

Decision Time - Rev. Calum Macmillan (Rosskeen)

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn back with me in your Bibles to Esther chapter 4. Esther chapter 4.! We can read again from verse 13.

! Then Esther in her response says, I will go to the king, verse 16, When asked you a question, you don't need to shout out any answers.

You don't need to worry, but have a wee think. If you could choose to live in any period of world history, what would it be? I've got a wee boy at home who I know would say the time of the dinosaurs quite instantly.

Maybe you're a Downton Abbey fan and you would like to go back. I suppose it depends which social class you might end up in those times as well. If you could live in any period of world history, what would it be?

Or maybe we just want to go back to the world that we knew when we were children, a different time. And as we read Esther tonight, we're reminded of something profound that the Bible says to us.

[1 : 39] And it says to us, actually, in the book of Acts, that God has appointed when and where we would live and be born. He's appointed the boundaries of the nations when and where we would be.

And that God has done this so that he would not be far off from any of us. You're not here by chance tonight. Nor are you listening to this maybe on the live stream at home by chance tonight. We're here tonight. We are where we are living, when and where we are living, because the Lord has put us here. And he's appointed these to be our days so that he might not be far off from any of us.

His purpose is so that we might know him. The folks at Roskane are fed up with me quoting Lord of the Rings, but they know I'm a big Lord of the Rings fan.

And you'll know the line where Frodo says to Gandalf, and paraphrasing, I wish that I hadn't lived. I wish that I didn't have to live to see such evil times as these. And Gandalf replies along the lines of, it's not for us to decide what times we live through, but it's for us to decide how we're going to live, how we're going to be.

[2 : 56] We don't get to choose the days we live in, but we do get to decide the people that we're going to be, the choices that we're going to make. We're going to dive into the story of Esther tonight.

And as we said, I'm conscious that maybe everyone's not familiar with the story of Esther. So we're going to recap the story very quickly. Esther is, in some ways, it's quite different to many of the other books of the Bible.

And certainly the time and the setting of Esther is different to other books of the Bible. This is not set in Israel. This is set in the kingdom of Persia. It's set in the Persian kingdom and the city of Susa.

And within that city, we find two Jews living there, Mordecai and his cousin Esther. Esther. And Esther has had something of a whirlwind promotion.

The king, Xerxes, has been publicly really humiliated by his queen Vashti. And as a result, Xerxes is obviously embarrassed.

[4 : 05] He's displeased. And he removes her as queen. And they begin this search throughout the Persian kingdom for a suitable bride to replace her as the queen.

Esther is recorded in the scripture as being a beautiful woman. And she is chose. She pleased the king. And she is chosen by Xerxes. But trouble is broken out.

There's a high official in the Persian kingdom honored by King Xerxes by the name of Haman. He's an important man in the kingdom. And King Xerxes has ordered that Haman was to be honored

above all the others.

You were to kneel before him. And you were to pay homage to him when you encountered him. But we're told that Mordecai would not. That's an interesting question to think about.

Why would Mordecai not do that? Because it's not a religious activity he's been asked to kneel before. It's not like in the book of Daniel where they're being commanded to worship the golden images and statues.

[5 : 10] Why would Mordecai not bow before Haman? Well, I think the clue in the text is that it tells us that Haman was an Agagite. Agag was an ancient king who's mentioned in the book of 1 Samuel.

King Saul was meant to kill him and yet spared him. But you'll remember the chapter where the Lord says to Saul that he desires obedience, not sacrifice. Agag was an Amalekite.

The Amalekites were an ancient enemy of the Jewish people. And Haman is described in either chapter 2 or chapter 3 as Haman, the enemy of the Jews.

I think it's a result of this ancient enmity. And actually you can trace the Amalekites back to Esau as well. Here you have in the book of Esther the warring brothers, Jacob and Esau.

