

Siding with the Eternal Empire

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 October 2018

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 0 0] To our Bibles now and to our reading, which you'll find in the Old Testament in the book of Esther. And we're reading together chapter 4.

If you have one of the visitor's Bibles, that's page 412, I think. Is that right? Yeah. 412. Esther chapter 4.

And after the first two chapters that set the scene, the background of this story, the plot began to thicken last time in chapter 3 with this grave threat to not only a small number of the Lord's people, the people of God in Persia, in the city, in the capital of Susa, but also throughout the whole world empire with Haman.

The Agagite, the enemy of the Jews, of God's people. And in chapter 4 we pick up the story with Mordecai.

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes and went out into the midst of the city and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry.

[1 : 1 7] 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. 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 Hatach, 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.

Hatach 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. 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.

[2 : 4 4] And Hatach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hatach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, All the king's servants and all 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. But as for me, I've not been called to come into the king these thirty 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.

[4 : 07] Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young woman will also fast as you do. And 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.

Amen. And may God bless to us this his word. Good.

Well, please do turn to Esther chapter 4. Esther chapter 4, which was read earlier. Page 412, if you have one of the red visitor Bibles.

Esther chapter 4, a chapter all about loyalty and choosing which side you're really on.

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

A couple of trivial examples. My Irish heritage only really raises its head when England play Ireland in the Six Nations. It's then, more than any other time, that the Irish blood in my veins shows itself.

People are so taken in by my accent that I don't see my true identity. And they're shocked when I start cheering for the Irish. In the Star Wars theme, Star Wars films, the question of loyalty is always there.

Which side are you on? The dark side or the force? Are you with the resistance or the empire? And you see in those films, don't you?

Films where the key characters are wrestling with that decision. Which side will they choose? Where does their loyalty really rest? Well, it's a crisis moment that is reached in this chapter for Esther.

[6 : 28] The decree for the destruction of the Jews has been issued across the entire Persian Empire. But at the very heart of the palace in the capital is Esther, the queen.

A secret Jew. She is the only character in the story who has two names. Her Persian name, Esther. But she has a Hebrew name, chapter 2, verse 7.

Hadassah. And she has, up until this point, concealed her true Jewish identity. But will she risk all and choose to align herself with the people of God or the empire of the world?

Where does her true loyalty rest? What will she decide? That is the tension that builds through this incredibly dramatic chapter. What will Esther do?

The stakes could not be higher. So let's look together at the story. We'll take it in four scenes. So first, verses 1 to 3, we see Mordecai's grief in the city.

[7 : 40] The chapter begins with Mordecai. He's Esther's uncle. And he is quite understandably devastated at what has just unfolded.

Remember from last week, in chapter 3, we were introduced to Haman, the Agagite, an ancient and cunning enemy of the people of God. And following Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him, he flies into a furious rage.

And he seeks to destroy not just Mordecai, but the whole of the Jewish people across the entire Persian Empire. Haman secures the approval of the king and the edict is issued.

Look at verse 13 of chapter 3. The edict contains the instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the 13th day of the 12th month, which is the month of Adar.

And it was, as we saw last week, just another example, another manifestation of that ongoing battle between the great enemy himself, Satan, and the people of God.

[9 : 00] And so in a sense, what happens here is not all that surprising when you see the big picture of the whole Bible, but it is absolutely devastating, isn't it? Imagine waking up as a Jew in the Persian Empire on the morning when that edict is delivered to your village.

Devastating. No wonder that Mordecai tears his clothes here in chapter 4 and puts on sackcloth and ashes. And these were signs of deep distress and grief.

He goes into the entrance of the city gate, unable to go any further, making his grief publicly known. He's right there. Everyone can see. But it's not just Mordecai.

Jews across the empire are likewise in deep mourning and grief. End of verse 3 there. You see the whole empire, Jews across the whole empire, devastated.

There is a death sentence hanging over them. There is weeping. There is mourning. And no doubt there would also be the prayer that always accompanies the sackcloth and ashes mentioned here.

[10 : 11] It was a common gesture through the biblical period. Joshua and Caleb, they tore their clothes when they heard that the people wanted to return to Egypt rather than go into the promised land.

Ezra, likewise, he did the same when he learned of God's people intermarrying with pagan unbelievers. to tear your clothes, to put on sackcloth.

Deep grief, deep mourning, but seeking the Lord's help. And so here we have the understandable outpouring of grief and mourning amongst the Jews because Haman, the enemy of the Jews, has brought the full power of the empire to bear on them and to seal their destruction.

