

For Such a Time as This

Esther 4:1-17; November 15, 2020

Introduction

- Who likes watching movies that depict the end of the world?
- I'm going to date myself here, but
 - *Armageddon* with Bruce Willis, Ben Affleck, and Liv Tyler (1998): large asteroid
 - *Deep Impact* (1998): a comet
 - *Independence Day* with Will Smith (1996): alien invasion
 - *Contagion* with Matt Damon (2011): a deadly virus
- All of these movies depict a critical moment when news of the pending disaster becomes public we see a myriad of responses from people. These movies suck you in and leave you wrestling with a question:
 - How would you respond if you were in their shoes?

Transition: we find ourselves facing a similar question today.

A recap of what happened in the story last week:

- Mordecai coincidentally (or should I say providentially) hears about an assassination plot on the king. He tells Esther, the queen, who tells the king, and after having it investigated, he has the two men killed.
- And as we're eagerly anticipating Mordecai's reward and promotion, the complete opposite happens.
- Haman, an Agagite, is promoted to 2nd in charge.
 - Haman turns out to be an enemy of the Jews.
 - When Mordecai refuses to bow down and pay homage to him, Haman decides to not only punish Mordecai, but to annihilate every Jew in the Empire.

This week...

- When we pick the story back up today, the Jews have just heard the news report that their life is going to end in 11 months.
- Our story today is inviting you in and implicitly asking: how would you respond if you were facing what the Jews we're facing.
- I know a lot of my focus the past 2 weeks has been on the invisibly present God and how God is working through ordinary events to providentially save his people. But God's providence doesn't undermine human responsibility. Our choices and actions really do matter and we're going to see that clearly in chapter 4 today.

Read Esther 4:1-3

- **“When Mordecai learned...”**
 - Mordecai wasn't privy to the conversations that Haman had with the king. I'm sure Mordecai knew Haman was upset and angry, but he must not have been

initially aware that his conflict between Haman would jeopardize the entire Jewish nation.

- **“Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes”**
 - Mordecai’s response was common in the biblical period. Sackcloth was made of goat’s hair and would’ve been uncomfortable to wear. Ashes signified desolation and ruin.
 - Mordecai’s outward response was a sign of his inward condition. He was broken.
 - Who was he crying out to?
 - While God is not mentioned, we would assume that he was crying out to God?
 - I can hear echoes of David’s lament in Psalm 13:

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2
How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long
shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps. 13:1-2 ESV)*

- **“He went up up to the entrance of the king’s gate”**
 - Mordecai does more than just weep. He goes to the king’s gate because he knows he has to do something. He’s trying to get word to Esther.
- **“There was great mourning among the Jews”**
 - The Jews fasted, wept, lamented.
 - The Jews also lay in sackcloth and ashes.
 - In short, Mordecai and the Jews are devastated by this news.
 - Just as with Mordecai above, it’s hard to imagine that prayer to God was not also included in their response as well.
 - I mean, it specifically mentions lament which Tanner taught us about during to the Seek Justice series:
 - “Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust” (Mark Vroegop).
 - Bring your pain in prayer to God making bold requests for restoration while expressing patient trust in God’s faithfulness.

Read Esther 4:4

- Mordecai’s actions and cry at the king’s gate works and word comes too Esther.
- Esther’s initial response is to comfort Mordecai so she sends clothing to replace his sackcloth but she doesn’t initially seek to find out *why* he’s so upset.
- She might have even feared for his safety, given what 4:2 says about sackcloth being forbidden at the king’s gate.
- But Mordecai refuses her care.

Read Esther 4:5-9

- It becomes apparent that Esther is oblivious to why Mordecai is so distressed.
- How is it that every Jew in the entire empire knew what was going on but the queen was clueless?
 - Had life in the palace isolated her from God's people?
 - Had she become callous to their needs?
 - Had she forgotten where she came from?
- Esther sends Hathach to Mordecai to get the scoop and Mordecai tells him everything. He also sends a copy of the decree for additional evidence.
- Mordecai makes a request of Esther:
 - "Go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people."
- Hathach returns to Esther and shares with her all that Mordecai shared with him.