This enmity is still playing out. The Amalekites, the Israelites, Esau, Jacob. These ancient divisions are still working their way out through the pages of history. He's an enemy of God's people and Mordecai defies him.

[6 : 12] And Haman is so enraged by Mordecai's defiance that he convinces the king to sign an edict. It's a law that goes to the four corners of the Persian Empire.

On a particular date, everyone is commanded by royal decree to annihilate, to exterminate all the Jews in the area. Young, old, women, children.

And they're allowed to plunder their belongings. And they're allowed to pass the king to pass the king to pass the king. And the king is appointed by royal decree. And the date is ringed in the calendar.

The date is announced beforehand. And in Persia, a law could not be repealed once the king had issued it. And so in the story of the Bible, it seems as if here in Persia, that the story of God's people is about to come to an end.

And in the story of the Bible, that's a serious predicament because it is through the people of God, through the Israelites, that God is going to save the world, that the saviour of the world is going to come.

[7 : 15] And here, an extermination notice hangs over the people of God. Just as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, salvation is from the Jews. And if the Jews were to be eradicated, then the God's salvation plan would be at risk, would be at threat as well.

So this edict has been issued. Word has gone out that on the appointed date, Jewish people are to be destroyed, killed, annihilated. All Jews, young, old, women and children.

And one day, the 13th day of the 12th month of the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. So that is the context in which we read and picked up our reading tonight in Esther chapter 4.

So two headings for us tonight as we look at this chapter together. It's going to be return, first of all, and then resolve. Return and then resolve.

First of all, return. The chapter opens with Mordecai hearing of the planned annihilation of his people. The edict would have been read out in the city, would have been pinned up around the city as well.

[8 : 28] Maybe he read it, maybe he heard it being proclaimed. And understandably, Mordecai is devastated. He tears his clothes, he puts on sackcloth and ashes.

He goes out and he wails bitterly and loudly. And we're told that this was replicated by Jews all over the Persian Empire. In verse 3, 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 in sackcloth and ashes.

Now, I know this whole sackcloth, ashes, loud wailing and lamenting, it's a very different culture. Us Highland males are not renowned for our showing of emotion publicly.

But it was very different, of course, amongst the people of the Eastern peoples. It was common practice for them to do these things. And the sackcloth and ashes was like an outward way of showing what was going on in the heart.

It was an outward representation of what was happening inside. And I wonder if Mordecai felt a degree of responsibility. Did he know that it was Haman behind it?

[9 : 43] Did he know that it was his defiance of Haman that had caused this? What a burden that would be to bear, to feel that you might be the one responsible for the extermination of your people.

Mordecai is broken. He wears sackcloth and ashes. He weeps loudly and bitterly. And the people throughout the Persian kingdom, the Persian empire, do the same.

But what's interesting here is that there's a wee, I call them hyperlinks. You know when you're on a webpage and you click a hyperlink and it takes you to another page? Sometimes the Bible does that by way of repeated words or phrases.

Phrases appear in different parts of the Bible that connect. It's like join the dots. And there's a phrase in Esther 4 that reappears in Joel chapter 2. In Joel 2 verses 12 to 14.

And it's the words in verse 3. With fasting and weeping and lamenting. And in Joel chapter 2 we read this. Even now declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and it's mourning translated.

[10 : 56] This is the NIV translation. It's the same word as lamenting here. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

And he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing. Grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God.

You see, I think in the book of Esther, we find God's people in a bad way. We find God's people in a bad way.

They're in exile for their sin. They're in a low place spiritually. And what strikes me as really odd when you read the chapter, and maybe it struck you as well, is what's not mentioned.

As well as Lord of the Rings, I used to like reading Sherlock Holmes. Some of you might have read the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime. When the inspector says to Holmes, is there anything else you need to draw to our attention?

[11 : 56] And he said, yes, the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime. And the inspector says, but the dog didn't do anything in the nighttime. And he said, that is the curious incident. Why didn't the dog make a noise?

