

Esther

CHAPTER 4

14 FOR IF YOU REMAIN SILENT AT THIS TIME, RELIEF AND DELIVERANCE FOR THE JEWS WILL ARISE FROM ANOTHER PLACE, BUT YOU AND YOUR FATHER'S FAMILY WILL PERISH. AND WHO KNOWS BUT THAT YOU HAVE COME TO YOUR ROYAL POSITION FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS.

Today I'm going to be talking about an amazing story which would be worthy of a Netflix miniseries or a blockbuster movie – in fact, in 1960 Joan Collins starred in a movie about Esther, so biblical royalty truly met a screen legend! The title of this talk is taken right out of Chapter 4 of our reading today and is 'For such a time as this.'

I'm going to start by asking you to think back over your life and ask whether you felt that something happened that proved you were in the right place at the right time? Perhaps you caught a falling child, perhaps it was a job where you found you could provide exactly the right skills when the boss needed it, perhaps you were miraculously on-hand to provide exactly the right word of encouragement to someone who needed it, or perhaps it was something much more significant – you had a very tough period in your life but when you looked back at it, you realised that you were put there 'for such a time as this' – you were in the right time, in the right place, and did the right thing. That is what today's reading and today's message is all about.

Before I get going I need to summarise the historical context. The book depicts events that happened around 400 years (give or take a century) before the birth of Christ, and for some, the questions of the historical accuracy remain a vexed question to this day. But if I was to spend the next 20 minutes talking about that, we would truly miss the point of the book, which is only one of two books (along with the Song of Solomon) that never mentions the name of God overtly, although I'm told that if you look closely

enough in the original Hebrew text, you will find the letters YHWH (a contraction of the Hebrew name for God) at the start of four words in the text. That's our first lesson – often the Divine is not to be found in the obvious – we have to search for him and if we do, we will find Him. But I need to move on quickly and build up a picture of the characters

Bad Decisions

THE CHARACTERS

- **THE KING** – PERSIAN, PETULANT, UNWISE AND IMPULSIVE
- **QUEEN VASHTI** – ARROGANT AND FLAWED
- **MORDECAI** – SOLID BUT STUBBORN, ESTHER'S GUARDIAN
- **ESTHER** – BEAUTIFULLY FRAGILE BUT ULTIMATELY BRAVE
- **HAMAN** – POWER-INTOXICATED, VICIOUS, INTOLERANT AND NARCISSISTIC

So let's take a look at the characters. Before Chapter 4, the King of Persia runs an amazing banquet but Queen Vashti fails to honour the king by his presence, The Kings courtiers tell him that if he doesn't act, every wife in the kingdom will effectively fail to respect their husband, so the King banishes Vashti from his presence for ever, granting her wish in an extreme way. This is the time of the exile of the Jewish nation to Persia, so Mordecai was an exiled Jewish person who had to take care of his beautiful and orphaned young relative Esther.

After the disastrous banquet and banishment of Queen Vashti, the King's advisors suggested he put the word out to the nation to find another queen. To cut a long story short, Esther was found, found favour with the King, and was admitted to the King's court.

Now, a word to the ladies who may be watching. The King of Persia was very discerning in his choice of women. Before any of them could see him, can you guess how long it took them to get ready? Men – cover your ears – it took a whole year while they received beauty treatments, essential oils and spices before they could see the King. By the time Esther was ready to see the King, she completely won him over. Esther was beauty and brains all wrapped up together. So, in this dysfunctional King's court, all was going swimmingly until along comes Haman.

Haman & Mordecai

- HAMAN GOT A BIG PROMOTION TO NUMBER 2 IN THE KINGDOM
- IT WENT TO HIS HEAD
- EVERYONE HAD TO BOW DOWN TO HIM
- MORDECAI, THE JEWISH MAN, STUBBORNLY REFUSED,
- HAMAN DECIDED TO HAVE BOTH MORDECAI AND ALL THE REST OF THE JEWS MURDERED, NOT KNOWING THAT QUEEN ESTHER WAS JEWISH.
- HAMAN CLAIMED THAT THE JEWS DIDN'T OBEY THE KING'S LAWS, BUT MORDECAI HAD EARLIER SHOWN HIS LOYALTY TO THE KING WHEN HE TOPPLED A PLOT TO KILL THE KING. HIS GOOD DEED HAD NEVER BEEN RECOGNISED.
- AN EDICT TO KILL THE JEWS WAS ISSUED, AND WHILE THIS WAS COMMUNICATED TO THE BEWILDERED PEOPLE, HAMAN AND THE KING SAT TOGETHER AND DRANK.

At this point, we set up the story before we get to our reading in Chapter 4 this morning. After Esther was happily admitted to the King's Court as his Queen, some time passed. Mordecai had toppled a plot to kill the king but the King had never really shown his gratitude to Mordecai. A Character called Haman was ennobled above all others and became second only to the king. This all went to Haman's head, and he issued a decree in the King's name that everyone in the Kingdom had to bow down to him. Haman was enraged when Mordecai point blank refused to bow to Haman. Not content with planning to kill Mordecai, Haman want to exterminate all the Jewish people as a punishment for Mordecai's disobedience. The King let Haman issue a national edict for the people to kill all of the Jews and went eating and drinking with the King. Haman, however, didn't realise that the Queen Esther herself was Jewish. Much trouble was brewing. The people were bewildered by this edict, and the Jewish people went into mourning.

Esther

CHAPTER 4

- THE ENTIRE JEWISH PEOPLE WERE TO BE ANNIHILATED
- THE PEOPLE MOURNED
- ESTHER FOUND OUT FROM MORDECAI
- MORDECAI INSTRUCTED ESTHER WHAT TO DO....

