

Esther 4:11-17 “Living with God in a Godless World”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We're going to keep talking about the goodness of God. this morning we're particularly going to talk about the story of Esther and learn together some of what it looks like to live in exile.

In other words, how to live with God when God seems absent. How to sustain hope when the promised land seems really far away.

How to live courageously when you're not the one in charge and those who are seem against you. Last week we saw the prophet Daniel.

We saw his friends in a foreign kingdom of Babylon when God's people are first taken into exile. This is now about a hundred years later. Yet another generation of exile still far from God's land.

[1 : 09] Now we're into the early fifth century BC in the kingdom of Persia. A new kingdom not set up according to God's laws. A new king who doesn't care about God's heart.

New threats to the very existence of God's people even in the moment that some of them are returning to Jerusalem. How do you live in a world so unfriendly to your God and your priorities? God's people then wrestled with that question and so do we. I want to bring it a bit more into our story before we read part of Esther's story.

These are glimpses into the lives of Southwood members. A college freshman who grew up in the church is sitting in world history class when the professor says, Is there anyone in here who actually thinks the stories in the Bible's Old Testament really happened?

Out to build a new reputation around new friends. Eager to start out on the right foot academically. Not wanting to be singled out.

[2 : 33] The student hesitates in the silence of the classroom. Praying briefly. But then he raises his hand.

A young couple sits in premarital counseling just weeks before their wedding day. They're talking about finances and the importance of addressing this student loan debt that they have.

But they got really excited last week at a conference about a work God is doing overseas. And they started talking about wanting to support it financially even though they have few resources and many needs.

They know it's going to put them behind many of their friends. They wrestle with the down payment that they had planned to use this money on. And then they pray and agree to give it away.

A long time employee has worked 15 years to move into middle management in her company. She's responsible enough there now that she's been in some HR meetings recently where decisions are being made that are going to hurt some of her fellow Christians in the office.

[3 : 44] The decisions are unethical but probably legal. After the last meeting she overheard her boss and some others laughing about how pretty soon there won't be any Bible thumpers around this office.

The safest way to keep her job and the paycheck that she desperately needs to support her kids is to stay quiet like usual.

She prays one more time and then knocks on her boss's door. Esther is a young Jewish orphan adopted by her older cousin Mordecai.

They live in Susa. It's the capital of the Persian Empire at the time. And they wonder when they can get back to Jerusalem. They wonder how long has it been since we heard anything from God.

And then through some remarkable events you can read about in the first chapters of Esther that serve to highlight the decadence, the pride, the immorality of the Persian king and culture.

[4 : 53] As well as through some, let's just say morally ambiguous decisions that Mordecai and Esther make that are just not the focus of the book.

Okay. Esther becomes the new queen of Persia. Married to a king, mind you, who is very unstable in his commitment to his wives, to say the least.

Very dishonorable in his treatment of women, period. And a king who has no idea of her Jewish ethnicity or her God.

Confusing. But a confusing and not particularly exciting situation gets worse. The king's trusted advisor, Haman, convinces him to issue an edict that all the Jewish people be killed.

Mordecai alerts Esther to this dangerous development. And he pleads with her to do something to rescue her people from the intended genocide that's coming against them.

[6 : 01] And Esther sends a reply to him in chapter 4. We're going to pick up the reading here at verse 11 as we read Esther's words in God's infallible word.

Esther 4 at verse 11. 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, Mordecai, listen, I've not been called to come into the king these 30 days.

They told Mordecai what Esther had said and 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.

[7 : 11] 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. If you've never heard the end of the story, it's actually quite enthralling.

There's lots of tension and irony and nuance to it. But for sake of time this morning, the key developments are Esther does go to the king.

And he does extend the golden scepter and offer her whatever she wants. And she is able to convince him to issue another edict, rescuing the people of God from destruction at the hands of the Persians.

[8 : 17] Moving Mordecai into great prominence in the king's court in place of Haman. Again, God rescues his people. Yet again, it's story after story we've seen that.

And this time, the young orphan girl become queen of Persia, whether she likes it or not, is at the center of God's amazing rescue.

Let's ask God to show us who he is in this and what he wants for us to learn today. Let's pray together. Father, it's a remarkable story.