Why didn't the dog alert to the presence of thieves? And here it's not so much what is said, but what is not said that's interesting. Because at no point here does it say that Mordecai or the Jewish people prayed.

Did you notice that? They wail, they put on sackcloth and ashes, they fast, but prayer is not mentioned. That to me, it's a stark omission. And I'm going to be scrupulously fair about this. People read that in two different ways. One school of thought says, well, prayer is the natural companion to fasting and to mourning. It's there by implication.

But others suggest that it's the opposite. That the fact that it's not explicitly mentioned highlights kind of the spiritual low ebb that the people are at here.

[12 : 59] Prayer is not mentioned even in the face of an impending Holocaust. And if that is the case, then this whole situation echoes Joel, where impending disaster is the background where God is calling his wayward people to come back to him.

God is saying, return to me with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments. For God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and he relents from sending calamity.

And that's what we'll see in Esther. He preserves his people. He protects his people, even when they're in a spiritually bad place. God is still the protector and keeper of his sheep. But it begs the question, doesn't it?

Where does the Lord find us tonight? And I don't mean what building or postcode does he find us in.

I mean, what spiritual condition does he find us in? Are we like Mordecai and his peers? The people of God, yes, but maybe we're at a low spiritual ebb.

[14 : 08] Maybe we've wandered. Maybe we've strayed. And if we have, what does the Lord say to us? He says, return to the Lord for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

Isn't that the most beautiful picture we can hear? So often we picture God as ready to scold us. And you see in parables like the prodigal son, he's a father ready to rush out and gather us up in his arms and hold us close.

He says, return to the Lord for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. And there are times God leads us into challenging and difficult circumstances because he's tried everything else to get our attention.

That our greatest joy and blessing he knows is found when we're walking with the Lord. And we all wander, we all stray, but the important thing is how we respond when we do.

And the Bible's answer is clear. We return. If we've wandered away from the Lord, don't stay where you are. Come home. Come back to him. Come back to the Lord Jesus.

[15:26] And if you've never known the Lord Jesus, what then? Well, the Bible calls you to come too. For the Bible warns of an impending calamity, much greater than the one that faced Mordecai and the Jews in Persia.

The Bible speaks of the danger of dying apart from Jesus. The Bible tells us that heaven is real, that hell is real, that eternity is real. And the Bible tells us that Jesus has come to save us and to spare us.

And so if you're outside of Jesus tonight, the Bible warns you that you're in danger. You see, Mordecai and the people knew when calamity was going to fall. The date was on the calendar. It was going to happen on the, was it the 13th day of the particular month? 13th day of the 12th month. But we don't know when we'll leave this world.

We don't know when Jesus will return. But we know the realities that Jesus warns us of. And we're told that we're in danger, but the glorious good news of the gospel is that Jesus himself stood in our place in order to save us.

[16:37] Jesus stood in our place and took the wrath of God on sin that we might be safe, that we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life and he endured the judgment of God for us.

And he says to you tonight, come. Come. Come and live. Come and be safe. Come and enjoy the protections and blessings of being part of my family and my people.

He says to you to come. So there's return. But secondly, there's also resolve. Resolve.

Esther hears about Mordecai's behavior and understandably she's perplexed as to what's going on, so she sends one of the king's eunuchs out to find out what's happening.

Evidently, she hadn't heard about Haman's plan. And then Mordecai tells the eunuch, Hathak, exactly what's going on. And he sends a copy of Haman's edict back with him so Esther can read it.

[17:43] And again, Esther is understandably shocked as to what's happening. And Mordecai urges Esther, she must go into the king to try to get the king to stop what was about to happen.

Now, at one level, that sounds like a fair enough request. She's in the king's palace. She's effectively the new queen. She's a person in high places. Use her influence to persuade the king and get him to stop the slaughter of millions of innocent people.

