

Finding Our Destiny in God's Gracious Purpose

From the sermon series: The Mystery of God's Sovereign Grace

Text: Esther 4:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise...from another quarter, but...who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Esther 4:14

To have a sense that one's life is caught up in a larger purpose, a drama of cosmic proportion and eternal significance must be one of life's greatest gifts. To have a sense that one's life makes a difference, has a meaning and purpose, is to be energized, to be fulfilled, to find happiness. To have a sense that one's life plays a role in the gracious purpose of God must be the ultimate satisfaction. It is a source of peace and wellbeing; it conveys a sense of worth and value, enabling one to live with self-esteem and confidence.

God's purpose is not accessible to human reason. It may even sound presumptuous to speak of finding our destiny in God's gracious purpose. Yet, the Scriptures are replete with stories of those who had a sense that God had a mission for them to execute through which He would effect His purposes. God does reveal Himself; He does move in and through the structures of history and the circumstances of our lives as He moves the created order toward the realization of His purposes.

To believe that is an act of trust. It is trust in God, in God's sovereign, gracious purpose. It is trust in the midst of conflicting evidence and ambiguity. It is trust in the face of mystery. But it is trust which confirms itself in the assurance worked in the hearts of God's children by God's Spirit.

Biblical faith affirms that God is active in history, that history will be brought finally to the goal God has established and that God will realize that goal through the free and responsible agency of those who make themselves available to be the instruments of His purpose. That is saying a great deal; it is a statement of faith - trust in the providence of God.

That providence is not self-evident; it is not easy to trace; it can never be verified with anything like scientific proof. Providence operates in a provisional and guilty world, a world full of capricious events which we call chance and full of determinism, which we call fate. The purpose of God will be effected through the agency of free and responsible persons who can say "no" as well as "yes" to God's purpose; He will not crush nor coerce. Still, our faith affirms, He will accomplish His purpose - a purpose of salvation - working all things together for our good.

That is our confidence. In all of life's circumstances, in light and shadow, in success and failure, in heights and depths, we are securely in the hand of God and, whether the way is plain or full of confusion, we trust God's sovereign grace to accomplish His goal; even more, as we open our lives to God we have a sense of destiny, of being a partner in the great drama of redemption.

There has been so much argument and debate, so much confusion and conflict over the question of the will and purpose of God and finding God's will for one's life that it may seem futile to try once more to discern that purpose and discover one's destiny. Yet we do so not to engage in speculation, not to play theological games. Our purpose is rather to gain that sense of being in the will of God, of finding our destiny in His gracious purpose.

A story is better than philosophical discourse and the Bible is full of narratives from which we gain insight into the trust that has characterized the People of God. Such a story is the Old Testament book of Esther. It was probably the most contested book to enter the Old Testament canon. It has always had its detractors, even among Jewish scholars. Martin Luther disliked it intensely. It has been much debated but finally it is part of the Jewish canon, part of our Old Testament and it witnesses to the theme of our present series, affirming in a powerful way faith in God's sovereign gracious purpose at work in the arena of human history.

The story probably has an historical core, although it is probably also an adaptation of a Persian story about the origin of a festival – perhaps a Festival of the New Year. It tells of the origin of the Feast of Purim on the Jewish calendar.

Just as the early Christians adapted pagan feasts, which lie behind our Christmas and Easter festivals, but filled them with Christian meaning, so the Jews in the story of Esther gave a "historical" setting for the origin of the Feast of Purim.

The story itself is full of drama and intrigue. Carey A. Moore gives a concise resumé of the story in The Anchor Bible Commentary on *Esther*. He writes,

Before going further, we should summarize the story which has raised so much controversy.

One day, during one of his lavish drinking parties, King Xerxes was feeling high and ordered Queen Vashti to appear before his guests, so that he

might show off her much rumored beauty. When she refused, the king deposed her immediately (ch. i). Later he launched a large-scale search throughout the kingdom to find someone suitable to replace her. Among the many attractive candidates taken to his bed - but only after a year of extensive beauty preparations - was the Jewess Esther, the niece and adopted daughter of Mordecai the Jew. A beautiful and shapely girl, Esther was quite popular among all who knew her at the palace, and not surprisingly, the king chose her as his queen.

