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Professor, speaker, author, CEO,
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THE ESTHER EFFECT

*The Secret
to Her Success*

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SANDRA GREGORY WAKEFIELD



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FOREWORD

The *Esther Effect* should change the way you think about living in a post-Christian society. The beautiful, beloved niece of Mordecai entered a pagan world of concubines and corruption. Yet even as a young woman, Esther remembered who God truly made her to be. Have you looked in the mirror lately? Do you find yourself standing tall in the face of adversity or apathy? Author Sandra Wakefield has created a world where we can look into the heart of this brave girl and be blessed.

Sandra has spent the last two decades portraying women of remarkable faith in monologues for churches, conferences, and women's groups. Her magnetic energy and passion compel her listeners

to peer behind the curtain of Bible women and be inspired.

Queen Esther didn't know the pivotal role she would play in saving the entire Jewish nation from destruction. She was humble, faithful, and pure of heart. But Esther was strong and unwavering in her obedience to God and submission to her uncle Mordecai. She persevered through hardship, fear, and rejection.

We learn from this heroine to be bold, too. We learn to stand, unafraid, in the face of our challenges and our opportunities. Don't miss the chance to be inspired. Read Esther's story as Sandra opens the Word with you.

—**Dr. Julie Barrier**

Author and founder of Preach It, Teach It
www.preachitteachit.org

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With heartfelt gratitude I want to thank my brother David for his kindness and encouragement to me over the years. He has enabled me to see the positive throughout the hard times in my life, and he brings me joy.

Many thanks to my mentor, Pastor Vera Speed, for deepening my faith and giving me direction in my ministry. It is she who first suggested that I write a book and then never gave up on my following through.

And thanks to Dr. Tracey Mitchell, another mentor, who also encouraged me to write a book and has always believed in me.

I couldn't have written the book at a better location than at the home of my friends Bill and Lois

Robinette. Because of their hospitality and kindness, I was able to hear the Lord in a beautiful, quiet place.

I dedicate this book to those who need hope. It is available to you.

CHAPTER 1

PERSEVERING THROUGH HARDSHIP

"**M**e, Queen? You've got to be kidding!" Can't you just see this astonished young Jewish woman wondering what in the heck just happened? There she was, living with her cousins in the town of Susa in Persia, brought up in an ordinary Jewish home, when she was *taken* from her home and put into the harem of Xerxes, king of Persia! All this happened *to* her, and she had no choice in the matter. And she ended up being queen of one of the most powerful kingdoms in the world.

How did that happen?

Many of us are familiar with the story of Esther but have never stopped to think about the different aspects of this young woman's life. We know that a

young Jewish woman became queen of Persia and was the catalyst in God's saving the Jewish people from annihilation, but we've never analyzed her life. Her life was divided into periods of time that, while difficult, Esther was able to persevere and triumph through. Her story is truly remarkable.

The setup was this: Vashti, the queen of Persia at that time, refused a request from the king to parade in front of his guests (male) at a banquet at the palace. It was the seventh day of one continuous banquet, and all the men, including the king, were quite drunk. He wanted to show her off, but she refused to do that! Why? Because it was a dishonorable thing for a woman, any woman, to garner attention from any man other than her husband. But when Queen Vashti rightly refused the king's request, he was furious and had her banished from the palace. In fact, he sent a decree throughout Persia (modern-day Iran) that *every* wife was to obey her husband. Every husband was to be "king" of his house!

After a while, the king reconsidered his decision to get rid of the queen, but since he had decreed his decision and sealed the written order with his signet ring, he couldn't undo it. So it was time to get another queen. And that set up a process of elimination of unsuitable or less-suitable young virgins.

King Xerxes sent emissaries into all parts of Persia to round up beautiful young women to bring

to the palace as possible replacements for Queen Vashti. When the emissaries showed up at Esther's house (her Jewish name was Hadassah, which means "sweet" or "myrtle," a particular tree), her family was stunned and disappointed. It would seem that a family would be thrilled to have a daughter chosen for the king's harem. But not this family.