But there was a problem, and there was a few problems. The law was that you couldn't just go in and see the king. Not even Esther could just wander in. It was only seven people in the whole of the Persian Empire who had the privilege to access the king at any time.

But everyone else, you had to be invited. And if he appeared uninvited, if the king didn't extend his golden scepter towards you, you would be killed for coming into his presence uninvited.

So Esther has a problem. She can't just knock on the door and go in. She has to be invited to see the king or her life might be in danger. And the other problem was that the king's interest in Esther seems to have cooled somewhat.

[18:58] She says that he hasn't called on her for this past month, for this past 30 days in verse 11. As for me, she says, I have not been called to come into the king for these past 30 days.

So Esther basically says back to Mordecai, I can't speak to the king. I can't go speak to him because he doesn't want to see me just now. And Mordecai, everybody knows that the punishment for wandering into the king's presence is death.

I'd be risking my life, Mordecai. And then comes Mordecai's reply. Don't think that because you're in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape.

But if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows, but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

What a reply that is to get. And I wonder what you would do if you were in Esther's position. You're the only one in a position to potentially save your whole people, but it could cost you your life.

[20 : 09] Or you could stay silent. And millions will die, but you'll be safe. What would you do?

Esther sends this response back to Mordecai. She says, Get everyone together to fast for me for three days, and then I'm going to go to the king. And if I perish, I perish. What a decision Esther's faced with, isn't she?

Again, what would you and I choose in that situation? It's easy to read these stories and just, especially if we know the ending, not feel that moment. Esther has these options available to us. You could say she's got three options available to her. She can show cowardice, she can show compromise, or she can show courage. But to show courage, she might die.

And she doesn't know how the story's going to end. She doesn't know what's going to happen. It's decision time for Esther. Now, one writer on Esther, a guy called Leyland Reichen, he makes the interesting point that Esther's the only character in this story to have two names.

[21 : 24] She's known, her Hebrew name was Hadassah, and she's known as Esther. Now, Esther is, effectively the queen, and we're told that nobody knew she was a Jew.

Nobody knew her heritage. Nobody knew her ethnicity. She'd hidden who she was, who her people were, because Mordecai had forbidden her to reveal it. So what is she going to do?

I think there's a wee picture here of decision time for Esther. Who are you, Esther? What people do you belong to, Esther?

And what kingdom do you belong to? Will you choose Persia? Or will you choose the people of God? Will you choose to face danger and maybe even death and disgrace with the people of God? Or will you say nothing and show cowardice and compromise? Esther has a decision to make. Who is she? And to what people does she belong? Who are her people? And what is her kingdom?

[22 : 27] She stands at a crossroads in her life and she stands at a moment of decision. Do you know, friends, there's times in our own spiritual life, so that's true of us as well.

There are times where we stand at spiritual crossroads and God calls us to make a decision.

Choose this day whom you will serve. There are times we find ourselves standing at these crossroads and we have to wrestle with these same questions.

Who are I? Who are we? Who am I? To what people do I belong? Will I stand with and for Jesus? Will I commit my way to Jesus or will I not?

And the Lord is gracious and he is so patient. But there are times in our experience, I believe, where he calls us to decision time. I remember my own conversion story, a moment like that one evening where it just felt very powerfully like I was standing at a T-junction, two ways to go, God's way or my way.

And it felt like I was being called to make that decision that would set the course of the rest of my life. And I remember praying and saying, Lord, I want to go your way and I'm not even sure I know how to go your way, but I want to go your way.

[23 : 53] There's that balance, isn't there, in Scripture where Jesus says that we're to count the cost and to weigh these things up, not to just rush in, but we're to call to balance things up, to count the cost and then to follow him.

But there are also times when he says, choose this day whom you're going to serve. Esther stands at the crossroads crossroads. And maybe tonight you stand at a crossroads. Or someone watching at home tonight stands at a crossroads.

