

CHOSEN

My school teaching career consisted of two wonderful years, from 1955 to 1957. I taught 32 second graders in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania and then 35 first graders in Tucson, Arizona. In both places I can picture eager hands waving, begging for recognition. These children wanted to be chosen: to give the answer, to be on the team, to do the task. Not everyone had raised hands, however. Some children wanted to stay in the background. They may have been unprepared, shy, disinterested or unsure of their abilities. It was challenging to try to handle these responses in a way that was fair to everyone.

The first sentence of 2 Chronicles 16:9 is a favorite of mine: *For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.* Through the years, as I have sung and thought of that verse, I have wondered if the Lord might notice me. I know that he knows me as a member of his faith family, but I wondered if he saw me as one whose heart is fully committed to him (thus useful for his service). If God were the Divine School Teacher, and the whole earth his classroom, he would be looking for students whose heart condition made them ready for assignment in his kingdom, whether they knew it (raised their hands) or not (cowered behind their desks).

I have met believers who were afraid to be too devoted to God lest God ask them to do something they really did not want to do. I've always thought that was so sad. Wouldn't it be an honor to be chosen by God, to be entrusted with a job on God's behalf or (dare I say it?) to be considered God's friend? My heart would yearn within me when thoughts like these would enter my head. And then, almost as a counterbalance, I would often say to myself, "Who do you think you are? You are just Verna Ziegler from Annville, Pennsylvania." And that didn't sound very important to me. But then ...

- Abraham was just Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans;
- The apostle Paul was just Saul of Tarsus;
- Amos was just one of the shepherds of Tekoa;
- Esther was just Hadassah, a Jewish orphan living in Persia;
- Mary was just a virgin from Nazareth, engaged to a man named Joseph.

Each of them – and many others – were ordinary human beings, going about their lives, when God chose them for special projects. Once God needed someone for a very difficult assignment: becoming involved in the ongoing battle for supremacy between God and Satan. The qualifications for the task were large. The person would have to be one with high moral standards, a good reputation, and known to be God-fearing. In addition, great inner strength would be needed, as the candidate would have to be able to endure reversals in fortune, status and health without cursing God. That was a lot to ask! As God's eyes ranged throughout the earth, they fell upon Job, from the land of Uz. Yes! Job fit the job description very well! And so, with the choosing of Job, the drama began.

How I love this story! Job has been a special friend of mine for many years. Every time I reread his story or even think of it, my heart is warmed and I am encouraged. My sympathy also goes out to Job, because we have information that he did not have, information that may have made his trials easier to endure. He had no idea, for example, of the high esteem with which he was held in the eyes of God. Listen to the words of Scripture:

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. His sons

used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom (Job 1:1-5).

What a godly man he was! And what a family he had! Ten children who enjoyed each other's company so much that when they held feasts, all their siblings were invited to come. The sons and daughters must have had the same outward character as their father, for when Job offered ten burnt offerings after the parties, it was just in case some of them had sinned and cursed God in their hearts.

Certainly Job knew nothing of the interchange between God and Satan that we know so well: *One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord (1:6-12).*

It is important to notice who was in charge here. God was the one who brought up the subject of Job. Obviously there was meant to be a confrontation that would benefit everyone, including Job; including us. Notice, too, that God set limits on what Satan could do. Satan took every inch that God had allowed, and within a very short time all of Job's animals and most of his servants were either dead or stolen. His ten children were dead as well. Of course Job was grief stricken, but his attitude was exemplary: *At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing (1:20-22).*

Round one ended with Job worshiping and God clearly the victor. Now for round two: *On another day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. And the Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life" (2:1-6).*

Again God took the initiative and set limits. And again Satan rose to the challenge: *So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes (2:7-8).*

This time Job's wife, who was also hurting from her losses and now the illness of her husband, added some advice. *His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!" (2:9).* Notice Job's response: *He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this Job did not sin in what he said (2:10).*

News about Job's misfortunes spread throughout the area. *When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was (2:11-12).* Imagine: one week of silence! May we never underestimate the pain Job was suffering or the disfigurement his illness caused.

