

For Such a Time as This

Esther 4:1-17

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Now if you would please take your own Bibles or turn in one of the church Bibles with me to the book of Esther chapter 4. You will find that on page 412 and 413 in the church Bible. Esther chapter 4. Once you have your Bibles open would you bow your heads with me as we turn to God together in prayer. Let us all pray.

Lord our God, would You now open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things out of Your Word. In Jesus' name, amen.

Esther 4 at verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's

provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law - to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.'

And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.' Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Amen and we praise God for the reading of His only holy, inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Think for a moment with me about the defining moments of your life - those forks in the road that set your course and determined your future; moments when you made a choice and you turned a corner and you declared your purpose and you set your face and you marked out your territory. Some of them are moments, not of choice, but of happenstance: the biopsy result, the stock market change, the company merger. Defining moments shape us and direct our steps in ways that leave us utterly changed.

As we turn our attention this evening to Esther chapter 4 we have come to the pivot of the whole book. In terms of character development, Esther moves from a subordinate, secondary role in the narrative, meekly following Mordecai's instructions, to the primary and central role in the story so that by verse 17, "Mordecai then went away and did everything that Esther had ordered him." And for Queen Esther personally it was also a defining moment. A crucial decision has to be made, and only she can make it, upon which hung the fate, not just of her own broken family, but of her entire people. It was a decisive moment for Esther and for the Jewish people, and as we study it together this evening, one of the key things it will help us begin to come to terms with is the oftentimes complex intersection of two vitally important Biblical themes. On the one hand, the absolute sovereignty of God in providence, upholding and governing all His creatures and all their actions, and on the other hand, the absolute responsibility of human beings as His creatures in their respective vocations and callings. The sovereignty of God governs and directs all things, including the free actions and decisions of human beings. And yet Esther 4 teaches us our responsibilities in such a universe where God reigns in such a way still cannot be denied by an

appeal to His sovereignty. As Queen Esther discovers, the sovereignty of God does not get us off the hook when called upon to make difficult choices.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE CHOICE: NO ONE CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS

Let's look at the passage together. You will recall from chapter 3 that Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, in his rage against Mordecai, has maneuvered and manipulated the amoral emperor, King Ahasuerus, into sanctioning the genocide of the Jewish people throughout the empire. Eleven months later, on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, they were all to be, in the words of Haman's decree, "killed, destroyed, and annihilated." As though being killed and destroyed were not quite enough! Chapter 3 ended with the citadel of Susa in an uproar while Ahasuerus and Haman, wearied from a hard days plotting genocide, unwind together over a few cocktails. And chapter 4 opens like a CNN news segment, cutting immediately to "get the reaction on the ground," doesn't it, in the opening verses of chapter 4. The camera zooms in on Mordecai, tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes and loudly proclaiming his distress and grief throughout the city. And then in verse 3, one can almost hear the news anchor back in the studio - "Those are scenes repeated across the empire: in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes."

Esther, however, appears to have been quite oblivious to Haman's plot and the uproar outside the palace grounds. When she turned on the news that night and saw images of Mordecai weeping at the palace gates, she is understandably concerned. She sends a set of fresh clothes to Mordecai, and eventually sends Hathach, one of her servants to find out exactly what was going on. And in verses 6 to 9 Mordecai gives Hathach a detailed report of all that had taken place and he begins to plead with Esther to intercede on behalf of her people before the King. We have Esther's immediate reply in verse 11. Look at it with me please. "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law - to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called into the king these thirty days."

It's not hard to picture the blood draining from Esther's face as she hears Mordecai's suggestion. "Doesn't he know what he's asking? To go in to the king uninvited is to risk one's life, to gamble upon the whimsy of an amoral and capricious tyrant. And if you think I'm the ideal candidate, you should know that the king hasn't wanted to see me for about a month now. I'm not so sure your plan's such a great plan Mordecai!"

And in verses 12 to 17 we have what is by far the most famous passage of the book of Esther. Mordecai's reply is a master class in balancing equally ultimate truths, helping us hold together crucial principles without compromise. First, in verse 13, he says Esther faces an uncomfortable choice. Verse 13 - "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews." Mordecai is unflinching in shattering the secret refuge of Esther's heart. "Do not think that just because you are the Queen that your identity will remain hidden for long, Esther. If the Jews die in the pogrom Haman is planning you will surely die with them, Queen or no!" He is forcing a decision that Esther has so far managed to avoid altogether. Remember that she is the one character in this story with two names, with a double identity. She is Hadassah, the Jewish peasant girl. And she is Esther, the Persian beauty and royal consort to the most powerful man in the world. For some years now, since she first came into the harem, she has lived a life actually submerged beneath Persian culture, her Jewish roots utterly obscured and hidden from view. But she can't live that way now for long. There is no belonging to the people of God, while living like a child of the world! To put it in our terms, there is no way to be a secret Christian and a public pagan! Esther is going to have to choose. And so must we.