Maybe you're a secret disciple. Maybe like Esther. You are the Lord's, you belong to the Lord's people, but you've told nobody and you've been content to cruise along, undercover, so to speak, just like Esther.

But Jesus doesn't let us off with that. Jesus calls us to believe in our hearts and to confess with our mouths that he is Lord.

Remember the incident where Jesus is on his way to heal Jairus' daughter and the large crowd that followed him. This woman who had an issue with bleeding comes and she reaches out and she touches the hem of his garment and she's healed.

[25 : 06] Now Jesus is, he's on his way to heal. A dying girl. There's a huge crowd around him. He could have just said nothing and continued on his way, but he stops and he says, who touched me? Jesus is not asking that question because he doesn't know what's happened.

I think he's asking that question for the benefit of the lady who's been healed. And she has to come from the crowd and to say, it was me. I reached out and I just believed if I could touch your garment I would be healed and I have been.

Jesus very gently and graciously brought her to publicly testify what he had done for her. And so maybe like Esther, you're a secret disciple.

As I say, Esther could have said nothing, kept her head down, avoided all the trouble that came with being part of the people of God. You might have seen even in the news this week all the furore surrounding Kate Forbes' speech at a conference and it all boils down to animosity against people of faith.

That's really what it boils down to, animosity against the Christian faith, those who love Jesus. Maybe like Esther, you've been undercover but that tonight is the night that Jesus calls you to make a decision to stand up and to come forward and to say what Jesus has done for you and has done in your life and to say that yes, the Lord's people are my people and Jesus is my saviour and I belong to his kingdom and I will choose to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of Egypt.

[26 : 49] Esther stood at the crossroads and she committed her way to the people of God. She would go even if it cost her her life. If I perish, I perish. And surely there's an echo of Jesus there in those words, isn't it?

To save her people, Esther had to risk her life. If she perished, she perished. But for Jesus to come and to save his people, it wasn't a case of if I perish, I perish.

But when I perish, I perish. Because Jesus came to save his people from eternal death and judgment. Jesus came to save his people from the wrath of God upon sin.

And Jesus knew from all eternity what it would cost. Jesus knew he had to lay his life down. Jesus knew he would have to endure the horrors of the cross.

I always wonder what it must have been like for Jesus growing up reading the Old Testament. Can you imagine reading Psalm 22 and knowing, that's describing me. or reading, or sitting even at the Passover, the Passover meal every year, and the Holy Spirit, as he grew older, revealing to him, listen, you are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[28 : 11] Reading Isaiah 53 and knowing that it spoke of what he was to do. Jesus knew it would cost him his life, and yet the wonder of wonders is that Jesus agreed that that was a price he was willing to pay for you and for me.

That was not a price that Jesus counted too high to pay. Jesus chose faithfulness to who he was and faithfulness to the people of God even though it would cost him his life, and Jesus chose to lay his life down.

Nobody was taking it from him, but Jesus lay it down to save you and me from the judgment that we deserve. Not if I perish, I perish, but when he would perish.

He embraced it. He chose it, knowing that he laid his life down, but his father had given him authority to take it back up again. As we saw this morning, no one loves you more than Jesus.

No one has done more for you than Jesus. And so if you stand at that crossroads like Esther, his call to you is tell somebody, even tonight, if you are his.

[29 : 25] And if you're at that crossroads, he's calling you to go his way, to choose life, to choose Jesus. Then also in the passage you have Mordecai's enigmatic words.

In verse 14, he says, 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.

In a book where faith-wise the people seem to be in a very dark place, these words come across as remarkably deep and full of faith, don't they? He seems to be showing remarkable confidence.

Esther, if you don't do this, don't imagine that God still won't save us. Again, it's interesting, he doesn't actually mention the Lord in that sentence, does he?

But he says, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place. What other place? What does he mean by that? Slightly enigmatic, but it seems like he's saying God will not let his people perish.

