

Relief and Deliverance Will Rise
Esther 4
October 30, 2022
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read Esther 4

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

William Wilberforce grew up in late eighteenth century England exposed to Christianity, but he did not embrace the faith until he was in his twenties when he was already a member of Parliament. As he grew in his faith and studied the Scriptures, he became very distraught by his country's slave trade. He considered leaving politics and pursuing the ministry, but others helped him see that he had a position within the government that he could leverage to fight slavery. At one point, the prime minister, William Pitt, gave him this charge: "Do not lose time, or the ground will be occupied by another." Wilberforce did not shrink from the monumental task, making it his life's work to introduce bill after bill to limit, and eventually end, slavery in the British Empire. As a result of his efforts and those of equally determined, likeminded men and women, England eventually outlawed slavery a good fifty years before the Emancipation Proclamation in America.¹

In 1940, facing a nation that was unsure if it was willing to fight the Nazis, Winston Churchill said, "Let us brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour." During the American Revolution, Patrick Henry said, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Nathan Hale said, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."² These men all knew when it was time to step forward with full courage and risk everything. In our Scripture passage today, we'll see that the time has come for someone to boldly step forward to confront a nationwide crisis.

Like William Wilberforce, Queen Esther needed to decide whether she was willing to step up and fight for those whose lives were at risk from unjust laws. Both had to come to realize that they had been given a position of influence that they could leverage to protect others. She was the only one who could do something about the upcoming slaughter of her people, but there was much at risk for her. She was urged to realize her unique position and the desperate consequences if she did not act. But she was still afraid. This was the ultimate "put up or shut up" moment, everything else in the book will flow from the decisions made in this chapter. This moment would define her as either nothing but a pretty face who let the luxuries of the palace cower her into silence, or as a bold intercessor who risked everything to save God's people.

A quick recap: the first two chapters of Esther describe the Persia king, Ahasuerus' "firing" his queen and bringing in hundreds of young women from around his kingdom to find a new queen. Esther, an orphaned Jewish girl who lived with her cousin, Mordecai, pleased the king the most and was chosen to be the new queen. A few years later, that cousin Mordecai so offended the king's right-hand man, Haman, that Haman put a plan into motion to have all the Jews killed by their neighbors in one day. We pick up this morning in chapter four, with the first five verses showing:

I. A Time for Mourning (vv. 1-5)

¹ Bryan R. Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence: The Gospel According to Esther* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), pp. 86-87.

² Charles Swindoll, *Esther: A Woman of Strength & Dignity* (Nashville: Word, 1997), p. 85.

¹ When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. ² He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. ³ And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. ⁴ When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. ⁵ Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.

If you've grown up in church hearing the Bible taught, like me you may have heard that phrase in verse 1 "sackcloth and ashes" and just translated it to "sad emotions/bad things are happening." Do you know what sackcloth is? It was a very rough garment made from a goat or a camel. The fact that it irritated your skin was the point; you wore it to highlight the fact that you were in mourning and distraught. Taking ashes from a burned-out fire and throwing them on yourself further expressed your misery.³ Though no one had died yet, Mordecai knew that the decree had gone out from the king declaring a day where everyone in the kingdom could kill their Jewish neighbors and plunder their goods. It was not only going to be allowed, but encouraged, even mandated. And Mordecai wasn't the only one lamenting; verse 3 says that Jews all over the nation exhibited the signs of great sorrow. Mordecai just happened to be in the capital city at the entrance to the king's palace where the decree was sent from.

You know the old saying, "When you make it big don't forget where you came from"? Esther had gotten big and famous, the queen of the realm, and had forgotten where she came from and who her people were. Here we have the contrast of Mordecai, who has heard and understood what the genocidal decree of the king meant, contrasted with the uninformed Esther, who was living her life surrounded by the luxuries of the palace. She didn't understand why he was acting crazy with grief, she was probably embarrassed that he wasn't wearing proper clothing, so she tried to get him to quit crying and get dressed properly, but he would not be consoled. She needed someone to wake her up to the evil plot that had been put in place that she was unaware of. So Esther and Mordecai started sending private messages back and forth. They used the 5th century BC's version of texting or Snapchat – sending a very reliable servant.

Mordecai's messages urged Esther that this was

II. A Time for Intervention (vv. 6-11)

⁶ Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, ⁷ and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. ⁹ And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 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, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

³ Jane Roach, *God's Mysterious Way: Embracing God's Providence in Esther* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2016), p. 147.

