

For Such a Time as This

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[0 : 00] Last week, we saw Haman, the king's second-in-command, become furious when Mordecai refused to bow down to him.

Rather than punishing just Mordecai, Haman convinced King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, to sign a decree ordering the killing of all Jews.

The date for the extermination was set for 11 months later. So for some review, let's look at Esther 3, 13-15. These verses will set the scene for tonight.

Esther 3, 13-15 say, The severe brutality of that decree is emphasized by the utter unconcern for human life, and we see that in the line that the king and Haman set down to drink.

On the other hand, we also see God's providence because God allowed 11 months' time before the decree will go into effect. Tonight, we'll study Esther 4.

[1 : 45] Mordecai starts making the best use of the time that he has, and let's read all of chapter 4 before looking at the verses in detail. Starting with verse 1 of chapter 4, it says, 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 Hathak, 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.

Hathak 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.

[3 : 04] 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 Hathak went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathak 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 into 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.

[4 : 28] 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.

We'll break tonight's chapter into six sections. In verses one through three, we see the despair. So we see the despair in verses one through three.

And the despair comes primarily from Mordecai. But we also see this despair from the other Jews in Persia. Listen to the first three verses again.

It says, The previous chapter ended with the city of Susa thrown into confusion by Haman's plot. Bad news travels fast in any day, but especially when it was disseminated by the official Persian postal service. Soon the Jewish community throughout the empire knew the whole story.

[6 : 00] They responded by putting on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning with loud cries, fasting, and weeping. We tend to keep our emotions to ourselves, but in Oriental society, it was common to show grief.

Tearing clothes is an expression of intense grief, and it's seen throughout the Old Testament. It also was customary among other nations. Herodotus, the Greek historian, told how the Persians under Xerxes tore their clothes because of their grief at having lost a battle.

So we know that the Persians also will understand what the torn clothing means. The sackcloth and ashes were another way of showing extreme grief.

First, after you tear the garments, you put a hairy garment on and you spread ashes on your head. The sackcloth or haircloth made of goat hair was the apparel of mourners, especially those mourning for the dead.

Obviously, we see that the Jews are in great mourning, and that's why we can say that these verses are about to despair. We see the Jews respond to the bad news through the sackcloth, the ashes, and also crying and fasting and weeping.

[7 : 16] Something, though, is missing from their response. We have no record in Scripture that these Jews in Persia did what even the pagans in Nineveh did when God had Jonah announce the coming destruction of Nineveh.

Listen to Jonah 3, 6-8 and see if you can detect what the Ninevites did that the Jews in Persia seemed to have missed. So here are Jonah 3, 6-8.

It says, So the Ninevites used sackcloth.

They used ashes. They fasted. All of this sounds very similar to what the Jews in Persia did. But did you hear what else the Ninevites did that the Jews did not?

Exactly. We see that they called out mightily to God, and even the king said that they should call out mightily to God. So even the pagans of Nineveh knew how to repent properly.

[8 : 42] When Jonah preached to them, they immediately put on sackcloth and ashes. They started fasting and calling out mightily to God. In our text from Esther, for all the sackcloth and ashes and weeping, there's no mention of prayer.

The first three verses of Esther, chapter 4, also show that Mordecai mourned the decree. Even though the empire had turned against him, Mordecai still was law-abiding in everything except bowing down to Haman.

He didn't enter the king's gate dressed in sackcloth because that was forbidden under Persian law. But instead of crying out to God, Mordecai's first thought was to appeal to the king through Esther. Mordecai's first problem then was how to get in touch with Esther. His solution was a public demonstration with one person in mind. Mordecai went through the whole city, wailing loudly and bitterly, until he arrived at the king's gate.

And this gate was the door to the palace itself. We see from the verses that no one dressed in sackcloth was allowed to enter the palace. Such garments made the people ceremonially unclean and that meant they were unfit for the king's present.

[9 : 58] The sackcloth and ashes, when no bereavement had taken place, and the public nature of Mordecai's behavior were calculated to attract Esther's serious attention. And Mordecai knew it wouldn't be long before the news of his conduct and actions would be reported to all around the palace and Esther would hear about it.

