

For Such a Time as This

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Date: 16 December 2012

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- [0 : 00] Let's turn together to Esther chapter 4 and verse 12. Esther chapter 4 and verse 13 rather. Esther 4 verse 13. 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. I really hope by now that most of you have actually taken the time to read the book of Esther.
- It's not a long read. It's not a boring read either. If you're particularly if you read other books, stories, novels, the book of Esther is an intriguing book.
- [1 : 18] It is truly once you get into it, as they say about books, it's a real page turner. Because you genuinely, if you've never read it before, you just do not know where it's going to go.
- You don't know what the end of the story is. And I'm sure you'll agree with me that stories like that make the most fascinating and compelling reading. So if you've never read this before, then I really do hope that tonight you will use the evening wisely and read the rest of the story.
- Because it truly is keeps you at the edge of your seat. As well as being, of course, a fascinating insight into the way that the Persians lived and the way that the Jewish people lived in Persia.
- Right now, there seems to have been a revival of interest in history. We have all kinds of different programs going out on TV that are telling us about the history of the world.
- And, of course, that's a great thing to be reminded that we are not here. We didn't just suddenly appear in the 21st century. There have been centuries and centuries and indeed millennia in the past.
- [2 : 26] We've had forefathers and people and differing shifts and moods and cultures that have resulted in us being where we are today. And, of course, the book of Esther belongs to a particular culture around about 450 BC in the Persian, the vast Persian Empire.
- The king is Ahasuerus. And part of his kingdom are the dispersed Jewish people. God's people had been taken about 100, over 100 years before by Nebuchadnezzar.
- And many of them had stayed in the Persian Empire, including Esther and Mordecai. Some of them had gone back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.
- And eventually they would rebuild the walls, Nehemiah and Ezra and Micah. They tell us the story about how some of the Jews went back to Israel to rebuild their city of Jerusalem.
- But many of them stayed within the cities and the towns of Persia. They married. They had children. They settled down just as God had told them to do. And this is, of course, the Jews who are part of this empire.

[3 : 38] And yet, although they're part of the empire, they never belong to it properly. They're always conscious that there's a difference, that there's a separation between them and the rest of the world.

And that's the way God moves in his people. He keeps them to himself. That doesn't mean they're not to be an influence in the world. We are to be in the world and yet not of the world.

And if you can figure out how to adjust your life so that you're in the world and yet not of the world, then you're doing the will of God. You're obeying what God has commanded us to do.

Now, we've got to the point where Haman, you'll remember, of course, that Haman has devised a plan because he was elevated to a position of great authority next to the king himself.

And he expected everyone to bow down to him. And everyone did. And he received the honor and the glory that he expected to with everyone bowing down except for one man.

[4 : 46] And I tried to explain the last time, two weeks ago, why I thought or I believed that Mordecai, who was clearly a devout Jew and knew his history and knew what lay behind Haman and knew the way that Haman was motivated, he refused to bow down to him.

Because for Mordecai, I guess it was something like Shadrach, Mishach and Abednego's refusal to bow down to the idol which Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Because for him, it was an act of paying too much tribute and too much worship to one particular individual who was an avowed enemy of Israel.

I'll try to go through the history of that last time. But because of that, Haman clearly had sat down day after day after day and he had allowed this nagging, sinful thought to get through to him.

He, under his skin, you would have thought that somebody like Naaman, well, it wouldn't bother him because he had the rest of the kingdom, the rest of the empire in his pocket. He had the king in his pocket, it looked like.

[6 : 00] He was an advisor to the king and the king had elevated him and given him a position. You wouldn't imagine that one man and his refusal to bow down to him would make any difference to him and it certainly wouldn't get to him.

And yet it did because he allowed his own sense of pride to consume him. Never underestimate the potential of our sinful pride and our bitterness and our covetousness.

Once you allow it to get hold of you, you do not know where it's going to go. You are capable of anything. Don't make any mistake.

We are capable of anything. There are no limits to what a person might do in the right circumstances driven by his sinful emotions.

And every so often we are reminded of what lies, the capability that lies within the heart of every one of us.

[7 : 16] When we hear of one young man and you needn't try and look for some kind of illness in him. Because it's been proved time and time again that those who carry out such incredibly merciless acts are people like you and I.

Albeit they have a background, there are circumstances in their lives which have contributed to what they do. And I'm not saying that every one of us is going to do that.