Job was the first to speak and when he did, he cursed the day of his birth, wishing he had been stillborn instead. Prolonged, persistent pain can do that to you; it can fill your mind so that all you can think about is how to get relief. In a recent hospitalization I had several days of lower back pain, unrelated to my surgery. I couldn't keep the pain from showing on my face, nor from dominating my thinking. Our God, of course, understands all this. God knows how it feels to hurt. God created us as human beings with a full range of emotions that we are allowed to feel and to express appropriately.

I like to think of Job through the filter of James 5:10,11 where God, through James, gives a commentary on his story: *Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.* Notice that in the New Testament God does not mention Job's complaining and questioning, both of which he did. Rather, God points out his patience and perseverance! Job is called blessed! I find this comforting. God sees the big picture. Perhaps we shouldn't be so hard on ourselves or each other when we notice human failings.

After Job broke the silence, the friends began to speak. *"Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,"* Jesus said in Matthew 12:34 and, oh, how true it was of these friends! They each had a simplistic kind of mind that had easy answers for life's problems, that had God all figured out. They believed that godly, righteous people were rewarded by God with prosperity and good health. In Job's case, these were now gone. To them the reason was obvious: Job must have sinned. A solution was available. All Job had to do was confess his sin and repent. If he did, God would forgive him and his troubles would be over.

Not true, cried Job, who became very defensive in his answers. Of course, with our inside information, we know Job was right. But hearing himself wrongly accused, down to specific details of his supposed shortcomings, added a new dimension to his suffering. Finally he told them that they were miserable comforters! And while he never cursed God, he began to say (thus revealing his heart) that God was not treating him fairly; he deserved better.

Finally the Lord began to speak to Job out of a storm. Both the content of God's discourse and its effect on Job are fascinating to observe. God wasted no time in reminding Job that he was a created being and that God was the Creator. The two were by no means equals. Imagine Job's shock at hearing these words:

"Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Prepare to defend yourself; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?" (38:1-11).

"Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion's belt? Can you bring forth the

constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth? Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, 'Here we are'? Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together?

"Do you hunt prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? Do you count the months till they bear? Do you know the time they give birth? They crouch down and bring forth their young; their labor pains are ended. Their young thrive and grow strong in the wilds; they leave and do not return" (38:31-39:4).

God said much more, all in the same vein, and then issued Job this challenge: *"Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (40:2).*

Job had been listening attentively and had learned his lesson. Here is his answer to God: *"I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more" (40:4).*

Job may have been ready to say no more but God was not. *Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm: "Prepare to defend yourself; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at all who are proud and bring them low, look at all who are proud and humble them, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you" (40:7-14).*

God then continued to describe beings that he had created: large, strong animals, beautiful yet fierce. Then God said, *"Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me" (41:11).*

By the time God stopped speaking, Job was a humble, contrite man, changed forever by his personal experience with God. He said: *"I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:2-6).*

There is a world of difference between hearing of God and seeing God. Many years later Jesus would say, *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matthew 5:8).* Job's pure heart – his pure spiritual eyes – had been dazzled by the flood of thoughts of God as Creator. The contrast between how he saw God now and the way he had seen him earlier (when he thought God was being unfair to him) was overwhelming. His response is the only one that makes sense: despising himself and repenting in dust and ashes. Job had reached a new level of relationship with God; from now on his life would be more fruitful than ever.

Job's new service for God began immediately. Notice how God affirmed Job as his servant in the following passage: *After the Lord had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you and I will accept his prayer and not*

deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the Lord told them; and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer (42:7-9).

Job’s praying for his friends would have included forgiving them for their brutal words, well-meaning though they were. God would not have wanted Job to carry a grudge against the people who misjudged him. Nor should we. The prayer of Jesus at the cross is one we would do well to echo at appropriate times: “*Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34).

I’m so glad we have the end of the story in the Bible: After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. Nowhere in all the land were found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation (42:10-16).

Twice as much of everything, except the same number of sons and daughters: why? I figure it’s because Job’s first ten children were not dead; they just did not live on earth anymore. Now Job is in Heaven with his fourteen sons and six daughters: twice as many!

I used to wonder why, in the story of the vine and the branches (John 15), God the Heavenly Gardener prunes fruitful branches to make them more fruitful rather than pruning unfruitful branches so that they may bear fruit. But then, I’m not a gardener! Observing God’s work with Job, other Bible characters and people since then has shown me the wisdom of working on fruitful branches. Job would say to us, “Don’t be afraid of God’s pruning. It may hurt for a while, but the results are glorious!”