With this motive of catching Esther's attention, there may well have been intense sorrow, too, that his actions, Mordecai's not bowing down to Haman, had sparked off such violent hostility toward all of the Jews.

The gravest possible danger and misfortune actually threatened the whole race because of his simple refusal. So we move now to the second section of the chapter, and the second section shows the effectiveness of Mordecai's plan to get Esther's attention.

In the second section, we see the distress. And this distress comes from Esther when she hears how Mordecai is acting. Check out verses 4 and 5.

They say, The heading for this section comes straight from the text in the English Standard Version. [11:31] Verse 4 says that Esther was deeply distressed when she heard about Mordecai. This tells us how insulated Esther was from the things going on outside of the palace.

The decree against the Jews had been proclaimed throughout all of the empire, but Esther, living in the palace, was oblivious to it. If Esther had known about the decree, she would have known why Mordecai was mourning.

Instead, she tries to make Mordecai get rid of the visible signs of mourning. Verse 4 says that she sent new clothes to Mordecai, but he refused to accept them.

Esther's only concern was to stop her relative from making an exhibition of himself, not to deal with whatever it was that was causing his distress. Only after Mordecai refused her clothes did she send her servants to find out why he was mourning.

Maybe she lacked the time between her manicures and pedicures and other beauty treatments to really keep up with the fortunes of her own people. And it could be, too, that bad news, like sackcloth, was not permitted inside the king's palace.

[12:39] We know from earlier chapters in Esther that Esther followed Mordecai's advice to keep her identity a secret. Because she had done such a good job of concealing her identity, nobody would think to inform her about the threat to this particular people.

Why would the queen be concerned about the Jews? That had to be what everybody in the palace was thinking. Before we're too hard on Esther, though, these verses can be a warning for us.

When we compromise with the world, we easily can find ourselves becoming isolated and distant from God's people and out of touch with God's concerns in the world, just as Esther did.

And we'll come back to that at the end of the lesson. Mordecai's refusal to accept the new clothes certainly got Esther's attention. She sent Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs, to find out the reason for Mordecai's behavior.

We should notice the phrase, one of the king's eunuchs. Hathak was known to be loyal to the king. He had been appointed by Xerxes partly to wait upon Esther, partly to serve her, and partly to observe her conduct and report back anything of an unusual or untoward nature.

[13:54] We know that the Oriental kings are never exempt from fears of jealousy and suspicion. In the book of Esther, the book of Esther already has documented two people who tried to kill the king, and with someone always looking to kill him, the king can never be too careful, even with his queen.

So he sends a spy to watch her. Hathak obeys Esther's order to speak with Mordecai, and in the next section of the chapter, we see the discussion.

And this discussion is between Hathak and Mordecai. And the discussion takes place in the open square of the city.

So listen to verses 6 through 9 again. They say, Hathak 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 Serza 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.

[15:05] And Hathak went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Mordecai told Hathak what had happened. He told Hathak about the sum of money Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury as compensation for the destruction of the Jews.

Mordecai also gave Hathak a copy of the Edict of Extermination published in Susa for him to show Esther. And with it went the command that she should go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people.

That's quite a switch for Mordecai. Until this point, Mordecai has told Esther to keep her identity as a Jew as a secret. Now Mordecai is asking Esther to do something that will reveal her identity as a Jew and will challenge an edict from the king.

So this is a major turning point in the book of Esther. The book of Esther is about God's sovereignty and providence and the certainty of his intervention on people's behalf.

That certainty, however, does not preclude action and initiative on our part. God may be behind the initiative that we're supposed to take. As in chapter 2, when Mordecai stopped the assassination attempt against the king, Mordecai's information sources were impeccable.

[16:22] He could tell Esther everything that went on down to the exact size of the bribe that Haman offered for permission to destroy the Jews. He also was able to provide her with that copy of the written text of the edict.

