

“For Such a Time as This”

Esther 4

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We will be focusing on Esther 4 today and I want to start by giving a brief introduction. The year was about 478 B.C. It was an anxious time for God's people, the Jews who lived in Persia as recorded here in the Book of Esther. Some of the Jews had already started trickling back to Jerusalem. A group had left under Zerubbabel, the priest and in the previous 25 years had built a new temple and in the next 20 or 33 years you would find more Jews going back to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra and then Nehemiah. But it's during this period where most Jews still lived in Persia under the kingship of Xerxes, also called Ahasuerus in the Biblical text and a Jew by the name of Mordecai, whose great grandfather Kish, had been deported to Babylon, many years before, under Nebuchadnezzar, had a Jewish niece who was so faithful and so beautiful that she was chosen to become the Queen of the Persian Empire. Now, I don't have time to go into the back story on that. It is remarkable how God elevated her to this position so I encourage you to go back and read the book of Esther. Despite their service in the kingdom, neither the king or his court knew that Mordecai and Esther were actually Jewish yet they served around the king.

After this, the king promoted a man by the name of Haman to be his chief official, who was perhaps kind of like a confidential prime minister and Haman was elevated to the height that the king ordered that all the other servants around the court bow down and worship him. Mordecai, who sat regularly at the King's Gate, however refused to bow down and honor Haman. Haman learned that he was a Jew and that he wouldn't bow down because of his religious scruples. Haman hated Mordecai, so he concocted a despicable plan not only to kill Mordecai, but to kill all the Jews living throughout the Empire at a certain time by the king's command. It obviously would have been devastating to the Israel nation, to the Israel population. In fact, if it happened at this time and Haman had been successful, we wouldn't have the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah in our Bible. So, there were far reaching implications with Haman's despicable decree. Great fear spread among the Jews in all of Persia. This is where we pick up the story in Esther 4.

Esther 4:1:17 says [1] *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. [2] 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. [3] 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.*

[4] *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. [5] Then Esther called for Hathach, 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. [6] Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, [7] 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. [8] 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. [9] And Hathach went and told Esther what*

Mordecai had said. [10] Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, [11] "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. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

[12] And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. [13] 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. [14] 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?" [15] Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, [16] "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." [17] Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

The grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of our Lord will stand forever, Amen.

This is a remarkable story and the story of Esther is really one of the most beloved in all the Bible. This book interestingly, never mentions the name of God however, God's sovereignty, God's mercy, God's grace, and God's power is demonstrated in the Book of Esther, as in no other Old Testament book. Spoiler alert – it does have a happy ending, but I'm not going to go there so you'll have to go read it if you don't know the ending. I want to stop here in Esther 4 to glean some lessons from this critical moment in Jewish history. Here in this chapter the tension is palpable. Terror and hopelessness are widespread among the Jewish people. Mordecai warned Esther that even as Queen, her life is threatened by Haman's despicable plot. Mordecai declares in Esther 4:14, 'Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.'

Esther was a young but faithful follower and interestingly, in this book, the text actually describes the elements of Esther's faithfulness. These details are far more than typical color commentary. Esther's traits, the revealing of her character, shows the kind of people that God is pleased to use. We see in Esther 2:10 that she was obedient. Her uncle Mordecai had warned her strictly not to reveal her ethnic background, and that would serve her very well in the future. She was also wise. In Esther 2:15 she listened to her superior, Hegai's advice about what to take before the king. That may not have been a small issue because kings during that period tend to be a little paranoid, nervous about being assassinated or threatened in some way, and perhaps she might inadvertently take something in before the king that might be a threat to him. So, she listened very wisely to her counselor here about what to take. In Esther 2:22 she was also, obviously, very courageous to warn the king of the threat of his advisers, the conspiracy against him and, those advisers were killed. In Esther 3, she also warned the king of Haman's plot and that was a very dangerous thing to do to go barging into the throne room unannounced or uninvited without him raising the golden scepter. She was just going to have to do it. She acted very bravely.

What we see here, I think, is profound because through Biblical history, God has continued to place His servants who were obedient, wise and courageous in certain situations, during certain times to accomplish crucial and strategic things for His kingdom. When you get a chance read the honor roll of the faithful from Hebrews 11 for this chapter includes people that at selected times, God chose, in a sense, for such a time as that. We read of Abel and Enoch, of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Jacob, Joseph and Moses. This chapter even cites all the people who cross the Red Sea. Also included is Rahab, a prostitute, Gideon, Samson, David

Samuel and on and on. God is pleased in His perfect timing to choose people, to use them at strategic points for His Kingdom. None of these people were perfect or necessarily heroic, but so many examples through the Scripture gives this principle – that as believers at some time or another in our lives, we will be called, perhaps suddenly and unexpectedly, to take a step of faith. We'll be called to assume some kind of responsibility, to make a decision, perhaps to take a stand which may be unpopular, which will be important in our life perhaps the important in the lives of others, and may be very important even in God's Kingdom and in God's church, or to use Mordecai's words, 'for such a time as this.'

