

Esther: Times Like These

#3 For such a time as this

Esther 4:1-17

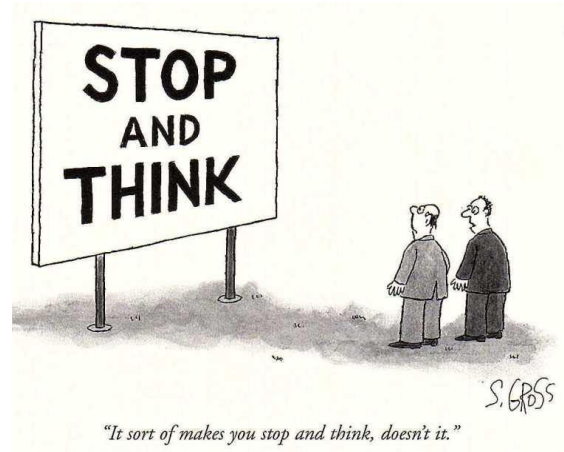
(Please read chapter 4 of The Book of Esther before reading on)

Intro – It all depends

What if everything depended on you?

Some people right now know this pressure all too well: mothers of infants, a single parent of a VCE student, an owner of a small business that had to close during COVID lockdown.

The Book of Esther in the Old Testament tells of someone on whom everything depended at a certain moment in time. It makes you stop and think! Imagine if future of a whole race, a whole religion lay squarely on your shoulders as it seemed to do for Queen Esther of Persia in the 5th century BC. More than just the survival of her people, the future of God's promise to bless all nations on earth seemed to depend on her!



As we heard in the reading today, Esther's cousin, Mordecai, said to her,

“If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14).

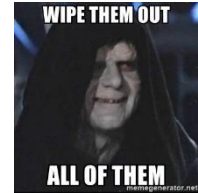
The Story So Far

Previously in the Book of Esther...

- A young Jewish woman named Esther was chosen to become queen of Persia against her will. She kept her family background a secret and lived in the King's harem to do his bidding.

- Esther's cousin, a Jewish exile named Mordecai, had remained in the city of Susa in the employment of the King.
- One day, Mordecai just happened to be in the right place at the right time and saved the king's life from an assassination attempt.
- But the reward due to him was given instead by the king to a genocidal megalomaniac named Haman.
- Haman's genetic disposition against the Jewish people stretched back through generations of religious battles and he convinced the king to wipe out Mordecai and all the Jews in Persia...

“wipe them all out, all of them.”



- A roll of the dice (*purim*) by Haman just happened to set the date for the slaughter 11 month away, buying the Jew's ample time for a miracle to save them.
- But, as we shall see, Esther wasn't just a pretty face but had inner qualities critical to the future of God's plan and God's people.



Now you're all caught up (as they say!)

Who will save?

As we pick up the drama in chapter 4 of *Esther*, Mordecai has learned of the now public plans of Haman and the king to destroy the Jewish people. Esther and the women isolated in the king's harem have no knowledge of what is to come. Esther chapter 4 we read...

¹When Mordecai learned about all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on burlap and ashes, and went out into the city, crying with a loud and bitter wail. ² He went as far as the gate of the palace, for no one was allowed to enter the palace gate while wearing clothes of mourning. ³ ... as news of the king's decree reached all the provinces, there was great mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, and wailed, and many people lay in burlap and ashes. ⁴ When Queen Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was deeply distressed. She sent clothing to him to replace the burlap, but he refused it.



Mordecai adopted a common oriental display of distress and grief. Hessian clothing and public wailing, however, were not merely signs of grief and protest in this case. When Hebrew people act like this in the Old Testament, it usually signifies turning to God; humble dependence on God in prayer.¹

For example, in Joel 2:12 God says to the people...

“Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts.
Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.”

In *this* book where God is not mentioned, perhaps there is still faith in the city of Susa!

Ignoring Esther’s concern for his wellbeing, Mordecai sent her an urgent plea. In verses 8 – 9 we read...

“... go to the king to beg for mercy and plead for her people.”

It must have sounded like he was saying, “Esther, it all depends on you!”²

Esther’s courage

Esther’s courage is about to shine through. But her initial reluctance to take up Mordecai’s challenge is understandable. In verse 11 she replies...

“All the king’s officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold sceptre...”

Queen Vashti had been banished because she would not make an appearance before the king (1:12). Now Esther knows she could be killed if she *does* appear before the king without being summoned! Reason to fear indeed!

Remember too that Esther’s journey to this point has been relatively powerless. She is a victim/survivor of terrible circumstances: plucked from normal life on the basis of outward appearance, restricted in movement, at the bidding of a reckless ruler, all the while having to hide her true identity for fear of reprisals.³

¹ E.g. 2 Sam. 12:22, Jonah 2:5-9, Ps. 35:13-14, Daniel 9:3-4)

² Is this a sign that there was hope in God, a matter of fate, heroism, or self-preservation?

³ Our sanitized re-telling of her story often misses this point, majoring on her opportunity and courage

Her moment of decision reminds us of other famous Old Testament figures...