Hadassah (Esther) lived with her cousin Mordecai and his family, who had taken her in when her parents died. She actually was an orphan. This Jewish family, like all the other Jewish families, had their own customs and traditions. To them, it was no honor for a young woman from their family to be part of a harem. The main problem was that they had no say in the matter. If the king's men came calling, the family couldn't refuse any request. And once a young woman became part of the king's harem, she would never come home again. Even if she saw the king only once, she was his property.

Back to Esther: The other big problem was that she was Jewish. Though the Jews were accepted in Persia and were more or less assimilated into the culture, their customs and traditions were very different. The Jews' belief system was totally different from the Persians'. Persians worshipped pagan gods, and in fact, treated their king like a god! The Jews worshiped Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and no other! That made the Jews very

different from their neighbors. (A note: Even though God's name isn't mentioned in the book of Esther, His hand is evident all through it as He intervened for His chosen people.)

As the king's emissaries stood watching, young Esther looked around her house, trying to decide what to take with her to the palace. What do you take with you when you know you'll never come home again? When any young woman entered the king's harem, she never left the palace grounds. After her tryst with the king she became a "concubine" and was sequestered with the other concubines. And she never left, even if the king never called for her again. It was that serious for Esther, who was just a young girl. She was to leave her family forever! I can imagine that she might have taken a little oil lamp or a favorite shawl to carry with her to comfort her when she was so far from home. Not far geographically, but far emotionally. What a heavy heart Esther must have had as she told her family goodbye. They were probably all in tears.

Mordecai was the caring father she'd had for years. Even though he was actually her cousin, he became a father to her when her own father and mother died. When Mordecai brought her into his home, the other family members treated her as if she'd always been part of their family. She was truly

loved. We know this from the Scriptures that tell of Mordecai's great concern for her.

As Esther told each family member goodbye, Mordecai whispered, "Don't tell anyone you're Jewish!" It must have been excruciatingly painful for her to go with the emissaries to the palace grounds. She had to leave behind a loving family and everything she'd ever known to enter a totally foreign, pagan world. Alone.

But oh, what a world of opulence she entered! The palace building itself was beautiful, and the enclosed garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. The flooring in the garden was of marble, mother-of-pearl, and other precious stones. And there were couches of gold and silver! Esther had certainly never seen anything like this before. Since she was a young virgin, Esther would have been put into the harem's "first house of women" and trained as a musician, dancer, or singer in order to entertain the king at banquets or throughout the night. Once she was admitted to the royal harem, she would have been in "the second house." How overwhelming this must have been to young Esther! She had probably never been away from her family for even one night.

After she was shown to her apartment, she tried to take all this in. Esther was in a totally different

place surrounded by people she didn't know, and she had no way out. And she was so young, probably no more than thirteen years old. She could have been angry, lonely, and bewildered (and she probably was!). But evidently she didn't show it, because Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem, was charmed by her. Scripture says that Esther won his favor, and he personally provided her with her beauty treatments and special food and assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace. Then he moved her and her maids into a special place in the harem!

Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her; she was "lovely in form and features," according to the Scriptures. She stood out from the crowd. Not only was she beautiful, but Esther also remained gentle and kind as she tried to make the most of her unwanted situation. It sounds like a glamorous life, but remember, it was not the life that Esther had chosen or wanted. It was totally foreign and totally pagan! As Esther lived in the harem day after day, she couldn't help but think of home. And her family. There was no one she could even talk to about her situation: All the other girls were in the same boat. She may have seen this harem life as a trap from which there was no escape. And there wasn't. She had food that was different, drink that was different, and a daily regimen that was totally unfamiliar.

