

If I die, I die

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[0 : 00] Well, we discovered last week of the crisis that was around in Esther's day, the crisis of an empire-wide attack on God's people as wicked Haman had plotted to destroy the Jews.

And this was not just an attack on some of the people of the empire.

It was, of course, an attack on God's own people. And as I pointed out, if Haman had achieved his purpose, then I suspect all the Jews in the world would have been exterminated.

So Haman, though he doesn't realize it, is actually attacking God's saving plan for the world. For from the Jews would come the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord Jesus.

Now, I know some of you were really shocked by my talking about persecution last week. And I'm sorry if I shocked you, but I'm not sorry if I shocked you, because this is a good shock for you.

[1 : 23] A member of the congregation emailed me during the week and told me the following advice her mother gave her when she was 11 years old.

You must never deny Jesus, even if they kill you. That's very good advice to give an 11-year-old, isn't it?

Here's the next brilliant piece of advice. The day may come when you may not be allowed to have a Bible. Get the Bible into your head so no one can take it from you.

What very good advice. Because when we do face persecution, and perhaps the loss of our Bibles, that is a time when we will need the Word of God to sustain us and strengthen us.

Now, I often talk to ministers about their ministry. And again and again I've had people say to me, I had no idea ministry would be so difficult, that I would meet such conflict and such opposition.

[2 : 41] And I smile kindly, and I say, didn't you read the fine print in the New Testament? Then I say, as a matter of fact, it isn't fine print at all.

It's big print. And when Christians hear me talking about persecution, they say, but nobody warned me this was going to happen.

To which my reply is the same. Haven't you read the small print in the New Testament? And the Old Testament? As a matter of fact, it's not in small print, it's in big print.

Here's Paul. In 2 Timothy, all those who live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. You've been warned.

Or think of Jesus' words of invitation. If anyone would follow me, let them take up their cross daily and follow me. Does that not suggest that some trouble or some persecution or some distress, even death, might be your lot as a Christian?

[3 : 51] Now, at this point in any discussion, people say to me, but I don't feel strong enough to face persecution.

And I say, no, neither do I. But God gives strength and power when we need it, not when we're worrying about it. And we must trust God that if the day comes when we have to stand firm in the midst of persecution, that at that moment he will give us the strength to stand.

Well, in the midst of crisis, there are two questions that come from this passage of Esther.

The first simple questions. The first one is, do you trust God? Do you trust God? And the second is, do you love God's people?

Do you love God's people? Well, let's turn to Esther chapter four, when Mordecai learned of all that had been done.

[5 : 10] He tore his clothes, put on slight cloth and ashes, went into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. Poor Mordecai had tried to keep his Jewishness quiet, but now he's telling everybody about it, isn't he?

Because he's a Jew complaining publicly about the wicked decree of wicked Haman. But of course, he could only go as far as the king's gate, because no one was clothed in sackcloth, was allowed to

enter it.

And 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.

But extraordinarily, although this news about Haman's edict has gone throughout the whole empire, Esther in the king's harem doesn't know anything about it.

When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress.

[6 : 12] She sent clothes to him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.

So Esther sent Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to her, ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

So you have this bizarre picture of all the Jews in the empire, weeping and wailing and lying in sackcloth, and here's Esther sequestered in the king's harem, who doesn't know what has happened.

So Hathak went to Mordecai in the square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him everything, the exact amount of money Haman had promised, that was the bribe, and a copy of the text of the edict for the Jews' annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain to her.

And he told her to instruct her to go into the king's presence, to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. So not only had Mordecai now publicly demonstrated his Jewishness, now he was telling Esther, whom he'd formerly told to keep quiet about being a Jew, to go into the king's presence and to beg for her own people, thus declaring that she was also a Jew.

So Hathak went back and reported what Mordecai had said. She instructed him to say to Mordecai, all the king's officials and all the people of the royal provinces know that any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned, the king has but one law that they should be put to death, unless the king extends the golden scepter to them and spares their lives.

[7 : 56] But 30 days have passed since I was called to go to the king. So Esther is understandably nervous about approaching mighty man Xerxes.

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent this answer.

And this is the only time in the book of Esther where we read Mordecai's exact words. We read what he said before, that he's instructed this or done this.