Mordecai made sure that Esther had all of the original documents to read about exactly what was coming, and made sure she understood that Haman was paying a huge sum of money to have their people, the Jews, destroyed. Mordecai had the messenger follow that up with a command to Esther to go to the king and beg him to stop the genocide. Once she saw how evil and destructive this plot was, surely she would be ready to do whatever she could to stop it, right?

Esther's response was basically, "You're asking me to throw everything away! You're actually asking me to commit suicide." She knew that she could be killed on the spot if she approached the king uninvited, and she was not invited in very often; it had been a full month since he had last summoned her. She knew that she had no power, no leverage; that he could just as easily do to her what he had done to the last queen. The key is in verse 8 – "*plead with him on behalf of her people*" – will Esther acknowledge that the Jews are her people? Up until now, Mordecai had advised her to keep her Jewish identity a secret, and she had followed that advice a little too well. But now she needed to identify with her people to save them. This, of course, was the hardest time to identify yourself as a Jew, it was essentially signing your own death wish. Her initial reaction was reluctance and fear. 2 Timothy 1:7 is one of my favorite verses, but one that I can't say that I embrace any better than Esther did: "*for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.*"

Esther perhaps initially thought that she could survive the purge but Mordecai set her straight. The last six verses lead to

III. A Time for Fasting (vv. 12-17)

¹² And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. 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. ¹⁴ 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?" ¹⁵ Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ "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." ¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Mordecai gave it to Esther straight: if you don't risk losing the palace, you'll lose everything anyways. If all of us Jews are killed, they'll come for you too. Unless you use the position that you were given, all will be lost. Now, Mordecai had great faith that God would not completely abandon His chosen people, regardless of what Esther decided to do: v. 14 - "*Relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place.*" How did he know this? Because he knew how God had pledged Himself to His people; that though God had allowed the Babylonians, Assyrians, and now the Persians to rule over His chosen people because of their sin and rebellion, that He would still protect a remnant and keep them from being wiped out. God always keeps a remnant of His people!

And then comes the rhetorical question that helps make sense of the whole book and shows us the guiding hand of God's providence: "*And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*" You remember what a rhetorical question is, right? One that implies the answer in the formulation of the question. The answer is: You were placed where you are to do this great thing! If you fail to act now, you will have missed the defining moment of your life, the moment that God has arranged and set you in the key position for. You will live with great regret, and it's clear that you won't even live that long. On the one hand: you're not indispensable, God can accomplish things without you. On the other hand: you have the opportunity to do something great!

There should be a long pause right before verse 15, Esther's final response, where the reader has a chance to ask him or herself:

- Will Esther do the hard thing and try to save her people, even at the risk of her own life?
- Or will she choose safety, the easy way out by not doing anything?

Esther realized that Mordecai was right, and so she took charge and acted decisively for the first time in the book. She barked out orders, "Get all the Jews that you can find together to fast; I'll do the same." She was determined that she'd speak to the king and try to save her people or die trying. "*If I perish, I perish*" was Esther's decisive turn. She stopped trying to protect herself, she stopped being intimidated by everything around her, and she now had purpose! From this point on, she would work on behalf of her people and not just for herself. She was isolated and disconnected from all the other Jews, but she would claim them as her people. Everything that happens after this in the book hinges on this decision. She embodied the saying: "Courage is not the absence of fear, courage is action in spite of fear."

Iain Duguid reminds us that Esther being the chosen deliverer is actually a bit of a surprise:

"Esther's rise to prominence through an ethically doubtful marriage to a pagan and the concealing of everything distinctly Jewish about her lifestyle for the past five or six years... 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.)"⁴

God using Esther, not only after her compromises but also her fear and hesitations, should encourage every one of us. We're all a jumble of mixed motives and half-hearted attempts at obedience and godliness. Praise God that He knows that and uses us anyways.

Conclusion

One of the great quotes from *The Fellowship of the Ring* is when Frodo tells Gandalf that he wishes that he didn't have to do what was being asked of him: "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." And Gandalf replies: "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." Gandalf has basically said: "You were meant *for such a time as this*." So are we. If we acknowledge that God has created us, we must also acknowledge that He has assigned us to the time and place that He has. I've heard people say things like, "I should have been born 50 years ago" or "I was born ahead of my time." For the believer in God's omniscience and providence, there's no such thing. God is no less intentional with our lives than He was with Mordecai's and Esther's. He placed you where you are and when you are for His good purposes. He's gifted you with your talents and abilities to pursue the line of work that you take on and use it for His glory. He has asked you to love your family, to give of your time, talent, and treasure to your church and other ministries, and to find ways to glorify Him by being salt and light here and now.

