

For Such a Time as This

Esther

By Iain Wright

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Bible Text: Esther 4; 2 Kings 5:1-14

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Covenant OPC

9340 W 147th Street

Orland Park, Illinois 60462

Online Sermons: <http://www.sermonaudio.com/covenantopc>

I'd like us this morning to continue our study in the book of Esther, as we consider together the import of this fourth chapter. And if there is one particular verse that we should bear in mind, then it would be that verse fourteen. Who knows? Perhaps you have been raised up for such a time as this. For such a time as this. A little while ago, we read together from Paul's letter to the church in Colossae in which he would have us set our mind upon the things that are above.

It is by setting our mind upon the things that are above that we stir ourselves, and steel ourselves, for whatever this week has to offer us. We know not what the next hour may bring for us. God forbid that any harm might befall any of us as we return home from the place of worship. But our lives, quite literally, hang by a thread. We know not but that some accident may befall one of us, or more, even as we turn to our own home. We talk about the safety of our own homes, and yet we know that accidents happen there also.

We will set our minds on the things that are above, so that we should put our lives day by day in the context of lives which are in the hand of our Father in heaven. And so, as we read through this story, we are convinced that it is not merely a story from ancient history which we might read because we have an interest in things that have happened long ago. Perhaps few of us would be entertained for very long if that were all that it were. But rather, we look at this particular passage of God's Word, and we say, "I want to see God's hand at work, even as it is made explicit for us in 2 Kings." For the reason that Naman found favor, the reason why he had achieved high office, was because it was through him that the Lord had given success to Syria.

Esther, as we have marked before, is one of the two books in Scripture where God is not mentioned at all, and I do not believe for one moment that that is mere accident, but is a vital lesson for us that even when God is not explicitly mentioned, that we can see and trace the operation of God's gracious providences being brought to bear. Mordecai was not blind to these things when he says to Esther, "Who knows. Perhaps you have been raised up for such a time as this."

So we read this chapter, and we do so with the eye of faith. We do so not looking at it merely as some record of an historical event long since passed. We read of it as the story of God's using circumstances in order to bring about salvation. And of course, as we look

towards the end of the book, and we will deal with that, God willing, in due course, we see how deliverance is brought about. But Mordecai already has that anticipation as he speaks to Esther. "Do not think that you will escape because you keep silent about this. The Lord will save His people! God has to save His people!" Right from the very beginning, God is always the one who is saving His people. Mordecai was confident in the God who had revealed Himself already in Scripture. God is not going to allow His people to be exterminated, because salvation will come through God's people. The Messiah had not come. The Promised One had not yet been brought into this world. And God's plans and purposes cannot be thwarted. "God will raise up a means of saving His people. The question for you, Esther, is are you going to be part of that salvation, or are you going to be swept aside."

So, as we contemplate these things, we come to the Word of God, and we ask, "What lessons has this chapter for me? How can I read this with the eye of faith, and say, 'Now, I want to stir my own heart as I read through this particular chapter.' I want to say, 'I want to learn what God has set before me, so that when, if in God's providence, I find myself in something of a parallel situation, well, it should not be as dramatic as the wiping out of the entire people of God. It may be my personal difficulties that I'm facing. How can I stir my heart before the living God to have confidence there to do what Paul says in the book of Colossians to set our minds on the things that are above?'" In other words, don't be so focused upon the difficulties that are set before us, but to see them in the context that "I belong to God." The pathway leads through a valley of great trial and tribulation. It may be a dark valley for us, but it is a valley which will ultimately lead us to the place where God will reign supreme and will show us His grace and glory.

We sang together from Psalm 23. There is a very good reason why that psalm is surely the most beloved and favored of all psalms. But it does not hide from our view the difficulties through which at times we sometimes go. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." There is the bluntness of Scripture. I might pass through that valley, but how does the psalm conclude? "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." We look back therefore to the valley of the shadow of death that the psalmist speaks of. He says, "While I was going through the valley of the shadow of death, goodness and mercy were following me." Perhaps in the darkness our vision is impaired. We don't see as clearly in the dark as we do in the light, but that is not to say that they are not there present. Our confidence is this day that whether it is today or tomorrow, next month or next year, whenever we pass through that valley, whether it is to us as a valley of the shadow of death, goodness and mercy will follow us, and we shall dwell in the house of our God forever.