And so, in this story everyone wins except Satan. God certainly wins and so does Job. All who knew Job then were winners and so are we, for we have his story to read in the Bible and to ponder. Isn’t God amazing? Amen!

* * * * *

Another Bible story could be entitled “Twice Chosen,” except God’s involvement is not so clearly spelled out as it is in Job’s case. I’m thinking of Esther, who was definitely chosen by King Xerxes. Her cousin Mordecai suspected that she was also chosen by God for a specific task. I agree with Mordecai. What do you think?

During the time of the Babylonian Empire, the nation of Judah was conquered and many Jews were deported to Babylon. Seventy years later this empire was overthrown by the Medes and Persians. The new king allowed the Jews to return to Judah, if they wished, and thousands did so. Others decided to remain in their homes scattered throughout the Persian Empire. Among them were Mordecai and his young cousin Esther, whom he had brought up as his own daughter after her parents had died. They lived in Susa, where the king had his palace. In the course of time King Xerxes ascended to the throne, and that’s where our story begins.

The king decided to give a seven-day banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. This feast was for men only and one of the main features was an abundance of wine. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the eunuchs who served him to bring Queen Vashti to him, wearing her royal crown, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. The king was furious! He quickly consulted his advisors about the situation. *"According to the law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her" (Esther 1:15).*

Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord. Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest" (1:16-20).

If situations like this were not possible today, if we were simply reading about a curious custom that has long been abandoned, we could continue the story without comment. But many people hearing what we just heard would think Queen Vashti should have come at once when her husband requested her presence. After all, they may reason, husbands are supposed to be number one in their families, aren't they? Aren't wives supposed to obey their husbands? Doesn't the Bible even say so?

I was one of those who, during our wedding ceremony, promised in the presence of God to love, honor and obey my husband. In 1957 that was common. Because I had a thirst for righteousness, wanting to please my God more than anything else, I took seriously the vow I had made. For years I retreated into a secondary role, both in my home and in the church, which also restricted the participation of women. And then, at the right time, God began to set me free from the wrong interpretations of a few Bible verses that had bound me. The process took many years, culminating in the good work of a wonderful organization called Christians for Biblical Equality.

This is the message I now believe and teach: that God created both male and female in his image, equal in standing before God, though different. In marriage both partners are adults, meant to work together for the good of each other and the family. Those in God's faith family are all gifted by the Holy Spirit with gifts that are to be used for the promotion of God's kingdom, regardless of gender.

With this thinking in mind, I have often wondered about Queen Vashti. Surely she knew that the consequences of her refusal would be serious. Therefore I like to think she had a good reason for saying no.

- Perhaps this had happened before with results that she did not like. Certainly she knew that by now many of the men were drunk.
- Perhaps Vashti had deep qualities in her that she wished her husband would notice instead of always stressing her outward beauty.
- Perhaps she took seriously her duties as hostess of the women's banquet and this was not a good time to leave.

Whatever her reason, she ended up divorced from King Xerxes and never heard from again in this account. And now, back to the story.

Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it (2:1-4).

When the edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel in Susa, among them Esther, who is described as "lovely in form and features." Esther did not reveal her nationality or her family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked to and fro near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Choosing the next queen was serious business! *Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem [reserved for] the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name (2:12-14).*

Finally Esther's turn came. *Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality (2:17-18).*

In all of this we are not told how Esther felt about the situation. Did she want to be the wife of a man who had divorced his previous wife for saying no to a request of his and who also had a harem and many concubines? Did she wish she could have married a Jewish young man instead? We don't know, but we do know that Esther was now queen of the Empire of the Medes and Persians, having been chosen by the king to be his wife. As the story further unfolds, it does seem as if God had something to do with Esther's rise to a strategic position in the Persian Empire. It is in God's timing that I often see God work on the earth.

During this time, for example, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate when he overheard two officers plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. After an investigation proved that the plot was true, the men were hanged on the gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

Now we are introduced to Haman, the villain of the story. As in Job's case, there was a battle between God and Satan going on, only this time Satan worked through a hateful man. Haman was promoted to such a high position by King Xerxes that everyone bowed down to him as he passed by – everyone, that is, except Mordecai. When people asked why he would not bow, Mordecai said it as because he was a Jew. (I suppose he meant by this that he would bow to no one but God.) This was all Haman needed to hear for an evil plan to form in his mind. Haman hated Jews! Instead of just having Mordecai killed for dishonoring him, he would have all of the Jews in the whole kingdom of Xerxes killed! He went to the king to present his plan.

Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they 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 give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury." So the king took his signet ring

from his finger and gave it to Haman, the enemy of the Jews. "Keep the money," the king said, "and do with the people as you please" (3:8-11).

Instructions were written in the various languages of the empire and distributed throughout. They said that on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar people had permission to kill all the Jews – young and old, women and little children included – and to plunder their goods. The reaction in Susa was interesting; we read: *"The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered" (3:15).* Perhaps, then, there was no general animosity toward Jews in Susa, mainly one hateful man with his influence and an oblivious king.

In every province there was great mourning and wailing among the Jews. In Susa Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, then sat at the king's gate, wailing bitterly. Esther was told about his behavior and sent one of her attendants to find out why he was so distressed. Mordecai explained everything to the servant and gave him a copy of the edict for Esther to see. "Urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people," Mordecai said.

Esther had real concerns about going into the king's presence. She told her servant to tell Mordecai: *"Everybody knows that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king" (4:11).*

Mordecai's answer contained a lot of food for thought for Esther: *"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?" (4:13-14).*

Mordecai suspected that Esther might have come into her royal position for this very purpose: to save the Jews from annihilation by speaking to the king. Would she do it? Yes! But not before asking God and others for help. Hear her reply to her cousin: *"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 attendants 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." So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions (4:16-17).*

The days of fasting ended. Now it was time to face the king, time to risk her life. *On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks."*

So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question" (5:1-8).

Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage (5:9). At home he told his wife and his friends about how good his life was and how the king had honored him above the other nobles. *"And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to*

accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built (5:12-14).

God can use anything for his purpose, even sleeplessness. *That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed two of the king's officers who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. "What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered. The king asked, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had built for him. His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered. When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" (6:1-6).*

Haman, of course, thought he was the one to be honored and listed all the things that would have brought joy to his heart. How he would have loved to wear one of the king's robes and ride one of the king's horses through the streets while a noble prince proclaimed, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" Imagine Haman's shock when the king said, "Do just that for Mordecai the Jew who sits at my gate." Haman had to obey. Afterwards he had little time to commiserate with his wife and friends, for now it was time to attend Esther's second banquet.

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life – this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated." King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he – the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman!" (7:1-6).

Haman was terrified and the king was enraged. Very quickly Haman was prepared for death. One of the king's attendants said, *"A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up for the king." The king said, "Hang him on it!" So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.*

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate (7:9-8:2).

Now all that remained was to somehow overturn the edict that called for the destruction of the Jews. Laws in that empire could not be revoked, so King Xerxes allowed Queen Esther and Mordecai to decide what to do. Mordecai wrote another edict saying that when the day came, the Jews would be permitted to defend themselves. The day arrived and some enemies did attempt to attack the Jews. The enemies ended up dead, however, rather than the Jews. The Bible also records that the Jews took no spoils from their foes. The big loser was Satan, who failed in another attempt to destroy God's chosen people, the Jews. The winner? Why, God, of course, although God's name is not mentioned in the story. Did you see God at work?

Today, about 2,500 years later, the Jews recall this story annually with a festival called Purim. They celebrate Esther, the young woman in a patriarchal society whom God chose to deliver his people from death, and a property owner, as well! They honor Esther, who rose to the challenge for which she was chosen. May we follow her example wherever we have been placed "for such a time as this."

To bring this topic to a conclusion, I want to take another look at two more Bible stories that have greatly influenced my life, along with the testimony of a woman I recently met through the media. The first story is that of the prophet Isaiah's encounter with our holy God, as told in Isaiah 6.

One day Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were flying around calling to one another, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."* At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke (Isaiah 6:3-4). Like Job when he saw the Lord as Creator at the end of his ordeal, Isaiah was profoundly affected by this vision. He cried, *"Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty"* (6:5). Then one of the seraphs took a live coal from the altar, touched Isaiah's mouth with it and said, *"See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for"* (6:7).