This is the first time we hear Mordecai's voice. And it is really the center of the book. And we'll look at it very carefully, these verses 13 to 14.

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. He says, here's the first point.

[9 : 00] You are in danger. Secondly, he says, well, if you don't act, God will still rescue his people.

But if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place. But here's the danger. You and your father's family will perish.

That is, because you're in the king's court. And then the provocative question. And who knows but that you've come to your royal position for such a time as this?

Who knows that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

Who is the you? Well, it's Esther, of course. A Jew, but in exile. An orphan adopted by her uncle Mordecai.

[10 : 09] Beautiful Esther, who'd won the beauty competition. And the reward was to be married to a Gentile. Now queen of Persia, that great empire.

But compromised by her marriage. And powerless because of the despot she had as a husband.

And Mordecai is saying, God can use you.

Well, I was in Glasgow a couple of years ago, about to take part in an ordination service. And I was in a pew with some ministers, whom I had not met before.

And the man next to me turned to me and said, I'm a murderer. So I edged away as much as I could in a crowded pew.

[11 : 13] And I said, tell me about it. And he said, well, when I was 19 years old, I murdered a man here in Glasgow. He's brought up in a very tough neighborhood.

And he said, I went to prison. And that's a good thing, because otherwise I would have done more damage. And he said, when I was in prison, I became a Christian. And then I decided that God was calling me to the ministry.

So I started studying in prison. Left prison, 15 years later, whatever it was. Went to college. And now I'm a minister. So a reformed murderer, you'll be pleased to know.

But he said, I think I'm a second class minister because I was a murderer. I said, well, the apostle Paul was a murderer.

He went about murdering Christians. And look at the job he got. Apostle to the Gentiles, us included. We then talked on, as you might expect, about the fact that when we sin, sometimes we can't undo the consequences of our sin.

[12 : 34] But I said, God promises not to remember our sins if we confess them. He promises to forget them. That is, not act on them, not respond to them.

So I said, have you confessed your sin? He said, yes, I have. I said, then you're forgiven. And if you turned to God again tonight and said, I want to confess the murder I committed all those years ago, God would say, what murder?

I've forgotten it. You confessed it. I meet many people who were not adventurous in their Christian lives because of a guilty conscience.

I meet many Christians who, because of mistakes they've made as Christians, have lost their confidence in coming to God with confidence.

who've lost their belief that God might use them in some way, that God will hear and answer their prayers. But God is such a gracious God and such a forgiving God, and the blood of Jesus is so powerful that it cleanses us from all unrighteousness if we confess our sins.

[13 : 56] My dear sister, my dear brother, if you are walking around even today with something on your conscience which inhibits your devotion and wholehearted service of God, then please forget it, forgive, repent of it, and know that God has forgiven you.

You have come, Mordecai says, to your royal position for such a time as this.

Now when we read this, one response is, well, this was a very special occasion, and there was a special crisis, so God raised up a special person to act and rescue her people.

And that is true. But I want to say to you, it's also true that Mordecai's words to Esther apply to each one of us as well.

you have come to your position for such a time as this. Why do I say this?

[15 : 21] Well, we know from the book of Psalms that God has a mighty kingdom, that he rules over all things, that all things are under his power and his control.

We know that God rules nations, that God rules the universe. But God's rule is not just about the kind of, the big powers of the universe.

God's rule and God's care and God's appointment is also about the smallest details of our lives. Do you remember Psalm 139? You created my inmost being.

You knit me together in my mother's womb. I'll praise you because I'm fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

Even a baby being formed in its mother's womb is known to God and sustained by God and shaped and formed by God.

[16 : 23] That's how personal God's knowledge is. That's how personal God's care of us is. That's how deeply personal God's provision for us is.

I love the words from Psalm 31, which I often sing to myself. Psalm 31, verses 14 and 15.

I trust in you, O Lord. I say you are my God. My times are in your hand.

I was driving to the airport in a motor car, as you might expect, and running late and panicking. And I was reminded of this verse, so I started singing to God, my times are in your hands.

Even this ministry I'm about to do, even this being late for the airport is in your hands. See, everything is in the hands of God.

[17 : 33] Nothing escapes his hands and his care. Or again from Psalm 37. The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him.