So we stir our hearts, we set our minds upon the things that are above, and we rehearse for the encouragement of our souls. Who is this God that I worship? He is a God who is powerful, and a God who is wise, and a God who is kind. He makes known His love to me, and I can trust such a God, even when He takes me along the path which after the flesh I say, "Father, I don't want to tread this path! It seems dark! There are many fears for me here. This is not the path that I would choose for myself! But I know my God, and I know that my God is powerful, so that He can protect me in the midst of great

difficulties. I know that my God is good, and He will not lead me anywhere which will be damaging to my soul. I know that my God is good and kind. And if it is His pleasure to lead me along this path, I know that even that will result in a greater blessing, and, therefore, I trust Him." And my prayer becomes, "Lord, not so much let me put my hand in yours, so that I can hold onto you, but, Lord, hold onto me." And that is where my confidence shall lie. Even when God is at work, does not announce Himself, does not state clearly from the pages of this book, "This is God's doing." We, as it were, lift up the words, and peek underneath the words, and say, "But I can see God's hand at work through all of this. God has orchestrated these things." "Now, Esther, recognize that you have been raised up for such a time as this, and the path may be difficult, but we are in the hand of our God."

How often have we comforted ourselves with words which are well known to us from the Heidelberg Catechism that my only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own. I am not my own, but I belong to my faithful Savior. Now, I have to say the first question and answer to the Heidelberg is not quite as memorable as the first question of the Shorter Catechism, because the first question of the Shorter Catechism is only about one line long, and the first question and answer of the Heidelberg is many lines long. It doesn't commit to memory quite the same way, but we bless the Lord for the wisdom, the pastoral wisdom, of those men that wrote that. It not only speaks to us of our confidence that we belong to our precious Savior, but that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father. God's providences. Mordecai knew that. God's providences are being worked out. "Not a hair will fall from my head without the will of my Father." Of course, these words are rooted in Scripture. This is not the pious hope of godly men aside from Scripture, but the teaching of the Word of the God. Not a sparrow will fall to earth, but your Father knows about it.

Well, let's just examine for a moment what's happening with Esther and with Mordecai. Mordecai is presented with something of a problem. He knew that the Jews were to be exterminated by royal decree, but he had a difficulty. He wanted to get a message to Esther, but of course the one person that he couldn't speak to was Esther. He couldn't come into the place where the wives of this Middle Eastern potentate were kept. They were kept away from contact with all men except with contact with eunuchs. So what is it that Mordecai does? Well, what he could have done, what sometimes what we do is just give up. We could say, "Well, it's hopeless! I would speak to her if I could, but I'm not permitted to do so, therefore, I'll just abandon the project." But Mordecai is a practical man, and many of you I know, most of you, all of you with the exception of your pastors probably, are practical men. And Mordecai has a very practical response. You read it in the way in which he goes around Susa, the capital city. He puts on sackcloth and ashes, and he goes into the very midst of the city, and then he cries with a very loud voice.

So, here you have somebody who has some status, not a very high one. He's not the prime minister has Haman is to King Ahasuerus, but he has some status in the community. He puts on sackcloth and ashes, and, quite literally, makes a public spectacle of himself. He draws attention to himself, and that's part of his plan. Now, of course he had reason to do so. The reason he put on the sackcloth and ashes is because the proposed

extermination of the Jews, and the Jews in the other cities of the empire, likewise, put on their sackcloth and ashes to demonstrate before the world that they were mourning for this decree that had gone out.

So as he approaches toward the king's palace, of course you're not allowed into the king's palace, well, the king doesn't want a bunch of unhappy people around him. So far be it for a man wearing sackcloth and ashes to be admitted into his presence. "Oh, happy, smiling faces please, thank you very much." So, he gets as close to the palace as he can, and he continues to wail out with a loud voice until reports of it come to Esther's ear, and she sends out the eunuch saying, "What's going on?" You see the way in which Mordecai has found a way to speak to somebody that he's not allowed to speak to. We're not called upon as Christians to basically just turn over everything to God, then wipe our hands and say, "Well, I've prayed about it, and now I have nothing to do." Nehemiah prayed to God and posted a guard. Practical man. He knew that he needed to pray about it when Sanballat, Tobiah, and the other folks wanted to destroy Jerusalem, so he appointed a prayer meeting but in a prayer meeting at which he took his sword. Or Peter in prison when he is set free by the angel. He can't open the prison doors for himself, but he can put on his shoes for himself, and so the angel said, "Put your shoes on. Put your coat on." What we can do, we are expected to do. We are not called to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. Here, rather, we have Mordecai doing what he can do, and finding new and imaginative ways to do it, and not yielding too quickly to, "No, it can't be done." Mordecai prays in the midst of the city. He cries out with a loud voice, covers himself with sackcloth and ashes, and gets as close to Esther as he can until Esther sends out somebody in order to speak to him.