I remember when I got out of seminary, Leslie and I moved to Macon, Georgia, and I joined the staff of Bible Presbyterian Church as the youth director, and after four months, the senior pastor there suddenly announced that he was leaving. He had received an offer from a much larger church, and he was thrilled and we were thrilled that he was getting this opportunity so he left. After being there only four months, suddenly I'm the acting senior pastor. God never asked my permission. I didn't get a vote in it. I was just there and suddenly I'm preaching every week. I'm moderating the session. I'm doing the baptisms, the weddings and taking care of the counseling. With very little warning, I was put up to bat, pushed up to the plate and started swinging away. It actually turned out to be a wonderful experience to start my ministry with those kinds of things going on. But as I said, God never asked me. He just shoved me there and I think that's true of most all of us as Christians. Just when we least expect it He's going to put us on the spot and use us for His glory.

God never informs us ahead of time and we don't get a vote but what we read in Esther 4:14 is true with a little edit and who knows whether or not you have come perhaps to Briarwood for such a time as this. I suggest that that's how you and I ought to look at this passage. Look at the role God has placed you in right now. Briarwood has seen an unprecedented thing happen in the death of our senior pastor. His death has shocked our members, our friends, the elders, the deacons, the leaders among the women in the church, and certainly our staff who've had their professional lives deeply touched. Again, God never gave us a vote. He really never gave us a warning but the reality is we have been called to Briarwood for such a time as this. It's no accident you are here. It's no accident that these folks joined this morning during this strategic time in our church. It's very important that we look at it this way because each one of us, whether we're 12 or 32 or 52 or 92, we have the responsibility of seeing this may be something that God has called you to.

This transition time is one of the most crucial in our church. In fact, God is just bringing our third senior pastor to this year that has been in existence for over 63 years. Statistics tell us that among Protestants in America, the average duration of a pastor is between five and seven years. That means if Briarwood was just another typical church, we'd probably be working on our ninth, our 10th, our 12th senior pastor. But quite uniquely and with such great blessing, this will be only our third senior pastor. It's a crucial time of spiritual growth. It's a crucial time of strengthening, of deepening, of unifying, of adapting, of equipping ourselves for ministry before a rapidly changing and darkening world. The needs out there in the world are increasing exponentially and I promise you, they're not going to wait for Briarwood to get its act together. God has called us to minister in the world around us and He didn't say 'just wait a little while to finally get a pastor.' It's up to each one of us under the leadership of the elders and the deacons, the leaders among the women, to say, "Lord, how can you use me during this time?" How can God use me among my friends in my class, at work, perhaps in my neighborhood? How can I step forward to represent the Lord Jesus Christ and certainly Briarwood Presbyterian Church in

our community, as You have called me? This is not a time for us to coast. This is not a time for us to be spectators by any stretch of the imagination. We are adapting and equipping and maybe we will retool in some areas.

However, many things are not going to change as we move ahead. Our devotion to the Scripture as God's only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and practice – that's not going to change. Our foundation of the five Solas – sola Scriptura (in Scripture alone), Solus Christus (in Christ alone), sola Gratia (in grace alone), sola Fida, (in faith alone), Sola Deo Gloria (to the glory of God alone) – is not going to change. Our understanding of human sin and everyone's need for Christ will not change. The reality of heaven, the reality of hell, and the reality that Christ may return at any time, is not going to change. Our conviction to the creation, the historicity of the creation that counts in Genesis, the actual historicity of Adam and Eve, our commitment to the family and marriage as between a man and a woman for all of life – that is not going to change in any way.

Our ministry strategy will not change – For God's glory Briarwood is committed to equipping Christians to worship God and reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ. Our desire to be a W.E.L.L. church. What a wonderful acrostic. We're a church that is committed to Worshiping authentically, Evangelizing intentionally, Loving purposefully and Learning consistently, and we're all committed to that as a church but there are many other areas of ministry that God might draw us into. He might tweak and retool us in a lot of different ways. However, God always uses these kinds of opportunities to build on our strengths of the past and create something new as we carry the time-honored Gospel of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit into an ever-changing culture. God is at work and the bottom line is we've been called by God for such a time as this. Each of us are needed in many ways, just like Esther was needed.

Those who enjoy watching football love to see the perfect play conceived and carried out. Imagine that play has been planned – the offense lines up and with the snap of the ball, the linemen provide the proper protection for the quarterback, the receivers go down the field in their various routes as decoys and one receiver breaks open and start running down the field and the quarterback spots him and launches a perfect pass as it arches in the right direction and at the proper time that receiver turns out and holds out his hands and the ball hits him in the chest and falls to the ground. You've seen it. It's heartbreaking. The stadium groans with agony and you might see a player along the sideline take his helmet and throw it down on the ground. Or perhaps the coach just puts his head into his hands. But for that poor receiver, that's the longest jog in the world back to the huddle after he has dropped the ball.