But unlike chapter 2, Mordecai was now powerless to intervene to foil the plot. His purpose in passing the information to Esther was so that she might go to the king to seek his mercy and plead with him for her people.

The language Mordecai adopts of begging the king's favor and pleading is precisely the language of prayer that would normally accompany fasting and sackcloth. Instead of seeking God's favor and pleading with God for deliverance, though, Mordecai was placing his hopes on an intervention at the human level with King Ahasuerus.

So we've seen the despair from Mordecai and the other Jews. We've seen the distress from Esther. We've also seen the discussion between Hathak and Mordecai. Through that discussion, Esther now knows the source of Mordecai's mourning.

Mordecai also has called Esther to action. So the question now is, will she go from being silent about her ethnicity, or will she suddenly become bold and speak on behalf of her people?

[17:38] Starting with verses 10 and 11, we see how Esther reacts to the news. And her first reaction is the doubt. So the doubt is the next thing we'll see.

And this doubt is a doubt that she will be successful if she tries to talk with the king. Listen to verses 10 and 11. Then Esther spoke to Hathak 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 into the king these 30 days. After reading verses 10 and 11, we can see that Esther has good reasons for the doubt.

For one thing, she'll be taking her life into her own hands if she goes to the king uninvited.

According to custom, visitors had to be summoned into the presence of the king.

Nobody could appear unannounced. The penalty for violating this law was death unless the king extended his scepter in welcome. Everyone knew this, even people from the outlying provinces.

[19:02] The implication of Esther's reference here is that Mordecai was asking her to do something that as a civil servant he should know was very serious.

So she's really asking if he knows what he's trying to get her to do. The intention behind this rule and about appearing unannounced was the protection of the king's life, his time, and his privacy. Josephus, the Jewish historian, adds the interesting note that around the king's throne stood men with axes to punish anyone who approached the throne without being summoned.

So Esther knew firsthand that the king had replaced at least one queen. Before Esther, Vashti had been banished. But Esther could fare far worse.

She might actually get axed. And that gives a whole new meaning to the term getting axed, doesn't it? So, you know, when you think about it this way, we could paraphrase what Esther said as something like this.

[20:01] You know, she said, Let me get this straight, cousin Mordecai. After all these years of telling me to keep my identity a secret, you suddenly want me to go unannounced to the king. Then you want me to tell him that I'm a Jew and that he made a mistake with the bad law.

Have you lost your mind? You know what could happen to me. And so if Esther had stopped right there, we might think that she was blowing the risk out of proportion. After all, this is the same king that a few years ago had chosen her out of at least hundreds of other candidates.

But we see that at least 30 days had passed since the king had requested her presence. And that's another reason for Esther to doubt that the king will welcome her. Though Xerxes delighted in Esther, he was weak and insecure.

And there were times when he preferred the frivolous company of his concubines to the stabilizing power of his wife. As a result, he tended to neglect Esther. Esther later will emerge as something of a heroine, but she was made of the same stuff as we are, with a natural proneness for seeing the difficulties rather than anticipating what God could and would do.

It should be a great encouragement to us to appreciate that the men and women whom God has used in the past had the same emotions and failings as we do.

[21 : 22] Faintheartedness is a natural reaction to challenging situations, but it's not a spiritual reaction. Cowardice is one of the most common but least conspicuous sins.

Sometimes we may be fainthearted in our attitudes. We perhaps never really grapple with vital and important issues because we're fearful of our ability to handle them. And we may be fainthearted in our actions, acting hesitantly instead of boldly.

But we need to realize that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or imagine. We need to rise to that truth. Boldness of faith should characterize us first in prayer and then in the action that the faith in God demands.

We'll move to the next section of the lesson now. And in that section, we'll see that Hathak continues to get his exercise by going back and forth between Esther and Mordecai. After Hathak receives Esther's message, he and others tell Mordecai what Esther said.

And in this fifth section of the chapter, we see Mordecai's response. Mordecai responds to Esther's doubt with the directness. So the directness is your next point there.