But, you know, there is a downside to being practical as well. Mordecai shows us, as it were, the positive. He thinks his way around the problem. Esther is somewhat practically minded as well, and she sees the problem all too clearly. She has a healthy regard for the negative. She doesn't present herself to us in the pages of Scripture with a can do attitude and say, "Okay, you've told me what the problem is, you've told me what I can do, and I'll go off and do it." No, she comes back and says, "Well, do you realize what the implications of what you've asked me to do are?" You see, sometimes the can do attitude may be self-confidence masquerading as piety. It's not, "the Lord can do this," but "I can do this. I can go before the king. I can present your petition. I can set the people free."

No, there is a realism that is presented to us in the pages of Scripture. Esther knows what the penalties are. One thing she is not is presumptuous. She doesn't presume upon God's protection and say, "All I have to do is speak to the king, and everything will be fine." "Do you realize what the penalties are?" Well, of course Mordecai must have known what the penalties are. But she says it nonetheless. "If I just go into the presence of the king without being sent for, then I risk death, unless he should extend his scepter towards me. Now, think about this. I haven't been before the king for the last thirty days." I think that's meant to indicate to us that she had in some sense fallen into disfavor. If she hadn't gone as far as falling into disfavor, she certainly wasn't every day before the king. Thirty days! More than four weeks had passed since she had last seen the face of the king. "And then you just want me to just walk into his presence when he hasn't bidden me. He hasn't

thought about me for the last four weeks. I'm just going to stroll up to him and say, 'Do you mind overturning that decree of yours?'" Esther was practical as well. She saw the dangers. She saw them all too clearly. And if you think that seems like a rather arbitrary use of power on the part of a king, well, what do you expect from a king back in the two and one half thousand years ago who had the complete rule of life and death? You enter into his presence and you are immediately, unless he extends the royal scepter, you are put to death. Aren't you glad you don't have a king? Well, maybe. But you try just bursting into the Oval Office without being asked, and you will find yourself covered with secret servicemen like a rash and they'll be on top of you. They won't see you at all but a bunch of black suits with men with hearing aids. They'll be all over you. Why? Because you can't just burst into the presence of the President. Why not? Because you may be a threat to his life. And that's exactly what was going on in the court of King Ahasuerus. If you came unbidden, it may be that you had come to kill the king.

So there is very good reason why Esther would be afraid to enter into the presence. There is a reason for that law. But Esther is persuaded and knows what she has to do. But though there's not a shadow of presumption in Esther, she says, "Go and tell the people to be praying for me. Be serious about it. Three days. Three nights. No food, morning or evening, night or day. Pray for me, and I'll go to the king. And if I perish, I perish." We find that sentiment in other places in Scripture. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego whose story is well known to you. As they are had up before King Nebuchadnezzar, what is they say? "Well, we're not going to bend the knee to your statue of gold. Our God can save. Our God will save! But even if he doesn't, we will still not bend the knee." Or Job who had come to the position to say, "Even though He slay me, I'll trust Him." Even though He slay me, I'll trust Him. And Esther is saying, "I'm putting my confidence in God. And if I perish, I perish but I'm still in the hand of God. And there's where my confidence rests, even if it means death." The brave man is not the man who is unaware of the dangers and just rushes in, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." The brave man is the one who knows all the dangers, and yet steels himself to the task nonetheless, "I know that this is difficult. I know that this is dangerous. I know that I risk my life. But if I perish, I perish. I lay myself before God." And as the representative of the people of God, Mordecai gathered the people together and prayed. Gathered the people together and prayed.

So that is the story of our chapter that is before us. But there are some other lessons that I want to draw out from this fourth chapter of Esther. There is a happy one, and there is a sobering one. The happy one, I think, should possibly have suggested itself to you already: aren't you glad that when you come into the presence of the King of Kings that you do not risk death for approaching? We have already prayed at least three times in this worship service this morning, and it may be, I would be reasonably confident to say, that most of us have spent time in prayer already this day asking for God's blessing upon the preaching of His Word, upon our time of worship, of witness, of fellowship together. Do we stop to consider the King to whom we address our prayers, the King of Kings, is ever willing to receive us into His presence? Esther was fearful to enter into the presence of her husband. And her first response was, "Mordecai, do you realize what it is you are asking of me? Do you realize?"

