

Fasting For A Special Reason

1st hymn by Martin Luther 1483-1546 (*T Ein Feste Burg* Martin Luther 1483-1546)

- 1) A mighty fortress is our God, our sure defence and weapon.
He'll help us out of every need whatever now may happen.
The ancient evil fiend has deadly ill in mind; great power and craft are his
his armour gruesome is, on earth is not his equal.
- 2) With our own strength is nothing done, soon we are lost, dejected;
but for us fights the rightful Man whom God himself elected.
You ask "who may this be? Christ Jesus it is He, the Lord Sabaoth's son",
Our God and He alone shall hold the field victorious.
- 3) And though the world were full of fiends all lurking to devour us,
we tremble not nor fear their bands, they shall not overpower us.
The prince of this world's ill may scowl upon us still, he cannot do us harm,
to judgment he has come; one word can swiftly fell him.

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Prayer:

Dear Father, we are thankful for the provision you gave us in your son, by whose grace you receive our prayers and our worship this day. We rejoice in this privilege and ask that you lead us in our time today by your Holy Spirit, and build us up in our most holy faith we ask in our Saviour's name, Amen.

Readings:

- Psalm 9:1-10
- Matthew 6:16-18

2nd hymn by Isaac Watts 1674-1748 (*T St Saviour* F.G.Baker 1840-1908)

- 1) I sing the almighty power of God that made the mountains rise,
That spread the flowing seas abroad and built the lofty skies.
- 2) I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day,
The moon shines full ay his command, and all the stars obey.
- 3) I sing the goodness of the Lord that filled the earth with food,
He formed the creatures with his word, and then pronounced them good.
- 4) Lord how thy wonders are displayed where'er I turn my eye,
if I survey the ground I tread, or gaze upon the sky.
- 5) There's not a plant or flower below but makes Thy glories known,
and clouds arise and tempests blow by order of Thy throne.
- 6) God's hand is my perpetual guard, He guides me with His eye,
why should I then forget the Lord whose love is ever nigh.

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Intercessions:

Dear Father, we pray today for your world, the world you so loved that you sent your Son to save us from the plight of our own choosing. We are conscious of the many places that are sites of horrific war, mostly against your plan for peace in the world. We pray, as we often have, for Ukraine at war with their aggressive neighbour Russia. We pray that those many there who believe in your Son may be faithful in praying to you, and that they will seek and receive your instructions to them, and be faithful to your will. Strengthen and sustain them, Father, and may your will for them be worked out in that land.

The Gaza war continues to rage with the many horrors which are common in all wars; we do not know how to pray mostly for the true facts are so often unclear, but we do pray for peace, with the awareness that true peace is unlikely until the Prince of Peace returns, and today we include our own longing that that wonderful day might soon come.

Bless the leaders of our land; give them discernment and strength in their leadership. And grant wisdom for your people as we pray for the right leaders to be voted in to power in the coming elections. And so in all things, may your will be done. For we pray our prayers in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

3rd hymn by William Cowper 1731-1800 (T Irish)

- 1) God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.
- 2) Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds you so much dread
are big with mercy and will break in blessings on your head.
- 3) Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.
- 4) His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour,
the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower,
- 5) Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.

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Message: Fasting for a special reason

Strictly fasting was going without food and drink for a period in order to fulfill some deeper commitment to God. For the Jews it was a part of their worship and service, but historically it was often a way of expressing grief, mourning, or penitence.

The Pharisees made a mockery of it by making themselves look cast down, or unwell, thereby winning admiration from the people for their piety. ("They look ill, so they must be *very* religious"!) Jesus prohibited this. That was hypocrisy, a deception. He required people to hide their fasting from others, to cover it up – it was not meant to win praise from men!

In the OT is an example of fasting worthy of consideration – a story which you may have heard. It is the story of Esther, who became Queen to King Ahasuerus in Persia, when the Jews had been taken into exile in about 500 B.C.

Fasting For A Special Reason

They were later to return in 3 waves after 70 years in exile – it was really a punishment which God allowed to overtake them for their disobedience to Him. It was early in the 4th century B.C. Their King had extraordinary power in those days, and in that country. We will skip how Esther became Queen, but even then, she had no right to enter the King's presence unless he summoned her. To enter without being invited was to forfeit one's life! They appeared to lack a clear standard of ethical behaviour then, so that the King was easily open to manipulation by someone cunning or corrupt, although I suppose that is not too rare any time, is it? The villain of this story was Haman, an Agagite, i.e. a descendent from Agag who was an Amalekite whom Samuel slew 500 years before, when King Saul failed to obey a command from God.

Haman hated the Jews – it was a long-standing feud. (Not hard to see why!) A respected Jew was Mordecai, a Benjaminite, but when Haman became prominent, Mordecai failed to bow and scrape to him, so he became very angry with him.

So he planned to kill Mordecai, and not just him, but the whole Jewish race. (If you please!) It was one of the many attempts in history to commit genocide – to get rid of the Jews. Such plans have never succeeded!

He started his plan by pointing out to the King that there were certain peoples dispersed among the kingdom who were different from the Persians, and failed to carry out what the King preferred, (probably because they were worshippers of Yahweh, not of the Persian gods). It was not wise, went on Haman, to allow them to continue in the kingdom!

Haman was wealthy, and he offered to put into the King's treasury 10,000 talents of silver (that is 375 tons!) if the King would issue a decree that all the Jews be annihilated in a single day! The King was happy with this. (There was no belief in the sanctity of human life then. Anyway he didn't know the Jews.) Having talked the King into it, (ordinary *bribery* wasn't it?) he himself borrowed the King's seal, and that made the decree law, according to the "laws of the Medes and the Persians" (which traditionally was supposed not to be allowed to be changed.)

