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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY
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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
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It's a joy to share this evening with each of you and an honor to receive the "Christian Excellence in Government Service" Award. I will cherish it as a high point in my life for many reasons, not the least of which is that it comes from the International Women in Leadership, an organization dedicated to applying Christian principles in every area of life.

Actually, I feel very humble at this hour. For it is I who should be honoring you. This organization, formed of women leaders from every sphere of influence, is committed to providing spiritual nurture, unstruction and and recognition of Christian women leaders across the nation and internationally. And I can think of no more worthy goal.

And I consider it one of the greatest possible privileges to be invited to share this evening with fellow travelers a little of my own spiritual journey. Like most of us, I'm just one person struggling to relate faith to life, ... But I am grateful that you have asked me to speak from the heart, about the difference Jesus Christ has made in my life.

But first, I must mention a political crisis . . . A crisis from which I have learned some very important lessons.

Now this is a political crisis involving high stakes, intrigue, behind-the-scenes negotiations, influence in high places, and even an element of romance.

Where have I learned of this crisis? On the front page of the newspapers?

No. The newspapers haven't carried this story.

No, the political crisis I'm talking about occurred around 2,450 years ago.

And we learn about it -- in the Bible -- in the Book of Esther.

Esther is the saga of a woman forced to make a decision concerning the total commitment of her life -- a decision she was reluctant to make. She had to be vigorously challenged, and it's this part of her story to which I can so easily relate in my own spiritual journey. For while the particulars of her challenge may differ greatly from the challenges you and I face, the forces at work are as real as the moral is relevant. The basic lessons Esther had to learn are lessons I needed to learn. Thus, the story of Esther, over the years, has taken on great significance for me. Indeed, it reflects an individual's discovery of the true meaning of life.

The story takes place in the ancient Kingdom of Persia where there lived a particularly faithful man of God named Mordecai. Now, Mordecai, a Jew, had a young cousin named Esther, whom he had adopted after the death of her parents and raised as if she were his own daughter. In fact, Mordecai had raised a young woman literally fit for a king. . . For Esther grew into a woman of extraordinary grace and beauty.

Then one day Xerxes, the King of Persia, commanded that a search be made throughout all the provinces for the most beautiful women so that he could choose a new queen -- a sort of, Miss Persia Pageant. Esther, above all others, found favor in the eyes of the king, and this young orphan girl was crowned Queen of Persia.

The King was so delighted with his new queen that he threw a magnificent banquet and even went so far as to lower all the taxes.

Meanwhile, Mordecai, out amongst the people, learned to his horror, that one of the top men in government had developed a very careful plan to put to death all of God's people, the Jews, throughout the entire kingdom.

Of course, Mordecai immediately thought of Esther, and he sent an urgent message saying: "Esther, you must do something -- you may be the only person who can persuade the king to call off this terrible plan."

But Esther wants no part of this. Her response to Mordecai: "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned, the king has set but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the golden scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

In other words, Esther is saying, "Mordecai, you don't understand protocol. I have to follow standard operating procedures. Chances are that

if I go to the king, I just might lose my head!" Mordecai has no sympathy with Esther's refusal to help. Tens of thousands of her own people stand to lose their heads. . . Mordecai feels compelled to send a second message to Esther.

I once heard a very insightful pastor, Gordon MacDonald, highlight three distinct parts to this second appeal -- three profound challenges which strike at the heart of Esther's reluctance.

First: Esther, think not that you'll escape this predicament any more than other Jews -- you'll lose everything you have if this plan is carried out -- all the comforts, all the fringe benefits. . . It seems that Mordecai is saying: If the thing that stops you from being a servant to thousands of people is your comfort and your security, forget it, lady --for you're no more secure in there than we are out here. Esther shares the predicament.

The second theme is privilege: If you keep silent, Esther, at a time like this, deliverance and relief will arise from some other place.

God has given you, Esther, the privilege to perform. If you don't use that privilege, He may permit you to be pushed aside and give your role to someone else.