Well, I was doing a children's talk once on Jesus' words about sparrows. Do you know what Jesus says about sparrows?

I hope you remember it. It's a great verse. You might need it in prison one day. Remember it. Here it is, Matthew 10, 29.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Will not one of them fall to the ground? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your father's care.

Are you not worth more than many sparrows? Well, what a comfort that is. When you look in the mirror in this morning and think, well, at least I'm worth more than many sparrows. Many sparrows are 12 or something like that.

[18 : 43] So at least I'm valuable to God. Well, I was doing a children's talk on this. So I said at the end, well, now I think we should pray for the sparrows of the world because God's caring for them. So why don't we pray for them?

So we prayed for sparrows who'd lost their mummies and daddies and sparrows who are feeling a bit thirsty and couldn't find anything to drink and sparrows who'd lost their way home that God would take them home again.

Was that a right thing to pray? Yes, certainly it was because God cares for sparrows. His eye is on the sparrow and he cares much more for you.

So you see, seeing ourselves in a strategic place for God is not just something that Esther should do but something that each one of us should do.

And I want you to take this to heart tonight because ordinary believers in their everyday lives and even their unknown actions are under the sovereign providential care and protection of God and God uses us, even ordinary believers, in our everyday lives even when we don't know it.

[20 : 01] I think I mentioned the other night about the fact that I wasn't brought up in a Christian family and I often wonder, well, who was praying for my conversion?

because I had two Christian grandparents. They were dead well before I was born. So who was actually praying for me? And I think the answer is that someone somewhere around the world was praying the Lord's Prayer, your kingdom come.

And God answered that prayer by converting me. Perhaps, if you're old enough, you were praying that prayer and God used your prayer to convert me or to do something else somewhere around the world.

But you see, we don't, we rarely see the answers to our prayers. Isn't that right? But is God hearing them? Yes, he is. Is God using them?

Yes, he is. I think I mentioned that the person who influenced me to start going to church was a non-Christian teacher at school.

[21 : 12] Well, actually, it was his father whom I never met who was a minister. And the strength of his witness was mediated through his unbelieving son so powerfully that I went home and said to my parents, I want to go to church.

Well, I never met the father of the teacher, but boy, I'm thankful his life, for his witness, and for his witness which his son recognized even if he didn't follow it.

And I imagine the father thought, well, I failed with my son, he isn't a Christian. But actually, God was using the father's witness to convert someone the father never met. Isn't that extraordinary? Later on, I was, we took my brother into college to study, he's going to study medicine, opened the door and there was a theological student sitting on his bed reading the Bible.

Don't know his name, he failed first year, but the fact that I saw someone reading the Bible had a profound effect on me, so much so that I began reading the Bible every day, beginning at Genesis and getting lost, I think, in Leviticus or something like that.

But my point is, how God used that person, though he has no idea the impact he had on my life. Truly, as Paul says, God works all things for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

[22 : 37] And dear friends, God is using you today, this night, even if you don't know it. I love going to church, you see, because I may not talk to all the other people who are at church, but the fact that they're there is an immense encouragement to me.

I know their names and I think, well, praise God that you're here today and still loving the Lord Jesus and still serving him. See, we have no idea the impact we are making on the world under the gracious hand of God.

Every human, every believer's life is of strategic and eternal value to God. God. And we should see ourselves at a moment of opportunity and a place of opportunity.

Yes, God works all things for good for those who love God according to his purpose. And Spurgeon says on this verse, everything, the most minute as well as the most magnificent, is ordered by the Lord whose kingdom rules over all.

And again, if God works all things for good, then nothing is left to work for ill. Do you remember what housekeeping was like during the Depression?

[24 : 08] You don't. Well, I do. Because people have told me about it. And the great thing in the Depression was to live economically and not waste anything.

Anything that could be reused was reused. Grandpa's trousers were used for Johnny and then George and then Fred and then Frida. Everything was reused. Nothing was thrown away. Everything was used. Well, you know, God is such a good housekeeper that nothing is wasted in his economy. No godliness is wasted by God.

No prayer is wasted by God. No sacrifice is wasted by God. No gift is wasted by God.

No service is wasted by God. No life is wasted by God. No witness is wasted by God.

[25 : 09] He uses it all for his glory. You are alive today for such a time as this.

