

Siding with the Eternal Empire

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Date: 13 February 2019

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[0 : 00] Welcome indeed. You'll see there's tea and coffee and some lunch at the back. If you're able to stay on the end of the service, you're very welcome to do so. Good. Well, we made our way through a little series in the book of Esther.

So please do turn to Esther and to chapter 4 this afternoon. And you will find that on page 412, 412 in the Blue Bibles.

That's the chapter 4. And as you're turning there, I'm going to pray before we read that. So let's pray, shall we?

Our Father God in heaven, we thank you that you are a speaking God, that you have revealed yourself to us so that we can be wise for salvation.

So help us now in the midst of a busy week, a busy day, to gladly sit under your word to us. Help us, Lord, to submit to what you say and to respond in repentance and faith.

[1 : 12] Hear us, we pray, and grant us your presence and help now for our Savior, Jesus Christ's sake. Amen. Okay, let's read this together.

Remember last week in chapter 3, Haman, the Agagite, the ancient enemy of God's people, he had come up with this plan to bring about the destruction of all the Jewish people across the whole empire of the Persian Empire.

So God's people have a death sentence hanging over their heads. So let's pick it up in chapter 4.

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes and went out to the midst of the city.

And he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. 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.

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.

[2 : 22] 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. Then Esther called for Hatak, 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.

Hatak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. 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.

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.

And Hatak went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hatak and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 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.

[3 : 55] But as for me, I have not been called to come into the king these 30 days. And they told Mordecai what Esther had said.

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. 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. Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai.

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. Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

[5 : 14] Well, the question of loyalty, the question of which side you're really on, really comes to the fore when a crisis hits or when the stakes are raised.

Isn't that the case? In all sorts of ways and also in trivial ways. Let me give you a trivial example. My Irish heritage only really raises its head when England play Ireland and the Six Nations.

It's then, more than any other time, the Irish butt in my veins starts to really course. Now, people are so taken in by my accent, they don't really see my true identity. And so they're shocked when I start cheering for the Irish.

Questions of loyalty rise to the surface in a crisis. Now, that's a very trivial example, isn't it? You can't get more trivial than a game of rugby. But for a more serious crisis, well, we just have to look here in Esther.

It is a real crisis moment that is reached here in the chapter we've read this afternoon. The decree for the destruction of the Jews across the whole empire has been issued.

[6 : 20] But at the very heart of the palace, the very heart of the Persian Empire is Esther. She's the queen. And up until this point, she has been a secret Jew.

She's not disclosed her real identity. But will she risk all and choose to align herself with the people of God, with her people?

Will she side with them or will she side with the empire of the world? Will she stick with King Ahasuerus? Where does her true loyalty rest?

What will she decide? That is the tension that builds through this incredibly dramatic chapter. The chapter begins with Mordecai, who is quite understandably devastated at what has just unfolded in chapter 3.

Imagine waking up as a Jew in the Persian Empire in the morning when that edict is delivered to your village. Imagine that news coming in. No wonder that Mordecai tears his clothes here in Chatsua.

[7 : 28] No wonder he puts on sackcloth and ashes. The date for the destruction of his people has been set. But it's not just Mordecai, is it? Jews across the whole empire are likewise deep in mourning and grief.

There is a death sentence hanging over them. There is weeping and mourning. But look at verse 4. Esther, surprisingly, seems to be entirely ignorant of what is going on.

Her young women and eunuchs, they come in verse 4 and they report Mordecai's behavior. And she's understandably distressed, but I think ignorant to the true nature of his distress.

Look at the second half of verse 4. She sends Mordecai clothes to replace the sackcloth. Now, if she had known the true cause of his distress, I don't think she'd be sending fresh clothes, do you? If she really knew why he was in mourning, I don't think she would tell him to get dressed properly, Mordecai. Mordecai refuses the clothes.

[8 : 36] And so begins this back and forth between Esther and Mordecai. And it's facilitated by a go-between, the eunuch, Hatak. You can almost imagine this in a film, can't you?

There's Mordecai outside the city gate. And there's Hatak bustling back and forth through the corridors of power, reporting to Esther and reporting back. Dramatic.

And the information that Mordecai passes on in verse 7 is absolutely devastating. Mordecai tells Hatak all that's happened. He tells him the exact sum of money that Haman has promised to give to the king in exchange for the destruction of the Jews.

And he also gives him a written copy of that decree that you read about in chapter 3. That decree that's been sent to the far corners of the empire but doesn't seem to have reached Esther in the palace.

But he doesn't just give the information. Mordecai also gives an instruction. He commands Esther to go to the king and to plead the cause, to plead the case for the Jews.

[9 : 40] And notice the way his instruction is phrased. Look at the end of verse 8. He asks Esther to plead for her people. That is Mordecai who up until now has instructed Esther to keep quiet about

her true identity, to keep it secret.

He now tells her to come clean, to plead on behalf of her people. To identify herself with the people of God, to reveal to the king who she really is.

And Esther is in the perfect place for that task, isn't she? We're not aware of any other Jew with such access to the king as Esther. She shares his bed, doesn't she? And Hathak, he brings the message.