We're at a strategic time in the life of our church where it's very possible that we might drop the ball. I know God is sovereign. He's working His purposes out, but it could be that I personally drop the ball and I think that could happen in in at least three areas, maybe four. The first area is I might drop the ball in the area of personal prayer. Esther's most immediate and most urgent request is found in Esther 4:16 which says [16] *“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.”* Most commentators believe that these women had become Jews. Either they were Jews or were proselytize and they believed, as Esther did. This is by far the thing we need in our church right now and hopefully the most used tool.

Our model, of course, is Jesus. He prayed. He was obsessive with prayer. He was constant in prayer. He prayed in important moments, like when choosing the disciples or when preparing to go to the cross at Gethsemane. He prayed with crowds. He prayed with the

disciples. He prayed when He was alone. In Luke 6:12 He spent all night alone in prayer on a hillside. He taught his disciples to pray, and He urged them and us to pray in Luke 18 when He told the parable of the persistent widow. Luke says to the effect that they, meaning us, are to always pray and not lose heart. He was obsessed with prayer to His Heavenly Father, and that is what we should be as well. Prayer is needed in all aspects of this transition as Briarwood goes from their second pastor to a third.

Briarwood has over 200 staff. We have 120 ministries and nearly 4000 members, not counting children who could use our prayer. We have two very special pastoral families, the Reeder family and the Barker family. We need to pray for them during this time of transition. We have two other families coming, the family of our interim pastor, and then finally the family of future senior pastor. There are many things to pray for and many opportunities and I would even challenge some of our young people. Perhaps you're sitting at the table and you've had a blessing but you need to remind your dad or mom that they didn't pray for the transition time at our church and it won't put off your eating very long to pray at that moment. So even in those moments, take a moment to pray for what God is doing. We have seen God work already in some wonderful ways as God has through Bruce Stallings lined up the speakers that we enjoyed repeatedly, week after week after week. So, my assignment for you is to pray for some specific aspect of this transition every day without exception.

Another area is very important not only in personal prayer, but we can sometimes drop the ball in times like this in the area of personal ministry. Esther didn't freeze. Esther didn't decide it was too dangerous and she was just going to become a spectator. She didn't have that option. She was the one that God tapped to step into the middle of things and work courageously. She was obviously, way out of her comfort zone and came to the king with a plea on behalf of her people. Jesus relentlessly calls us to engage in ministry in this world. None of us are spectators. None of us have an excuse. In Matthew 5 Jesus called His disciples and by extension He calls us, when He says, 'You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.' Did you ever think of what that means? You're an influencer par excellence. In fact, when Jesus gave those commands, He's speaking to a bunch of Jewish peasants. He wasn't speaking to the religious leaders or to Roman soldiers. He wasn't speaking to the celebrities of the day. He was speaking to the peasants, telling them that they were the light of the world, they were the salt of the earth. And the same thing applies to us. It's just Biblical for influence for God's Kingdom in our world.

In Matthew 5:16, Jesus said *[16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* The need at Briarwood in this transition is that we do remain on mission and on message with the Gospel and in ministry to lift up Christ through worship and evangelism, fellowship and service. Each of those 120 ministries at Briarwood have specific needs for leaders and volunteers. There are plenty of places to serve. There's no shortage. Now is the time and my assignment would be find an area of ministry during this period of transition. Many of you are already involved. Many of you are active in a number of areas and that's wonderful. Stay at it. Don't quit. You might be working in the kitchen. It might be teaching a class, it might be helping with children's church or children's Sunday school. It might be attending a Men of the Covenant group or a women's Bible study, it might be taking a mission trip, helping with the youth, helping with our special needs ministry. They're looking for volunteers all the time.

You might want to volunteer with the love ministry. My mother, who will be 97 years old in February, gets flowers every Monday morning from Trish and Diane, plus they pray with her

as an extension of that love ministry. Now, my mom can't ever remember their names, but she never forgets those flowers. What a blessing for someone who served the Lord all her life as a pastor's wife and now she's perched in her one room world and these ladies show up, bringing Jesus to her. It's a significant ministry in our family because of what they do for my mom. God wants to use us very, very powerfully no matter where we are. You might be called on to keep a missionary when the missions conference comes along in a few weeks. In a few weeks will be our walk-through Nativity and here's a place you can serve. I wish I could go down and itemize all the opportunities that are there, but there are many areas of ministry during this period of transition that you could serve in.