[30 : 32] God will not let his plans fall to nothing. God will not let his salvation plan for the world fall. And Esther, if you don't take this step of obedience, you and your family's house will perish.

But God will still save his people. God will still intervene. And God will still spare us. But he challenges Esther when he says, but maybe, who knows, but that you are where you are for such a

time as this.

You know, I imagine in some ways it's probably been quite a traumatic time for Esther. I can't imagine being part of the royal harem and suddenly being thrust into the Persian kingdom.

The Persian king's bedroom was a particularly pleasant experience for Esther and probably quite, maybe in some ways, a very traumatic experience for Esther. And yet, even through the hard times that she's experienced, God has put her in a position that through her he would redeem his people and save his people.

How does God save the world? How does God reach the world? Through his people. No one's here by accident. No one's here on the west side by accident.

[31 : 52] God has put you here for a purpose to proclaim the greatness and the majesty of Jesus for such a time as this. And Mordecai and Esther's sufferings become meaningful in the light of what's now happening.

Esther was in a place, she might not have chosen for herself. But God had put her there for such a time as this. You know, you and I will face the same pressures as Esther.

Cowardice, compromise, or courage. But what will we choose? And the pressures that we might come under, may be not as extreme as the ones Esther and Mordecai felt, but pressures, real pressures nonetheless.

Cowardice, compromise, or courage. What will it be for you? And what will it be for me? God calls us to stand for him, to be a light in the darkness.

God calls us to come back to him, and God calls us to trust in him. Even when all seems bleak and all seems lost, the Lord has got his people, and he calls us to trust him, and he calls us to follow him, and he calls us to hold on to the hope that he has for us.

[33 : 16] Amen. Let's pray together. Lord, we ask that you would give us the grace to see Jesus, that we might have courage, but we have no courage in and of ourselves.

We are weak, but you are strong. But help us to see our Jesus, the greater than David, who slew the giants of sin, Satan, and death, the Jesus who stands by our side, and Lord, whom shall we fear if you are with us?

There is no principality or power, there's no powers in heaven above or on earth beneath that can separate us from your love. We have a God who is our refuge and our strength, the one in whom we have eternal security, and Lord Jesus, that you would give us the grace to stand for you in this world, to face the pressures that we will come under, to stand against maybe the mockery or misunderstanding that does come the way of your people.

But we pray that you would give us strength to stand and strength to be faithful. We pray for any tonight who have wondered and that they may hear your call in their heart and on their life to come home, to come back to you.

For you are the Father waiting to wrap them up in your arms and hold them close. For any who are at the crossroads tonight, by your grace, Lord, that they would choose life and choose you. They can only do that by your gifting.

[34 : 51] And so, Lord Jesus, that you would bless and give the gift of new life even here this evening. And any maybe, Lord, who have, who are yours and have never made that public, may you give strength for them to be able to say that Jesus is their Lord and their Saviour.

And we ask this all in your name. Amen. Our closing psalm is going to be Psalm 23 from Sing Psalms.

It's on page 28, Psalm 23 from Sing Psalms. The Lord is my shepherd, no want shall I know. He makes me lie down where the green pastures grow. He leads me to rest where the calm waters flow.

Psalm 23 from Sing Psalms, the whole psalm, and we can stand to sing. The Lord is my shepherd, no want shall I know.

He makes me like the river, the green pastures grow. He leads me to rest where the calm waters flow.

[36 : 11] my wandering steps he brings back to his way.

In state paths of righteousness making me share, unless he has done his name to display.

Lord, walk in this valley where darkness is near.

Because you are with me, O evil I fear. You wrought and your sound bring me comfort and cheer. in the sight of my enemies at table you spread.

[37 : 17] The oil of rejoicing you pour on my hair, my cup overflows and I graciously fed.
O surely your cavern and mercy and grace will follow me closely in all of my ways.
I will dwell in the house of the Lord all my days. The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face towards you
and give you peace. And all God's people said Amen. Amen.