Of course not. If that was to happen then the world would be in meltdown. But it always frightens me. When I hear of, when we hear from time to time of atrocities like happened in Connecticut two days ago.

That if one young man can do this, then others could do the same. Can you imagine what life would be like if others fulfilled their potential for evil which lies in every one of us?

And it's the same kind of sinful emotion that grew in the heart of Haman. It's all very well saying Haman was a wicked man. The Bible tells us we're all wicked.

[8 : 46] Every one of us. The heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked. And there's no use tonight in saying, ah but I'm not like that. You're not like that because you've come under the influence of good things.

You've been brought up in a balanced environment. And you have been, of course there's always the argument as to nature or nurture.

And what it is that drives one person to one thing and one person to another. And yet a lot of it is our own personal circumstances. So you can't point the finger at someone else and say and label him as wicked.

Every one of us, the Bible says, is fallen and capable of anything. And that's all the more reason tonight why we should recognize that and come to Jesus Christ.

Who's the only person who can forgive us for our sins and create within us a new heart. Anyway, Haman had taken it into his head that not only was he going to wreak havoc on Mordecai.

[9 : 48] That's what you would expect him to do. You would expect him to say to the king, look there's one man who's not obeying you. And he's not bowing down to me. And I think he should be made an example of in case others start the same thing.

And he should be put to death. That would have been no problem. The king would have done that. But instead of that, Haman saw his opportunity to raise the stakes.

And there was clearly something that lay at the back, a hatred against the Israelites. That lay dormant in the back of his mind and his soul. And he saw this as the opportunity to vent his ancient prejudices and his hatred against God's people.

And I tried to explain what these prejudices, where they would have come from, right going all the way back, centuries back. So for Haman, this was an opportunity that he must have spent hours devising and plotting.

How he was going to do this, how he was going to go into the king. And he was going to win the heart of the king over in his agreement to issue this order. That on a certain day, that all of the Jews across the empire would be exterminated.

[10 : 56] And this order was signed and sealed by the king. It went out and it wreaked havoc amongst God's people, understandably so. If you were in that position, you would be terrified.

Because you would know on that particular date, your days were literally numbered. And on that particular date, an army was going to come out. And just on account of you being a Jew, you would be put to death.

Your days were numbered. There was no hiding for any one of them. I guess they would single them out by their language, by their accent, or whatever it was that identified them as Jewish people.

The writing, as we say, was on the wall. It was only a matter of time. And of course, I guess with a heightened sense of his own responsibility in this Mordecai, he cried aloud.

He went into the marketplace, we're reading, into the courtyard, and he cried aloud. And he put off his clothes and he put sackcloth on, which was, of course, a sign amongst the ancient people of being in mourning.

[12 : 04] There was a massive dilemma. And I guess he must have felt that he should bear a lot of the responsibility of it.

He acted as far as his conscience led him. And yet, this was the consequences. These were the consequences of what he had done. And so, Esther, the queen from the palace, she hears about Mordecai because, obviously, there must have been a mechanism, a communication mechanism, where she would ask every so often how her cousin was.

She clearly wasn't allowed to speak to him herself. So there had to be this message person, this hathach. And he was going back and forward between Esther.

First of all, Esther asked Mordecai, why was he wearing sackcloth? Take some clothes. I'll give you some clothes so that you can put your sackcloth on. No, he says, I'm not going to take your clothes. So she says, why are you wearing sackcloth?

You're not actually allowed to wear sackcloth so near the palace. You're drawing attention to yourself. And he's saying, he passes a message on to her and he says, do you not realize what's happened? You obviously don't realize what danger your people are in because you are a Jewish person yourself.

[13 : 19] You are one of us. She clearly, it appears anyway, that she didn't know what was happening. So he had to prove it. He had to produce the paperwork. And he did so easily the order and the details as to the agreement that Hasuerus had come to with Haman in order to obliterate the Jews.

And so he says to Esther, please plead for us. You are the only person. You are the link between us and the king himself who is the only person who can change this order.

And Esther sends a message back through Hathachanis and she says, I can't. It is illegal for me to, without an invitation, go into the king's presence.

And the penalty is death. No one was allowed to come into the king's presence on pain of death. Unless, she says, unless he hands out, he holds out to me the golden scepter.