Why didn't this young girl give up and let everyone around her know how unhappy she was? That would have been so easy to do. She knew she'd never leave the palace, and she didn't know what might happen to her there. Evidently, even at a young age, Esther had strength of character that was remarkable. And she evidently was mature beyond her years. Using all the strength of character she had, and probably relying on Scripture she'd learned at home, Esther was able to persevere through this hard time without losing her identity or self-respect. She persevered day after day, month after month, as she faced an uncertain future. And that isn't easy to do. Many people lash out at others when they feel that they have no control over their situation. When hopelessness creeps in, we sometimes look for someone to blame. It may be someone else's fault that we're in that hard place. That's when it's much easier to just give up or make sure everyone else knows that we're unhappy. When the days go on and on, and it seems like there is no way out, it isn't easy to stay the course and stay positive. It's much easier to lash out and give up. But that's not what Esther did. Esther persevered through a very hard time.

Is this ability to persevere through hardship found anywhere else in Scripture? Esther Effect Number One, Perseverance Through Hardship, is

indeed found in the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel the prophet, in the book of First Samuel.

This young woman married Elkanah, a lower-level Jewish priest, and they lived in Ramah. They were happy together, and Hannah expected to have babies—and soon—just like the other young Jewish wives. Can't you see her anxiously waiting each month to see if she had conceived? (Have you been there? Are you there now?)

Besides her just *wanting* to have a baby, at that time Jews believed that if a woman didn't conceive, she was a useless link in the line to their expected Messiah, and more importantly, that she had some secret sin in her life. A woman who didn't conceive was considered to be cursed by God. Month after month she waited. Month after month she was disappointed. Every woman wanted to conceive and give birth to multiple children. At first, neighbors in the town looked at Hannah questioningly. As time went on, some looked at her with pity, knowing how badly she wanted to be pregnant.

After a while, people looked at Hannah with suspicion, wondering what *sin* kept her from becoming a mother. Some probably shunned her because of their own misperception. How ashamed, how anxious, how bewildered Hannah must have felt as other young wives around her became pregnant. It probably felt like a knife went through her heart as

those proud mothers carried their newborn babies. And hearing those little darlings cry must have been almost more than she could bear. Hannah surely didn't want to be in that situation, but she had no way out. This was now her life. What a hard place to be.

Hannah's husband, Elkanah, wanted children, mainly sons, so he was extremely disappointed, too. Elkanah loved Hannah deeply, but he felt that he needed children (especially sons) to carry on the family line and retain the family inheritance. So he told her one day that he was going to take another wife. Now *more* pain was added to Hannah's life! It was not unusual at that time to have more than one wife. But imagine her disappointment with herself and now with her husband also. She was disappointed with Elkanah because she would have to share him with another woman. Because Hannah couldn't conceive! While it happened often in those times, having several wives was not a good idea for many obvious reasons.

So Elkanah chose Peninnah, petty, whiney Peninnah. Hannah hoped, I am sure, that this woman wouldn't have children either, so Hannah wouldn't feel inferior to *her*, too.

Unfortunately for Hannah, this woman was Fertile Myrtle. If she wasn't pregnant, she was giving birth. Year after year she produced one baby

after another. Peninnah's pride grew ever stronger, and she began to despise Hannah because *she* had children and Hannah didn't, and couldn't. And Peninnah never let Hannah forget it. Day after day she taunted Hannah: "Come over here and help me take care of all these children, Hannah. You're not busy." Or "Why don't you let *your* children play with *my* children, Hannah? Oh, that's right. You don't have any children, do you?" This poor woman was taunted, teased, and tormented day after day, year after year. It is hard to imagine having a tormentor who just never quit bullying and taunting someone. But that's just what Peninnah did.

Oddly enough, Hannah never retaliated! She cried a lot but never told Peninnah off. Ever. What a kind, gentle heart she must have had. She was human just as we are, but Hannah never retaliated against Peninnah. I wonder if Hannah, like Esther, kept her mind fixed on the Lord and on Scriptures that she'd known since childhood. That could very well have been her answer. She understood her situation. She knew it was hopeless without intervention by the Lord. So instead of fighting Peninnah and losing her focus on the One Who could make a difference, she concentrated on God's mercy. She stayed gentle and soft-spoken. What a godly woman!

