

## For Just Such a Time as This

Sermon by John Strommen on the book of Esther

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(film clip from "Fellowship of the Ring")

*Frodo - "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened"*

*Gandalf - "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."*

As Frodo discovered in the Lord of the Rings, much in life is not chosen but is given. What is important is deciding what to do with the time that is given to us. Such was the case with the character of Esther in the book of Esther from the Old Testament. Let me tell you about Esther.

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In the sixth century BCE, the people of Israel had become prisoners of the Persian Empire, and many of them were forced to leave their home and live in Persia. The Persian Empire extended from India to Egypt, and in the next couple centuries it extended even further— all the way to Greece – before Alexander the Great eventually defeated them. One of its capitals was Babylon, which you no doubt have heard of, but another capital was Susa, where the king of Persia lived. One of the central characters in this story is King Ahasuerus, referred to by historians as King Xerxes, so I will use that name. The story begins with King Xerxes banishing Queen Vashti from his court for insubordination. So, the search was on for a young and beautiful replacement for the queen. This was done by recruiting beautiful young women all over the land who would become a member of the king's harem and essentially, "audition" for the role of queen.

Enter two Jews living in exile in Susa: Mordecai, who worked in the court at Susa, and his cousin Esther, who Mordecai adopted when Esther's parents both died. Being young and beautiful, Esther was discovered and chosen for the harem, and eventually, she would become the queen.

Now, since anti-Semitism was common in Persia, Mordecai counseled Esther to conceal her identity as a Jew, just as he had done. Mordecai's relationship to Esther was also a secret, as they both blended in and did what God instructed through the prophet Jeremiah instructed: *...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, pray for them, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-5)*

Indeed, Mordecai did seek the welfare of his king. Mordecai sniffed out a plot to assassinate the King and the men were arrested and hanged. We'll come back to that later.

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Enter Haman, who was promoted to second in command to the king and had great power. Haman was from the Amalekite tribe on the western edge of the empire, a long-time enemy of the Jews. It was a

royal decree that everyone must bow down to Haman, yet Mordecai would not, possibly out of disrespect for this Amalekite. Haman was furious and after learning that Mordecai was a Jew, even more furious. So, he vowed to destroy Mordecai and *all the Jews in the land*. This is one vindictive dude!

He reported to the king that there was a foreign tribe scattered throughout his kingdom who did not obey the king's laws and who ought to be destroyed by order of a decree. Haman would also see to it that an enormous sum of money would find its way into the king's treasury as a result. The King, not even knowing who this tribe was, whether he knew any of them personally, or even what specific offenses they were guilty of, compliantly agreed to go along with Haman's suggestion, accept the bribe, and look the other way. And so, with the power of the king's seal, Haman sent the order to every governor and province. In nine months' time, all Jews in the land were to be killed.

While this order went out, King Xerxes and Haman sipped wine while the entire kingdom was thrown into confusion! Mordecai and Jews everywhere began mourning, fasting and weeping over what was to come.

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Mordecai took this especially hard (maybe because his obstinance had caused all this) and sent word through a messenger to Esther to speak up and ask the King to stop this decree. But Esther's message back to Mordecai was filled with appropriate caution: if anyone approaches the king without being summoned, queen included, they are by law subject to death. Only if the king holds out his golden scepter can a person be spared. And as Esther pointed out, she herself had not been summoned for 30 days! In response, Mordecai's message back to Esther was as follows:

*<sup>14</sup>For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.<sup>15</sup>Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai,<sup>16</sup>'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.'<sup>17</sup>*

"perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Although God isn't mentioned in the book of Esther, Mordecai is clearly assuming a divine hand here. Esther also concluded that she had been led to this point for a purpose, for soon she had put on her royal clothes and approached the King's chamber. Upon seeing Esther, he waved his royal scepter, granting her an audience with him and offering to grant her whatever request she had. Esther then invited the King and Haman to her quarters for dinner. There she would tell the king her request.

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Haman was very boastful that he was invited to dine privately with the king and queen, but he became agitated when, *once again*, Mordecai failed to bow or tremble in his presence. Haman then schemed to

have the gallows prepared for Mordecai's execution, to which Haman was certain the king would agree. Remember, Haman did not know that Esther was a Jew.

That night, the king could not sleep and gave orders for his servant to read from the royal records, at which time the account was read of Mordecai foiling a plot to kill the king. The king realized that he had never honored Mordecai for this, so when Haman approached the king to request the gallows be built for Mordecai, the king asked Haman for advice on how to honor an anonymous someone in his court. Haman thought *he was the one* the king had in mind, so he described an elaborate public ritual involving riding a horse in the finest robes through the center of the city. The king then told Haman that would be perfect for the Mordecai, *the Jew*, and then requested of Haman that he arrange to robe Mordecai and lead his horse through town. This Haman did, in utter humiliation with a sense of impending doom. His own family members basically told Haman, "You're history."

That night, at the special dinner with the king and Haman present, Queen Esther made her request of the king: "If I have won your favor, O King, spare my life and the lives of my people, for we have been sold not as slaves but sold for execution. How can a king compensate for that loss?"

King Xerxes responded, "Who has done this?" Not sure King Xerxes was all that bright.

"A foe and enemy, the wicked Haman!"

Haman saw the king's wrath immediately and got on his knees before Esther to beg for his life, but to no avail. There was a hanging that day at the gallows prepared by Haman, but it wasn't Mordecai who was hanged.

To Esther the king gave the house of Haman. Upon hearing that Mordecai was her step father, the king gave Mordecai the royal ring that had belonged to Haman and Esther appointed Mordecai over all Haman's possessions.

From this point on, Esther and Mordecai were second in command to King Xerxes and became heroes in Persia. And although there was some bloodshed as Haman's irrevocable edict was played out, the Jews emerged victorious and much stronger.

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"Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Mordecai's words. God's words, too, I think.

Now, you might be saying at this point, "Well, this story about Esther is interesting and all, but it doesn't apply to me. I'm not royalty." And yet Esther herself only stumbled into that position. Apart from her good looks, she was a nobody before her promotion. And as queen, she played a purely passive role in this story up until Mordecai said: "Esther, don't keep silent. You can make a difference." Esther heeded this advice and was transformed. She saw that she had a role to play in something much larger than herself.

You may not exactly be in Esther's situation, but "Perhaps you have come to *the place where you are in your life* for just such a time as this." Is there someone around you who needs you, *especially you*? Is there something that needs to be done for which you, *especially you*, are well suited?

Maybe you are where you are in your life for a reason. What might that mean for you?

I close with a short saying by Edward Everett Hale:

*I am only one, but I am one.*

*I cannot do everything, but I can do something.*

*And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.*

Amen.