That's the only exception to this rule. And it very rarely ever happens. And it's at that point that Mordecai issues the final challenge.

[14 : 33] He says this. You don't have any option in this. Do not think that in the king's palace you are safe any more than 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.

There are three things that strike me about this. This challenge. This statement. This message that Mordecai sent to Esther.

That has become so well known throughout the centuries. Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. And that have given inspiration to many as a Christian down the ages.

And have reminded us that God is on the throne. And yet we have a significant part to play in the plan and the purposes of God.

[15 : 38] There's three things. First of all. The first thing that strikes me in all of this is the providence of God. The providence of God means the way in which God weaves his own plan into the world by means of the ordinary everyday conversations and interactions and events that take place all the way down to the lives of you and me.

God's providence is the way in which it mysteriously, everything mysteriously acts. We do not believe in a random world.

We don't believe that the world was created randomly. We don't believe that we have just come into being. And neither do we believe that the events in this world are to no purpose.

Now you might say, well, I believe that some events are to a purpose. But I really can't bring myself, I find it so difficult to believe that every single turn of a screw and step that I take and choice that I make and switch that I turn off and on, everything is included in God's providence some way to some kind of end result.

Yes, that is exactly what God's providence is. The God who created this world, and the only reason you find difficulty with it is because you, like me, are unable to fathom the mind and the ways of God.

[17 : 16] That's why the Bible says, as high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are God's thoughts above our thoughts. And that's why when we talk about providence, we place ourselves into the hands of God.

But does it not strike you that every single element in your life is providential? Does it not fill you with amazement?

Does it not fill you with amazement that you're here tonight? Why that you are born in the place where you were born at exactly the right time, at three minutes past twelve on the 4th of July 1963?

Why were you not born a day earlier or a day later? We say there's no purpose in it. Yes, there is. Yes, there is. Why were you conceived exactly the moment that you were conceived?

Why have you made the choices? Why were you placed in the family that you were placed in? Whether it's by way of parentage or whether you were adopted or whether you were brought up in whatever circumstances you were brought up.

[18 : 28] It's all there by providence. Now, that doesn't mean that your life's been easy. You might say, well, you don't know what I've gone through in my life. You don't know how hard my life has been.

Maybe so. But it does you no good to just throw your hands up in the air and say, well, we live in a random world. Whatever we'll be, we'll be.

The best thing you can do tonight is to recognize, to come to God and say, God, whatever hardship there's been in my life, somehow or other, I am here in this world because you have put me in the world and somehow, it's not that you're to blame, but somehow you have weaved the, the, the, the, every event in my life, somehow you can bring your own plan to pass in that.

See, that's the choice. You either, either God is in which case he's involved in this world in every detail, whether we can understand, of course we can't understand it.

That's the whole point of providence. We can't understand it. It's a mystery. And you cannot second guess what God is going to do tomorrow. Nobody can.

[19 : 54] And yet we have to submit to this, this mysterious principle that somehow or other, God is in this world in its every movement without being responsible for evil in this world.

Why were you not born in India? Why were you born in the 20th century? Why were, why, does it not strike you as, as being amazing that somehow or other we are the ones who are here on this particular date tonight?

Do you think that's an accident? It's not. There are no accidents with God. And it involves every single choice that we make.

Because, you know, when you think about it, every choice has consequences. I know that some choices have very few consequences.

But nevertheless, every choice that we make has an effect and another effect and another effect and another effect. And the effect goes into the future and it goes beyond us.

[21 : 10] And yet the Lord operates through that. Now that doesn't mean that you and I can say, oh well, it doesn't matter how I live then. In that case, if God is involved in everything, then I can do what I like because he'll just bring his purpose.

No, no, that's not the way to think about it at all. Because the other side of providence is that God holds us responsible for everything that we do.

And he will hold us responsible. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, says the New Testament, says Paul. We must all appear so that we may have given account of what we have done in the body, whether good or bad.

And so God's providence means that we are here tonight on the 16th of December, 2012, all together hearing this word because God has brought us here.

And he's given us the minds. This is the second thing that strikes me about this, is privilege. The privilege that God has given us this evening. Here was a woman who had been elevated to a place of great importance.

[22 : 18] She had been called, she had been chosen rather by the king out of how many other hundreds of girls that had been taken to his palace in order for him to inspect them and so on.