The date of their destruction has been set. And mourning and godly grief are the right response to terrible news like this.

The fact that God is sovereign, that's one of the great messages through Esther. The fact that God is sovereign, it doesn't mean that we don't feel or express real sorrow.

[11 : 24] This is terrible, it's devastating. And Mordecai and all the Jews in the empire, they are deeply distressed. But look on then to verses 4 to 11.

In contrast to Mordecai's grief in the city, we see Esther's ignorance in the palace. Esther, quite surprisingly, seems to be entirely ignorant of what is going on.

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

Look at the second half of verse 4. She sends Mordecai in new clothes to replace his sackcloth. Now if she had known the true cause of his distress, I don't think she would have sent fresh clothes, do you?

And Mordecai's refusal, he doesn't take the clothes, and so begins a back and forth conversation between Esther and Mordecai facilitated by the go-between, Hatak.

[12 : 31] You can almost imagine it in a film, can't you? The camera zooming in on Mordecai outside the city gate, his face smeared by tears and ash, anxiously waiting.

The camera cuts to Hatak, running through the corridors of the palace, rehearsing the message he's been given, finding the queen there in the luxury of her extensive apartments, and breathlessly passing on the information from Mordecai.

And the information from Mordecai is devastating. Look at verse 7. He tells Hatak about all that's happened. He tells him the exact sum of money that Haman promised the king in exchange for the destruction of the Jews.

He also gives a written copy of the decree that's been sent to the far corners of the empire. But he doesn't just give information. Mordecai gives an instruction.

He commands Esther to go to the king and to plead the case for the Jews. And notice the way that his instruction is phrased.

[13 : 38] End of verse 8. He asks Esther to plead for her people. That is, Mordecai, who up until now, has instructed Esther to keep her true identity secret.

He now tells her to come clean. Tell the king who you really are. Plead for your 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 such a task. We're not aware of any other Jews in such a position of access to the king.

She's the queen. She even shares his bed. And so Hatak brings the message. And Mordecai awaits the response.

What will Esther do? Well, the response that comes back shows the reality of the situation for Esther. It shows the real danger involved for Esther if she is going to plead for her people.

[14 : 42] Look at verse 11. Esther says to Mordecai via Hatak, Look, everyone knows that if anyone goes into the king without being called, there is only one outcome.

There is but one law to be put to death. There is one exception though. If the king holds out his golden scepter, that person will live.

And on top of that, Esther says, the king has not called for Esther for a full month. Perhaps she's fallen out of favor with the king.

They've been married almost five years by this point. Perhaps his bed has been kept worn by others. Esther says, This is a risky move. She's not refusing his command, but neither is she giving it the go-ahead.

She's merely stating the reality of the situation and it does not look promising, does it? Death seems the likely outcome for Esther if she does what Mordecai suggests. But she seems to be the only hope for the Jewish people.

[15 : 54] And so the next interactions between Mordecai and Esther are crucial. And they prove to be the real turning point in the whole book. So we look on then to the next section of the conversation, verses 12 to 14.

And we see here Mordecai's gospel confidence. Mordecai's gospel confidence. So Mordecai replies to Esther. Look at verse 13.

He says, Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than any 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. 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'll escape what is coming.

[17 : 07] It may be that Mordecai is referring to the carrying out of Haman's edict. And he's saying to Esther, don't think that being in the palace will protect you.

Don't think that because you're the queen you'll be okay. Chances are you'll be discovered for who you really are. And the king won't hesitate to part with you. Remember what happened to Vashti?

So it may be that or it may be that Mordecai is thinking beyond merely the temporal judgment and to eternal things. Refuse to side with God's people now, Esther.

And you and your father's house will perish. In the final reckoning, God will say to you, I never knew you, Esther. So there is a real choice before Esther.

But regardless of what she does, Mordecai has great confidence, doesn't he? Great confidence in God's salvation. Mordecai expresses real gospel confidence.

[18 : 13] Look at what he says there in verse 14. If you keep silent, Esther, if you do nothing, then relief and deliverance will arise will arise for the Jews from another place.

That's a pretty extraordinary thing for Mordecai to say, isn't it? He's read the edict issued by Haman. He knows the clock is ticking. How can he possibly speak with such confidence about deliverance for the Jews?

it's certainly not that he can somehow see into the future. It's not that he's been given a vision about how things will pan out. Rather, it is, I think, based on the promises and the sovereignty of God.

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

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

[19 : 33] Indeed, the whole world would be blessed through Abraham. It was also through Abraham's line that a more ancient promise was to be fulfilled.