And so we come to Chapter 4!

Though Mordecai had previously proved his loyalty by toppling a plot to kill the King, whether Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman was simply folly or spirited resistance, we will not find out in this world, but the result was the same. Mordecai, Esther and all the Jewish nation in exile were to be killed. Mordecai wept bitterly and sat in sackcloth, something that was never supposed to happen in or around the King's palace. He and all the Jewish people mourned and wept bitterly at their impending doom, as their exiled nation had been ordered to turn against them and kill them.

Esther had been in Lockdown in the King's Palace, and knew nothing of these events, so wisely sent word to Mordecai asking what was wrong. Mordecai sent through the text of the King's edict saying all the Jewish people were to be killed. He asked something that was unaskable – that Esther approach the King without first being summoned – unheard-of, and plead for mercy and for the lives of her and her people. To make matters worse, the King hadn't asked to see Esther for a whole month – perhaps the King had tired of her. If Esther approached the King without permission against his will, the harsh rules of the court meant that she would immediately be killed.

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, 13 he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 16 "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

For Such a time..

THE STORY SO FAR

- **THE JEWS** (INCLUDING MORDECAI AND ESTHER) TO BE KILLED BY ROYAL DECREE
- **HAMAN** TO BE VENERATED – AND RATHER PLEASED WITH HIMSELF
- **THE PEOPLE** BEWILDERED AT THE MADNESS OF IT ALL, AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE ARE IN MOURNING
- **MORDECAI** IN SACKCLOTH AND ASHES – BUT INSTRUCTING ESTHER TO PLEAD FOR MERCY AT 'SUCH A TIME AS THIS'
- **ESTHER** PRAYING FOR THE KING TO BE MERCIFUL TO HER AND TO GRANT HER REQUEST

At this point we come to the story so far. Haman has issued an edict in the name of the King to have all the Jewish people killed. Unknown to him, that includes Queen Esther herself, along with her guardian Mordecai. Haman, intoxicated by his power, revels in his position by the king and abuses his power. The people have been commanded to kill the Jews and the Jewish people are distraught at the prospect, as is Mordecai. Whether through stubbornness or faith, he has brought potential disaster on them all, and all he can do is to reach out as her guardian to beautiful Queen Esther, for her to plead for the lives of her people. But Mordecai asks the right question, and here I want to pause a little to look at the response of Mordecai. He understands that even bad things can happen for a reason.

The trouble with this reading here in Chapter 4 with the story not yet finished. Doesn't that seem very relevant to us today in so many ways, not least the coronavirus pandemic? Here we all sit in isolation, or socially distanced in our homes. We're like Queen Esther – she was isolated in the King's royal palace and the King wasn't seeing her. Except by messaging, she had no communication, but she kept open the lines of communication with Mordecai. What could she possibly do to stop disaster befalling her people? What can we learn from her? Well, number one, she listened. She listened to her stubborn but loyal relative Mordecai. She communicated. She sought and received messages from Mordecai so she could judge by the facts. She didn't get intoxicated with power, like Haman did. She made a big decision. And how about

Mordecai. What can we learn from him? He was to a large extent the catalyst for Haman's murderous intent to kill all the Jewish people. However, he let Queen Esther know that she could expect to be killed just in the same way as the rest of her people. They were all in the same predicament together. He gave a clear instruction on what Queen Esther would have to do if they were to be saved. Esther's big decision was to accept that she was in the King's Palace 'For such a time as this.' She decided to approach the King, and accept her fate.

What's to learn?

- THERE WILL ALWAYS BE PEOPLE WITH EVIL INTENT
- EVEN IN LOCK-DOWN WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE
- IT IS RISKY TO MAKE THE RIGHT DECISION
- IN THE UNFINISHED STORY WE DON'T KNOW THE OUTCOME
- GOOD ADVICE IS PRECIOUS, BUT ONLY IF WE TAKE IT
- FERVENT PRAYER CHANGES OUR OUTLOOK
- GOD IS SOMETIMES HIDDEN, BUT ALWAYS THERE
- WHAT IS YOUR 'FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS?'

This hasn't been a conventional talk with three , but I make no apology for that. As I speak at the beginning of May 2020, we live in a locked-down world. We have forfeited out freedom to beat a virus. 75 years ago our forbears fought and won a war against a Nazi threat in Europe. 400 years before Christ, our story today tells of the difficult decision Queen Esther had to make against an evil noble who would kill all her people and her included. Today we are all part of a global fight against an unseen viral enemy. Just like Esther, in our reading, we have no idea of the outcome, but we know that to save lives the virus must be opposed just as evil Haman had to be opposed all those years ago. This weekend we have celebrated the Victory in Europe day in 1945. What is the answer? What is the bridge between decision and victory? What is the action we must take to bridge the gap between the present suffering and the future victory?

Before I answer that, I guess you're wondering what happened next in our story today. Well, I'm not going to tell you! If you want to find out, by all means re-read chapter 4, but go on to read chapters 5-7 to see how events play out. I'll give you a clue. Things don't go well for Haman, just like they didn't go well for Hitler in the Second World War, and just like things won't go well for Coronavirus when it comes up against a viable vaccine.

But what must we do? What is the action we must take to bridge the gap between the present suffering and the future victory? First, we must listen to the cries of the people

and lift our eyes heavenwards in prayer when we don't know what to do. Second, we must risk all to do the right thing, just as those who gave up their lives and future so we might all taste freedom again. Third, we must seek opportunities to influence the outcome, because we all might have been brought to this point, with all of our strengths and weaknesses, FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS.

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