And she had been singled out amongst them. And perhaps she may have wondered, why is the Lord doing this? Why is the Lord allowing me to go?

She's been brought up as a Jew. She knows her Old Testament because that's all they had in those days, Moses and Abraham and the Exodus and the wilderness journey. She knew the living and the true God, presumably.

And I guess that like so many people, they wonder why the Lord is allowing this to happen to them. It was really a nightmare scenario, wasn't it?

Being called away from all that was precious to you in your home, being called into a foreign environment where you were expected to be part of the harem.

[23 : 23] And even as a queen, she would probably not know how to behave half the time. And she was probably on tender hooks, not knowing when the king would call her at any given moment. That's not an easy situation at all.

And in these kind of circumstances, we ask ourselves, what is the Lord doing? And then it was then when all of this blew up that Mordecai, he realized that God is in this all along.

Because he was all along. And he said to her that this is the time. Who knows, he says, if you keep silent, that's one of your options.

Relief and deliverance will come from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. But who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

And he reckoned in his own mind that all of a sudden that he saw a link, perhaps, maybe, between her being in the palace and what was taking place and the threat that was taking place against the Jews.

[24 : 31] And he put together the link. Because for him, faith did not mean, well, God will do whatever he wants. But faith meant taking hold of the opportunity as it came to them.

And that's what faith does mean. The third thing that comes to my mind in all of this is the purpose of God. God was determined in all of this.

You see, if you read this, you'll find people saying, of course, that there is no mention of God in Esther. We've said that a few times. And that, of course, is correct.

That God's name is not mentioned in Esther. You have to have the right spectacles on. And when you do, then God is everywhere in Esther. He exists in the behavior of his people.

Mordecai was clearly a man who rested and trusted in the Lord as his God. And who believed his actions all betray the fact that he believed that there was another power at work in him in order to save and to be with his people.

[25 : 37] And he believed that God was carrying out his purpose. But, of course, at first reading, it's hard to see what God is doing in this. Hindsight is a great thing.

We can go to this book and we can see how it fits into the pages of the Bible and how God, but they couldn't see it at the time. And what this great story does for us, it reminds us that God is determined to carry out his plan for this world.

What was that plan at that time? His plan was to send his own son in the fullness of time 450 years later and for his son to be born into that very race, the Jewish race that God had called centuries before in Abraham.

And he had promised him that all nations in the world would be blessed through him. And God was so determined he was going to stop at nothing. But that meant the faithfulness of his people.

God's plan is not something that he carries out just by himself. He takes his people and he places them in positions of influence.

[26 : 56] Now, that influence could be major influence like Esther, but it also could be minor influence. They all work together. Everything works together in the plan and the purpose of God.

But if nothing else, the Old Testament reminds us of how God was utterly determined.

Why was he so determined to save his people? What importance did the Jewish people have in any case? Were they not just one race over and against plenty other races in the world?

Well, here's the importance. That God had chosen them into which to send his son when he was born in Bethlehem.

Why was it so important that his son was to come into the world? Well, because God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

[27 : 59] Jesus was born to die. He was born among his own people so that they of all people would recognize him. And yet, instead of recognizing him and bowing down to him and worshiping him as the son of God, they refused him.

And they arrested him and took him to Pontius Pilate and had him condemned and crucified on a cross. And yet, that was God's plan to save us from our sins by the sacrifice of Jesus.

The New Testament tells us that it was by his death that we are set free from sin. And it's by coming to know what his death means and by coming to lay hold of his death by faith, to trust in Jesus, having been crucified at Calvary, that God sets us free from sin.

And in the mind of God, that plan had first priority. And nothing was going to stop the Lord bringing that to pass. And we are worshiping God tonight because he has sent his son into the world.

Because that son died for us in love, giving himself on the cross for us. That son was born into the world to die. He was born into the Jewish nation.

[29 : 28] And if it wasn't for Esther and what she did in pleading to the king, we're going to see in chapter 5 what Esther went and did as a result of Mordecai's pleading with her.

All of these individual actions and people God brought together in the course of time to do his will. And the same is true tonight for God's people.

Who knows what God has raised you and I up for. He has placed us into the world at a certain time with all the challenges that that world presents to us as God's.

I often feel that it's such an amazing thing that God has brought us. not 100 years ago, not 200 years ago.

