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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**Defeating the Power of Fear**

**Esther 2:8-17**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just again thank you for who you are. We thank you for the fact that by virtue of your sacrifice on the cross, we can say when that roll is called up yonder, I'll be there, it is the work that you've done, not that we've done that makes that possible and we thank you for that, Lord. We also thank you, Lord, for the work that you've done in giving us your word, and again, we just want to undertake the task this morning of opening it up, of asking your Holy Spirit to accompany us and to make it of lasting value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we are looking at the book of Esther and so far we've seen that Esther and Mordecai have been faced with a dilemma. Having been kidnapped, having been relocated to a foreign land, they have to choose between living a life of isolation where they can stay true to their faith by separating themselves in little enclaves of fellow Jews, kind of hoping to stay alive long enough to await the repatriation that would occur when Israel reunites or they could assimilate. And to do that, they'd give up that identity as Jews

in order to kind of fit into the culture that they're now part of. And as we know, they chose to assimilate.

We said last time that Esther is a particularly applicable book for our times as well because we can argue that our experience is not that far removed from Mordecai and Esther's. I mean, we may not have been kidnapped and relocated to a foreign country, but as Christians, we are part of a culture that is just as hostile to the gospel as Mordecai and Esther's was. In fact, the similarities go even deeper. One of the things the Persian Empire was known for was assimilating those whom they had defeated. They didn't seek to wipe out and destroy other cultures and religions, they merely made them a part of an ever-expanding empire. And for most cultures and for most religions, that was a pretty simple task. There was a new language to learn, there was many new customs to grasp and understand, but as long as you didn't rock the cultural boat, you could fit into your surroundings rather well. Well, it could be argued that that's exactly where Christians find themselves today. See, we live in a culture that grows more and more foreign every single day. We live in a culture that now says killing children while still in the wombs of their mothers is a constitutionally protected right. I know most of you know that just last week Governor Cuomo passed legislation, it's called the "Reproductive Rights Act." It did a number of things. Number one, it took

abortion out of the legal realm, just removed all the legal penalties just associated with breaking the law with regard to abortion. It said if you qualify under many certain circumstances that you can receive an abortion up to the day of birth. It also said that you don't have to be a doctor to do abortions any more. Now nurse practitioners and nurses can do abortions. And perhaps cruelest of all, there used to be a proviso in the law that said -- the infant born alive clause, which was if there was, in the course of an abortion, a child who was born alive and still clinging to life, you had an obligation to save that child. Well, they took that language out and they said if a child is born accidentally, you can just sit there and watch him die. And what's even worse about this is if you saw when this legislation got passed, it got a standing O, and the legislators were just beside themselves with joy at the fact that they were able to get this passed, and the Governor was so thrilled with this legislation that he lit up the World Trade Center in pink to celebrate this advance. That's the kind of culture we're living in right now. It's a culture that says that marriage is no longer a sacred bond between a man and a woman and that gender is no longer related at all to biology. Thirty years ago the average person on the street would have viewed such ideas as coming from another planet, let alone this country. And what has happened to our culture is not only a dramatic restating of the basic understanding of the right to life, of

sexuality, of gender, but it's a restating that's happened almost overnight. In a matter of a few short years, we've come to the place where the most basic biblical truths that nearly everyone once accepted as gospel have been turned upside down, and this is because it wasn't the gospel itself that kept them right side up. In fact, it was popular culture. And when you have an edifice that is constructed as poorly as the religious consensus in America was, you're going to find it takes very little to tear it down. And when the biblical truths about abortion and homosexuality and gender were all part of the culturally accepted norm, you had no need to speak up. Because even if the reasons for those beliefs were not grounded in what the Bible says, they were grounded in what the culture said. And so we felt we had no need to really defend them from a biblical standpoint. We held to those beliefs not because we were convinced from scripture but because our parents and their parents had accepted them as truth. So when those truths began to be challenged as unloving, as unkind, as un-Christian, many, if not most of us, had no biblical way to respond. I mean, we didn't have biblical answers to the objections that were raised because we're largely ignorant of what the Bible said about them. We, by and large, were hopelessly unable to give the account of the hope that was within us, and so when challenged, we just folded like a cheap camera.