So the decree went out, and the Jews were terrified, and grief-stricken.

They reacted as was then the custom – they tore their clothes, and put on sack-cloth and ashes, always a sign of grief and mourning.

Now Esther had hidden the fact she also was a Jew (on Mordecai's instruction – he was her uncle.) She also heard the decree, and was stricken with horror. Mordecai managed to communicate with her that although she was Queen, she would not escape the edict.

Mordecai was also quite a wise man, and said to her "Who knows but that your ascending to be Queen of this kingdom was for such a time as this!"

Then Esther fully aware of her danger, and her restrictions, made a decision: "Ask Mordecai and all the Jews in Susa the capital city, to fast, eat no food, drink no drink, for three days. I and my maidens will also fast three days, and at the end of that time, I will enter the King's presence, *uninvited*, to see if he will grant me a concession and hear my request – and if I perish, I perish!" They would all have been praying fervently.

Fasting For A Special Reason

So it happened that on the third day Esther the Queen entered the court into the presence of the King, who had in fact not called her in for 30 days in succession! And she found favour in his sight, and he held out to her the golden sceptre, a sign of acceptance, and reprieve from his restriction.

She drew near, and touched the sceptre, and he asked her what her request was, promising her he would fulfill it even to half his kingdom, if that was what she wanted. (She *was* favoured!) Her request was that he and Haman be invited to a banquet she would organize, where she would make a second request. The King and Haman were delighted to accept.

But Mordecai still would not bow down to Haman, and he boiled with anger! He shared his anger with his wife, and she and her friends advised him “Make a gallows, 50 cubits high, and have Mordecai hanged on it!”

So the gallows was duly prepared.

That night the King could not sleep, and he called for the Chronicles of the law to be brought and read to him (that ought to put him to sleep), and to his surprise he heard how Mordecai had thwarted a plot by two of the King’s attendants to bring him down (the usual behaviour around a powerful king!) The King didn’t even know! “What has been done to reward this man who saved my life?” asked the King. “Nothing” was the answer.

Just then, with impeccable timing, Haman was ushered into the court, so Ahasuerus asked him “What should be done for the man whom the King desires to honour?” And Haman thought – “that’ll be me!” and answered: “Let them clothe him with a royal robe which the King has worn, and let him ride on a royal horse and wear a royal crown (in fact treat him right royally), then lead him through the city and let all the people cheer him!”

The King agreed, (what a splendid plan). So he ordered that this honour be conferred on..... *Mordecai*, who was sitting at the King’s gate, and it all happened just as Haman had specified, but not to him!

And it was announced “This is the man the King desires to honour!”

Then Mordecai returned to the King’s gate, while Haman hurried home, his head covered, in great shame! His friends rubbed it in by telling him: “If Mordecai is a Jew, you will not overcome him, but you will fall before him.” Then his friends brought him to Esther’s banquet, where the King asked “Now what is your second request – I will surely grant it, even to half my kingdom?” (You can see this is classical Jewish story-telling, with its hyperbole, even with the repetition that children so love!)

And Esther answered, “If I have found favour in your sight, and if it pleases you O King, let my life be given to me, and also the life of my people – that is my request; for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed – annihilated. If we were only to be sold as slaves, I would have remained silent, for our trouble would not have been commensurate with our annoyance to the King!”

She now had the King’s total attention! “He asked “Who is he, and where is he who would presume to do this to you”? And Esther said – “A foe and an enemy. This wicked Haman!”

Fasting For A Special Reason

The King rose in wrath, while Haman stayed and begged for his life from Esther, falling on her couch to beseech her, just as the King came back in – with the usual impeccable timing, and assumed Haman was trying to molest her!

“Not content with plotting her death, he is now trying to assault her!” he concluded. One of his attendants pointed out “Not only this, but there is the gallows on which Haman planned to hang Mordecai, whose word saved the King. It is standing ready where he constructed it.”

“Hang Haman on that” said King Ahasuerus!

So it was done, and the King’s anger abated.

And Mordecai was honoured and admired second only to the King, encouraging his people, and speaking peace into their lives. (...lived happily ever after!)

History, my friends! With the delicious touch of Jewish story-telling!

Who is the hero of the story? Well Esther was the innocent one, and the star, but the unsung Hero is really... God himself, not even mentioned, who arranged the saving of His people, and the perfect providential timing which makes the story so enjoyable. Just a part of the large flow of history in which God would eventually bring His people home in the triumph of Salvation History! History which of course brought their Messiah to be seen, who is also our Messiah, Jesus the Christ. Their teacher on that mountain, is also our teacher and our Saviour, whom we worship tonight, with the Father, through the eternal Spirit. How blessed is the whole family of God! Amen

4th hymn by Anna Laetitia Waring 1823-1910 (T Penlan David Jenkins 1849-1915)

- 1) In heavenly love abiding, no change my heart shall fear;
and safe is such confiding, for nothing changes here:
the storm may roar without me, my heart may low be laid,
but God is round about me, and can I be dismayed?
- 2) Wherever He may guide me no want shall turn me back,
my Shepherd is beside me and nothing can I lack;
His wisdom ever waketh, His sight is never dim,
He knows the way He taketh and I will walk with Him.
- 3) Green pastures are before me which yet I have not seen;
bright skies will soon be o'er me where the dark clouds have been:
my hope I cannot measure, my path to life is free,
me Saviour hath my treasure, and He will walk with me.

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Benediction:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

This service was prepared by Neil McIntosh (M.B.B.S. F.R.A.C.S.) for HopeNet SA