And Mordecai, he's there outside the gate waiting to hear. What will she say? What will she do? Well, the response that comes back from Esther shows the reality of the situation.

It shows the real danger involved for Esther if she's going to go and plead for her people. Look at verse 11. Look at verse 11. Esther says to Mordecai via Hathak, Look, everyone knows that if anyone goes to the king without being invited, if they just turn up, there's only one outcome according to the law and it's to be put to death.

[11:01] There's one exception though. So, if the king holds out his golden scepter, that person will live. And on top of that, the king has not called Esther for a month.

Perhaps she's fallen out with favor of the king. They've been married by five years at this point.

Perhaps things have started to cool and relationships are strained.

Esther's saying, This is a risky move. I'm risking my life if I go into the king. Death seems the most likely outcome, doesn't it, for Esther? If she does, what Mordecai suggests.

But she seems to be the only hope for the Jewish people. And the next interactions between Mordecai and Esther, well, they're crucial.

And they prove to be the real turning point in the whole of the book of Esther. Two key points here at the end of chapter 4. First, in verses 12 to 14, we see Mordecai's gospel confidence.

[12:06] And then the end, the last couple of verses, we see Esther's gospel choice. So first, Mordecai's gospel confidence. Look at his reply to Esther in verse 13.

He says, Mordecai speaks pretty plainly and straightforwardly, doesn't he?

He presses upon Esther the reality of her predicament. Yes, you may die if you go into the king. But if you do nothing, if you keep silent, don't think you're going to escape what's coming.

Don't think because you're in the palace, you won't have the same fate as the rest of the Jews and the rest of the kingdom. There's a real choice before Esther here. But regardless of what she does, Mordecai has great confidence, doesn't he, in God's salvation.

Mordecai expresses real, great gospel confidence. Look at what he says there in verse 14. If you keep silent, Esther, if you do nothing, then relief and deliverance will rise from another place.

[13:35] That's a pretty extraordinary thing for Mordecai to say, don't you think? He's read the edict issued by Haman. He knows the clock is ticking. He knows there's a day in the diary for the destruction of the Jews.

And here's Esther in the best possible position to go and plead the case. And he says, if you don't do it, Esther, relief will arise from somewhere else. Now, it's not the case that he can see into the future.

It's not that he's been given a special vision about how things will pan out. Rather, it is, I think, his confidence that salvation will rise one way or the other. However, that confidence is based on the promises and the sovereignty of God.

It's the very basic promise that underlines the whole existence of God's people. That surely must have been at the front of his mind as he spoke these words of confidence, certainty that God would deliver his people.

What was the basis of that confidence? What was the promise? Well, remember, God's words of covenant promise to Abraham all those years ago. He promised that Abraham's people would be more numerous than the sand on the seashore, more numerous than the stars in the sky.

[14:51] Indeed, the whole world was to be blessed through Abraham and his people. And it was through Abraham's line that a still more ancient promise was going to be fulfilled.

That promise, all the way back in Genesis 3, that promise of a child, of a woman, who would destroy the great enemy. Those are the promises in Mordecai's mind.

And so Mordecai knew that God's promise could not fail. And this edict to annihilate the Jews in the Persian Empire couldn't be carried out. Because that would mean the destruction of the Jewish people across the known world.

The Persian Empire is basically it. And so if all the Jews were destroyed, well, that would be the end of God's promises. And Mordecai knew that couldn't happen. As Christopher Ashe says in his excellent commentary, Mordecai's statement is not wishful thinking, but rather it is straightforward trust in the God of covenant promise.

Not wishful thinking, straightforward trust in what God has said. Now, Mordecai doesn't know exactly how God would deliver his people if Esther didn't step up. He doesn't know that, but he knew that there would be another way.

[16:12] There would be deliverance from the Lord. If Esther didn't do it, there would be another way. And so Mordecai pleads with Esther on that basis. The Lord is going to deliver his people, Esther.

He's going to do it. Will you be a part of that deliverance, Esther? The Lord is going to save. Will you play your role? Will you step up? Will you be one who is faithful to him?

Will you be part of what God is doing by being faithful? Or will you be part of it by one who's refused to be known as one of his? Either way, Esther, you're going to be part of it.

And the thing is, if men and women respond in faith at any point in history, then they are caught up in the onward and ongoing and upward march of God's eternal enterprise.

God is doing great things. He's got great promises. And as we express faith, we are taken up into what he is doing. But if men and women do not respond in faith, well, God's purposes will still be fulfilled.

[17:23] Nothing will stop that. But those who do not respond in faith, they will suffer in the process. Impoverished, cast aside, disqualified, not part of God's eternal empire.

And if Mordecai, living way back then, could have such gospel confidence, how much more ought you and I have today?

We know, don't we, that God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, has struck the killer blow to the enemy. We know how things are going to play out because Jesus has begun to bring fulfillment to all those promises that God made to Abraham.

The decisive moment has happened. We look back on it in history. And all the promises of the covenant, those that Jesus has begun to fulfill, he will complete.