What a blessing it is for us as we seek the face of God, whether it is together in the place of worship, or whether it is in the secret place of prayer when we are alone, even from the closest members of our families, that we turn our thoughts heavenward, set our hearts upon the things that are above, and say, "I am thankful that the God whom I worship welcomes me into His presence. Welcomes me to make my petitions. I am not like Esther who is fearful to enter into the presence of her own husband unless she is made put to death as a result, unless the scepter is extended to her." But that you and I, by God's grace, can come at any time, and in any place, and for any reason, and because we know God, my Father in heaven will hear my prayers, I have more than merely an understanding that I may do this, but that my Father in heaven welcomes me into His presence. If I have understood anything from Ephesians it is this: that I am loved in heaven. If I have understood anything from Ephesians it is more: that I am much loved in heaven. Much loved. That I, though flesh and blood, though a sinner, clothed in Christ can enter into the presence of my God and King, my Father in heaven, and know that He will hear my prayers. That I do so without fear, without trepidation, but with confidence. As the writer to the Hebrews said, "With boldness approaching the throne of grace." That's good news.

But there is a sobering aspect to this story that we cannot pass by. We can enter into the presence of our God and King. Why? Because we are clothed in Christ. And because we are clothed in Christ, because we are in Christ, because, as Paul would say, we are hidden in Christ. This is a strange expression, isn't it? Hidden with Christ. Well, what does that mean? We ought to set our minds upon the things that are above, because we are hidden in Christ. In other words, we come into the presence of our God and King and there is nothing, as it were, that is of us that is seen: not our sins, not our vileness, not our corruption, but we are hidden in Christ. God looks upon us in Christ and says, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased." And you and I can enter into the presence of our King and of our Father, and being hidden in Christ we are protected by Him. We are cleansed by Him. We are made new in Him so that every benediction, every blessing that the Father could possibly bestow upon His Son is bestowed upon us as well. We are united with Christ. That's a great blessing, the greatest blessing.

But here is the sobering thought: that my Savior entered into the presence of the just Judge clothed in me. That is the transaction. He has come before our Father in heaven as the sin-bearer. If Christ now becomes our great covering, so that we enter into the presence of God in Him, then when we are looking at the cross we are seeing the Son of God, as it were, taking upon Himself the vileness of our sins, and the full justice, the full measure of God's wrath revealed against all unrighteousness poured out upon Him. I cannot fulfill the laws demands, but I have a Savior who has. It is Christ that we see revealed to us on every page of Scripture. And even in this story from long, long, long ago, we see Christ portrayed to us. That because we are in Christ, we have access to the throne of the King of Kings, but only because there was a day when Christ took upon Himself my sins. There was no pardon for Him on that day, but the justice of God revealed against all unrighteousness was revealed.

If He would at times lead us through the valley of the shadow death, ponder this: that the valley through which God the Father led His own Son was not the shadow of death, but death itself. But He rose victorious over the grave, and, because He lives, I shall live also. That is the Savior who we worship and adore. That is the Savior who causes us to lift our voices in praise and in thankfulness. Death has been conquered. Not only is Ahasuerus powerless to affect the destruction of God's people, but all in every age, and in every place, who would work against the people of God will find themselves dashing themselves upon the impregnable rock of Jesus Christ.

We do not know what tomorrow will hold for us this week, this month, the remainder of this year, but we read through the book of Esther, and we see that God is in control, and in that confidence we place ourselves. Amen and Amen.

Let's pray together.

Our gracious God and our Father in heaven, how good and how kind Thou art that we, even now, might enter into Thy presence knowing that the scepter is eternally extended towards us in Christ Jesus. That we need not fear, but come, because we are bid come, and do so right gladly. Lord, we do not know what Thy providences have in store for us, but we know this: that Thou art powerful. That Thou art wise. That Thou art good and kind. Because we are in Christ, all the sweet benedictions that are due to Him are now ours as well. So, we set our minds upon the things that are above. Bless, O God, thy Word to our hearts for the sake of Thy dear Son, even Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.