So now the consensus has shifted, or at least the world wants to make us believe that, and speaking of what the Bible has claimed for thousands of years has now become part of hate speech. I mean, the world has won many, many victories over Christians in the last few years and a lot of the reason for that is simply fear. I mean it's fear of our own biblical ignorance, it's fear of sticking out, it's fear of being labeled as backwards or bigoted, or even worse, as a hater. It plays a huge role in keeping many of us docile and uncomplaining. So one of the reasons why we want to study the book of Esther is to understand that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Ancient Persia didn't care if you worship Marduk or Ashtar or Chemosh or Molech as long as you didn't rock the spiritual boat. Our present culture couldn't care less whether you worship Jesus, buddha or rock and roll just so long as you don't rock that cultural boat. I mean, there's only a few rules that govern a culture such as ours when it comes to spirituality. Rule number one is never, never, never suggest that your way is the only way. I mean, this has become the new spiritual norm and it's directly related to this idea of a melting pot. America's the melting pot and we all know that and for the most part that's been a very good thing, it's an idea that you can come from Scandinavia or Europe or Africa, Asia or the Middle East and still maintain some level of

distinctive as long as you subscribe to the idea that to be an America is to be somebody who's willing to give up some of that cultural distinction that makes you unique to your own area so that you can be part of something bigger. I mean, to be an American is to recognize, unless you're a native American, that you, too, were at some time an immigrant, that being part of the American experience means trading in some of your distinctives from your country of origin for a distinctly American identity. And for the most part it's been a wonderful experiment, and largely it's worked but where it has been an absolute disaster is in the area of spirituality.

You see, one of the things that is critical for the melting pot to work is this idea of pluralism. And one of the key definitions of pluralism according to Webster's dictionary is this, it says it's a theory that there are more than one or more than two kinds of ultimate reality. See, the idea of a pluralistic melting pot runs into a brick wall when a Christian claims that his truth is the ultimate reality. Here's where fear begins to take effect. I mean, we saw that firsthand when we were in India. We found the folks there were extremely accommodating to this idea of Jesus. In fact they were happy to add him to the list of the gods that they were already worshiping so they could really afford to be magnanimous about their understanding of the spiritual world. They

worshiped literally thousands of different gods and they believed in hundreds of different ultimate realities, so no big deal, just add another. But when they learned that our understanding included the idea that Jesus alone was Lord, well, they saw that as being obstinate, being arrogant. They were willing to accommodate our God but we were unwilling to accept theirs. Well, that same pluralistic philosophy has become extremely powerful in the United States today. The melting pot works wonderfully at producing a unique kind of citizen whose roots should be able to accommodate people from all nations with all different kinds of ethnic and cultural differences but it fails miserably when it comes to spiritual consensus. The idea of a melting pot where cultural distinctives are something to be given secondary status for the greater good simply doesn't apply to the kingdom of God for one primary reason. That's the gospel is not and never has been rooted in one particular people group. You know, it may have started in the Middle East with the offspring of Abraham but God made it quite clear what the kingdom's intentions have always been. Jesus himself said in *Luke 24: That repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* Preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins in modern day America means you're doing something very bad, you're violating one of the primary tenets of the melting pot. You're stating categorically that when it comes to the ultimate truth,

there are not many different truths, there's just one: That we are fallen, lost sinners, hell bound without the saving grace of God through the death of Jesus Christ on a cross.

The reason why the book of Esther is to apropos today is because Persia, in Esther's day, was a culture that allowed you to survive and even prosper as long as you maintain the status quo when it comes to spirituality. Well, here in America, pluralism has ascended to the throne as the most cherished value we have. I mean feel absolutely free to worship whatever Jesus you choose so long as that Jesus doesn't impinge on any of the values that others may have. And where we start to run into trouble is when we start to not only believe but to act like we believe that this Jesus we believe in is not some cultural cul-de-sac but is actually the author of creation, the king and creator of all mankind, the one who alone is worthy of worship. I tell you, make that case, and it just may well cost you. Daniel got thrown into a lion's den for stating that there was one true God. And Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, they found themselves in a furnace for refusing to agree with Nebuchadnezzar's idea of what godliness was. We're going to find that Esther and Mordecai are going to find themselves in a similar situation. And like we said at the beginning, this is what they see as a dilemma. And a dilemma's really just a choice between two very bad options. For them it was you could isolate



yourself or you could assimilate, and that was it. You know, they only had to look to the prophet Jeremiah to see that there was actually a third option. This is what Jeremiah 29 says specifically about the ones who were sent to the Exodus there, to Babylon. It says: *Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

