

A Willing Sacrifice

Esther 4

Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 24 September 2023, AM Service.

Israel has assimilated into the Persian empire. Yes, this was forced upon them in some senses, but most have showed a preference for foreign rule.

Five or so generations have passed while in exile... five generations since the best and brightest of Israel were sent to Babylon for re-training... to learn how to be Persian... Read about that in Daniel.

Five generations since the godly example of Daniel and his friends in exile.

Is it any wonder that Israel has forgotten what it means to follow Yahweh? It isn't like prior to exile they had been particularly faithful either. And year after year after year, it seems to get worse.

A warning to us all I think... the slow drift of the people of God, influenced by all the paganism around us.

Mordecai has heard of Haman's plan... and he is notably upset. He tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes... publicly mourning for all to see... crying out for attention, even to the king's gate.

And he's joined in his weeping by all the Jews throughout the empire.

Who will comfort them?

First batter up... Achashverosh. Verse 2... Mordecai approaches the king's gate... but it was closed to him. Why not? Because nobody approaches the king in such a mournful state! What truck does he have with the poor and needy of his kingdom! Yuk... keep them away.

And so Mordecai gains no hearing from the king.

Second batter up. Queen Esther. She's been hiding in the wings... the trump card of Israel. And what's she going to do?

In deep distress, aching for her father, she tries to make him feel better by doing what? Verse 4... sending him some clothes.

Now we might laugh at this if it wasn't so painful.

It's no surprise Mordecai won't accept them. How on earth would clothes make a man facing the death penalty with an entire nation feel better about his position?

To be fair, the lack of clothes was the reason why Mordecai couldn't go into the king.

So arguably, with these clothes, the gate would now be open to him!

But no... Mordecai doesn't actually want to go into the king's presence... why not? We're not told... it seems most likely that he was afraid... he saw no hope in him appealing to the king, for he was the one who instigated the so-called rebellion in the first place.

Instead, he wants Esther to go on his behalf... vs 8... a mediator... a go-between.

Isn't this why Esther was there in the first place?

If so, she's hardly doing a good job is she. She seems to be the last to hear of the immanent destruction of the Jews... and even when she's told, she tells Mordecai in verse 11, that it's impossible.

Why is it impossible? Because of the Law. Nobody can break that law without being put to death.

That Law is what caused Vashti to be expelled, and the Jews to face the death penalty... King Achashverosh is a stickler for the Law... she will surely die.

And then we get to the most famous verse in the entire book... but not verses... famous verse... why just a verse... because it's famous, partly because it's torn from the verses before it.

Look at verse 13-14... Look carefully at the logic of Mordecai.

Esther... you're a Jew... don't think you can keep the secret I've told you that you should keep... you won't escape *even though you're in the king's palace*.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, believed this was Mordecai warning Esther that the Jews wouldn't keep her secret. He believes this was blackmail. It may have been... But even if it wasn't, the reminder of her fragile position cuts deeply.

Despite working to gain safety in the house of the ruler of the world... the safety she has found there is as fragile as it was for Queen Vashti. You're not in as powerful a position as you think you are Esther.

And so one may well wonder... why did she crave that position in the first place?

What does he say next? Verse 14— "For if you remain completely silent at this time, all the Jews will die..."

No... he doesn't say that does he.

Had he said that, he would be encouraging Esther to be willing to put her life on the line for a noble cause... that by her risking her position, she may well be the saviour of all of Israel.

Instead, he says this: "if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place..." Effectively, someone else will save them...

“but... you and your father’s house will perish.”

What’s he saying? Esther... who cares about the nation of Israel... if you don’t take this opportunity, your chance to be the hero of Israel, with all that that entails, will be lost... and the glory will go to another.

You don’t want that, do you Esther?

And it’s in this explicit context, that he says: “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

What is Mordecai wanting? Not ultimately for the Jews to be restored... but for his family to be projected into a position of power and authority and glory.

Selfish... manipulative... too weak to achieve the ends himself... Esther... the time is now.

And yet, famously, Mordecai’s statement was more true than even he realised... for behind the scenes, God had orchestrated all these events for a purpose. Why? To show through this parody how immensely ludicrous it is to deny **Him** as king, and to seek safety and peace and rest in paganism.

To point to a greater kingdom... a greater security... a greater king.

Consider the contrast between this Persian kingdom and the kingdom of God... promised in the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7. The kingdom of the Son of David... the kingdom of heaven.

Christ speaks of this contrasting kingdom in Luke 14:16-24.

The true king calls the world to gather before him... but what do they do? They have all these excuses don’t they: we’re too busy with our business... we bought new land... we just got married... the weather was too good... we were sleeping... and so on. This is a particular criticism of the people of Israel... their heart was attached to the things of this world and they despised the grace and favour of their true master.

