

# For such a time as this

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] And tonight's reading is from Esther and chapter 3 and 4. Esther chapter 3 from the beginning. After these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman, son of Hamaditha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles.

All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour.

Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, Why do you disobey the king's command? Day after day they spoke to him, but he refused to comply.

Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behaviour would be tolerated, for he had told them he was due. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged.

Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai.

Instead, Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

[ 1 : 1 0 ] In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, the power that is the lot was cast into the presence of Haman to select a day and month.

And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar. Then Haman said to King Xerxes, There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate.

Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws. It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury.

So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman, son of Hamaditha, the aggregate, the enemy of the Jews. Keep the money, the king said to Haman, and do with the people as you please.

Then on the thirteenth day of the first month, the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of all the provinces and the nobles of the various peoples.

[ 2 : 2 7 ] These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and children, on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day. The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa.

The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered. When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.

But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing.

Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.

[ 3 : 50 ] Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs, assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why. So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city, in front of the king's gate.

Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for the annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her.

And he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence, to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said.

Then she instructed him to say 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 but one law, that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives.

But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king. When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer, Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape.

[ 5 : 07 ] For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai, Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night and day.

I and my attendants 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. So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

Okay, Esther 3 and 4. Thinking about our ordinary day-to-day life. On any given day, we make countless small decisions, right?

We decide trivial things all the time, most of which have little obvious long-term impact. Cornflakes for breakfast or porridge? Who cares? What difference does it make?

[ 6 : 08 ] But every now and then, a seemingly small thing has big repercussions. Think of the film Sliding Doors. What is it, 1999, something like that? A woman leaves work.

She catches the train by a hair, arrives home to find her husband in bed with another woman. Or it rewinds and she misses the train, doesn't make it home for hours, and then these two divergent life paths are played out before us on the big screen.

Small event. Do you catch the train or not? Massive impact. Now, obviously, in normal life, we don't get to see both tracks play out, do we?

We have to turn to the pages of fiction for that. But there are these small events with a big impact. And then every now and then, from time to time, there comes that moment that you know is going to be decisive.

You know this is a big decision. This will set the course of my life for years and decades to come. The first time you're told to actually choose which subjects to study at school.

[ 7 : 14 ] Where are you going to buy your first house? Asking someone to marry you or answering that question. Ten years ago, I spent the week, sat on a rock on the Isle of Col, looking out to sea.

And I came home, resolved to move on from engineering, and here I am. I knew it was a big decision. Sometimes we know. And sometimes they catch us by surprise, these decisions that we make.

Well, in these couple of chapters, Esther 3 and 4, we have both kinds of decision. Mordecai's decision not to bow down to Haman. I don't think he really expected that decision to result in a plan to exterminate a whole race of people.

Seems like an apparently relatively minor decision. Will you bow down or not? And yet it has this huge impact. And then later in the story, we get to the point where Esther has to decide what she's going to do.

For Esther, either course of action is risky. Is she going to face going to see the king or not? It's a big, dramatic decision. She knows it affects not only her, but all the Jews throughout the empire.

[ 8 : 25 ] Big decisions, small decisions, and life moves on from that point. So here we are. First couple of chapters that we looked at last week, we heard about that messy and abusive way that

Esther came to be queen.

And chapter 2 ended with the account of Mordecai uncovering a plot against Xerxes' life. A couple of eunuchs dissatisfied with him. Mordecai here sends to Esther and is credited by the emperor for saving his life.

And the conspirators get executed in verse 23 of chapter 2. And the incidents entered into the official record, into the annals. And so at the end of chapter 2, you kind of expect, following on from that, that what you'll see next is Mordecai being honored by the king.

Mordecai will surely be raised to a position of greater authority under King Xerxes, just like, well, when Joseph sought the good of the nation, found himself interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, and he was raised to Pharaoh's right hand.

Surely this will be another instance of the same thing. The same ideas are playing out. But not so. Instead, in the opening verse of chapter 3, instead we meet the last of the major characters of our narrative, one Haman, son of Hamedapha.

[ 9 : 45 ] And the honor that which we might have expected would go to Mordecai, instead goes to Haman. The authority that should have been his goes to another.