- Joseph was a victim/survivor too. He was granted great opportunity by God in the courts of the Pharaoh to save others (Gen. 45:6-8)
- Daniel was powerless in Nebuchadnezzar's courts except for God's gift to discern dreams. He too was able to shape history (Daniel 2:24).
- Moses feared he was inadequate to lead the people of God out of trouble, yet with God's help they were saved (Exod 4:1-17).

Mordecai's delivered three challenges to Esther. In verses 13-14 he says...

1. "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed.
2. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die.
3. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"

Peter Adam points out⁴ that Mordecai's challenge holds in it an expectation that God is working behind the scenes.⁵

Mordecai seems to think God will fulfil His purposes either way. Esther has a choice to take her part as this coincidence, like others in the story, points to divine providence. Mordecai's message gives her a cosmic perspective. The Hebrew reader may have a biblical perspective asks, "Did it ever depend on Joseph alone? On Daniel? On Moses?" Perhaps Esther will step up and depend on God!

Esther acts immediately, at great risk to her own life.⁶ Now willing to show her true identity, she displays signs of faith and leadership. In verse 16 we read...

"Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die."

⁴ *Esther: For Such a Time as This (Reading The Bible Today Series)* by P Adam, (Paul Barnett Ed.)

⁵ Adam says it's like when we pray The Lord's Prayer – we know only God could make His name hallowed. Only God could make the kingdom come in this world, as in heaven.

⁶ Though it should be remembered that if she approaches the king she *may* die, if she opts out Mordecai says she will surely die

Karen Jobes⁷ makes the link again to the Prophet Joel. She says, Esther's call for a fast across the land reminds us of the blowing of 'the trumpet in Zion' in the Book of Joel to see if the Lord may relent from sending this calamity on the people.⁸ For the first time in this story Esther identifies herself with God's people and responds to the prophetic call to repentance by joining (them) in the fast.

What's in it for us?

Esther's critical moment in time had the potential to avert genocide and to protect God's age-old plan and promise to bless all nations through His people.

I don't expect you will have such responsibility in any decision you take this afternoon! Nor does the narrator pause after verse 16 and say to you, "go and do likewise"! This is not a book of example followed by instruction.⁹

Christians know that Jesus Christ has now fulfilled those ancient promises of God that were at stake in Esther's time (Gal. 3:14). We now depend on the messiah God sent from Esther's as saviour from sin and death. Through Christ, God's gracious blessing of peace and hope is now available to all.

So, what's the lesson for us if it all depends on Christ?

Let's consider the two key statements of faith in this chapter:

1. Mordecai: "for such a time as this"
2. Esther: "If I die, so be it."

1. Moredecai: "for such a time as this"

In response to Mordecai's words, as a church we should consider how God may grant us opportunity at certain points in time to take a costly stand - especially on behalf of those who are vulnerable or treated unjustly.

- Imagine the challenge it must have been for Oscar Romero and his church in San Salvador in the 1970's against the facists, or

⁷ *Esther* (NIV Application Commentary) by K Jobes

⁸ Joel 2:1-14

⁹ From time to time I have met people with a messiah complex for whom examples such as Esther in Scripture (though more likely Daniel) is justification of reckless self-importance

- Consider the struggle of Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragettes against church and government in the early 1900's standing for women's rights.

You and I may never be written into history like them, but God may give us opportunity to take our part for significant action.

- Perhaps in our time it may be for climate action – giving greater honour to God's creation and advocating for those most affected by human wastefulness;
- Maybe it will be in relation to reconciliation with indigenous peoples in our nation by choosing to work with aboriginal people to bring about justice that reflects the Gospel.

2. Esther: "if I die, I die"

In response to Esther's commitment, we should remember that Jesus promises to be with us in *our* sacrificial acts of love:

- Esther's willingness to risk all for her people reminds us of Jesus' proverb: "Greater love has no one than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13) – a motto he embodied;
- Jesus called his follower to love others just as he loved us (John 13:34-35), and promised that it doesn't all depend on us. Instead, "God lives in us and God's love is made complete in us" as we sacrificially love others (1 John 4:10-12).

Our moments may be far less dramatic than Mordecai and Esther, but we should ask for what purposes God has prepared this church, at this time?

It all depends...

So, it turns out, it all depends on Christ. The New Testament assures us that our standing before our holy God is secure in him and his divine love is at work in our sacrificial acts of love.¹⁰

Costly love for the sake of others is challenging and hard. We may never face decisions of the magnitude of Esther or of Jesus for that matter. Yet, love is the stuff of Christian discipleship. There may be a moment coming your way even today. Your faith may be stretched, your fears may be exposed. But Mordecai

¹⁰ E.g. Ephesians 2:8-10

and Esther remind us that God is with us and God is for us in our acts of love and grace.

A prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace and acceptance of each of us through Jesus Christ. Thank you that you shape our lives by your Spirit to bring you glory. Grant us the time, the gifts, the health, the energy, and the opportunity to do the good works of love that you have prepared beforehand for us to do, and be with us as you promise in our acts of love and grace. Amen.