Read Esther 4:10-12

- Esther responds making sure that Mordecai was aware of the stakes involved along with an update on her relationship with the king.
- No one was allowed to go before the king uninvited and if you did, you would face death. The only exception is if the king chose to hold out his golden scepter and spare your life.
 - Chapter 1 taught us how only the king's 7 advisors had access to the king's face and could enter unannounced.
 - Haman had access to the king but Esther did not.
- Oh, and by the way, I haven't been with the king in over 30 days.
 - We're not told why she hadn't seen the king in 30 days but the tone isn't encouraging.
 - Esther does not seem hopeful that she'll see the king's face anytime soon nor does she seem all that hopeful that the king would extend his golden scepter to her.
 - It's not too much to conclude from this text that the king hasn't been alone the past 30 days. He's most likely spent time with other women.
 - This seems to be an indication that the king's love for Esther may have been cooling. They would've been married 5 years at this point.
- Whatever the reason, Esther does not foresee a favorable outcome. As one commentator notes, Esther is basically saying to Mordecai, "It would be suicide to go before the king and you know it" (so Cain).

Read Esther 4:13-14

- We've now arrived at the key verse of the entire book. There's a ton to unpack here.
- **First**, Mordecai tells Esther not to think that she'll fare any better than the other Jews. In other words, if you don't do something, you're going to die just like the rest of us.
- **Second**, even if you choose to remain silent, I'm confident that "relief and deliverance will rise from another place."
 - While God is still not mentioned, it's hard not to read this as a reference to Mordecai's trust in God's faithfulness to save his people.

- Mordecai doesn't know what other source of help might appear or how God is going to act, but he is confident that if Esther doesn't act, God will raise up another way. It seems as if he has placed all of his hope now on God and God alone.
 - This is what faith looks like.
 - We see all through the Bible examples of God teaching us that no matter how impossible a situation might be, God always keeps his promises.
- It's not Esther vs. God as if we're having to decide between Esther saving the Jews and God saving the Jews.
- The question is: what human agency is God's going to use to save his people?
- **Third**, if you remain silent, you and your father's house will perish.
 - There have been a number of possible explanations for this:
 - Is Mordecai threatening to take things into his own hands and kill Esther?
 - Is Mordecai threatening to reveal her identity as a Jew?
 - Is Mordecai suggesting that Esther and her family will be punished for her refusal to act, presumably by God.
 - Either way, here's the point that Karen Jobes makes clear: "In Mordecai's thinking, Esther's life *may be* in jeopardy if she goes to the king uninvited, but doom *is certain* if she does not" (Jobes).
- **Fourth**, it may very well be that you are in this position as queen for this very reason.
 - Combined with Mordecai's previous statement, we see here the strongest hint so far in this book of Mordecai's belief in divine providence.
 - Mordecai is suggesting that there is a larger purpose in all that has happened to place Esther in the position she is in to be able to intercede on behalf of the Jews.
 - Given this, he is pleading with Esther to align herself with the invisibly present God who is the reason she's in the position she's in.
- So how does Esther respond?

Read Esther 4:15-17

- Yes, let's go Esther!!! We begin to see a transformation taking place in Esther's life. She goes from receiving commands to giving commands.
 - This is the last time in the story that Mordecai commands Esther.
 - She's now the one commanding Mordecai.
- Gather all of the Jews and hold a feast on my behalf. I and my young women will fast also.
 - The response here is different from that of 4:1-3. That was primarily a response of grief, this is a response aimed at calling upon God in earnest prayer (cf. Ezra 9:5ff; Neh. 1:4-11)
 - This is the strongest indication yet of Esther's faith in God.
 - Think about it: instead of spending 3 days beautifying herself, she's not going to eat or drink. She's not going to physically be at the top of her game. She's decided to let go of control and put her hope and trust fully in God.

- I will go to the king and “if I perish, I perish.”
 - Esther is ready to act even if it costs her own life.
 - One commentator describes Esther’s response this way: “Esther realizes that life in the palace without God isn’t worth it. In fact, Esther realizes that life itself without God isn’t worth it.” He continues, “For the first time, Esther is living in such a way that if God doesn’t show up, she will perish” (Timothy Cain).

What does Esther and Mordecai’s response have to do with us?

- The author has drawn us into the story to consider how God is providentially working in our own lives and to live a life of faith where God must show up.

Transition: Here’s how I want to call each of us to respond to today:

The Point: Rise up with rendered hearts risking it all for God.

With the rest of our time, I want to break this phrase down into 3 smaller nuggets:

I. Rise Up to the Occasion.

- Esther and Mordecai both illustrate the fact that divine providence does not negate the responsibility for us to act with courage and resolve.
- There is a purpose behind all of your life:
 - The good, the bad, the ugly.
 - Where you live.
 - Where you work.
 - Who you know.
 - The opportunities that are presented before you.
- No matter how you arrived to where you are in life, it’s never too late to rise up and embrace all of this to honor God in your life.
- Where in your life do you hear God saying, “Who knows whether God has placed you in this house, job, church, community, _____ for such a time as this.”