And along with everyone else, Mordecai is expected to come and to bow down and to honor him. But he doesn't. This is that small choice with the big impact.

Why? Why does Mordecai choose to do this? Has Mordecai not read 1 Peter chapter 2? Does he not know that he's supposed to honor the emperor and consequently the emperor's officials?

I mean, of course, he hasn't read Peter's letter. That's hundreds of years later. But still, that kind of proper respect for authorities, it was expected. It was the ordinary way of going about things.

That's just what you do. You bow down to the officials. And you can't find anything in God's law that justifies refusing to pay homage. I mean, in our day, we kind of have something of an attitude of, well, why would anyone bow down to anybody?

[ 10 : 48 ] We're not big fans of expecting a show of respect in our modern egalitarian society. But if it's anachronistic to read feminist attitudes into Vashti's refusal in chapter 1, well, it's even more so to read those kind of modern sensibilities into Mordecai's actions, as if he has some grand objection to people bowing down to one another.

That's just not part of the psyche. There isn't a blanket prohibition on Jews bowing down before authority. So what's going on? Well, you get various other far-fetched explanations being offered, but there's really only a couple that seem remotely plausible, as best I can tell.

And option one is that there's some kind of combination of pride and arrogance and jealousy on Mordecai's part, okay? That he thinks he deserves the honor that Haman has received.

And so Mordecai is bitter. He refuses to obey the command to show honor. Because why would I honor him when I should be the one being honored? Now, if that is the reason, then his behavior is, frankly, completely inexcusable.

It's a direct insult. However miffed he's feeling, he is not entitled to take it out on Haman. But I find the second possibility more convincing.

[ 12 : 12 ] Notice how Haman is introduced. Haman, son of Hemeditha, the Agagite. You're mostly looking fairly blank.

That's about what I expected. That's okay. You know, this is where the books are helpful, okay?

The Agagites. The Agagites are linked to Agag, who was king of the Amalekites in the days of Saul. And the Amalekites are the ancient enemies of God's people. In fact, one commentator says it's fair to call them the arch enemy of God's people.

Because the Amalekites are the only people in the whole of the Old Testament against whom God proclaims that he himself is at war with them. Back in Exodus chapter 17, verse 16, God says, I am at war with the Amalekites.

And in the days of Saul, Saul is commanded when fighting with the Amalekites, he's commanded to utterly destroy them. But he doesn't. He brings King Agag back as a captive into his palace, presumably because he wants to gloat over this man whom he has conquered.

[ 13 : 25 ] And the prophet Samuel's outrage, and he takes matters into his own hands and puts Agag to death. But the damage has been done. Saul loses his throne.

He loses the favor of God Almighty. And the ancient enmity between God's people and the Amalekites that goes back to Exodus 17 when they refuse to permit passage.

That ancient enmity continues. These people, the Amalekites, fundamentally opposed to God's people. And they live to fight another day because Saul didn't do as he was told. And then here in the days of Esther, here we see Saul's disobedience coming home to roost. Because Saul disobeyed the commands to annihilate the Agagites, this Agagite seeks to annihilate them.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Why does Mordecai refuse to bow down in the first place? Well, to my mind then, the most likely reason is this sort of ethnic antagonism.

[ 14 : 29 ] He just can't bring himself to bow down to a representative of one of those people who, commentator by the name of John Goldinger, he describes them as the epitome of a people irrationally and inhumanly hostile to Israel.

This is who the Amalekites are. And so Haman just can't bring himself to bow down to somebody so vehemently opposed to God and to his people. Why is this the most likely understanding?

Well, it seems to be confirmed by the fact that when you look down at verse 10, Haman is once again there referred to as the Agagite, which is surely by that point redundant because just a few verses earlier, we were told that was who he was.

We don't need to be told again he's an Agagite, and yet we're reminded that this is his identity. This is who this man is. He's part of the ancient enemies of God's people.

And then when you add to that Haman's own kind of disproportionate response to the slight and his willingness to say, well, let's kill all the Jews, the ancient enmities continue, don't they?

[ 15 : 46 ] But is that any better? You know, if we're saying jealousy and bitterness is an inexcusable reason, well, is this a better reason? Is Mordecai more justified in refusing to bow down?