Well, this is basically the option that Daniel took. You know, he lived in Babylon but he was not of Babylon. He clearly didn't isolate himself because he became one of the most influential persons in all of Babylon and he clearly didn't assimilate because we know his devotion got him thrown into a lions' den. And what he did actually is what we represent by the New Testament idea of sanctification. I mean, he just became more and more Christ-like even though Christ wouldn't come for thousands of years. You know, Daniel's influence was so great that everywhere he went, he brought with him the flavor of the kingdom, and that's not an easy thing to

do. I mean, suffice it to say, there is an art to being in the world but not of the world. You know, I once heard a pundit say you could put a white glove on and just plunge it into a muddy puddle and only two things are going to happen, either the glove is going to get muddy or the puddle is going to get glovey. But chances are far greater that the glove is going to get muddy than the mud is going to get glovier. Obviously what he meant by that is that the mud of this world is far more likely to defile us than we are likely to redeem it, but our task is still to redeem it. And to do so requires a wisdom that only God can give us. And wisdom we need to govern how we interact with a foreign culture. Make no mistake about it, if you are a Christian, this world is most definitely a foreign culture.

If you remember last time out, we spoke about Tim Tebow. I spoke about how much of an exemplar he is of what it means to live a consistent Christian testimony and how deeply he appears to be hated for it. Understand, it was exactly the same for Daniel as well. I mean he, too, did everything. He didn't just do it well, he did it exceptionally well. And he, too, was constantly confronted by the hatred of those who resented his commitment to God and to kingdom. *Daniel 6:3 says: Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over*

*the whole kingdom. Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. Then these men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God."* You know, it's been thousands of years since that day and once again we find folks in the 21st century have the exact same complaint, it's in connection with the law of our God. You know, the world is set at odds against God and it's deeply committed to defeating God's kingdom and we as a Christian culture have grown incredibly comfortable accommodating a system that functions much like the systems that were going in Persia and Babylon. So God gives us Mordecai and Esther to help us learn how we can function in this present day and age.

I want to re-look at something we talked a little bit about last week. I want to revisit Mordecai's name because Mordecai's name says an awful lot about how much he accommodated the culture that he was part of. Mike Cospers in his excellent book on the book of Esther, he speaks about what a telling text Esther 2:5 is. This is *Esther 2:5*, it says: *Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai.* This is what Cospers says. He says:

*To be a Jew, first and foremost, is to be called out and set apart from the rest of the world. In the Old Testament, everything important about being Jewish -- dietary laws, practicing the Sabbath, declaring "The Lord Our God is one" made them distinct from their non Jewish neighbors. And so the phrase "a Jew in Susa named Mordecai" is scandalous. It brings to mind the Jewish comedian Jackie Mason's joke: "In the United States nobody has a Jewish name. Americans want to make sure they don't sound too Jewish, so every Jewish kid now is Tiffany Schwartz. Allison Ginsburg. Ashley Lipshitz. I know one kid that's named Crucifix Finkelstein. A Jew named Mordecai is a bit like a Jew named "Crucifix Finkelstein." Mordecai's name isn't the only thing that makes his introduction startling. Read it again. "There was a Jew in Susa the citadel." Not Susa the city, which wrapped around the citadel, where the Jewish exiles would have lived, but in the citadel itself, at the heart of Persian power and politics. It'd be one thing if his name was Abraham or David and he lived in the citadel, we'd have reason to suspect he hadn't compromised his Jewish identity. Likewise, it might be forgivable to be named Mordecai and live among the Jewish exiles in the city of Susa. But a Jew named Mordecai living in the citadel was a compromised person. He'd sacrificed his identity and taken up a place in the center of power in a foreign government -- a government that had been more gracious, perhaps, than the Babylonians towards the Jews,*

*but a foreign government with a demigod king and a pagan religion at its core. There should be no doubt about it when we meet Mordecai: He's a compromised man, living with a Persian identity in service to a Persian king.*