He will bring it to a complete conclusion. That will happen. And we can have absolute certainty about that. And so the question is, it's the same as it was for Esther, it's the same for us.

[18:30] Which side are we on? Which side are you on? The empire of the eternal God? Or the empire of the world?

Or the empire of the evil one? That is what Mordecai sets before Esther here. That is the choice. And he's got great confidence, hasn't he?

Great confidence in God's gospel purposes. He knows that God will deliver his people. He knows that he will do, just as he promised to Abraham all those years ago.

Are you with the Lord or not, Esther? So what will she do? She's heard Mordecai's plea. He's set the choice in front of her.

What will she do? Well, looking at the last few verses from verse 15, we see Esther's gospel choice. This is a huge turning point in the whole book.

[19:28] A huge turning point for the destiny of God's people. And a huge turning point for Esther as an individual. It's a remarkable moment. We know the stakes are high, don't we?

In all likelihood, it seems that Esther will be put to death if she goes into the king. But look at what she says in response to Mordecai. Verse 16.

Notice who's doing the instructing now. Esther. She's the one who's telling Mordecai what to do. And it's the first time in the book that we see Esther moving from a passive role to more of an active role.

She's starting to dictate how things are going to go. And it comes after she's made that decisive choice. That's an interesting point, but almost every reference to her as Queen Esther comes after this moment.

Up until then, she's been known as Esther. Every other point after this, Queen Esther. She's starting to step up into the role that she's been put there for. But look at what she says.

[20:29] She says, She's willing to be known as a Jew, as one of the Lords.

She's willing to risk all and be used by the Lord, if he so wishes, to fulfill his covenant promises. It may just be that this is the way the Lord intends to deliver his people across the Persian Empire.

They don't know that. Esther's got no idea if this is going to succeed or not. But she's willing to throw a lot in with the Lord to be known as one of his. She chooses her side.

And she chooses not the pleasures and the comfort of the Persian court. How tempting would that have been? All the pleasure, all the money, all the wealth that was there. She's willing to risk all of that.

And instead, she chooses the weak looking, the threatened people of God who belong ultimately to an eternal empire. That's her perspective. Something fading and temporary or something eternal.

[22 : 01] And ironically, that is the safest place for her to be. As one preacher put it, in one of the strangest paradoxes of the gospel, the only safe place to be is with the people whose existence is threatened.

It's often the case, isn't it, for God's people all through the ages. Often they're threatened, often under pressure, often persecuted. But it is the safest place to be because as one of his, you are under his shelter, his protection, his shield is all around you.

Now, it's pretty unlikely that any of us will find ourselves in a situation similar to Esther. I don't suppose any of us will be becoming queen any day soon.

But each of us will face crucial moments in our lives, perhaps crisis moments, when we will have to decide where to pledge our loyalty.

We will have to pick a side. And the most fundamental moment of all is, of course, that moment when we hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel confronts us with the reality of our rebellion against God, with our sin, and with the decision to continue to live apart from him, or to identify with God and his people, his church.

[23 : 26] That is a real choice. It's the fundamental choice, isn't it? But it's not just that moment that we must choose to pledge ourselves to the Lord and his people.

The life of the believer is made up of many such choices from that moment on. Constant moments where decisions must be made. And sometimes it will be a crisis moment when the pressure is really on.

Will we choose to identify with Christ through obedience to his will for every aspect of our lives? Or will we choose to live in ways contrary to his will in this area or that?

Will we choose obedience with him or not? Will you choose loyalty to him when all those around would urge you not to? Come with us.

Come our way. Will you at that moment choose loyalty to him or not? The question is the same as it was for Esther. Are you willing to be known and seen as one of his people?

[24 : 32] Will you be willing to be taken up into his unfolding, unstoppable purposes and used by him? Because God's purposes will be furthered and fulfilled.

He is doing what he's doing. Nothing will stop that. But what a tragedy would it be if we were passed by, overlooked, because we were unwilling to play our part, to step up, to make that gospel choice.

We may never know just how critical, how vital, how important, how strategic our small moments of decision, those moments where we choose to pledge loyalty to him.

We may never know this side of eternity, how crucial, how significant they all prove to be in the furtherance of God's purposes for his world and for his people. So when those crisis moments come, when the pressure's really on, make that gospel choice in light of the great gospel confidence we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That was Esther's choice. That was Mordecai's confidence. And so we too are encouraged to have that same confidence so that we make that same choice.

[25 : 55] Well, let me pray before we sing, shall I? Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for its clarity. We thank you for the extraordinary drama of the book of Esther. And Lord, would you encourage us to have, in light of these words, great confidence in what you are doing, great confidence that you are promise-keeping God.

And so would you help us, Lord, to make those gospel choices. You know how fearful we are. You know how often our knees tremble as we look at the powers of this world, the empires that look so powerful.

But Lord, give us the perspective of your scriptures. Give us the perspective of Esther. So that we may see what is truly lasting. And so side with your eternal kingdom.

Help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. And so may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
[27:15] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.