She never gave up believing God for a baby. Year after year, the one consolation she had was that

Hannah knew she was Elkanah's favorite. He still loved her deeply. The worst time for Hannah was when the family went to the temple at Shiloh each year to celebrate the Feast of the Fruitful Harvest. That feast was to thank God for the harvest that year. And as they walked those miles to the temple, Peninnah was surrounded by her own fruitful harvest of children.

One year, Hannah couldn't stand it anymore. During the feast time in Shiloh, she couldn't eat and couldn't stop crying. Hannah left the family and went into the temple, leaned against a pillar, and sobbed. She began praying silently from way down deep inside, asking God to please have mercy, to remember her and give her a son. She told the Lord that she would dedicate this child to Him and that the child would serve God his whole life. She'd never cut his hair as a vow to show she meant it. Only dear Hannah's lips moved as she prayed from the depths of her being.

Have you ever had a situation go from bad to worse? That's exactly what happened to Hannah. The priest, Eli, saw her mouth moving but heard no words being spoken as she slumped against the pillar there in the temple, and he rushed over to her. He shouted, "When are you going to stop getting drunk on wine? And in the temple! *Shame!*" That was all she needed. Can you imagine? Her pain was

already so great, and now she was accused by an authority figure of something that wasn't true. She was already hopeless and now she had been publicly shamed. Did she run away or clam up and pout? Not at all. This woman of God stayed respectful as she explained to the priest that she hadn't been drinking and that she was praying out of the depths of her soul.

When Eli realized that he had totally misread what Hannah was doing, he agreed in prayer with her that the Lord would grant her request. She laid her burden down right then in the temple. She just knew that the Lord had heard her prayer this time. She walked out the door a changed woman. She rejoined her family and returned home to Ramah.

Guess what happened. Shortly after that, she conceived a baby boy. When he was born, Hannah named him Samuel, which means, "Heard of God." She gave him that name because God had heard her prayer, and Samuel was the answer to it. Think about this: Hannah had promised God that she would give this child back to the Lord to live and serve in the temple. So until little Samuel was about three years old (the age when he was weaned, most probably) Hannah rocked him, sang to him, and told him stories about the temple. Every day when she kissed his beautiful curls, she knew that day was one day closer to the time she would have to take this sweet

little boy to the temple and leave him there. What a woman! She would not renege on her promise to God, much as it must have grieved her heart to know that this darling son would not be in her arms much longer.

The day finally came when Hannah took this precious little Samuel to the temple in Shiloh to live and serve God with Eli. How hard it must have been to hold him and kiss him one last time! And then she and Elkanah turned and left the temple, waving one last goodbye. Hannah was determined to follow through on her promise to the Lord to give little Samuel back to him. This wasn't easy for many reasons, one of which was that Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas who served as priests with Eli, were evil men. They lived in the temple with Eli and would be there when little Samuel came to live there also. What faith Hannah had in God. She knew that if God had answered her prayer to give her this son, He would protect Samuel and use him for God's purposes. What great faith this woman of God had! She was determined to believe God.

To reward Hannah for giving up this long-sought-for son so he could serve God, the Lord gave Elkanah and Hannah three more sons and two daughters! And little Samuel became the first Hebrew prophet after Moses and the last judge of Israel. His name means "Heard of God," and he

became known as the prophet who heard *from* God. God spoke to Samuel in the temple on a regular basis when he became a man, and Samuel in turn told the Israelites what God wanted them to know. Hannah went through a long hard time in her life, but she held on to God through it all. The point is that Hannah would not be drawn into resentment and bitterness, and God rewarded her beyond what she had ever imagined. Now it wasn't in her timing, and it was after much hardship and tribulation, but God answered her prayer. The story goes on and on, and it is a powerful story about God's ultimate plan for her life and Samuel's life. But the point is that Hannah persevered through hardship and came out on the other side triumphant.

