

For Such a Time as This - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Esther 4:1-17** (#475)

Introduction: “Courage.” It’s a word that we most often associate with soldiers, or perhaps firefighters. Typically, we think of courage as putting your life at risk for other people. Sometimes, we might hear the word “courage” used when somebody speaks an unpopular truth. And lately, the word “courage” is being used more and more to speak of everyday people doing things that are necessary, yet more hazardous during a pandemic than we fully appreciated before. While we might have expected the word to apply to doctors and nurses, who would have imagined that teenagers stocking shelves at the supermarket would also be seen as selfless – yet that is the reality in our new world.

This morning, we’ll see courage in several forms. If you’ve read through the chapter, perhaps the most well-known form comes with Esther’s decision to approach the king even though it may cost her life. This is the sort of “self-sacrificing” courage that we are used to. But we’ll also see a second form of courage: the courage to speak hard truths to a loved one. That, too, is no less courageous. Taken together, these two portraits will help to color in our picture of how to live faithfully in unfaithful times – and in the midst of our own lives. Let’s turn to **Esther 4** and see how the Lord pulls all of this together...

4:1-3 The King and Haman have just signed their new law and have gone out for drinks afterwards. To them, this is a savvy plan that eliminates a problem people, enriches the king’s treasury, and gets Haman what generations of his forefathers have desired. It’s win-win-win. Unless you are Jewish. Remember that this was a law that amounted to the pillaging and genocide of the Jewish people.

Perhaps you wonder why the Jews didn’t flee to safer lands? The answer is simple: they couldn’t. Don’t forget the setting: the Jewish people are, essentially, captives of Persia. Sure, they are allowed a certain amount of daily freedom to go about their lives. Yet that freedom is bounded by a tall fence – the second a Jewish person stepped out of line, that was it. Game over.

It is in this scene that Mordecai learns of the wicked law. And I wonder: how would you respond to such a directive? Would you take to social media? Or call up the local news station for an investigative report? Perhaps contact a lawyer? Yet all of those solutions are incomplete. None of them actually bring about justice – at best, it will take months for a case to wind through the legal system and there’s no guarantee of justice even then. At worst, they wouldn’t help at all.

Instead, the people of God do something very different in Susa. Mordecai responds with torn clothes, sackcloth, and ashes. He laments. He wails. He cries out. Why? Because this is the way that the Jewish people have historically sought the Lord when such circumstances arise. It’s been said that we in the West don’t know how to lament, and examples like this one show that observation to be correct. Too often, we don’t go to the Lord. We don’t cry out to Him. Our first instinct is to respond in our own strength and power – or at least to try to borrow the influence of others. But – as we’ll see – Mordecai is right and we should be challenged: in whatever circumstance, the One we most need is the Lord.

When, by the way, was the last time that you fasted? Did you see, in **verse 3**, that fasting was part of this process of crying out to the Lord? Don’t misunderstand: I myself have a lot of room to grow in this area. Yet if we see fasting from the people of God – not just here in the Old Testament, but even described by Jesus in **Matthew 6**, practiced by the church of Antioch in **Acts 13**, and commended by Paul in **Acts 14** – then we ought to at least consider if this should be a part of our spiritual disciplines. I don’t intend to give a theology of fasting at this point, nor do I say that we should somehow become legalistic about it. Instead, I simply want us to notice that this may be something we ought to give more thought to than we have before. The point – whether with fasting or not – is to use our time and focus to cry out to the Lord, to show our dependence upon Him, and to trust that He will act according to our need. That seems to be what the Jewish people here in **Esther** are doing. Let’s keep reading and see what comes of it...

4:4-11 At first, there looks to be a great deal of hope: Esther learns that Mordecai is in mourning and – no doubt, out of her love – responds immediately. She sends

garments to Mordecai, though he refuses them. Perhaps she thinks he is being a bit dramatic? Or maybe that if she could clothe him, then he could come into the palace and they could talk? It seems that – ironically – though she is in a position of great influence in the kingdom, Esther has been insulated from knowing the details of this new law. That, by the way, should give us a bit of insight: so often we say that a leader “had to have known” what was happening all around them. While that’s often true, there certainly are times when it just isn’t the case. Be careful that you do not assume others know everything that you know.

After Mordecai’s refusal, Esther sends Hathach to talk to him and see what the problem is. Mordecai proceeds to tell him all the details about what has happened – and these details are important to establishing that he isn’t overreacting, nor is Mordecai operating off of some rumor that he’s heard. He hands Hathach a copy of the new law and the eunuch returns to Esther to give her the report. Clearly, Mordecai is hoping that Esther can do something.