[22 : 36] We see the directness because of how bluntly Mordecai responds to Esther. So here are verses 12 through 14 again. 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. In response to Esther's fear about being killed for approaching the king, Mordecai tells Esther that she will die even if she takes no action.

Esther couldn't count on her comfortably isolated position in the royal palace. She too was part of the Jewish community, and her fate was intertwined with theirs. If they were to die, she likely would die too.

But the Jewish community would not in fact die, even if Esther were to keep silent, help and deliverance would come from somewhere else. If she didn't act to help her community though, she would be judged for failing to do her part, and would suffer the consequences.

[23 : 55] But if she did intervene, things might perhaps turn out well after all. Mordecai's question at the end of verse 14 is the theme of the chapter.

He asked, And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Because we're familiar with the end of the story, we're apt to see the answer to this question as obvious.

After all, would Esther be in such a position of royalty if God had not raised her up? But given the nature of Esther's rise through prominence through an ethically doubtful marriage to a pagan, and then concealing everything distinctly Jewish about her lifestyle for the past five or six years, that question would have been very real to Esther.

She would have had a lot of doubt about whether this was what she was supposed to do. So the question comes down to this. Could God really use someone like Esther after everything she had done or failed to do?

The surprising answer in Esther's case is yes. God's providence works through all kinds of sinners, which, after all, is the only material he has available.

[25 : 05] In his speech, though, Mordecai performed a remarkable feat. He made a request to Esther that was everywhere grounded in the reality and necessity of God's intervention, but he completely avoided mentioning that fact.

From where else would help arise if Esther didn't step forward? Mordecai had no plan B, nor did anybody else. There were no other highly placed Jews who could intervene, and in a secular universe, those people would have no interest in or commitment to the preservation of the Jews if they weren't Jewish themselves.

If there were no God, the Amalekites would win through Haman. A meaningless world would have no guarantee of a happy ending. So the future of Mordecai's people was assured only if the God who had permanently linked his name to his people would provide deliverance for them for the sake of his name.

But instead of stating that fact as the ground of confidence, Mordecai just vaguely said, help will rise from another place. Esther now had a clear and life-changing choice to make.

She could no longer live in the blurred shadow of two worlds. Until now, she'd been living as an undercover believer. Inwardly, she still regarded herself as part of the covenant community, but outwardly, she'd become entirely separated from it.

[26 : 29] To continue to do so was no longer possible. One option would have been to take her privatized faith a step further and deny her connection to the Jewish people. Then she would have to trust the empire to protect herself against the empire itself.

The only other alternative then was to identify herself publicly with the covenant community in its hour of need and thus risk her life in an attempt to save her people. Neither option held out much hope.

If she appeared uninvited before the king, she stood a good chance of finding herself hanging like the two eunuchs who had plotted against King Ahasuerus. On the other hand, if she trusted in the empire and survived alone, it would mean a complete and final separation from her community and from any source of meaning in her life.

So that would be a slow, lingering death of a different kind. So far in the chapter, we've seen the despair, the dismay, the discussion, the doubt, and the directness.

In the final section of the chapter, we see for the first time a firm resolve from Esther. Esther shows the determination. The determination. She shows the determination to approach the king on behalf of the Jews regardless of what happens to her.

[27 : 51] Check out verses 15 through 17. 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. It's interesting she had to throw that in there one more time.

And if I perish, I perish. Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. Esther agreed to show solidarity with the Jewish community.

A mark of this new connection was that she asked Mordecai to gather the Jews in Susa to fast for her for three days. She and her maids were going to do the same thing and then she would go in to try to see the king.

If you think about what life was like back then, this fast was counterintuitive to say the least. Three days of fasting would hardly enhance the side of Esther's appeal.

[28 : 55] We know that the king liked to have his women fat and happy looking. But because she was not allowed to speak to the king unless he first chose to receive her, this was a risk to her appearance.

All she had to offer was the appearance itself. But now at least the whole community would be involved in this appeal, silently rooting for Esther to succeed. We can assume that all the Jews were rooting for Esther because Mordecai agreed to do everything that Esther had asked.