I know how easy it is and how tempting it is for people to say, oh, I wish I lived 200 years ago. When churches were full and when people had a respect for the gospel and the Lord's Day and when the nation was so tied in with the Christian faith and when there was so much deference given to the Bible.

[30 : 46] People knew their Bibles. They knew their catechisms. Churches were flocked to everything. Everything was closed down. I know how tempting it is to sit and to wish that you were back in some bygone age.

We're not there. We're here. It's for a time like this that God has placed us into the world. He's made you what you are with your age and your opportunities and your talents and your gifts and he's placed you in your home with your husband or your wife and your children and he has given you a particular place in this world and we are to say, we are to in faith take these words, who knows but that the Lord has raised us up for a time like this and we are to believe that God has brought us to this place for a time like this and we are to respond to all the challenges of a world that is increasingly opposed to the Bible and to the Gospel.

Mordecai could have given up. Esther could have given up. He could have thrown up his hands in despair. But his duty was to take hold of the challenge that he saw and to use every opportunity to bring about the deliverance of God's people.

And it is in Mordecai's determined faith and in Esther's determined obedience, trembling as they were, not knowing what God, you see, none of us knows what God's going to do.

We don't know what God's going to do. We don't even know what he's going to do later on tonight, let alone tomorrow or next year. We don't know. And so tonight, we can be consumed by fear and that fear can lead to despair and we can end up saying, well, I can't do anything for the Lord.

[32 : 59] I am completely useless. Don't tell me that I'm any part whatsoever in what God is doing in modern day Scotland. that's not true.

God's plan includes all of us who belong to him and who follow Jesus. It might be something small. It might be something that only God sees and nobody else will pay any attention to and nobody else will notice.

But God has raised you to seize whatever opportunity lies in front of you. You are not here for your own pleasure.

You see, I believe that, I think I've said this before in Esther, that the great temptation amongst God's people, the Jews, in Persia was just to sort of settle down and to pretty much forget who they were because I guess a lot of them had good jobs and they kind of, it was easy, the easy option for them.

And I wonder sometimes why it was only some of them that went back to Jerusalem because going back to Jerusalem would have been a huge challenge to them. So the easy option would have been just to stay where they were.

[34 : 11] And I believe that part of this is God saying to the Jewish people, you're not going to be comfortable where you are. I'm going to stir things up. And that's what he says to his people in every generation.

If you're comfortable as a Christian tonight, then it's only a matter of time before God shakes us.

Because it's in adversity and in difficulty that we cry to the Lord. God's people all over this empire needed that threat, that danger in order to remind them of who they were.

And as a mass of, you know what they did, you know what the chapter ends with? They're all in sackcloth. They're all fasting. And every time God's people fasted in the Old Testament and the New Testament, that means that they were praying.

Perhaps many of them hadn't prayed for years and this was the first time in a long time that they were coming back to the God in whose hands they were.

[35 : 26] Perhaps that's what many of us need. But when God does that, he does it in love in order to stir up people, in order to bring them back to himself.

And sometimes it can be a very painful road, the road of being restored to a right relationship with him. Esther's words to Mordecai, they betray the fact that she depended on the prayers of God's people.

And if anything, this chapter, at least the end of it, it reminds us of the importance, how essential it is to be praying to the Lord for impossible things.

It's easy to pray for easy things, isn't it? It's easy to pray for obvious things. But how often do we pray for the impossible things? the things that stretch our faith to the very limit, the things that we actually in our heart of hearts don't believe that God's going to do.

Well, if that's the case, then your God is too small. Nothing is too hard for the Lord tonight. Nothing. He can do anything and we don't know what he's going to do but what we do know is this, that he's a great God, a merciful God, a God who's worth serving and knowing and following and loving and he's the safest place to be tonight.

[37 : 01] So make sure that you're in his kingdom. Let's pray. our Father in heaven, once again we pray that you will bless your word to us.

We thank you for it. We thank you for how relevant it is to a time in history when we do not know what our future holds. Lord, there's so many threats and dangers and so much uncertainty as to how your people are going to survive and thrive in the next few years.

And we ask, Lord, that in that secular hardened world that you will have mercy upon it and that you will blossom your church and that you will convict and convert many, many people and bring them into your kingdom so that the world may become the place, a place of worship, a place of peace, and a place, Lord, where your son is glorified.

In Jesus' name, Amen.