See the opportunities. Trust God for the responsibility and trust that God is using you whether you know it or not for his glory this day this night.

what about Esther's reply? Mordecai said and who knows but you come to your royal position for such a time as this.

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 or day I and my attendants will fast as you do when this is done I'll go to the king even though it is against the law and if I perish I perish Esther's reply is remarkable it's immediate decisive and instructive please notice first of all she says you get fasting and I'll do some fasting as well that's saying she's trusting in God not her beauty and not her cleverness no she's trusting in God because to fast is to beg God to act and this is not a fast of mourning of distress as the earlier fast was this is a fast of intercession casting ourselves on God and saying please act please preserve us please rescue us and then these remarkable words I'll go to the king even though it's against the law and if I perish I perish Esther has moved from being powerless to being powerful she was a pawn pushed around by the king now she is taking royal authority and dignity and her if I perish I perish is not fatalism but determination to act whatever the cost she changes from being a beauty queen to being a saviour from being a hidden believer to being an active witness isn't that extraordinary what a transformation all this nervousness all the being careful has just disappeared it's just disappeared if I perish I perish

[28 : 01] I perish she might not succeed she's not sure of success she might be killed even before she enters the court of the king she might be killed as she approaches the king she might be killed after she has spoken to the king well here's a great saying better to serve God if I fail than to fail to serve God better to try and serve God even if I fail than to fail to serve God I hope you're as adventurous as that

Jesus dignifies humble self sacrificial service John writes this is love not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins dear friends since God so loved us we also ought to love one another no one has ever seen God but if we love one another God lives in us and his love is made complete in us well there's a challenge to trust God and love God's people sometimes God's people are lovable sometimes they are not as the little poem has it to live above with the saints we love will all be bliss and glory to live below with some of the saints we know is quite a different story but Esther trusted

God and Esther loved her people she loved the people of God and what a wily woman she is she appears before the king she's welcomed what is it Queen Esther the king asks what's your request even up to the half of the kingdom it'll be given to you I don't think he actually meant that but it sounds really good you know if it pleases the king replied Esther let the king come together with Haman come to a banquet I've prepared for him well the king and Haman are always ready for another banquet they love eating and drinking so that's going to be a winner so bring Haman at once the king said we may do what Esther asks you think well why didn't Esther just get up and say what she wanted to say well I think she was a wily woman who knew the situation in which she could best approach these two males food and drink always helps so the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther prepared as they were drinking wine the king again asked Esther now what is your petition it will be given to you what's your request anything give us another bottle of wine I'll be happy even up to the half of the king will be granted Esther replied my petition my request is this if the king regards me with favor if he pleases the king to grant my petition let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I'll prepare for them and then I will answer the king's question well you know our hearts the reality of our lives is revealed most clearly in our

reactions not our actions because when we decide to act we can often think well what is the right thing to do and we feel in control we've decided what to do we're going to do it we're we're faced with something unexpected when we have to react to an unexpected situation that's really a test of our character isn't it you see it's not very well being nice to people when you want to be nice to them but if they attack you you think well how do I react to this reactions our reaction to situations and to people is a very revealing test of our character how do you react when you feel out of your depth in an extreme situation in a crisis this is the real test it's okay to trust in

God when things are going well will you trust in God if your life falls apart and okay to enjoy being in a church where your friends are and you get on really well but will you love God's people when God puts next to you the very person you don't want to be next to you do you trust God do you love God's people may God in his kindness transform us into the image of his son by the power of his spirit so that we like Jesus can trust our heavenly father and lay down our lives for others for such a time as this I am willing to sacrifice myself to serve

[35 : 33] God God that could be a daily prayer couldn't it on this day whatever happens I am willing to sacrifice myself to serve God praise God for Esther praise praise God much more for our saviour the Lord Jesus Christ let's pray heavenly father we thank you that you do order all things for good and for your glory and we thank you that you order and rule our lives for our good and for your glory so please help us see ourselves as those placed strategically in this world to live for you to speak your words and to show your kindness and love in service and generosity please help us recognise ourselves as those made in your image made to reflect your character made to achieve your purposes and please renew your image in us by the power of the

Lord Jesus and by the power of your spirit in his name we pray Amen