I mean, yes, God declared himself to be at war, but he didn't command Mordecai to continue hostilities. Do you know, to be honest, I think this is an example of exactly what we were talking about this morning, isn't it?

Mordecai repays evil with evil. Now, admittedly, the first evil is ancient history, and the second evil is decidedly petty, but that's what's going on, isn't it?

He responds to an insult, responds to an ancient offense with an offense of his own. Once again, we have a character drawn in shades of gray.

This is not a dramatic hero. This is an ordinary guy with petty jealousies and the sort of ethnic issues that might even be rightly called racism.

[ 16 : 50 ] It's not a great picture, is it? I mean, at least he's now admitting to his Jewishness that was being hidden before. Verse 4, he admits to that now, but still, it is.

It's not a good picture. But it's a small thing, isn't it? Verses 5 and 6 show us Haman hasn't even noticed that Mordecai is not bowing down.

Haman kind of breezes through the crowd, seeing only the adulation that he expects, as there's this ripple of people bowing as he walks through. And Mordecai's defiance goes unobserved until other people bring it to his attention.

But once they do, once he knows Mordecai is bowing down, then it is the only thing he can see. Nothing else matters. No matter how many people bow down, he's not.

It's the only thing he can focus on. I mean, that's so often the way, isn't it? No matter how many positive things people say to us, it's the one criticism that we remember.

[ 17 : 52 ] So for Haman, it's not enough to punish Mordecai. Just like with Vashti, an example must be made.

Everyone must be brought into line, and others must pay for the perceived sins of one. In this case, every Jew across the whole empire must pay for Mordecai's sins.

So his decision not to bow down has changed the course of history for his entire people. Once again, just as in the days past, once again there is a threat to the very existence of God's people. Pharaoh commanding for the baby boys to be killed. It's an even greater threat than that. Not just the boys, the men, the women, the children, young and old, everyone annihilated.

I'm following on from this. Well, Haman goes to talk to Xerxes to get permission to act, and basically he uses the king's apparent near total disinterest in the affairs of his empire to his advantage.

[ 19 : 04 ] The king doesn't even bother to ask which people Haman has in mind to destroy, let alone, you know, consult with other advisors or take some time to think for himself. Nothing like that. And so we have this decree of utter destruction issued.

Verse 13, destroy, kill, and annihilate. I mean, any one of those three words would suffice, but the totality of destruction emphasized by these three terms in parallel.

The men, young and old, women and children. And so that famous postal system of the empire springs into action again. The verdict goes out. The edict is published across the empire.

And the king and Haman sit down to drink as the city of Susa wonders what on earth is going on. So the tension's rising, isn't it? There's no obvious means of rescue at hand.

The decree has been sent. It's done. There is, there's maybe a single glimmer of hope in these verses. A weak, faltering, guttering glimmer.

[ 20 : 09 ] But the day of action is set for the 12th month, the month of Adar. But at this point, we're only in the month of Nisan. The year has barely begun.

First month of the year. In other words, there is most of a year to do something about it. This, this destruction isn't happening tomorrow. Why is it not happening tomorrow?

Well, because Haman wanted to be sure that the gods would smile on his endeavor. And so he chose the date by casting lots. Verse seven. Haman casts his lots.

But as every good Jew knows, Proverbs 16, 33, the lot is cast into the lap. But it's every decision is from the Lord. God has provided time.

There's a glimmer of hope. So we move into chapter four. And as we do so, we know that something dramatic is going to be necessary. That the coming actions are going to be momentous.

[ 21 : 07 ] Big things are coming. Difficult decisions will be made. The sort of stuff that you know will have a long-term impact. But it takes a while before we get to those decisions being made. First up, Mordecai and the Jews across the empire, they register their protest.

Their distress is made public. Like, you know, protesters blocking the road in central London. The purpose of the sackcloth and ashes. The purpose of it here is to grab attention.

To say this is unjust. To register protest. To make people sit up and take notice. The people of the empire should know that this is unacceptable.

But sadly, Xerxes, the king in his palace, well, he's insulated from such things. He has no interest in hearing people, you know, spoiling his feast with wailing.

So anyone who's wearing sackcloth and ashes, well, they get no further than the gates. They can't come and protest to the king. They can't come and show him their distress.