The third theme is providence. Mordecai says: Esther, who knows --but that God has placed you where you are for such a time as this. . .

Finally, Mordecai's appeal struck home -- Esther's response: "Go, gather together all the Jews and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids 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. . ."

That's total commitment. Indeed, the story of Esther is for me a very challenging and humbling one. For there came a time in my life when I had to confront what commitment to God is all about. . .

My witness contains no road to Damascus experience.

My spiritual journey began many years ago in a Carolina home where Sunday was the Lord's day, reserved for acts of mercy and necessity, and the gospel was as much a part of our lives as fried chicken and azaleas in the spring.

My grandmother, Mom Cathey, who lived within two weeks of her 100th birthday, was my role model.

I remember many Sunday afternoons with other neighborhood children in her home -- the lemonade and cookies -- I think that's what enticed us --the

Bible games, listening to Mom Cathey as she read from her Bible -- now one of my most cherished possessions.

She practiced what she preached, and lived her life for others. In a tragic accident, Mom Cathey lost a son at the hands of a drunk driver. The insurance policy on his life built a hospital wing in a far-off church mission in Pakistan. Although Mom was not at all a wealthy woman, almost anything she could spare went to ministers at home and missions abroad. When it became necessary, in her 90's, to go into a nursing home, she welcomed the opportunity. I can still hear her saying, "Elizabeth, there might be some people there who don't know the Lord, and I can read the Bible to them."

I love to find her notes in the margin of her Bible, notes written in the middle of the night when she couldn't sleep. For example, I find by Psalm 139, this notation, "May 22, 1952, 1:00 a.m. -- my prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart -- Try me, and know my thoughts. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

I can't remember an unkind word escaping Mom's lips in all the years I knew her or an ungracious deed marring her path. My grandmother was an almost perfect role model.

And I wanted to be like her. From an early age, I had an active church life. But as we move along, how often in our busy lives something becomes a barrier to total commitment of one's life to the Lord! In some cases it may be money, power, prestige. . .

In my case, my career became of paramount importance. I worked very hard, to excel, to achieve. My goal was to do my best, which is all fine and well. But I'm inclined to be a perfectionist. And it's very hard, you know, to try to control everything, surmount every difficulty, foresee every problem, realize every opportunity. That can be pretty tough on your family, your friends, your fellow workers and on yourself. In my case, it began crowding out what Mom Cathey had taught me were life's most important priorities.

I was blessed with a beautiful marriage, a challenging career. . . And yet. . . only gradually, over many years, did I realize what was missing -- my life was threatened with spiritual starvation.

I prayed about this, and I believe, no faster than I was ready, God led me to people and circumstances that made a real difference in my life.

I found Ed Bauman of Foundry Methodist Church, here in Washington, a tremendously sensitive, caring pastor, who helped me see what joy there can be when God is the center of life, and all else flows from that center.

A spiritual growth group gave me renewed strength as I began to meet each Monday night with others who shared my need to stretch and grow

spiritually, and I was strengthened through Bible study with other Senate wives. I learned that Sundays can be set aside for spiritual and personal rejuvenation without disastrous effects on one's work week... And suddenly, the Esther story took on new meaning. . .

I finally realized I needed to hear and to heed those challenges Mordecai so clearly stated. Mordecai's first challenge: predicament: "Don't think your life will be spared from the slaughter, Esther. If you try to save your life, you'll lose it all!" It's a call to total commitment, to literally lay her life on the line.

But I can sympathize with Esther's dilemma. She had all the comforts, a cushy life -- and when you get all those things around you, it can build up a resistance to anything which might threaten the comfort and security they seem to provide.

I know all too well how she felt. Maybe you do, too. I enjoy the comfortable life. I had built up my own little self-sufficient world. I had God neatly compartmentalized, crammed into a crowded file drawer of my life somewhere between gardening and government. That is, until it dawned on me that I share the predicament, that the call to commitment Mordecai gave to Esther is like the call which Jesus Christ presents to me.

"If anyone would come after me," Jesus tell us, "He must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul."

