

# Esther: For Such a Time as This

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer for Illumination

God of courage, be in our speaking. Be also in our listening, and speak to our souls' deep understanding. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

### Background

Charlie Chaplin in his 1940 film *The Great Dictator* used comedy and satire to depict Hitler not so much as evil incarnate, but as a bungling fool. In the midst of the real-life atrocities Hitler was committing against Charlie Chaplin's people—the Jews—the comedian hit Hitler where it hurt most—*his pride*. Hitler was enraged by the film and tried to have it banned in several countries. Chaplin's subversive comedy gave further exposure to the genocide that was going on in such a time of history.

This is exactly what the book of Esther does. To best understand the book of Esther, you have to read it as a comedy. A comedy that deals with serious matters. This style of storytelling in Persia was not uncommon at the time. When you study the book carefully you see how the many embellishments, exaggerations, misunderstandings, coincidences, and reversals are employed to enhance the story.

Like Shakespeare's comedies, everything gets wrapped up nicely in the end of the book, but the journey getting there is a little stressful.

Esther has a special place in my heart—my sophomore year of college I was in a play that put the story of Esther into a musical. It was there that I made my acting debut—and swan song—as Nobleman #4.

I sang in the chorus:

*There's nothing like the life of a nobleman's life  
in the court of the mighty king.*

Also had a solo:

*I say OFF with her head!*

And got to dance a little Persian jig in the court of King Xerxes.

Esther is probably the most out of the box book of the Bible. It's the only Old Testament book that wasn't found among the Dead Sea scrolls. Both Judaism and Christianity debated if it should be included in the canon. It starts in Persia and ends in Persia. God, the temple, and Jerusalem is never explicitly mentioned. But Esther teaches us the timeless message about how to live out our faith *away from home*.

The book of Esther also explains how the Jewish holy day of Purim came to be. Purim comes from the word "*pur*" which means "dice." The evil character Haman cast clay dice to figure out what day should be chosen to exterminate the Jewish people. The day the dice fell on was Passover. This was a foreshadowing that the story would have a happy ending. Just as the Jews were delivered from Pharaoh and Egypt, so would the Jews be delivered from Haman and Persia.

There are ten feasts in the book of Esther. Each feast is about power—either the gaining of power or the losing of power. So one of the main themes of the book of Esther is the dramatic reversal of fortune God can bring about for his people—even when the odds are heavily stacked against them.

The book of Esther is read the night before Purim and on the day of Purim. On these two days, the Jewish people reenact the story of Esther, often times wearing funny costumes. Children use a doll of the evil character Haman like a piñata.

Usually Jewish holidays are more somber—but not Purim. This celebration is filled with boisterous merrymaking, carnivals, masquerades, and not a little bit of drinking. It's kind of like the Mardi Gras of Judaism. Other Purim traditions are sending gifts of food to friends and to the poor. The carnival of Purim is a time to celebrate the Jewish people's deliverance from being exterminated.

The book of Esther reminds us that the people of God are called to live faithful, courageous, and shrewd lives in an often dangerous and cruel world. We're also encouraged not to forget that God often uses the most surprising and unlikely people to save the day—even an orphan, exiled, foreign young Jewish woman—who would rise from "rags to royalty" to be the queen of Persia in order to save her people from genocide, "for such a time as this."

In the story of Esther, Xerxes the King of Persia is quite the party animal. After 180 days of straight partying with the noblemen, the inebriated king decides to have a beauty contest with one contestant—his wife, Queen Vashti. The queen says, "thanks but no thanks" and declines the invitation. The king is not happy. He fires her from being the queen and his wife.

So Xerxes decides to have the first reality TV show called *The King*, which is the prequel to *The Bachelor*. Countless beautiful young virgins are brought into the palace for the King to pick his new queen. After 12 months of pampering, perfume, and spa treatments, Esther ends up winning the king's favor and she becomes queen.

But there's one small detail. In the reality show application, Esther followed her adopted father Mordecai's advice and left blank that she was Jewish in the ethnicity section of the questionnaire.

Now, one of the meanings of the name Esther is "conceal." Just as Esther concealed her Jewish identity, so God is concealed in this story. But with God, there is a presence even in his absence.

The book of Hebrews puts it this way, "faith is the conviction of things *not seen*." So the unseen God is working undercover and incognito throughout the story. There are a lot of "just so happens" and "coincidences" in Esther. God may be veiled, but God is quite involved.

And so it is in our lives. We walk by faith, not by what? Sight.

We find more about Mordecai's background. Before he was exiled, he was a royal official in the line of Saul. While Esther was queen, he uncovered an assassination plot on the life of Xerxes. His deed was recorded, but oddly he was not recognized for saving King Xerxes' life.

Haman is then introduced as one of Xerxes' royal officials. Haman came from the line of the Jews' greatest enemies in Scripture—the dreaded Amalekites. This is a foreshadowing of what Haman would do to the Jewish people in Persia. So Haman, not Mordecai, is promoted by the King. It is ordered that everyone should bow to Haman. Everyone bowed—except for Mordecai.