[ 22 : 12 ] He's not interested. He's the billionaire playboy just enjoying his time in his palace with his harem and with the people coming in. You can come into my palace to feast, sure, but come in to talk to me and to protest what's going on.

Not a chance. So if Mordecai thought he was going to catch the king's attention for his plight with his sackcloth and ashes, if he thought that, you know, maybe the king would remember his past services, well, his plan there has failed completely.

So then Esther, hearing of Mordecai, sat outside, hearing of him sat in sackcloth and ashes, she offers a superficial solution to the problem that she sees.

Here, have some new clothes. As if what he's wearing is really the issue. It fails completely to get to the heart of what's going on, doesn't it? And so Hathak is appointed as the intermediary, one of the eunuchs of the king's court.

Verse 5, Esther and Mordecai carry out this entire conversation to and fro by means of sending messages through a third party. He can't come near the palace. She can't leave it.

[ 23 : 20 ] Hathak steps up. And verses 7 and 8, Mordecai presents his case to Esther. He sends, you know, the documentary evidence.

Here is the edict that has been published. He explains to her what's going on. He knows the details. You know, the amount of money that Haman promised to pay into the king's treasury. Mordecai has his information and he gives it to Esther so that she can decide what to do or rather not so that she can decide what to do.

He tells her what to do. He tells her that she must go to the king. She must go and beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Verse 8, Mordecai might not be able to present his distress before the king but surely Queen Esther can step up. And it's a great moment, isn't it, as we hear this story because we realize that there is hope after all.

That there is a potential avenue of rescue. It's that hope dawning but Esther shuts it down straight away. She's having none of it.

[ 24 : 29 ] And this policy that she presents where no one can approach the king without being summoned, surely this is plenty familiar to Mordecai already. He knows that this is a situation. In fact, Esther herself says all the king's officials and the people of the provinces know that this is how it goes.

I can't just go into the king's presence. Familiar to Mordecai but not familiar to us as the audience. And so as we realize this problem, then we're cast straight back down into despair again.

This approach seems futile. I mean, Esther is demonstrably out of favor. This woman who's supposedly Xerxes' wife has not seen him for a whole month.

She's well aware of how he's spent his nights without her. She sees others come and go from their quarters. Who's not feeling good about their relationship at this point, is she?

It seems entirely too plausible that the king will indeed see her executed for her presumption. So how dare Mordecai ask her to put her life on the line?

[ 25 : 40 ] And Mordecai's response when it comes in verse 13, it might well be taken as a threat, mightn't it? As he says to her, don't think that because you're in the king's house, you alone will escape.

It's ominous stuff, isn't it? But I think it's better to see it not so much as a threat as a warning. He's not actually so much asking her to put her life on the line as he's pointing out to her that it already is on the line.

Her possession already is under threat. There is a very real risk that she will die and her father's bloodline with her. Interestingly, he does have at least some degree of confidence that deliverance will come one way or another.

But that confidence hasn't prevented him from acting to see that deliverance arrive. And his challenge culminates in what I'm sure is the best-known phrase of the book of Esther.

Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. The last bit of that, at least, for such a time as this, is well known, isn't it?

[ 26 : 50 ] So Esther overcomes her fear and her reticence. She agrees to act even with the recognition that if I perish, I perish. Sensibly, she calls for the local Jews to fast with the assumption that this fasting is accompanied by prayer.

If I perish, I perish. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they said to Nebuchadnezzar, if we're thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it and he will deliver us from your majesty's hand.

But even if he does not, we want you to know, your majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. It's the same sentiment that Esther expresses here, isn't it?

I will do the right thing. Even though the cost might be as high as my very life, I will be faithful to God. So when Mordecai says to Esther, who knows, but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this, the challenge from Mordecai is to do the right thing, to do the right thing in the situation where you find yourself.

Part of what we saw last week was that God can and does work through even sinful actions, that nothing thwarts him from achieving that which he intends. And Mordecai is confident of that.

[ 28 : 13 ] one way or another, relief and deliverance will arise. But it's clear, isn't it? Ability to work through sin and failure notwithstanding, it's still clear that God's expectation from his people is faithfulness.