We've already said that Esther's determination is the focus of this last section and that newfound determination is summarized in verse 16 where Esther said, if I perish, I perish.

From this point on in the book of Esther, Esther's the one to take the initiative. She determined here to go to the king illegally, disobeying the law, even as Mordecai had done earlier.

She acknowledged the possibility of failure, but she had the hope of success. So this chapter focuses on Esther and the specific things that happened to her, but we can learn several things from it.

[30 : 07] First, we can sometimes be so involved with the world that we can forget that we are children of God. We talked about this earlier when we saw verse 4 where Esther had no idea why Mordecai was so distraught.

Another thing we can learn is that despite God's sovereignty, he expects us to take action to help ourselves. John Calvin recognized that God's providence is no reason to put aside our human responsibility for action.

Here's a quote that's also in your handout. He said, we are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees, either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order, but always in submission to his will.

It is very clear what our duty is. Thus, if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it. If he offers helps, to use them.

If he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong. If he makes remedies available, not to neglect them. When we are most aware of our struggle against Satan and his dark forces, that's when we need to renew our dependence on God, striving to put on the full armor of God that he provides.

[31 : 22] And then we should ask, what should the Lord have us to do? Our assurance of God's sovereignty is no excuse for failing to do our duty, whether it's in missions, in evangelism, or in building up the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The friends and colleagues of William Carey, the pioneer missionary, presented him with innumerable obstacles when he first suggested going to India. Some even went so far as to put forward the idea that if God wanted the people of India brought to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, God would accomplish it without their endeavors.

Carey rightly responded by reminding them of our Lord Jesus' final command to his church. And then later in his life, as Carey looked back, he said, few people know what may be done until they try and persevere in what they undertake.

Another thing we can learn from this chapter is that this chapter, like the earlier chapters in the book, invites us to contrast the earthly king with our true king. The earthly king, Xerxes, often refused to see his subjects.

We saw that even from how the queen lived in fear of approaching him. For people living in those conditions, Proverbs 25, 6, and 7a offered good advice.

[32 : 41] So here are Proverbs 25, 6, and 7a. They say, Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, Come up here, than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

Just think how different our true king is. Think how welcome we are to come to him. One of the glorious benefits of our reconciliation to God is our access to him.

Peace with God and access to God go hand in hand with each other. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of our assurance of faith. Listen to Hebrews chapter 10 verses 19 through 22.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with the true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

So, people stayed away from the earthly king. We're encouraged to draw near to the heavenly king. Not only that, we're invited to do that.

[33 : 59] James 4.8 gives us this promise. That's where James wrote, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. If you need more proof that believers have peace with God and access to him, listen to Romans 5.1 and 2.

They say, therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we also have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

We could cite several more verses to prove this point, including Ephesians 2.17 and 18 and 1 Peter 3.18. The point, though, is clear.

Our king is much different than any earthly king. We also see from this chapter that our king has a purpose for each of his followers.

As we pause our study in Esther tonight, Esther's life purpose was at stake. God has guided her in being chosen queen and that shows us that in the biblical perspective, election is for service, not just for our own benefit.

[35 : 13] Being liberator of her people was more important than being the queen of Persia. Mordecai told Esther, if you keep silent, you will perish. In a crisis situation like this, there was no such thing as a neutral position.

Failing to decide brings personal loss and misses the opportunity to fulfill God's purpose. We see that in God's providence, each person has a unique task.

Earlier, we considered the question, could God really use someone like Esther after everything she had done or failed to do? We concluded that the surprising answer in Esther's case is yes.

We said that God's providence works through all kinds of sinners because that's the only material he has available. Each of us can ask that same question about ourselves.

So do ask that question of yourself and then ponder the answer. Could God really use someone like me after everything I have done or failed to do? And for each of us, the surprising answer is yes as well.

[36 : 21] As we said earlier, God's providence works through all kinds of sinners because again, that's the only material he has available. So perhaps God today is asking us a similar question to what Mordecai asked Esther.

Who knows whether we have come for such a time as this. Thank you.