

“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”

I. Introduction

- A. What do you do when you find yourself in a difficult situation due, at least in part, to your disobedience to God’s revealed will?
1. J.I. Packer frames the question this way in his classic book *Knowing God*: “If I found I had driven into a bog, I should know I had missed the road. But this knowledge would not be of much comfort if I then had to stand helpless watching the car sink and vanish; the damage would be done, and that would be that. Is it the same when a Christian wakes up to the fact that he has missed God’s guidance and taken the wrong way? Is the damage irrevocable? Must he now be put off course for life?” [241]
 2. This is a good question for us to consider at this point in our study of Esther.
- B. We have already noted that a number of the decisions made by Esther and Mordecai were out of accord with what God had revealed to the people of Israel in his Word.
1. Mordecai should have taken his family back to Palestine, but instead he stayed in Susa, perhaps because it was the center of culture in the Persian empire.
 2. Esther should have made it clear that her religion forbade her to marry an idolater, but instead she became queen of Persia through her compliance and eagerness to please.
 3. Both Esther and Mordecai should have lived as those who were spiritually distinct from their pagan neighbors, but instead they kept quiet about their faith and blended in.
 4. In light of such failures, were Esther and Mordecai doomed to be off course for the rest of their lives?

5. Listen to how Packer answers this question: "Thank God, no. Our God is a God who not merely restores, but takes up our mistakes and follies into his plan for us and brings his good out of them." [241]
6. We begin to get a glimpse of how God is going to do this in Esther's and Mordecai's lives in the passage that is before us tonight.

II. Raising a Lament

- A. The passage begins by telling us about Mordecai's response when he learned of Haman's evil plot to wipe out the Jews.
 1. Mordecai tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and wailed aloud in public.
 2. And it wasn't just Mordecai who responded in this way.
 3. All the Jews throughout the kingdom of Persia were doing the same thing.
 4. The writer says that "there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes."
 5. This is a picture of an entire nation in mourning.
 6. Most of us can remember moments when our own nation experienced something like this.
 7. The entire country mourned when President Kennedy was assassinated, when the Space Shuttles exploded, when the September 11th attacks took place.
 8. Those were certainly tragic moments in our nation's history, but the thing that made the situation in Esther's day even more tragic was that these were God's covenant people.

9. These were the people through whom God had promised to bless all the peoples of the earth.
 10. How will God's promises be fulfilled if the covenant people are wiped out?
- B. Things like the rending of garments, the wearing of sackcloth, and wailing in public may seem strange to us, but these were traditional expressions of mourning in the ancient world.
1. Mourning does not look the same in every culture, but it is an important part of life in a fallen world.
 2. I think it is important for us to consider this, because many people in our culture are forgetting how to mourn.
 3. It is becoming more and more common for people to say that they don't want to mourn the death of a deceased loved one.
 4. Instead, they say they only want to celebrate the person's life.
 5. This is not the biblical way to respond to sadness and suffering.
 6. In the Bible, when bad things happen to God's people, they respond by raising a lament.
 7. Nearly one-third of the psalms are laments.
 8. Faith does not deal with suffering by pretending that the suffering isn't real.
 9. Faith cries out to God and asks for help.
 10. This is what Mordecai and the people of Israel are doing in this passage.
 11. It is what we need to do whenever troubles come into our lives.

- C. The writer tells us that Mordecai was not allowed to enter into the king's gate wearing his sackcloth.
1. This was not just a dress code.
 2. Ahasuerus made this law because he didn't want to be reminded of all of the sadness and suffering that took place outside his palace.
 3. He wanted to be able to enjoy his rich food and drink, and all of his concubines, in blissful ignorance of what was going on in the real world.
 4. This gives us insight into the king's utter insulation from the people over whom he rules.
 5. We saw another example of this at the end of chapter 3, where the city of Susa was thrown into confusion by the king's decree to wipe out the Jews but the king was completely oblivious, sitting down with Haman to drink.

III. Paralyzed by Fear

- A. In verse 4, the writer tells us that when Esther learned about what Mordecai was doing, she had no idea why he was so upset.
1. It would appear that Esther is the only Jew in the empire who doesn't know about the king's decree.
 2. Because she did such a good job at keeping her identity a secret and blending in, she wasn't even aware of the trials that were being faced by her people.
 3. This is what happens when believers allow themselves to get absorbed into the world.
 4. They lose touch with God's people.

5. They forget about the spiritual antithesis that always exists between the church and the world.
 6. They begin to live as if they belonged to the world rather than to Christ.
- B. When Esther sends one of the king's servants to investigate what is going on, Mordecai tells the servant about the king's decree, making special mention of the vast amount of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries.
1. He even gives the servant a copy of the decree.
 2. Then he instructs the servant to explain all of this to Esther and to command her to go to the king and plead for the Jews to be spared.
 3. Notice the use of that word "command" here.
 4. This is not the first time that we see Mordecai commanding Esther to do something after she was taken to the king's palace.
 5. Back in chapter 2 he commanded her not to make her Jewish identity known.
 6. Esther obeyed that command, and her obedience seems to have been one of the factors that resulted in her being made queen.
 7. But this is a different matter.
 8. How will Esther respond to Mordecai's command when it means putting her life on the line?
- C. After receiving the servant's report, Esther explains to Mordecai that the law of the palace said that no one was permitted to go into the king without first being summoned by him.