We can learn much from the lives of both Esther and Hannah. Both experienced life situations that they did not want. Both had choices to make as to how they would respond to their troubles. Is there a characteristic that enables someone to persevere that is inherent in some people, or is this a character trait that can be learned? Perseverance can be learned! Both women *chose* to follow and trust God as they continued through the hard times, knowing that He had their best interests in mind, and both were ultimately rewarded by God for their courage and obedience.

GETTING PERSONAL

Are you in a time of hardship right now? If you're human and live on earth, you will most certainly go through hardship at some time in your life. Sometimes we go through a *lot* of hardship. In fact, Jesus said this, "I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. *In this world you will have trouble*. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, emphasis added).

I laughingly say to myself, "Thanks a lot. Wish You hadn't said that." Of course, we would have trouble whether He told us we would or not! I appreciate His warning. I've had hardship I surely never dreamed I'd have. I had cancer many years ago, and it was a path I surely wouldn't wish on anybody.

I went into the hospital in Boston to have a routine hysterectomy, and after the operation was over, it was discovered in the pathology lab that I had cancer in the uterus! I stayed in the hospital for several days, in great pain. The one Scripture verse that comforted me was Psalm 23:2: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." For some reason, that was the only verse that helped me with the pain. I imagined God giving me a soft, comforting place to lie down, safe and quiet, and that thought and Scripture helped me.

I was grateful that it was an early-stage cancer, but I had to go through five weeks of radiation, once a day for twenty-five days. I never in a million years had thought that would happen to me, but there it was. I remember getting progressively weaker and weaker with each treatment. Friends showed up at my house every day to drive me into Boston for a treatment. They brought meals to me and my family. How comforting it was to have friends who cared that much for me when I was going through a lonely, hard journey. It was hard to stay positive during that time, but I made myself get up and dress up each day, put on heels and earrings, and be ready when someone would arrive to take me into Boston for my radiation treatment. It wasn't easy, but I was determined to make it without its breaking me. I stayed grateful for all the kindness of my friends and church family, and I knew they were praying for me.

I continued to hold on to Psalm 23:2. That one Scripture carried me through a very long time of suffering. If you are suffering today, please know that I've been there, where you are, in pain, in a hard place. Your pain may not be physical. It may be emotional or mental. It doesn't matter. It's all pain. And during those times when we see no answer from God yet, we continue to hold on to Him. He doesn't always answer our prayers the way we wish He would or when we wish He would. But He will

absolutely walk us through those dark valleys of despair and disappointment. There are so many wonderful Scriptures in the Bible to help us during times of hardship. Find a Scripture to hold on to. That is key. Remember, there is power in the Word of God.

Both Esther and Hannah persevered through times of hardship without turning against others out of their own pain. You can do that too. You can depend on God to help you.

A GEM FOR YOUR JOURNEY

If you are in a valley right now and God hasn't answered your prayer, hold on. *Hold on.* Ask Him how to pray about your situation. Find a confidante, someone you can trust, to pray with you. My prayer for you is that God will give you exactly what you need in your life. It may be just what you've prayed for. It may be entirely different. Know that God has allowed you to be in this situation. Ask Him to take you through it. Know for sure that He will. He is waiting for you with open arms.

REFLECTING ON YOUR LIFE

- What was the hard time or hard place you went through?
- Was there anyone who helped you?

- Was there a Scripture verse or passage that helped you?
- How do you encourage someone who is in a hard place?

God came through for Esther and Hannah in a big way, and He did it for me, too. It is my hope and prayer that, in the difficult times that may even seem like impossible times, you can remember that He loves you and He will come through for you, too. Don't give up. God *will* see you though. You can count on it.