That promise of a child, the child of a woman who would destroy the great enemy. And so Mordecai knew that God's promise could not fail.

This edict to annihilate the Jews in the Persian Empire couldn't be fully carried out surely because that would mean the destruction of the Jewish people across the known world.

Mordecai knew that that couldn't happen. God would deliver his people. And as Christopher Ash says, in his excellent commentary, Mordecai's statement here is not wishful thinking, but rather it is straightforward trust in the God of covenant promise.

Mordecai doesn't know exactly how God will deliver his people if Esther didn't step up, but he knew that there would be another way. There would be deliverance for God's people.

[20 : 46] And so Mordecai pleads with Esther on that basis. the Lord is going to deliver his people. Will you be part of that deliverance, Esther? Will you be part of it as one who is faithful to him?

Or will you be part of it as one who refused to be known as one of his? purposes? You see, God invites the cooperation of men and women in the furtherance and the fulfillment of his gospel purposes.

And in this case, it's the deliverance of his people from the great enemy. And he invited Esther then, and he invites you and I today to be part of his plans and purposes.

It's extraordinary, isn't it, that the sovereign God of the universe invites people like Esther to take part in his plans. And if men and women respond in faith, if you respond in faith, then you are caught up in the onward and ongoing march of his eternal purposes.

We're part of it. But if they do not respond, if you don't respond, well, his purposes will be fulfilled anyway.

[22 : 03] Nothing will stop that. And those who do not respond in faith, they will suffer in the process. As one preacher puts it, they will be impoverished, cast aside, disqualified.

And if Mordecai, if he could have such great gospel confidence in God's deliverance, how much more ought you and I to have today?

we know that God through the Lord Jesus Christ has struck, past tense, he's done it, he struck the killer blow to the great enemy.

He has assured and sealed our great deliverance. We know how things are going to play out in the end because Jesus has begun to bring fulfillment to all that God promised to Abraham.

All the promises of the covenant Jesus will fulfill. He's already started doing it. He's begun to do it with his death on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension. And he will return again to bring about the consummation of his eternal kingdom.

[23 : 16] Ultimate and eternal deliverance. It is a sure thing. That will happen. And we can have absolute certainty about it.

and so the question is, which side are we on? Which side are you on?

The empire of the eternal God, the one who through Jesus Christ has delivered that eternal deliverance. Are you on the side of the eternal God or the empire of the world?

The empire of the evil one? That is what Mordecai sets before Esther. He has great confidence in God's eternal purposes, his gospel purposes.

God will deliver his people. He will do just as he promised to Abraham. So are you with the Lord or not, Esther? Mordecai doesn't know exactly how it's going to play out.

[24 : 17] Look at the end of verse 14. Who knows? Who knows whether you, Esther, have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Mordecai doesn't know how it will play out. But things have fallen into place over the course of the opening chapter of the book, such that Esther finds herself in this unique position.

Of course Mordecai is going to say to her, Esther, you're in the right place at the right time. Are you going to step up? She is in a position to speak up. She is in a position to advocate for her people.

What will she do? We've seen Mordecai's great gospel confidence. What will Esther do?

What we see in verses 15 to the end, we see Esther's gospel choice. This is a huge turning point in the whole book, a huge turning point for the destiny of God's people and a huge turning point for Esther as an individual.

It is a remarkable moment. We know the stakes are high. In all likelihood, Esther will be put to death if she goes into the king uninvited. But look at her response to Mordecai.

[25 : 35] She instructs Mordecai, notice who's doing the instructing now, she instructs him to gather the other Jews in Susa and to fast, and she will do likewise.

And then she says, I will go to the king. Though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish. Now up until this point, Esther has largely played quite a passive role.

Things have happened to her. But now she starts to step up and to make things happen. Someone makes the observation that every reference to her as Queen Esther comes after this point in the book, apart from once.

after this point, it's Queen Esther. And Karen Jobes puts it this way, Esther assumes the dignity and power of her royal position only after she claims her true identity as a woman of God.

She expresses real dependence upon God here, doesn't she, as she commits this plan to him with these days of fasting. her and she's heard Mordecai's gospel confidence and she's now made her gospel choice.

[26 : 53] She's thrown her lot in with the Lord and his people. She's willing to be known as a Jew, as one of the Lords. She's willing to risk everything, to risk it all and to be used by the Lord if he so wishes, to fulfill his covenant promises.

It may be that the Lord will use this way to deliver his people across the Persian Empire.