There's one more area we can drop the ball in and that's the area of personal stewardship. That's kind of what we're about this study on Esther 4. Esther was obedient and wise in responding to the counsel of Mordecai and Haggai in dealing with Haman. She was especially wise in dealing with Haman. That's a very mysterious and crafty part of her work – God's blessing through her. The Bible constantly challenges us to be obedient and wise, especially in the use of our resources and wealth, so much so that it devotes, I believe, about 275 verses on instructions about prayer and over 2000 verses in Scripture, giving instructions about the use of wealth and our resources. We are so phenomenally blessed in our country, it's hard to fathom that 95% of the world lives under the poverty line in America. You and I live way above that poverty line. We are in a consumer culture that saturates us, inundates us all the time, and we have to be especially vigilant to keep our eyes on Christ as we manage our resources, lest they consume us, lest they so distract us that we're basically no good to the Kingdom. We need to be very careful with everything the Lord has given us because all our wealth will be left behind someday.

When I was over the Pastoral Care ministry, I did a number of funerals that just was a constant drumbeat of reminder that when people step into eternity, when the Lord takes them, everything they had is left, and that needs to govern our lives. Leslie and I had a treat of traveling to Egypt, and we took a ten-hour train ride up the Nile. It was actually south, but it was up the Nile to Luxor in the Valley of the Kings. In the short period of time that we were there, they had opened several of the kings' tombs that had been discovered. These are not the pyramids. These were tombs that were discovered by Howard Carter back in 1922 and one of them was King Tut's tomb. Leslie and I went down these long steps to Tutankhamun's tomb and it was a large empty room. The walls were filled with hieroglyphics and all kinds of Egyptian paintings. It was quite interesting, but the room was empty, just as the Egyptians thought it would be, because when King Tut died around 19 years of age, his advisers and his family filled his tomb with all kinds of artifacts, priceless artifacts and relics from his family, all meant to be toys in a sense that he would take into the netherworld or into heaven wherever, when he died. If an Egyptian walked in there, they'd say, 'See, he's all gone.' Except that's not what happened because the day before, Leslie and I had been in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and walked through a whole room filled with a display of all these artifacts that had been in King Tut's tomb. Contrary to what he was expecting all these artifacts have now become a source of income for the Egyptian government and the wonderful Egyptian museum. In other words, King Tut stepped into eternity and took none of that with him. It's all been left and that will be the same for us.

Wealth not only will be left, but it can steal our hearts. It can steal our minds. It can act like magnets to draw us away from the worship in the service of God and we have to be consciously vigilant. I can't watch out for my wife or my children. They don't watch out for me in this area. This is my responsibility. Wealth can steal our hearts and therefore, knowing that it

belongs to God, what do we do? We spend wisely and give obediently, generously and regularly back to God. The apostle Paul was shocked with what he found in the suffering church in Macedonia. They had been much persecuted. They were very poor but he writes this about the church in Macedonia in II Corinthians 8:3-5 which says *[3] For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, [4] begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— [5] and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.*

A tithe is a 10% gift of your regular income. This is the time of the year we make pledges of what God wants us to give to the church and this might be a good place to start. Now, many Briarwood members not only give a tithe, but much more and generally in America, we can give far more than a tithe given our affluence. But that's a great place to start in. As we do so, we will be obedient and we'll be wise like Esther with the use of our resources "for such a time as this." Let us not drop the ball. My assignment would be pledge to make this my most joyful year of giving. Calling God's people for such a time as this is the way that God tends to always work.

In her heroic work which protected her people, Esther demonstrated wisdom, obedience and courage and in doing so, of course, she pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself was obedient and faithful. He Himself was wise and courageous. He is the wisdom of God. Consider what Paul writes in Romans 5:6-8 which says *[6] For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [7] For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— [8] but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Perhaps you are reading this and you know that you are not a Christian. You may have never accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior and astonishingly, God may have brought you to this study today for such a time as this. I urge you to consider the claims of Christ. Confess your sin, to turn from that sin and embrace Christ as your Lord and Savior, knowing that not only has He paid the penalty for that sin, but He will clothe you with His righteousness and grant you access to God Himself so that you can pray and you can give and you can be used to have an impact in the Kingdom, to speak boldly and to serve wonderfully. This is what God would challenge each one of us to come to Him for such a time as this. Friends, we are entering one of the most challenging, unique and wonderful times at Briarwood Presbyterian Church. Let us take it very seriously, the personal challenge that God has given each one of us for such a time is this and let us not drop the ball. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Lord, I thank You so much for the wonderful blessing of knowing You, the wonderful blessing of walking with You, but even more of a being used by You in service in Your Kingdom. I pray that You might continue to work in us and through us, and that You would open our hearts, give us generous hearts, and use what we give for Your glory and the extension of Your Kingdom. We thank You and pray this in Jesus' Name and for His sake, Amen.