Now Haman had a bit of fragile ego, so he was rather peeved with Mordecai at this slight. In fact, Haman was so mad that he sought to have not just Mordecai destroyed, but the entire Jewish population. Haman offered 10,000 talents of his own money to sway King Xerxes to make a decree that the Jewish people be eradicated throughout the kingdom. The 10,000 talents that Haman offered was about ½ of the Persian empire's GNP at the time.

In addition, Haman had a 75 foot-high gallows constructed to hang Mordecai on. The king told Haman he could keep his money, and he would still make the decree against the Jews. Upon hearing the news of the king's decree, Mordecai lamented in sack cloth and ashes. The Persians feasted, but Mordecai and the Jews of the city of Susa fasted. Xerxes caroused, the Jews were confused. Mordecai then knew what must be done—he had to make a request of Queen Esther.

*Let's hear the Word of the Lord from:*

#### **Scripture: Esther 4:10-17 NRSV**

Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "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—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days."

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 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."

Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "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." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## Sermon – Esther: For Such a Time as This

*For such a time as this.* This was a time that required action, even if it risked death.

Queen Vashti did not come to the King when she was summoned. Queen Esther came to the King when she was not summoned. The once passive Esther, now boldly approached the King in defiance of the law, on behalf of her people.

Xerxes looked upon Esther with favor and extended the gold sceptre to her. Both the Queen and her people's lives would be spared.

And then the Great Reversal took place:

- Mordecai was given the honor he deserved for saving the king. Haman's diabolical plan backfired and shame came upon him.
- Mordecai, not Haman, was given the king's robes and the king's horse to ride upon. Haman had to lead Mordecai through the city proclaiming the honor of Mordecai.
- Haman was hanged on the gallows he made for Mordecai.
- The king's decree to eradicate the Jewish people was erased and the Jews were given a seal of protection by the king in their exile.
- Esther was given Haman's property and Mordecai managed it.

The feast of Purim was declared and "all was light and joy, gladness and honor for the Jews." Sorrow turned to joy. Mourning into holiday. Gifts of food were sent to friends and family. Instead of being reviled, the people of the world sought to become converts to Judaism.

This is the message for us all: God will watch out for his people.

And God calls us to be faithful—to courageously walk in the footsteps of Mordecai and Esther and to bravely seek the good of God's people and to promote the welfare of their descendants.

Chiune Sugihara, better known as Sempo, was a Japanese diplomat who came to prominence during WWII. Sugihara's first diplomatic assignment was in Harbin, China. He was a promising diplomat, but his concern over the mistreatment of Chinese civilians by the Japanese authorities got him branded as a disobedient servant of the Empire. Through the years, his reputation as a skilled diplomat increased. His expertise was needed in Europe and so in 1939 Sugihara was transferred to Lithuania, where he served as a vice-consul of the Japanese Consulate. As the invasion of Poland began, Polish Jews fled to Lithuania.

Local Jews and those seeking refuge were now applying for exit visas in large numbers. But Japan gave a very limited amount of visas and none of the Jews in Lithuania met the criteria. Sugihara asked for instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but their answer was uncompromising—no visas.

For Sugihara, it was a "for such a time as this" moment. The vice-consul acted on his own. From July 18 to September 4, 1940, Sugihara ignored all orders from the Ministry and granted visas to as many applicants as he could. Day and night he wrote, issuing a month's worth of visas in a single day!

When the consulate in Kaunas was closed, he was ordered to evacuate. But he even issued visas on the way to the railway station. When there was no time left, he stamped and signed blank pages and distributed them so that they could be forged into exit visas.

It was reported Sugihara was so concerned about the fate of the Jewish people that he bowed deeply just before his departure and said: "Please forgive me. I cannot write anymore. I wish you the best." The answer came from the crowd by an unknown man who spoke for all of them when he said: "Sugihara. We'll never forget you."

While the train was leaving the station, he threw more documents out of the window into a crowd of desperate refugees.

As Sugihara departed reality struck, and he wondered what his superiors would say. Luckily, in the confusion caused by the hasty closure of the consulate, Sugihara avoided detection. His superiors failed to find out how many exit visas were issued by him. He and his family would eventually spend two years as POWs, but they were able to return to Japan safely.

Historical research estimates that Sugihara issued around 6,000 visas that ended up allowing 10,000 Jews to escape certain death.

In 1985 his actions were acknowledged by the government of Israel, and he was granted the title "The Righteous Among the Nations," reserved for individuals who helped Jews during the Holocaust.

When asked about his motives for helping all those people, Chiune Sempo Sugihara humbly answered: "I do it just because I have pity on the people. They wanted to get out, so I let them have the visas."

Immanuel, let's be a people today who walk in the footsteps of Esther and Mordecai, Sugihara, and our Savior Jesus, who delivered us from death to life. Amen.

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