There's no guarantee. Esther doesn't know how things will pan out. There's no guarantee of success. But Esther chooses her side. And she chooses not the pleasures and comfort of the Persian court, which were huge.

Remember in chapter 1, that great description of the party? Huge extravagance. Huge money. Imagine the palace that Esther lived in. She was giving that all up. The empire of the world.

She doesn't choose that, but rather she chooses the weak-looking, the threatened people of God who belong ultimately to the eternal empire. And ironically enough, that is the safest place for her to be.

[28 : 07] 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 the safest place to be.

Now, it's pretty unlikely that any of us will find ourselves in a situation comparable to Esther, with the destiny of God's people weighing on our shoulders across a huge empire.

It's unlikely, isn't it? But each of us, we 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 when we hear the gospel call 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 God, or to identify with him, to identify with God and his people, with his church.

[29 : 19] That's the choice the gospel presents. Keep going as you are, or repent, and turn to him, and side with him and his people. And that was certainly the case for me, as a 19-year-old boy on the brink of going to university.

Would I be willing to be identified with God and his people? Would I throw my lot in with the church? Which side? That was the choice I faced. The choice many in this room have faced.

Perhaps that is the crossroads you find yourselves at, even tonight. You know there's a choice to be made. But it's not just in that moment that we must choose to pledge ourselves to the Lord and his people.

The life of every believer is made up of constant moments where decisions must be made. 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 you choose loyalty to him when those around would urge you not to?

[30 : 36] Perhaps you feel the pull of unbelieving friends or colleagues or family. Come join us is the unspoken call to flip allegiance.

And it is a real choice, isn't it? Where do you go? On a Sunday morning or a Wednesday evening when your friend suggests doing something else?

Will you go to church? Will you side with God's people or not? It may be that your loyalty is tested at a crucial moment and at a particular time.

It may be that the Lord has you in a particular situation for a particular purpose at a particular time and don't flinch. In those moments, don't flinch. Remember, the Lord is sovereign.

He is at work behind the scenes directing all things. It's one of the clear themes for the book of Esther. He was sovereign then and he still is today. Sovereign over the life of this church, over your life.

[31 : 45] And he has brought you to the very place he wants you to be. he's placed you in whatever situation you find yourself in. And it may well be hard and unpromising, but he has you in the right place at the right time.

Will you remain loyal in those moments? The question for you is the same as it was for Esther. Are you willing to be known as one of his people?

To be seen as one of his people? And that will be costly at times, won't it? For Esther, it was deeply costly. She was willing to risk her life.

And there will always be real crisis moments in the life of God's people. Moments where that is the question. Where life is in the balance.

Perhaps not quite on the scale we read about here in Esther, but crisis will come will you be willing to act in faith as Esther does here? Will you be willing to trust him and his covenant promises and say, if I perish, I perish?

[33 : 02] Will you be willing to be taken up into his unfolding unstoppable purposes and used by him? Because God's unfolding purposes, they will be furthered and fulfilled, but what a tragedy it would be if we were bypassed, overlooked, because we were unwilling to play our part, to step up, to make that gospel choice.

So we may, like Esther, not see the end from the beginning. She had no idea how it was going to pan out. And we may not see how things will pan out, even in the seemingly mundane, mundane, day-to-day things that we are engaged in.

But we may never know just how crucial, how vital, how important, how strategic are small moments of decision, those small obediences.

We may never know just how significant they will prove to be in the furtherance of God's purposes. But we can, we can act with real confidence.

Whenever those moments come, whenever that decision for allegiance, that decision of where our loyalty will rest, we can act with real confidence because the ultimate deliverance has been well and truly guaranteed.

[34 : 34] Jesus, who was loyal and obedient, even to death on the tree, he's won for his people everlasting life with him in the new creation.

So it would be foolishness then, wouldn't it? It would be a tragedy to choose any other side than the Lord's side. Who will you choose?

Where does your loyalty really rest? That was the decision that Esther wrestled with. And it's the decision that you and I must wrestle with.

Which side will you choose? Let's pray. our Father God, we do thank you for the great certainty that we have through the Lord Jesus Christ, the great gospel confidence that we can enjoy because of what Christ has done and achieved.

so Lord, would you help us to be a people who live by faith, knowing that you are sovereign, knowing that you are at work.

[35 : 56] And so would you help us in our frailty and our fear, when our knees are knocking, when those choices come, help us in those moments to remember all that you've done, all that you've promised, and to know that your great promises are sure and certain.

So help us, Lord. Help us to choose wisely, to pledge our allegiance, to throw our lot in with you. Please help us, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.