Faithfulness in difficult, dangerous circumstances. See, my friends, God's highest priority for you is not preserving your life.

It is that you will be faithful, that you will do the right thing even when it might be unpopular, even when it might cost you, that you will risk even your life for his purposes.

Boys and girls, we learned a few weeks back, didn't we, about Corrie ten Boom hiding the Jews in her house to keep them safe. She and her family, they did the right thing.

They did it at great personal risk. Well, Corrie ten Boom lived. Her sister Betsy died in Ravensbrook concentration camp.

[ 29 : 22 ] What they did was right despite what it cost. Now, God willing, you probably won't be called on to risk your life like Esther did and like Betsy ten Boom did.

but you may nevertheless be in numerous situations where doing the right thing is a risky business. Employed as a middle manager in some company or other, when a dehumanizing HR policy is

proposed that will clearly make money for the company but is morally wrong, well, will you in your middle management position protest at risk to your own job?

when you sit on the school parent council and the management team asks for perspectives on their inclusive education instructions from the government.

Will you speak up? Because if you do, you risk the good opinion of your peers and perhaps more besides. what about when your friend tells you about her plan to abort the unwanted fetus?

Will you speak in defense of that innocent life? Will you do that knowing it might cost you that friendship? Sometimes doing the right thing is risky.

[ 30 : 43 ] It might cost you. And yet, in each of those situations and countless more besides, given what stands to be gained, isn't it fair to ask, might you not be there for such a time as this?

Might it not be part of God's plan for your friendship that it will be the means of saving that life?

Might it not? Might he not have a purpose in bringing you to that position at work?

Couldn't it be precisely so that you can protest this move and benefit countless others? If we believe that God is in control of the universe, then don't we have to ask exactly that?

Don't we have to consider that perhaps this was his plan all along? But as we consider this, we need to watch out. Because standing here on the outside of this story, well, we're pretty confident that the answer to Mordecai's question is yes, right?

Yes, this is exactly why Esther is here. Yes, God has organized things so that she will be in position to do this. We know how things are going to turn out. Well, let's not lose sight of the fact that she did not know that.

[ 32 : 06 ] Mordecai says, who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? They don't know. She doesn't know with certainty that this is why God put her here.

In fact, the reasons why he put her there could have been completely different for all she knows. I mean, she's been in this position for a number of years by now. For all she knows, she's accomplished that which God intended. He might not preserve her life at all.

This king's been shown to be capricious. He's been uninterested in her the last 30 days. It is entirely plausible that he's affronted by her presumption and decides to trade her in for a newer model.

He's done it before. She does not know what will happen. She may well perish. And you and I in our daily lives, that's our situation, right?

I mean, maybe not quite so dramatically. But still, in that sense of we do not know whether this is why we're here. Faced with this challenging situation where the right thing to do is clear but may well be costly, we do not know whether this is why God has placed us here or not.

[ 33 : 22 ] Maybe he wants to teach us something precisely through the loss of the job that we value so highly. Maybe you'll have that conversation with your friend and the friendship will be over.

But one of her friends hears about it and is moved to go to a church and find out more about these Christians who care so much but you never even find out.

You never even know that that's what's happened. You do not know in these kinds of situations whether this is why God has you here and you don't know even if it is why he has you here, you don't know how that's going to pan out.

It would be a lot easier if God showed us all his plans, wouldn't it? He calls us to be faithful. He calls us to act on the basis of the best evidence that we have available.

It's always right to protest genocide. It's always right to cry out to those who could prevent it for them to do so. The right thing for Esther is clear.

[ 34 : 28 ] It's always right to seek to save a life. It's always right to look out for other people. You may well be in situations where the right thing is clear though it is difficult.

We don't know the answer to how things are going to turn out. We don't know whether this is why we're here. But what we do know is that God calls us to be faithful in those kind of circumstances.

And wonderfully, wonderfully as we are faithful there, we can trust in the certainty of what God actually has promised to us. The Jews of Esther's day, they saw the possibility of resurrection life dimly if at all.

It wasn't really part of their understanding of God's blessing but you and I, we know more fully, don't we? Jesus said to Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And so your life is not too high a price to pay for faithfulness to him because he who promised is faithful to you.

[ 35 : 43 ] GodSmitha!

? You and will you