1. Those who went in to him unbidden were putting their life at risk.
 2. Esther may have been queen, but at this point the king seems to have grown bored with her.
 3. He had not called for her in thirty days.
 4. The honeymoon period was over, and the king's attention seems to have been drawn back to his many concubines.
- D. Esther clearly cared about her people, but she was also afraid of what might happen to her if she went in to see the king without being summoned.
1. This is something with which we can all identify.
 2. There are many moments in life when we know what we ought to do but also know that we may end up paying a price for doing it.
 3. Sometimes, the price is only a matter of being being ridiculed.
 4. That may not seem like much, but it is not something that anyone enjoys.
 5. At other times, the price can be considerably higher.
 6. What if doing the right thing will put your finances in jeopardy?
 7. What if it will potentially alienate a family member?
 8. What if it could put you in harm's way?
 9. Make no mistake, there are times in all of our lives when fear is a potential obstacle to faithfulness.

IV. Acting in Faith

A. When Mordecai hears Esther's fearful response, he issues one of the most memorable challenges in all of Scripture, saying, "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?" (4:13-14)

1. Several things stand out here.
2. First, take note of Mordecai's confidence.
3. He believes that deliverance will arise for the Jews.
4. This is not naive optimism; it is faith.
5. Mordecai believes that God will be faithful to what he has promised to his covenant people.

B. Another thing to note is that Mordecai does not shy away from warning Esther, even though she is the queen.

1. He tells her that she cannot hide from her true identity.
2. She will not be safe in the king's palace.
3. If she renounces her people, sooner or later she will share the fate of the enemies of her people.
4. Mordecai does not spell out exactly how this ruin will come about, but he is as confident of it as he is of Israel's deliverance.

C. This brings us to the last part of Mordecai's response, where he says, "who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

1. God's name is not mentioned here, but this is a clear reference to the doctrine of divine providence.

2. While there were a number of secondary factors that led to Esther becoming queen, the supreme cause was God himself.
3. He placed her in this position, and he did so in order that his purposes could be carried out through her.
4. Iain Duguid explains how astonishing such an idea would have been: "It is as if someone who has risen up the corporate ladder by shady manipulation of the books, along with neglecting his family and any connection with the church, were to be asked to stand up at a board meeting for his faith over a crucial issue. His response might well be, 'Could God really use someone like me after everything I've done -- or failed to do?' The surprising answer in Esther's case is yes! God's providence works through all kinds of sinners (which, after all, is the only material he has available)." [49]

D. Upon hearing Mordecai's challenge, Esther responds in faith.

1. She sees that clinging to her position as Queen of Persia would mean renouncing her citizenship in God's kingdom, and she is not willing to do that.
2. What the writer of Hebrews said about Moses is also true of Esther: she considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Persia.
3. She will go to the king, even though it may result in her death.

E. Before Esther takes this fateful step, she asks Mordecai to gather the Jews and hold a fast on her behalf.

1. There is no mention of prayer here, but it is implied because fasting and prayer always go together in the Bible.
2. Esther realizes that she cannot live as a private believer anymore.

3. She acknowledges her need for the support and prayers of her fellow believers.
 4. This is just as true today as it was then.
 5. No Christian should ever think that he can live a faithful Christian life on his own.
 6. We need the support and prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- F. This passage teaches us something about the role of fasting in the lives of God's people.
1. The main purpose of fasting is to help us to take serious matters more seriously.
 2. In the words of one commentator, "the whole point of fasting was to render the prayer experience more effective and prepare oneself for communion with God." (Baldwin, 80)
 3. By purposely depriving ourselves of food, we remind ourselves that there is more to life than mere physical existence.
 4. Fasting also creates time for prayer, allowing us to use the time that would have been spent preparing and eating a meal in prayer.
 5. When faced with life's important decisions and critical moments, fasting can be a helpful aid to our prayers.
- G. It is significant that Esther says, "if I perish, I perish" after calling for this fast.
1. This is not an expression of resignation.

2. Instead, it reminds us of what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said when they refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's image and faced the threat of being thrown into the fiery furnace.
3. They told the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18)
4. Like those young men, Esther realizes that she does not know God's will in this matter.
5. God cannot be manipulated into doing what we want him to do.
6. There is no guarantee of success when we make stands for God, but we still need to make those stands.
7. In the words of Iain Duguid, "It was up to God how to glorify himself through Esther's obedience, whether by delivering the people through her or allowing her to be martyred in his service, but he would be glorified one way or another." [Duguid, 57]

V. Conclusion

- A. Esther got so absorbed into the world that she almost forgot her true identity.
- B. But God reminded her that she owed her ultimate allegiance to him and his kingdom, and she responded in faith, letting go of everything else in order to cling to God.
- C. May God give us grace to do so the same thing, even considering the reproach that we sometimes receive as Christians to be greater wealth than all the treasures that this world has to offer.