Yet, it is precisely at this point when Mordecai’s hopes will hit rock bottom. Esther may be the queen, but there are regulations constraining her actions as well. She sends back the bad news through Hathach: the king doesn’t do drop-in appointments. Apparently, so much does Ahasuerus not want to be disturbed that – normally – to go before him without being summoned would lead to a death sentence. The only exception is if the king himself holds out his scepter to the person, sparing their life. And here’s more bad news: Ahasuerus has not summoned Esther for the past month. Said another way: she is further from his favor than ever and doesn’t see any way that she can help in this situation.

Perhaps you have been in a position like Mordecai, thinking that if you can just plead your case to the right person, all will be well. But you’ve also likely been in the situation of receiving a “no” or a “sorry, I can’t help” also. Those are devastating times, aren’t they? Not only are you dealing with whatever struggle brought you to need help in the first place, but then you learn that help isn’t coming. What are you to do?

Look at things from Esther's point of view: while there might have been some hope that she could bring up the problem to the king, the laws of the king's court prevent it. She feels that her hands are tied and that there is nothing which can be done. Certainly that would have been frustrating in the extreme!

I want you to see these two people's very real, very human struggles because I suspect that each of us have been in – and will be in – similar situations. Perhaps not with the fate of an entire people hanging in the balance; but certainly with jobs, relationships, and finances being the basis of the struggle.

As we finish out the chapter, notice what Mordecai and Esther deliberately choose to do. They don't sit around, moping, thinking that there is no hope. Instead, they act – each of them with courage. In a book that is focused on God using all kinds of everyday events to bring about His will, note two truths then:

First, that God really is in control. None of this surprised Him. As we'll see in the rest of the book, it is all a part of His plan to uphold His promises. God's rule – His sovereignty – is not in doubt from either Mordecai or Esther even though all seems lost. You and I need to adopt similar attitudes: just because life isn't going your way doesn't suddenly mean that God is powerless. Keep looking to Him, cry out to Him, trust Him all the more in such times of waiting and dependence!

And secondly: the fact that God is in control never in the Scriptures means that we humans are just to sit on our hands and hope things work out for the best. "Let go and let God" in that spiritual-sounding-but-lazy sense is found nowhere in the Bible. Mordecai and Esther don't take matters into their own hands – rather, I would argue that their very actions display their trust in God's sovereign hands. So it is with you and I: we trust God and so we act as wisely and faithfully as we can. Let's see the example of how these two act in our next verses...

4:12-17 Mordecai is told of Esther's response and offers up three points in return. Think of the courage it would take to say these to somebody that you love! First, he warns Esther to not think that her position will somehow insulate her from

what is coming. Even if she keeps silent, Mordecai sees that God will use somebody else to rescue His people. That's point one: even in the midst of tragedy, Mordecai fully believes that God has a plan. Second: Esther can either be found to stand with the Jews or to stand with the Persians. If she stays silent and stands with the Persians, then she will also bear the brunt of whatever rescue the Lord has in store. Silence will not protect her. Third: Mordecai encourages her that God is in control not only of this situation in general, but of her own elevation to queen specifically. He sees that God has worked in these circumstances to place her in the right spot at the right time to act for His glory.

It's an amazing display of faith applied to life! Certainly, it would take courage to say these hard but necessary truths to a loved one. And Esther's response is every bit as courageous: she calls for a fast amongst the Jews in Susa. For three days and nights, nobody will eat or drink. Then, she will go before the king in violation of the law in hopes of winning a hearing for her people. If she dies, then so be it. All of this brings up quite the reversal: Mordecai has often advised Esther and she obeyed. Now it is Esther who advises Mordecai, and he does all that she orders.

Brothers and sisters, courage is never easy or convenient. It is quite costly, in fact. Yet think of Jesus: He arrived and acted in precisely the ways that we needed, even knowing it would cost Him His life. Yet He goes through it anyways. And by His death, we who trust Him have lasting hope and eternal life. Dear church: pray for courage. Pray that you, yourself, would have the courage to hold to what the Lord has said even in the face of your own doubts and struggles. Ask the Lord to give you opportunities to speak up, to literally en-courage others so that they also would be found faithful. And pray that the Lord would use you – wherever He has placed you, in whatever job or role or situation – to display your trust in Him through your words and actions. The call here is intensely personal, and it requires the sort of courage that is evidenced in **Joshua 1**: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” And we praise Him for that! So let's have our actions meet our words – let's have what we sing in here be the reality that we live out in the watching, needy, world out there. Let's display our trust in Christ!