II. Rend Your Heart to God.

- You may be asking, where do I get this from the text?
- A number of scholars have drawn attention to the connection between this passage and Joel 2. There seems to be an intentional echo between Esther 4:3 and Joel 2:12 (called a metalepsis).
 - Esther 4:3: וְצוֹם וּבְרָכָי וּמְסָפֵד
 - Joel 2:12: וּבְרָצוֹם וּבְרָכָי וּבְרָמְסָפֵד
- If this is the case, the author of Esther is assuming the readers would’ve been familiar enough with Joel’s words to recognize this link and interpret Esther 4 in light of Joel 2.

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; (Joel 2:12 ESV)

- There is a call to return to God with all of their hearts.
- Notice the same language of "fasting, with weeping, and with morning."

"and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. 14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God? 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; 16 gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. (Joel 2:13-16 ESV)

- Notice similar linguistic connections:
 - "Rend your hearts and not your garments" (2:13).
 - Compared with tearing their clothes (4:1; 3).
 - "Who knows..." (2:14).
 - Compared with "who knows" (4:14).
 - "Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast" (2:15).
 - Compared with Esther calling a fast (4:16).
- What's the author doing?
 - This is an opportunity for the Jewish people (in exile for their sin) to return to the Lord and see him relent from this pending disaster.
 - In fact, we're to read the Jews' response in Esther as the type of repentance that Joel calls for in 2:12ff.
- God wants your heart.
 - Just as Mordecai and Esther throw all of their hopes and trust on God, do that today.
 - For some of you, it's to respond to the gospel for the first time and give God your heart.
 - "Jesus didn't just *risk* his life to save us; he actually *gave* his life in order to save us." (Cain).
 - Jesus is like the golden scepter which God extends and grants life when you trust him.
 - Where is God calling you to trust him completely?
 - Where is God calling you to reject passivity and to initiate action?

III. Risk it all for God.

- When you renounce everything to follow Jesus, when he is your life and your security, you can risk it all because you are truly free.
- When our hearts are rendered to God and we choose to identify as followers of Jesus, this

- energizes our lives but gives us great purpose in life. It gives us courage and boldness.
- Esther said, “If I perish, I perish.”
 - God calls us not to be foolish, but to take risks for the sake of the gospel. He wants us to reject passivity and initiate action.
 - Go read about Paul in the books of Acts and you’ll see a man who was daily ready to risk it all for God (Acts 20:24).
 - Where is God calling you to take risks for the sake of the gospel?
 - Do you know why I’m here today? Why we moved to Boston to plant a church? Why we’ve adopted two girls and are foster parents.
 - We’re tired with boring Christianity that doesn’t change our lives or those around us.
 - What is God calling you to call a fast and seek his face on?
 - Consider taking risks in the following areas:
 - Take risks with your money.
 - I don’t know how much money you give away but my guess is that many of us need to take more risks with our money for the sake of the gospel.
 - If you want a tangible risk: start with giving 10% of your income to the local church.
 - Leigh and I have done this since we got married. Then, above and beyond 10%, you also budget to give to things like:
 - Thanksgiving Meal Giveaway
 - Multiply March
 - People with needs in our CG
 - People raising support and working in parachurch organizations
 - Start giving in such a way that it hurts and where God has to show up in your life.
 - Ills: Leigh’s new raise and wanting to give.
 - Take risks in evangelism.
 - Don’t wait until it feels safe to share the gospel.
 - Take risks in ministry.
 - What ministry opportunity has God providentially placed in front of you that you need to say yes to.
 - Who has God put in your life that you need to pursue to read the Bible, pray together, etc.
 - It will cost you money and time. But those risks are worth it (Matt. 28:18-20).
 - RHC isn’t here today if some risks were taken.
 - “Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God” (William Carey).
 - “If we wait until we have success in our back pocket, we won’t need God any more” (John Piper).

Conclusion

- I want great things for you as an individual, us as a church, and for this world. It won't happen apart from us taking risks.
- You give God your heart. You seek God in fasting and prayer. You obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit. God will lead you.
- A few years ago, we had the lyrics of a song printed and now they hang on the wall in our dining room. It's from the song *Oceans* and it says,

*Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever You would call me
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Savior*