that she was related to him.

As Mordecai pressured Esther to reveal her true identity and appeal to the king for relief from the edict, Esther tried to hide behind court regulations which permitted no one to see the king uninvited. To do so would put her relationship with the king and her life in jeopardy.

**Verse 12:** Mordecai's response to Esther is the fulcrum of the entire book. Everything that is to come rests on Esther's decision. Mordecai certainly would not wish for any harm to come to Esther, but the situation calls for Esther to be able to put aside concern for her own safety in order to save God's own people.

**Verse 13:** Mordecai makes very clear to Esther that when violence against the Jews finally is carried out, she will be no safer inside the palace than he will be outside the palace. The instigator of the plan to eliminate the Jews is a high authority in the government. Haman's hatred will not be satisfied until anyone related to Mordecai in any way is eliminated. It would only be a matter of time before someone would tell him of Esther's connection to Mordecai.

**Verse 14:** Even though God's name is not voiced, this is a clear declaration of divine intervention and justice. Mordecai made it clear that, ultimately, Esther had a personal decision to make. She had the option to keep quiet or to speak up. Either decision carried a great deal of danger for Esther. There was no assurance that doing the right thing would save her life. Her choice would have to be made on the basis of what is right rather than what is safe. If Esther chose not to be a part of the deliverance of her people, Mordecai assured her that help would come from somewhere else and she would lose the opportunity to be part of something larger than herself. But even more, there would be divine judgment upon Esther for neglecting her responsibility to her people.

Here is also a clear statement of divine providence. Perhaps she had become queen because that is where God needed her to help in this particular time of crisis. Mordecai called on Esther to look at the big picture. Becoming queen of Persia was a big deal for Esther. It defined her life from that point forward. But in the big picture, becoming the queen of Persia was not about Esther—it was about God saving God's people from destruction. The God of Israel had found countless creative ways throughout the millennia to preserve his covenant people. Queen Esther was the instrument of choice on this occasion.

#### MAKING THE PASSAGE CONTEMPORARY

Every day of our lives we are in the process of making decisions. Some decisions come easily and automatically such as what to have for breakfast or what clothes to put on. We may not even realize we are in decision-making mode. Other decisions are more difficult—what college to attend, who to marry, how to invest our savings. The decisions that call for complete trust in God are the choices God calls us to make. God is constantly at work in us and through us but we are not always willing partners. Our human instinct for self-preservation tells us to avoid danger or at least be in control of the situation. When God calls us to a task, the first thing we have to do is relinquish control. God works in surprising ways—ways that we cannot second-guess. The outcome may be completely outside our comprehension but in the big picture that God sees it makes perfect sense. Faith calls us to trust God's vision.

When God calls us to take a risk, God asks us to make an individual choice. He made us with the ability to choose right or choose wrong. But God will not coerce anyone at any time. Every person must come to an internal conviction that making this choice is the right thing to do, and then each person must find the courage to follow through. Deciding to take a risk for God does not place us in a protective bubble where nothing bad will happen. God has not promised our protection but rather, our peace. Corrie Ten Boom spent months in prison camps. Her sister and father died. Their decision to risk all for the sake of Christ ultimately led to their deaths. The same can be said for Paul, the Apostles, Stephen and a multitude of Christians down through the ages who have made the risky decision to do what was right rather than what was safe. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, declared that through Christ we have peace while we boast in our sufferings. (Romans 5:1-5)

## TEACHING OUTLINE

Teaching Aim: Help adults to see that we will face many situations where we have to make choices. Many times it might be risky to make the right choices, but we, as Christians, must see that the challenge is to trust God and step out on faith and leave the results to God.

### BEGINNING THE LESSON

Option 1: Invite a woman with a gift for story telling or acting to become Corrie Ten Boom. Introduce her to your class as a guest who has come to tell her story. As she tells the story of Ten Boom's life, encourage your guest to place emphasis on how difficult it was to make a decision to place herself and her family in danger to save people who were not like her ethnically or religiously. Ask learners to consider this question as they listen: *Has there ever been a time in your life when you had to make a decision that would require you to take a risk on behalf of someone else? How big of a risk was it?*

Option 2: Divide the class into groups of 3 to 5 people. Ask each group to generate a list of five things they consider to be the most important things in life. Have the groups rate the items on their list from greatest importance to least importance. Bring the groups together and make a list of the top two items from each group. By vote of the class members, determine the top five things that are most important to your class.

### DEVELOPING THE LESSON

Option 1: Today as we consider what it means to be called by God, we will pay particular attention to making right choices that may place us at risk. Queen Esther is a prime example of someone who is called to make a tough decision with potentially hazardous results. The focus of our study is Esther's point of decision found in Esther 4.

Give a brief synopsis of the events in Esther leading up to 4:12-14. Because there are multiple characters which can become confusing, write each character's name on the board or flip chart as you come to them in the story. Beside each character, write a descriptive word to help identify their role in the story. For instance: Vashti – Former queen; Mordecai – Cousin/father; Haman – Villain; Ahasuerus – King of Persia; Esther – heroine/queen.

Ask learners to read Esther 4:12-14.

- What is Mordecai asking Esther to do?
- Mordecai uses two main arguments to persuade Esther to action. What are they?  
[She will be no safer inside the palace than outside; Perhaps God has placed her in the palace for just this occasion.]
- If Esther fails to act, deliverance will come for the Jews in some other way. What are the consequences for Esther?  
[She will perish, ending any hope of continuing the family blood lines. If Esther dies, her whole family dies.]

Ask someone to read 4:15-17 to find out what Esther decided to do.

- How will Esther find the strength to carry out her task?
- Does her attitude change or does she simply give in to Mordecai's pressure?

Continue the synopsis of the story to its end.

- The name of God is never mentioned in Esther. What evidence is there of God at work behind the scenes?

Option 2: Ask two people to play the parts of Esther and Mordecai in a talk show format. They will need to read the book of Esther ahead of time and be able to answer questions about the story. As the host of the talk show, the Bible study leader will ask leading questions about the plot, the people and the motives. Pay particular attention to how and why Esther made her decision to place herself in danger to help her people. Invite the "audience" to ask questions or make comments about the events.

## APPLYING THE LESSON

Option 1: Recall the story of Corrie Ten Boom presented at the beginning of the class. Ask: *How were the risks faced by Corrie Ten Boom and Esther similar?*

*How were they different? What was the outcome of each story? Was the outcome worth the risk made by each woman? How was God at work in each story?*

Divide the class into groups of five. Ask each group to discuss the following:

Think about the circumstances of your life as it is now. What do you think God is calling you to do? How do your circumstances impede that call? What decision might you have to make to answer the call?

Option 2: Using the list generated in Option 2 from “Beginning the Lesson”, ask the learners these questions:

- 1. For which of these five things that we said are the most important things in life would you risk your life or well being? Why?*
- 2. How do you evaluate the risks of alternatives you face? If you knew that God was asking you to take the risk, would your decision be different?*
- 3. What if God asked you to risk everything for something not on your top five list or even your top ten list. What criteria would you use to make a decision about your involvement?*
- 4. Our vision tends to be myopic. We can see no further than our own life at this moment. How do we see God’s big picture?*