Hard words to swallow, when you're busy doing your own thing -- but the most compelling logic I've ever heard. For if Christ is who he says he is -- our Saviour, the central figure in all of history who gives meaning to a world of confusing, conflicting priorities, then I had to realize Christ could not be compartmentalized.

It would be different if I had believed that Jesus was just a man -- as some do. Then I could easily have compartmentalized Him. Or, if I had believed He was just a good teacher of morals, then perhaps, I could have just put His book away on my shelf. Or, if I had thought He was just a prophet -- even then, I might have been tempted to file Him away.

But I knew that Jesus Christ was my Lord and my Saviour, the risen Lord who lives today, sovereign over all. And I knew it was time to cease living life backwards, time to strive to put Christ first, preeminent -- with no competition, at the very center of my life... It was time to submit my resignation as master of my own little universe... And God accepted my resignation!

Mordecai's second challenge was privilege. "If you don't take this privilege seriously, Esther, God will give it to another."

This too, was a challenge I needed to hear.

What God had to teach me was this. It is not what I do that matters, but what a sovereign God chooses to do through me. God doesn't want worldly successes. He wants me. He wants my heart, in submission to him. Life is not just a few years to spend on self-indulgence and career advancement. It's a privilege, a responsibility, a stewardship to be lived according to a much higher calling -- God's calling. This alone gives true meaning to life.

Mordecai's warning to Esther is sobering. God forbid that someday I look back and realize I was too distracted by things of this world, too busy, too driven... And my work was given to another...

The third challenge: providence. "Esther, who knows, but that God in his providence has brought you to such a time as this."

What Mordecai's words say to me is that each one of us has a unique assignment in this world given to us by a sovereign God -- to love and to serve those within our own sphere of influence.

We've been blessed to be a blessing: we've received that we might give.

The challenges Esther needed to hear were challenges I needed to hear -- and continually need to hear: the call to total commitment.

But there is one last lesson I had to learn from Esther. . . the way in which her heart responded.

Esther called on her fellow believers to pray and to fast. And then she cast herself -- indeed, her very life -- upon God in dependence on him: "If I perish, I perish!"

And how did God work in this situation? What was the outcome of Esther's commitment and dependence on God? Scripture tells us that the king extended the golden scepter -- sparing Esther's life, that his heart went out to her cause, and that God's people were gloriously rescued!

Esther could have played it on her own wits and charm and just left God out of the picture. But she knew her cause would only succeed if God were with her. And she rallied others to join her in a spirit of humble dependence through prayer.

It has struck me that this is really our purpose in gathering together this evening at this, the Second Annual International Women in Leadership Conference. We have come to humbly acknowledge our dependence on God. We have come to seek the Lord's guidance and strength... With the hope that the power of Christ may deepen our fellowship with one another.

But dependence on God is not an easy thing for modern day achievers, and it has not been easy for me. Often I find myself faced with tasks demanding wisdom and courage beyond my own. And not just on the big decisions, ... I am constantly in need of God's grace to perform life's routine duties with the love for others, the peace, the joy, ... inherent in God's call.

I've had to learn that dependence is a good thing, that when I've used up my own resources, when I can't control things and make them come out my way, when I'm willing to trust God with the outcome, when I'm weak, -- then, I am strong. Then I'm in the best position to be able to feel the power of Christ rest upon me, encourage me, replenish my energy, and deepen my faith. Power from God, not from me.

Yes, the story of Esther is actually a story of dependence. It's a story not about the triumph of a man or a woman, but the triumph of God. He is the real hero of this story.

And in the same way, I've come to realize there can be only one hero in my story, too: God in Jesus Christ.

Total commitment to Christ is a high and difficult calling. And one I will struggle with the rest of my days. But I know that for me, it's the only life worth living, the only life worthy of our Lord. The world is ripe and ready, I believe, for men and women who will accept this calling, men and women who recognize they are not immune from the predicaments of the day, men and women who are willing to accept the privilege of serving, and who are ready to see that the providence of God may have brought them to such a time as this.

Thank you, and God bless you.

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