Have you had some ministry idea or way to serve Jesus that God has placed on your heart? You're sure that it would be a great idea and if it was done right could really impact a lot of people. So you've looked around and thought, "Hmm... I wonder why nobody else is doing this? I wonder who God will tap on the shoulder to start this up? I hope somebody has the time and energy to do this right." And then it hits you between the eyes: you're the one that God is tapping on the shoulder,

⁴ Iain Duguid, *Esther & Ruth* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2005), p. 49.

you're the one He's burdening and equipping for this. But rather than say, "Here I am, Lord, send me," you list all the reasons that you're not the right person for the job; why you're too busy or haven't earned enough credibility or clout to get things going. Think of Frodo, think of Esther, and most of all, think of Jesus. Life is risk and God has not called us to play it safe but to step out in faith!

Sometimes we need to look at ourselves and ask if we are in a position to accomplish something that God has put in front of us. Yes, my unchurched friend or neighbor might get invited to church by someone else or decide to go on their own, but if I have an opening and a chance to invite them, why wouldn't I? When we are too inert, fearful, lazy, or selfish, God can still accomplish His plans, as Mordecai told Esther. We just won't get the blessing of being involved. We also need to think about whether we are willing to stick out our necks for other people. When other people are threatened or put down, will you speak up for them? Like Esther, maybe you've achieved a high position in life. And you see a way that we can speak out for oppressed or mistreated people, but it might come at the cost of losing that high position. Can you come to the point where you can say with Esther, "*If I perish, I perish.*" Doing what's right is so important that I'm willing to risk everything. If I stand up for someone, I can say, "If I'm hurt, I'm hurt." Or "If I'm ridiculed, I'm ridiculed." Or "If I'm fired, I'm fired."⁵ God can provide for us in any situation; we can risk everything in life, knowing that our Lord sees and comes to our aid.

Let's put the idea of "Such a Time as This" and "If I Perish, I Perish" together in the life of Jesus. Jesus came at just the right time in history, Galatians 4:4 calls it the "*fullness of time... (when) God sent forth His Son... to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*" Jesus came to earth to accomplish a mission that His Father had given Him - to give His life for the salvation of His people. The stakes were high for Esther - she had to decide whether she would risk her life for her people. The stakes were higher for Jesus - He was fully aware that obeying His heavenly Father's plan for His life meant that He would be killed so that His death would act as a substitute for all those who put their faith in Him. There was no "*if I perish*" with Jesus, it was the plan all along for Him to die. But He pressed on, knowing that He was the uniquely positioned One who could intercede for His people. His death redeemed us, bearing the penalty of our sin and keeping us from the wrath of a just God.

Tomorrow is Halloween, but the greater celebration is that it is Reformation Day. It is the anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing the 95 Theses to the door of the church of Wittenberg, Germany in 1517, that is one of the defining moments of the Protestant Reformation. Luther had his "*if I perish, I perish*" moment where he stood before a church counsel that wanted to condemn him and then put him to death, and said, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other-my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." His courage in the face of threats and the power of the Roman church helped ignite a movement that restored God's word and the clear teaching of salvation through Christ alone, and justification by faith alone, to its rightful place in the church.

Luther also said this about salvation:

"Hereby it appears that the doctrine of the gospel... speaks nothing of our works or of the works of the law, but of the inscrutable mercy and love of God towards most wretched and miserable

⁵ Adapted from Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence: The Gospel According to Esther* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), pp. 80-89.

sinner. Our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law, and that we could never be delivered from it of our own power, sent His only Son into the world and laid upon Him all the sins of all men.”⁶

Beloved, you have a Savior who loves you and died to make you His own. And as His people, we can live our lives knowing that our work, our obedience, and our decisions can be used by God to accomplish His great purposes. You and I have been called here and now *“for such a time as this.”* May God give us the courage to pursue everything that He places in front of us, Amen.

Benediction

Romans 8:37-39 - *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

⁶ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, p. 182.