So we've established the fact that Mordecai is a compromised man and he's living in a compromised city. But what happens next to his cousin Esther is a tale of compromise as well. We pick up the story at *Esther 2:8*. It says: *So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in the custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.*

Well, here's the circumstance: Esther and Mordecai find themselves in a foreign country, Mordecai is now in the position where he's established himself in the local government, Esther has won a contest, so to speak, she's now going to be taken into the king's harem. Actually we're not told if Mordecai presented Esther to the

king or if Esther was taken from him. We're only told that among the many women were gathered in Susa, Esther was one of the few who was selected. And we're further told that Esther pleased the palace eunuch and because she did so well, she quickly rose to the top of her class. Furthermore we're told that she was given seven assistants as she advanced to the top of the harem. And so we ask ourselves at this point, okay, what exactly has Esther accomplished? I mean, these women were all assembled for one thing. They were given one year's preparation in beauty and cosmetics on the chance that they might be given the opportunity to sexually satisfy the king's lust. Picking up at *Esther 2:12*, it says: *Now when the turn came for each young woman to go into King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women -- when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.*

Okay. So there's two different harems here. One is run by Hegai

and is filled with hopeful virgins competing to have one night with this king. But there's a second harem. This is the one that's run by Shaashgaz and it's filled with those who had tried and failed to please him enough to warrant being called the new queen. See, the women would go in as virgins and they would come out broken and used and banished to a life spent waiting for some second chance to please this king. It may have sounded glamorous, but for all intents and purposes, it was sex slavery dressed up as royalty. If you strip all of the pomp and the power from what happened to Esther, it bears remarkable resemblance to what happened just last week to Jamie Closs. She was the 13-year-old girl from Wisconsin, the one who was rescued from a kidnapper who broke down the doors of her parents' home and murdered her parents and simply stole her away. For three months people scoured the country trying to find her, only to find that she was some 60 miles away, held captive in a basement of a nondescript rural home. This young girl spent three months as the captured slave of a monster. We know that Esther was an orphan herself. We also know that she was captured and taken into the king's palace. This wasn't a squalid basement and her captor wasn't an unemployed murderous pervert. This was the most glorious palace in all of the world and the king was the most powerful man on the face of the earth. But if you strip away all the pomp and the glory, we find that her captor was in fact also a murderous pervert, only the most powerful and wealthy

murderous pervert in Persia and in the rest of the world. I mean, just to give you some background as to what this king was really like, when he launched his attack on the Greek Empire, he marched his army out through a unique reminder of his power and his ruthlessness. See, this king had a wealthy patron and this wealthy patron supported him in all of his ventures contributing not just his fortune to the army, not just his fortune but literally his five sons to the army. Shortly before the Greek campaign began, this man had an omen. And he started to think that things were not going to turn out well. So he asked the king if he could relieve only his oldest son of his duty so that he could care for him in his old age. Well, the king found that insulting. So he located the oldest son and he had him cut in half and then he assembled the two halves of his body and he marched his army out for war between those two halves. This was the man that Esther was preparing for. This was the man who she won as a contest, in a contest.

Picking up at verse 15, it says: *When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go into the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year*



*of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.* Well, now we have to ask, okay, what did she win? She won but what did she win? If you look at the timeline, it's been four years since Vashti had been banished, so the king, in all likelihood, had ravished about a thousand other virgins before he'd even gotten to Esther. So his statement in verse 17, *the king loved Esther more than all the women*, means only that Esther was more adept at satisfying him than all the others, I mean, understanding he'd only met her that night. This was as empty a love as you're ever going to find.