You are indeed a remarkable God. And so as we look to understand, would you show us yourself, show us who you are, that those of us in whom you live may be faithful in our day.

That those of us struggling to see you in our day might see you afresh, might know your love, might be able to trust you even when we're unsure.

[9 : 29] Help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. There are only two books in the whole Old Testament out of 39, this is trivia, okay, where God is not mentioned at all.

One of them is the Song of Solomon. It's an extended poem celebrating marital love. Can you guess what the other one is? That's right, Zephaniah.

Yeah, exactly. So, no, of course, it's Esther, the one we're reading this morning. It seems to be a really intentional choice by the narrator of Esther to help us learn about God's silent sovereignty.

We talk about him being sovereign, in charge, but this is how he's in control, how he's behind the wheel, how he's at work, even when we don't see him or hear him, which for most of us is most of the time.

I mean, isn't that often the case for us? Imagine, for just a minute if you can, try to imagine a season of life, maybe a month or two, where you don't go to church at all, where you don't attend your grace group or any Bible study, where you don't even read the Bible on your own, okay?

[10 : 52] Nothing explicitly spiritual that you're involved in. I think if you imagine, most of us could go to work and watch the news and socialize and have a great couple of months and go a long time, perhaps even longer than a couple of months, without hearing about God.

Right? Without considering his role in our world or our life, we are not living surrounded every day by the smells of sacrifices from the temple.

Right? We're not living with Red Sea-like miracles in every moment. Neither is Esther. Where is God?

Have you asked that question? Perhaps when tragedy struck? Perhaps when faced with a difficult situation that you don't know how to handle?

Perhaps when everyone around you is living as though he doesn't exist and you think, maybe I should just move on without him too. Maybe that would be more effective, more efficient, more helpful in my life if I just stopped thinking about him.

[12 : 11] Where is God anyway? Well, once again, in a new situation, yet another of these Old Testament stories we've been tracking through, God is at work.

Generation after generation rescuing his people, showing them that they can trust him, reminding them and reminding us how much he values our relationship with him.

So even when we can't see him or understand what God is doing, he is always sovereign, always in charge.

And among other things, in Esther's story, what's he doing? He's always keeping his promises.

Notice verse 14 as Mordecai and Esther send these messages back and forth to one another.

If you keep silent, Esther, at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place. How does Mordecai know that? Well, Mordecai remembers God's covenant promises.

[13 : 21] We've seen them repeated through these stories, right? Remember, God has said he's going to make Israel into a great nation. He will bring from them the promised seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent.

Even more recently, that he will place a king forever on David's throne. Now, God's people have gone through all sorts of terrible suffering.

Suffering that I suspect they didn't expect, that we reading these stories may not have expected. Most of them right now are being disciplined, exiled, far from home. Not where they imagined the promises leading.

This is not the way it was supposed to go. But God is still faithful. Mordecai understands relief and deliverance will come.

I don't know what it'll look like, but this God always works to bring his people out of disaster into relationship with himself. Whatever else seems to be going on, you can count on it.

[14 : 22] God is keeping his promises. And specifically, Mordecai trusts God is rescuing his people. Mordecai here is really preaching the gospel to Esther even before Jesus comes.

Rescue will arise from somewhere. It doesn't mean it will go the way we expect. It doesn't mean that it won't cost us. It doesn't mean that it won't hurt. Some may well perish.

But Mordecai believes this rescuing God is present and at work. Working all things, Romans 8, 28, we say all things together for the good of those he has called.

Even when we can't see it, even when we don't know what he's doing, that's not required, is it? For him to be working for good. And this is actually the focus of Esther's story.

It's not primarily a morality lesson in the ways we sometimes think. The author ignores a lot of those questions that we think, wow, hold on, what's going on? Why is she not, why is he not saying, why are they not doing?

[15 : 34] What Esther is trying to do is give us another glimpse of the rescuing God who always fights for his beloved people. Aren't we grateful for that?

Don't you need to know that? Because one day, God himself is going to invade, to rescue us from certain death at the hands of our greatest enemies, and he is going to fight to bring us safely home. That's where this story's headed. He's a God who rescues people like that. One last thing you can always count on God being up to, positioning his people.

Notice the end of verse 14. Who knows, Mordecai says, who knows, Esther, whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Whether you have not come. It's a passive verb that, in other words, could well be translated. Who knows whether or not you have been brought.