Maybe God is calling you this evening to recognize the double life you have been living that simply cannot go on. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters, for he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" - Matthew 6:24. He said, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" - Matthew 12:30. In other words, there is no middle ground, there is no neutral territory, no demilitarized zone within which you may safely sign a truce with sin. Whose are you? Jesus Christ claims your allegiance, and He calls you to face the cost of discipleship. We are to pick up our cross and follow Him, and be prepared, Matthew 10:38-39, to lose our lives for His sake that we might find them. It is hard, and it is scary, and there will be a cost to be paid, Esther. But this is the call of God in your life. You belong to the covenant people of God and it's time you stood in solidarity with them. Be who you are, child of God. There is no defecting from the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

THE UNSHAKEABLE HOPE: RELIEF AND DELIVERANCE WILL ARISE

The second thing Mordecai tells Esther, however, points, not to her identity and her need to own it, but to his own security. If, first of all, we learn about the uncomfortable choice Esther and we all must make to stand for the cause of King Jesus, we also learn in these verses, secondly, about the unshakeable hope that those who do so can enjoy. The book of Esther is a small room in the center of which sits a huge elephant, never mentioned and yet rather obvious once you've read through the book once or twice. The elephant in the room of course is the presence and sovereign grace of Almighty God. He's never mentioned, yet His sovereign overruling and His presence at work is everywhere in evidence. And

here in Esther 4:14 the elephant that had been sitting somewhat meekly in that room, now shuffles over to sits in our laps. If we hadn't noticed it before we can't miss it now, can we? Look at Mordecai's words, verse 14 - "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish."

Relief and deliverance will arise from another place. Mordecai is full of an unshakeable hope and security isn't he? All the might of the empire is mustered against him and yet he speaks here with notes of remarkable confidence. The extermination of his entire people at the hands of an ancestral enemy, Haman the Agagite, the never-to-be-repealed decree of Ahasuerus, King of the Persian Empire has proclaimed their destruction, and Mordecai and the Jewish people, have been swept up in grief as a result. But it is not despair that we are reading when we see them weeping and fasting and mourning in reaction to Haman's decree. Look again at verse 3 for a minute. "There was a great mourning among the Jews with fasting, weeping and lamenting." That language appears again, word for word, or perhaps it's better to say that language is borrowed word for word from the prophet Joel, chapter 2, verses 12 to 14, which is a passage where God is calling His people to "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and mourning; to rend your hearts and not your garments." Almost certainly, the author of Esther 4 wants us to read the reaction of the Jewish people here in light of Joel 2, as a response, not of despair, but of repentance and faith and returning to the Lord. "Return to the LORD your God," Joel goes on to say, "for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." Hear the echo of Mordecai's words now. "Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him" - Joel 2:14. Do you see the echo of Joel's words now here in Esther 4:14? "Who knows but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Where does Mordecai get his security and the unshakeable hope that characterizes him before the hatred of Haman and the almost complete power of the king? Mordecai knows the promises of God. Mordecai knows the covenant faithfulness of the Lord who has sworn to relent when His people turn back to Him. Relief and deliverance will arise from another place. Mordecai rests secure in the sovereign faithfulness of the covenant keeping God whose promises never fail. He trusts that the Lord who reigns over Haman's wicked heart and Ahasuerus' perverted power and Esther's fear-filled mind, also rules the destiny of His people and He has promised to deliver them when they call upon Him in faith.

Here is the proper use of the doctrine of divine sovereignty. It is not a theological bludgeon with which to beat other Christians. It is not a shibboleth by which to test for orthodoxy. The sovereignty of God is a refuge in which to rest secure. A safe harbor in which to anchor your faith amidst every trial. A hiding place in the storm. Mordecai knows that God, because He is Lord over all things, utterly and comprehensively and exhaustively sovereign, will not, cannot fail to keep His

promises and uphold His covenant, no matter what the odds are arrayed against Him. Relief and deliverance will arise from another place. The sovereignty and faithfulness of God is the scriptural medicine for the disease of fear. You kill the germ of anxiety with a hefty dose of divine sovereignty. Brothers and sisters, your life rests in the hand of the God of infinite faithfulness and goodness and grace, and you could not be safer or more secure.

It may also be the case that Mordecai wants Esther to understand that although there is a responsibility she is being called upon to face up to here - we'll get to that in a moment - there is also a danger she must be careful to avoid. The danger to be avoided is thinking herself essential, indispensable. Isn't that a real temptation we sometimes face? We either avoid our duty, perhaps citing God's sovereignty as a justification for our passivity, or maybe we step up to our obligations, but if we are not careful begin to minimize our dependence on the Lord as we do so, thinking that we are the one vital cog in the machine, the indispensable component in God's plan. The trap Satan loves to ensnare God's people with, if he cannot paralyze us into inactivity, or leave us passive with distorted views of the lordship and sovereignty of God, he will make us overstate our own importance and make us bear the weight of the responsibility for the salvation of others entirely on our own, minimizing God's role and maximizing ours.