You know, there's an Ed Sheeran song entitled "Shape of You." Raise your hand if you ever heard that song. Okay. Couple of you. I hear it every time I go to the gym. I hear it over and over again, I mean, it's a testimony to the power of music. That song is one thing but you hear songs -- I hear songs, some are just awful and what awful song, hear it three or four times, and I find myself, I know the next line. I'm trying to memorize scripture and it's very, very difficult and here's something I don't even want to hear and it gets into your head. So there there's a line in this Ed Sheeran song that just amazed me, and over and over again the chorus says, "I'm in love with your body." Actually it says "I'm

in love with you 'bo-day.'" That's the way he said it. My first thought when I heard that was if I was a woman and I heard that said to me, I would be so incredibly insulted. I mean he's essentially saying she's just a piece of meat. I mean, I'm not in love with you, I'm not in love with your spirit or your heart or you as a person but your body. I'm in love with that. That's what the king was in love with as well. I mean, I looked up the video of the song and I was amazed to find out, it's the second most watched video in all the world. You know how many views this video has? Four billion. Not million. Billion. Four billion views. I looked and I said what do you know, Ed Sheeran and King Ahasuerus both look at women the exact same way even though they've been separated by thousands of years. And if four billion views doesn't tell you a lot about where our culture is and how similar it is to Persia's thousands of years ago, I don't know what does. I mean, the bottom line here is that Esther was one of thousands of women who would spend many, many months preparing for the opportunity to have a sexual encounter with this king. And she may well have appeared willing or even anxious, but there's no doubt she was being exploited for her looks and her body. And when the king declared his love for her, it meant only that she was safe as long as her efforts to please him prevailed. And whether it's Jamie Closs or Esther, in the end, there's very little difference. I mean, Jamie's captor had ultimate power over her, at least she

certainly thought that, and Esther's captor, the king, had ultimate power over millions, including Esther. So the primary motivation for both Esther and Jamie had nothing to do with love. What it had to do with was fear. And when Ed Sheeran's view of love prevails, then the king who rules over our culture is no different than the king who ruled over Esther's or Jamie Closs and his primary calling card isn't love, it's fear.

Here's how it works. Mike Cosper again notes: We are a culture that worships "self" in a thousand different ways. Me, me is what matters most in this culture. And when "self" becomes the center of our worship, then the world has us right where it wants us, rooted in this world and the broken treasures that it has to offer us and terrified that we're somehow going to lose them. Nobody articulated that better than David Foster Wallace, who I don't think was a Christian. David Foster Wallace was a deeply troubled but gifted writer who committed suicide at age 46. He suffered from depression. No matter how hard he tried, he just could not get a grip on his soul. But he saw our culture with crystal clarity. And he once gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College, and this is what he said he said:

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping.

Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship -- be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles -- is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

You see, David Wallace saw through the smoke screen. He saw what happens when you worship anything but God. We get eaten alive. Esther thought that her only resource was her body, and thousands of years later, we find our culture is buying the exact same lie. I mean, if you look at the icons that drive our culture's idea of sexuality, we come across people like Madonna and Lady Gaga and Miley Cyrus. They all want you to believe that their sexuality is a source of great strength and wealth and power for them and for

you as well, if you buy into it, but they're terribly mistaken. They're unaware that they're worshipping something that's going to eat them alive. They just don't realize it yet. You see, the problem with worshipping bodies is that they get older every single day. They begin to get wrinkled, they begin to age, gravity sets in and the terror that the object of your worship is slipping away begins to grip you. As Wallace puts it: "Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you." I have no doubt that Madonna is looking over her shoulder at Lady Gaga who's looking over her shoulder at Miley Cyrus, and somewhere in the wings is some exploited youngster anxious to repeat the process. I mean they think they're selling empowerment, but what they're trading in is fear. The same kind of fear that drove Esther to think being the king's choice was a privilege instead of a sentence. And what is critical is that you never realize just the role fear plays in shaping and molding you until it's too late. Fear makes us do strange things. It makes us say or do things that we shouldn't or stay silent when we know we should speak up. Fear allows the loudest voices in our culture, the ones with the least amount of fear, to shout us down and to insist that their broken, ugly and demonic view of life prevails. And the more you give in to fear, the more it grows until eventually it controls you. It can make you do all kinds of things

you never dreamed of. It can even make a nice Jewish girl join a harem.

So how do we conquer fear? We go Romans 8:28. We trust that God is so much bigger than we imagine, that every single thing that takes place in our life is working towards an end and a goal and a purpose and that what ultimately matters is that no one and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God tells us that his perfect love casts out fear, and when you fully grasp the length, the width, the breath, and the depth of the love of God in Christ Jesus, you can literally become fearless. I mean, the more you realize that on the deepest level, on the cosmic level, on the eternal level, the God of the universe truly does have your back, the more you realize that, the more you can treat your life with reckless abandon, and as strange as it seems, that's how you find your life. I mean Jesus said: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* Worship the world and it will eat you alive. Worship Christ, take up your cross and follow him and you will find that he can give you the power to conquer any fear that you're dealing with.