[16 : 39] What? Implication by God. Brought by God to this place in the kingdom for this specific time. Is it possible, Esther, that God has put you in this unique place because he knows what's best for you and because he intends to use you for kingdom purposes that are beyond what you imagine?

Is it possible, Esther, that you feel abandoned and forgotten but that in God's eyes you are remembered and significant? Is it possible that even when you're in the heart of a pagan government surrounded by people and values that war against your God, that God intends you to see his strong arm fight for you, to deliver you, to provide for you so that you know him and that you love him more?

Is it possible that's what he's doing? Maybe, just maybe, young, neglected, orphan queen, Esther, is not so alone as it appears from her situation.

It's really hard for her to see God but Mordecai reminds her that doesn't mean that she should stop trusting him to show up or stop considering where he has placed her for his ultimate glory, for her ultimate good.

I bet there are a bunch of us here this morning that God is reminding that he's sovereign, that he's at work in your world, in your life, that he's really, really good at keeping promises.

[18 : 25] He's been faithfully keeping promises. He's been faithfully rescuing his people for generations and for millennia, longer than you've been around.

So when you ask, where is God? What is going on? Where are you, God? In some way or other, that's what he's up to for you, too.

If you can't figure it out right now, you can still trust him. You can't trace his hand, you can trust his heart, right? We've seen this over and over.

God's people keep learning that. And then, if you're willing to lean into that about him, as you see who he is, as you start trusting him afresh, then because you trust him, look where you are.

And as you look again at your situation, assume that he has not sinfully, of course, but silently and sovereignly put you right there.

[19 : 31] Now, that'll give you hope. That will change your perspective on where you are if God has put you exactly there. See, because of who God is, because he's the hero, because he is sovereign, even when he's silent, we can be different where God has placed us.

We're not without resources to know how to engage where he has called us in this world. We can actually live like Esther and Mordecai do here with what is remarkably bold faithfulness.

If you've not yet stopped to think long and hard about what they do, it's beyond what most of us have thought faithfulness would look like or potentially cost us.

because of who God always is, we see here that we, his people, must always be first expectant.

Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? That famous phrase, right? You might not have even known that was from Esther, but you've heard for such a time as this.

[20 : 44] God is always using his people in his time. Just think about who he's using at this particular time in their history. They're languishing in exile.

And some of them start to return to Jerusalem, the new kings allowing it. And who does God raise up? God raises up Ezra, an old preacher to give me some hope.

This preacher is going to remind them of his heart and their calling. God raises up Nehemiah, a veteran city planner and builder who humbly uses leadership gifts to rebuild the wall of the city.

And he raises up Esther, a young woman in the palace who uses her political connections to work for justice, to the protection of God's people.

faithful. You see, all of us are needed. All of us are called to be faithful wherever God has placed us. Paul says in Ephesians that God has prepared good works for all of us to do as we walk in the places, in the relationships that he has placed us in.

[22 : 05] There are works for you and me to walk in. because God is always at work, young Esther should expect that God has her where she is for a reason.

That she will get to be a part of his work in the world. I want to talk to young people for just a second. I didn't bring you up on the stairs because I'm going to cry when I try to say this anyway so you might as well be further away.

It will feel less awkward for you. Young people, the world in which you live is increasingly hostile to the heart of your God and the things that you've grown up being taught even to God's people sometimes.

You may be challenged at school maybe by friends even by a social media influencer who doesn't even know you will challenge you to compromise what you believe.

To give up on following God because it's just not worth it. To think perhaps that you can't do anything significant.

[23 : 20] Maybe you think like Esther can you imagine being this young girl who becomes the queen and all of a sudden all this pressure being put on you to stand up for God and maybe you think you don't have any special skills any track record of success living for God and maybe you think and I remember feeling this way if God's going to do something amazing he's going to use someone older than me.

There's got to be somebody smarter than me. There's got to be somebody who's more connected more popular you know.

But what if God put you not me but you in your classroom on your team on your dance squad in your friend group in your video game community what if he put you in that conversation specifically to be a light for him to tell the people around you what he's like to show his love to them even when they don't love you that way.