Which angered the master. And so he sends his servants instead to whom?

The poor and the broken... the murderers... the highway bandits... the prostitutes... the lepers... the blasphemers... the adulterers... the despised and abandoned of the world... those who have been turned away everywhere else... for who would love people such as these?

And he sends his servants to compel them to come in.

But they come into the presence of a king! They aren’t fit to come before him!

So what does God do? Our king goes beyond sending us an invitation... he removes our filthy rags... our wickedness... he bathes us in the blood of his Son, removing all our wickedness...

And then he clothes us once more... not with earthly robes as Esther offered Mordecai to impress an earthly king... but placing around our shoulders the righteousness of his beloved Son, so that we can come boldly into his presence... so that he will delight over us with singing!

Brothers and sisters, this is the good news... that God in his wonderful grace and kindness would draw us near through Jesus.

Esther went into the presence of the king with no hope. The phrase in verse 16 is one of resignation and defeat...

But in the kingdom of God, Israel had always had a hope of coming before their king... a messiah who would pay the price on their behalf, a living hope... a sure expectation.

Because of Christ, the people of God can come boldly... humbly, yes! In reverence and awe, yes! But boldly... for their place has been bought by the sufficient and perfect work of Jesus.

But as glorious as the joy is for those of us who know it, you know what the heartache is don't you. It's plain in our text. There is much grief... much fasting and tearing of robes and wailing and crying out in bitterness...

Why? Not because they are truly repentant of their sins before God... But because Israel has forgotten where their only true hope lies.

This political cycle we're currently in reminds us of the problem again doesn't it. It's the same kind of thing... People crying out for help in their trouble... a failed medical system... a failing justice system... our children being exposed to terrible perversions in schools... solo parenting is at an all time high... new gangs are moving into New Plymouth... methamphetamine is once again on the rise... The wars in Ukraine, and Palestine, and Northern Africa continue unabated... rumours of a new Covid strain strike fear into every business holding on with their fingernails.

The list is endless. And all creation groans with the people of the world.

"Woe is us!"

But to whom do they cry? To their earthly kings... to idols made of stone and wood... to false gods of their imaginations.

Futility and death, all of it.

And you know the most painful part of it all. That so many among the people of God do the same...

There's a notable absence in this chapter again isn't there... The Jews are wailing... but in all their agony, they do not call upon the name of their God.

And I would suggest to you, that this lack of calling upon the name of the Lord isn't so uncommon even now...

You don't think that's true? How's your prayer life?

Perhaps some of you are pretty good in crying out to God... perhaps your private prayer closet has holes in the carpet from your knees.

I hope that's the case. I suspect for the vast majority of us it isn't.

I don't raise this because I'm any expert on the subject either. I struggle with the same things... I have the same sinful heart as you all.

But the problem with a lack of prayer is that it testifies to a forgetfulness of where true and lasting comfort comes from. We are so quick to forget.

And in our forgetfulness, we try on every other form of clothing before realizing that none of them truly covers our guilt and our sin and our shame... and none of it covers our frailty and our fear and our hurt...

And so, in forgetting the immensity of God's grace and kindness, when we come into contact with others who suffer and sin and make an absolute mess, we far too often try with them what has already failed in our own life.

If you wear this for your boss he might like you more... If you blank that person out of your life, you'll be happier... if you yell and scream and rage, or wail and cry and weep... surely that will get the attention you need.

But does it work? Is it lasting? Does it solve the heart of your problem?

No it does not.

Brothers and sisters, when you encourage one another, I urge you, use the gospel... point each other to Jesus... remind each other that there is forgiveness of sin... there is freedom from the curse... there is peace forevermore... if they look to Christ.

In him and in him alone do we find a loving King... a loving heavenly Father... one who does not treat us as we deserve but works even the hardships for our good. And he has promised us that though we carry our cross for a time, that time is short and will give way to a weight of glory beyond all comparison.

True hope and lasting peace is found nowhere else.

Not in alcohol, not in drugs, not in pampering each other with beauty treatment, not in new clothes, not in partying harder, or studying harder, or getting a better job, or a bigger house, or a better spouse.

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That you are not your own, but belong body and soul to your faithful saviour Jesus Christ. **He** has paid for your sins with his precious blood and has freed you from the tyranny of the Devil.

He watches over you in such a way that not even a hair can fall from your head without his Father's will.

In fact, in **him**, all things must work together for your salvation.

Brothers and sisters, if you belong to Christ by faith, you are promised an eternal life... in an eternal kingdom... with no pain and no betrayal and no weakness and no sin... you will be in the presence of your beloved king forevermore.

And nothing can separate you from his love.

Be bold and courageous, for when you are his, he will never let you be lost.

Amen.