Filled with the awe of God and overwhelmed with the truth that he had been forgiven by God, Isaiah was now ready to be chosen. The picture in my mind once again is of the whole earth as God's classroom and Isaiah as one of many pupils, all seated behind their desks. The Master Teacher tosses out a question: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Like the eager students in my long ago classrooms, Isaiah couldn't sit still. His hand shot into the air, waving for recognition. He couldn't keep quiet, either. *"Here am I! Send me!"* he called out. And God did call on Isaiah. God chose this volunteer to be his prophet, a difficult job that Isaiah did very well.

It is true that every member of God's faith family has been chosen by God – individually – to belong to a corporate body which God has also called for a purpose. Peter, writing to many believers, expresses this point so well: *You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light* (1 Peter 2:9). Each of us, if we took the time to meditate on this marvelous verse, would live with a sense of calling on our lives. Every time we tell of the amazing grace of our Savior who turned our darkness into light, our blindness into sight, we are doing that for which we all are called. But in this essay I am focusing on the additional thought of being chosen for a specific purpose or project. Some people are chosen by God again and again to do something, go somewhere or experience something that will promote God's Kingdom. Such a person was the apostle Paul.

Paul accepted every assignment God gave him because he never forgot how God stopped him in his tracks one day on the road to Damascus and turned his life completely around. Paul knew he did not deserve the high calling he had in Christ Jesus. He also knew from the start of his new life that suffering was a part of the plan God had for him (see Acts 9:16). But I don't think he was prepared to be assigned a thorn in the flesh, or perhaps he didn't understand that it was an assignment. The story is told in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. The ailment must have been really severe because Paul called it a messenger of Satan and said it really tormented him. Three times he pleaded with the Lord to take the ailment away. And then came what some people call a promise from the Lord. I see it rather as a challenge: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* Paul immediately caught on. Not only would he accept his physical problem, he would delight in it! His response rings down through the years, bringing encouragement to a multitude of people, including me: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Paul then experienced God's grace in a new way and he would certainly say that God's grace was sufficient for him. Before we can know if that grace is sufficient for us, we must stop fighting our challenges and instead find joy in them. I am trying to do that with my primary lateral sclerosis and other physical problems. Recently I heard of a person whose testimony is such a help to me.

Sharon, one of the women from my church who comes to help me, brought a video tape with her and said the Lord had told her that I was to see it. I am so glad Sharon obeyed! That is how I met Sue Thomas, whom I later saw on a television program as well.

Sue Thomas has been profoundly deaf since the age of eighteen months. She says she struggled with her deafness until she was brought to the foot of the cross while in seminary. Then her deafness became her best friend. She eventually learned to speak and to read lips to know what others are saying. Toward the end of her talk, she revealed that she now has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, an illness that is affecting – among other things – her eyesight. If Sue can no longer see, she will be completely cut off from communicating with others. She says that rather than wrestling with MS, she has decided to embrace it – and she says this calmly, with a smile on her face! Sue is experiencing God's grace and finding it sufficient for her. What glory she brings to our loving heavenly Father through sharing her story! Sue's embracing of her lot in life is as wonderful as Paul's. If Paul could embrace his thorn in the flesh and Sue Thomas her deafness and MS, then I can embrace my PLS and whatever else may come my way. God will never run out of grace!

I have a vivid recollection of an incident from about 1981. I was about seventy miles north of our house, driving south on the Taconic State Parkway. Alone in the car, I was either returning from a Bible conference or from a place where such conferences are held. I don't remember what my train of thought was but I do know the day was lovely and the scenery was beautiful. All of a sudden I said to the Lord, "If you want me to be an example for the believers, I am willing." There I was in God's school with my hand raised, volunteering to be chosen. I knew I was volunteering for hard times; how can you be an example if you are not going through anything?

Did God take me up on my offer? Does that explain some of the experiences I have had in my life? Is that why I am where I am now, in this physical condition? I don't know, but then Job didn't know either, nor did Esther. What I do know is that with our human limitations we can see only a small portion of what is really happening in this universe. There is also a spiritual drama going on all around us. The Bible stories give me an idea of how God works through ordinary people. I choose to think that I have been chosen to play a role of God's own choosing in his great master plan. Thus my daily life continues to be an adventure with God. I am happy.

May the same be true of you.

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