Well, let me give you a practical if perhaps extreme example of how

this works. Six years ago David Platt gave a message about how full and complete trusting God's sovereignty can allow you to literally live a death-defying life, because you know God has your back, because you know that all things work together for good really does mean exactly what God says it means. That's all things, that's good things, that's bad things, that's frightening things, all of them are under the absolute control of our sovereign God. And when you get to the point that your trust in God is so great that you can literally stare death in the face and say, hey, bring it on, knowing that God alone can prevent it or allow it to happen, then you can become free to address the fears that plague us as strangers in a strange land.

In this message, David Platt spoke about a Romanian pastor named Josef Tson who because of his willingness to share the gospel was literally staring death in the face and he's described how he conquered that fear. This is what he said:

*Romanian pastor Josef Tson recounted a time he was being interrogated by six men. He said to one of them: "What is taking place here is not an encounter between you and me. This is an encounter between my God and me. My God is teaching me a lesson [through you]. I do not know what it is. Maybe he wants to teach me several lessons. I only know, sirs, that you will do to me only*

what God wants you to do -- and you will not go one inch further -- because you are only an instrument of my God. Every day I saw those six pompous men as nothing more than my Father's puppets!

Tson again said: During an early interrogation I had told an officer who was threatening to kill me, "Sir, let me explain how I see this issue. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Here is how it works. You know that my sermons on tape have spread all over the country. If you kill me, those sermons will be sprinkled with my blood. Everyone will know I died for my preaching. And everyone who has a tape will pick it up and say, 'I'd better listen again to what this man preached, because he really meant it; he sealed it with his life.' So, sir, my sermons will speak ten times louder than before. I will actually rejoice in this supreme victory if you kill me." After I said this, the interrogator sent me home. Another officer who was interrogating a pastor friend of mine told him, "We know that Mr. Tson would love to be a martyr, but we are not that foolish to fulfill his wish." I stopped to consider the meaning of that statement. I remembered how for many years, I had been afraid of dying. I had kept a low profile. Because I wanted badly to live, I had wasted my life in inactivity. But now that I had placed my life on the altar and decided I was ready to die for the Gospel, they were telling me they would not kill me! I could go wherever I wanted in the



*country and preach whatever I wanted, knowing I was safe. As long as I tried to save my life, I was losing it. Now that I was willing to lose it, I found it.*

You know, in this country we literally, we have no fear whatsoever of dying. We do have a fear of being singled out, of being mocked, perhaps, of being made to look foolish, of being thought of as a bigot or as a hater because we will not wallow in lies that this culture demands we wallow in. The stakes for us are considerably lower than they were for Pastor Tson, yet still, for many of us, fear is our master.

So my question this morning is very simple, it's: How about you? Are you afraid? It's okay to admit it. What is not okay is to let fear control you. So if you sense that fear has gotten the best of you, understand that God never took his hands off Esther and Mordecai even though they let fear get the best of them. And if you are one of his, God will never take his hands off you. Believe that and it will transform your life: For he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you," so we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Let's pray.

*Father, I just want to collectively come before you this morning*

*and confess, every one of us in this room is guilty of being fearful at one time or another. I should speak only for myself but I suspect I can speak for everybody. And Lord, we just, you have to have just eyes and ears to see that this culture is so rapidly deteriorating around us, and we find ourselves amazed that things which were perfectly okay and acceptable now has now made us into bigots and haters. There's an incredible temptation to keep our mouth shut. There's an incredible temptation to just kind of go under the radar so we don't get singled out as one of those "haters." Father, I want to pray against that spirit of fear. I want to pray for a recklessness, I want to pray for a sense of abandonment for each and every one of us, that we recognize that when we are willing to lose our life, we find it. When we are willing to understand that we have a God who has our back no matter what and that nothing and no one can touch us outside of his sovereign will, then we, too, will have that power. So I pray that grace, I pray that wisdom, I pray that power in Jesus' name. Amen.*