If I may speak personally for a moment, were it not for the truth that Mordecai declares so boldly here, I could never climb the pulpit steps. If I believed that God were not sovereign in the salvation of sinners, if I thought that your destiny rested entirely on the exercise merely of your own will and thus therefore also on my ability to impress and incline your will with the power of my rhetoric, if that's how I thought I would not be standing before you preaching God's Word, I'd be in a darkened room somewhere, rocking back and forth, overwhelmed at the unbearable burden of that obligation. No, no! Praise God that salvation belongs to the Lord! Your redemption is not my responsibility. I am not called to save sinners, neither are you. We're called to preach Christ and it is God alone who saves. And far from paralyzing us in our efforts to make Christ known, that truth of His sovereignty actually sets us free to do it boldly and without fear. Relief and deliverance will arise from another place. If you don't go in to the King Esther, do not think that your failure to fulfill that duty will somehow derail the plan of God and place it beyond recovery. Our salvation does not rest on you but on the Lord. Salvation belongs to the Lord! Praise God that that is true. What a relief! What an incentive to serve him with boldness. We preach Christ; God opens blind eyes. Relief and deliverance will arise from another place.

THE UNAVOIDABLE DUTY TO FULFILL: YOU ARE HIS INSTRUMENT FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

There is an uncomfortable choice to be made - whose are we? An unshakable

hope we can enjoy, and then finally, in the second half of verse 14 Mordecai tells Esther, there is an unavoidable duty we must fulfill. Look at the text. "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Review your own history Esther. See the steps that led you here. Haven't you asked yourself, Esther, often enough through all the heartbreak and the sorrow of those days what God was doing? Could it be that you have come to the kingdom for just this moment? You are in a unique place in the providence of God, with unique opportunities and responsibilities. Don't you see the duty that rests upon you to which you are now being called? You are His instrument for such a time as this.

It is a question worth asking ourselves, isn't it? For what has God brought me to this moment and to this place? Who has He made me to be, in His wise providence? What are the unique opportunities that I have arising from the peculiar web of relationships I have developed? How is the path of duty illumined for me by the overruling sovereign providence of God at work in my life? Those were very much the kinds of questions Mordecai was asking Esther to begin to wrestle with and to face up to. And as verses 15 and 16 make abundantly clear, they were questions that did not wait long for an answer. God seems to have taken hold of Esther's heart. She resolves her fears. She makes her choice. She opts now for solidarity with the people of God no matter what waits for her by way of consequence. She calls the people of God to continue fasting in earnest, this time specifically with a view to God's provision for her, and she will join them as together they wait upon the Lord for the next three days. And then, verse 16, comes Esther's immortal declaration. "I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." It is the decisive moment, not just in the narrative, nor even in Esther's life, but in the life of God's people at this point in salvation history.

And as Esther's words ring in our ears, resounding with notes of courage and faith and heroism, isn't it easy to hear in them also an echo of another Savior's words, spoken at the greatest decisive moment of them all. In the garden, staring into the gloom of Calvary still waiting ahead of Him, the submission and resolve we see in Esther is surpassed and fulfilled in the One to whom she points us, as the Lord Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done"? Like Esther, in the citadel of Susa and for the exiled Jews of the empire, so now for God's elect in every place, in every age, at just the right time - Romans 5:6 - in the fullness of time - Galatians 4:4 - for just such a time as this, God has raised up a Savior, in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. But whereas Esther risked everything to intercede for her people and lived, we have a better Mediator, one who did not merely risk it all, but who lays it all down and dies for His people. What Esther confessed only as a possibility, "If I perish," Jesus owned and chose as a necessity, for us and for our salvation. He perished that we might live.

So Esther 4 directs our gaze, doesn't it, to the great decisive moment where salvation was won. And it calls each of us to a decisive moment of our own. Has

God in His purposes brought you to this place for such a time as this one that you might hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Will you join the people of God in Esther 4 in repentance for their sin, rending their hearts not just their garments, and will you find refuge in Jesus Christ alone, who has gone before the throne of glory for us that we might live? Will you pray with me?

How we bless You, O Sovereign Lord, that our call is to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ, but salvation belongs to the Lord. Would You please here tonight and in days to come, using us and through the Peru mission team in Peru, would You please open blind eyes, unstop deaf ears, as the good news of Jesus is declared? And would You draw near to all of us enabling us to stand for Christ and for His kingdom, whatever the cost? In Jesus' name, amen.

Let us stand and receive God's benediction.

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. Let all God's people say, amen.

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