God loves you so much that he will go with you and use you there for his kingdom purposes so be expectant of that. If he wanted me to do it if he wanted your parents to do it he would have put them there.

But I don't get to go to third grade anymore. You do. I know you're thankful for that. You get to go right where God's put you and watch him work and he's doing it in your life right now.

[25 : 12] Look for that. Look for him to show up with you. Let me tell you something there is nothing more exciting in all your lives than to be a part of God rescuing and restoring people to relationship with him.

The special relationship that he made them for and helping them know that and feel that from you. There's nothing better that you'll ever be a part of. So when Esther expects God to use her, when we all get a glimpse that he's going to use us, we just go for it, right?

We stubbornly just put our head down and plow ahead, right? No. No, this is for all of us, young and old. She remains intentionally dependent upon him.

Look at verse 16. Go gather all the Jews to be found in Susa and hold a fast on my behalf. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.

I and my young women will also fast as you do. It's not a rush. I don't have to feel the pressure and the urgency, but I'm going to hold a fast and I need everybody to be fasting with me.

[26 : 27] That would have meant a time of refraining from eating in order to pray, in order to cry out to God, along with others of God's people, in order to remember that her hope was not in herself, but in her God.

Man, we need help remembering that. So often we rush quickly into doing what we can in our own strength, with our own strategies. We want to be the one who does things for God, but the fact that God is at work for us, it frees us from the pressure of performance to dependence on the divine. He's there. We can trust him. It's a bold move, isn't it? What might happen in those three days? Maybe they start carrying out the edict faster than anticipated.

No. It's a move requiring faith to believe that a plea to God would make any difference in her plea to a king who doesn't care about this God.

How big must this God be? That talking to him is going to help her talk to someone who doesn't even believe he exists. Christ. I was with a group of pastors this week, and we needed to spend time together praying that we would be dependent.

[27 : 46] We needed to do that repeatedly before and while we were being strategic. Are you like me, like us, sometimes a little slow to slow down?

A bit too eager to assume that courage or boldness means self-reliance? Not with the sovereign God at work on your behalf.

It's not all up to you. He puts you there in that position. He knows what he's doing. You can trust him to empower you there too if he's put you there. Finally, the hardest part of all this bold faithfulness to which we're called, I think you've seen this coming.

At the end of the verse, what is she say? And if I perish, I perish. Sound familiar?

Sound like the exiles from a hundred years ago facing the king's fiery furnace? Our God is able to deliver us, O king, but if he doesn't, if we perish, we perish.

[29 : 03] He's still faithful. There is a self-forgetfulness that I can't even imagine having unless you are deeply certain that God is keeping his promises and rescuing you no matter what happens to you here and now.

The question of self-forgetfulness may not always be a life-and-death decision, but it's still a tough one. Are you willing to use where God has put you for his kingdom and people rather than just for yourself?

To be more specific, are you willing to say your job, your family, your home, your time, your connections, your gifts are at his disposal to do with what he wants to for the sake of his kingdom even if it costs you?

I don't want to lose my job, my friend, my money. Where did it all come from, y'all?

He gave you the job. He gave you the talents to get in the position, the relationships to be included, the resources to be where you are.

[30 : 30] So Esther realizes because of that truth, because this is all from him, she can hold it all in an open hand, even what? Even her very life. It's a gift from him.

She's not in charge of it. She can trust him with that. If I perish, I perish. He's still worthy of my trust. He's given me this gift to use it for his glory according to his will.

With open hands as I receive his gifts, I can instead of clinging to the things, I can cling to him, the one who's faithful, and say, do whatever you will with me. That's bold faithfulness.

It is life saving, world changing, eternity impacting faithfulness. Human actions here by Esther and Mordecai that God commends right alongside divine sovereignty.

He's clearly at work. He's clearly in control. And Esther lives and acts. And God uses her powerfully right where he placed her to rescue thousands of his people.

[31 : 43] It doesn't always work out like that in the short term. God doesn't promise, does he, that the king will always extend the golden scepter? Did Esther get that promise ahead of time?

No. He does promise that we can trust him regardless as we boldly remember his goodness and sing about it over and over.

And so we realize that because of that we can forget ourselves. Seek first his kingdom and let him take care of us. The college freshman who raised his hand found himself in the professor's office later that day with a professor who was genuinely seeking truth, who had questions about the Bible that he wanted to ask someone who believed it and who wanted to know where he went to church and if he could go with him.

Not what the freshman saw coming. The young couple is married now. They're not the wealthiest family that I know but they're out of debt and faithfully, joyfully serving Christ's church.

The employee was eventually let go from her company but has found in a new season of life a renewed joy in where God has her.

[33 : 13] each of them was willing to lose to see kingdom gain. A lost grade, a lost nest egg, a lost job.

Worth it somehow in the service of the sovereign rescuing faithful God. would God make this a church family and community full of Esther-like bold faithfulness?

For such a time as this in an age of confusion, in the midst of a government shutdown, in grief and uncertainty, would we boldly and faithfully trust him and live like that?

See, the encouragement is you can live like her too. Wherever God has placed you, whatever difficult decision he asks you to make, whatever costly sacrifice you may have to make, you can live with expectancy and dependence and even self-forgetfulness.

Why? How? Because God is a father to us. Because he delights to give us good gifts that meet our deepest needs so that we can forget ourselves and still not be forgotten.

[34 : 41] Amazing. You can live this way only because as a good father to us, God sent Jesus as more than an example. Okay?

Esther can be an example, even an inspiration. I hope she is to some of you. But we need more than that. Jesus was willing to forget himself and stand as a representative for God's people facing certain death to say not if I perish but when I perish.

And your great mediator stood with bold faithfulness all the way to the cross in your place to ensure your protection, your eternal safety for even the moments when your faith fails, even when you don't come through like Esther.

He has come through once and for all for you. Praise the Lord. He has rescued you. But don't miss it.

This is beautiful. He didn't rescue you so you could sit complacently, fearfully, in a church pew, and hear about someone else's life.

[35 : 59] No. He also sent his spirit into you so that you're empowered to live with your father like he does, expectantly, dependently, self-forgetfully, just like him, boldly walking in all the good works he prepared specifically for you to walk in.

It may look and feel right now. From all you can tell, you are in a God-forsaken situation or world. You're not. In the worst, most dangerous, most overwhelming situation, God is at work.

A father to you who sent his son for you, who sent his spirit to be with you so that you can walk boldly to the throne of grace this morning and boldly to the throne of any king this week with faith that he is in control, that he is at work, that he is with you where he puts you.

We can be confident of this because as Paul reminds us, if God did not spare his own son but gave him up for us, he's not through with us.

[37 : 23] How will he not also with him graciously give us all things, graciously continue to work for his own glory, graciously keep us in his eternal good, he will.

At this table, he meets with you to assure you that he's worthy of your trust, to strengthen your faith in him that leads to your faithfulness for him.

Come meet with him. It was the night that Jesus was betrayed, sent to his death on a cross, that he sat with his disciples who were about to feel like they were in a really God-forsaken place, yes?

And here's what Jesus did, he took bread, and he broke it, and he gave it to them as I ministering in his name, give this bread to you. He said, take and eat, this is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me, and then he took the cup after supper and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins, drink from it all of you, for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

You say to a world that feels God-forsaken, my God has entered in to this world. He's given his life for me, he's not left me here alone, he's with me, and Jesus says keep doing this.

[39 : 08] Even after I leave, I'm going to send my spirit to meet with you at the invitation of King Jesus, Southwood welcomes all of you who are brothers and sisters in Christ, members of any of his churches, to come this morning and eat with us and with him at this table.

If you don't trust Jesus personally, or haven't yet professed that publicly, we're so glad that you are here to, and we invite you, if you would like to come and observe, we'd love to be able to talk with you up close, even pray with you.

If you prefer, please feel free, you're welcome to stay seated and just consider what King Jesus is offering. A king who would give his life to protect his people and invites us then into a life of purpose and rest and joy with him.

Hear that invitation, consider Jesus' love and life and death and resurrection for you as we come to this table.

Let me pray and then we'll partake. Jesus, what an amazing gift you gave us, not just one time to give your life once for all, but also to give us a gift of your presence in this meal, of your spirit sitting with us, whispering in our ear, in our lips, feeling that you've given your life for us, how will you not also keep caring for us into eternity?

[40 : 55] And so would you take very normal bread and wine and use it in a very special way in our hearts? In Jesus' name, amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

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