Some time after this Mordecai learned about a court intrigue against the king; he told Esther, who in turn warned the king in Mordecai's name but without revealing that she herself was a Jewess. As it turned out, Mordecai's good deed was officially recorded although he was not rewarded at the time (ch. ii). Later on, Mordecai refused to bow down to the king's prime minister, Hainan, because he was an Amalekite and thus the mortal enemy of all Jews. In revenge for this disrespect, Haman persuaded the king to approve a pogrom against the people who were the principal obstacle to the success of all his plans for the empire. These "enemies" were, of course, the Jews. Nevertheless, Haman succeeded in getting the pogrom accepted without identifying them by name. Thus an edict was sent throughout the empire, declaring that on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, all Jews, including women and children, were to be wiped out and their possessions plundered. Dictated by Haman but written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet, the edict was irrevocable (ch. iii).

As soon as Mordecai heard about the edict, he ordered Esther to intercede for her people. Reluctant to approach the king unsummoned, for fear of being summarily executed, Esther was finally persuaded by Mordecai to take the risk. To improve her chances of success, she insisted that all the Jews in Susa, herself included, observe a strenuous three-day fast, after which she would appear, unsummoned, before the king in her most fetching attire (ch. iv).

When Esther approached the throne three days later, the king received her most cordially, assuring her that her request would be granted no matter what it was. But instead of interceding for her people then and there, Esther invited the king and Haman, her greatest enemy, to dinner. At that time the king repeated his sweeping promise to grant her almost any request, but she asked only that the king and Haman come again for dinner the next day; then, she assured him, she would ask her favor. Haman, of course, went away jubilant, flattered that only he had been invited to the queen's dinner with the king. The taste of victory and joy turned to ashes in his mouth, however, when he noticed Mordecai sitting at the gate, acting as if nothing had happened to him or his people, and still refusing to bow down! Haman controlled himself until he got home,

where. after boasting to his wife Zeresh and friends of all his accomplishments and honors, he admitted to being robbed of any joy and self-respect by Mordecai's continuing contempt for him. When someone suggested he ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai, the idea struck him as perfect; and he ordered a seventy-five-foot gallows constructed outside his home (ch. v).

That night, when the king could not sleep, he had his journal read aloud. In this way he was reminded of how Mordecai had saved his life by uncovering the assassination plot against him. Embarrassed to realize that Mordecai had never been rewarded, the king determined to remedy the matter right away and, on learning that his prime minister was waiting in the outer court, asked that he come in. Without indicating the particular person he had in mind, the king asked Haman what should be done for someone he especially wanted to honor. Unable to recognize anyone's merits but his own, Haman assumed that the king wanted to honor *him*; he therefore advised that a royal robe and horse be given to that man, and that a high-ranking official of the court go before him throughout the city, crying, "This is what is done for the man whom the king especially wants to honor!" One can imagine Haman's surprise and dismay on learning that Mordecai was the man to be so honored and that he, Haman, would be the high-ranking official to wait on Mordecai and walk before him. Returning to his home mortified and seeking solace, Haman was cautioned by his wife and friends that if Mordecai really was Jewish, then Haman would never get the better of him (ch. vi).

If Haman left home for the queen's party hoping to forget his humiliating experience and have his ego bolstered, he was rudely disappointed. During the party the king reaffirmed, for the third time in two days, that he would grant Esther virtually any request. Realizing that it was now or never, Esther asked that she and her people be saved from destruction, arguing that she would not have bothered the king if they were only to be made slaves. When the king demanded that she identify her enemy, she pointed to Haman as the one who had abused his position of power and the king's friendship. So surprised and incensed was the king that he bolted from the room. Haman, left behind, begged Esther to intercede with the king on his behalf. As Haman begged Esther for his life, and possibly even touched her as she lay upon her dinner couch, the king returned. For this serious violation of decency and harem etiquette Haman was sentenced to death on the spot. When Harbonah, one of the eunuchs attending the king, informed him that Haman had constructed a gallows for Mordecai, the king ordered Haman to be hanged on it himself (ch. vii).

As compensation for Esther's suffering, the king awarded her Haman's estate, which she, in turn, gave to Mordecai; the king also appointed Mordecai Haman's successor. Unable to revoke Haman's letter instituting

the pogrom against the Jews on the thirteenth of Adar, the king did the next best thing: he granted Mordecai full authority to compose a letter, in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet, granting Jews the right to defend themselves that day and, more importantly, encouraging all public officials to aid them. Mordecai hoped that this letter, copies of which were sent throughout the empire, might counteract the potential evil of Haman's letter; but although the letter may have had its intended effect on many, it did not deter all (ch. viii).

When the thirteenth of Adar arrived, the enemies of the Jews were still so numerous that the Jews that day killed five hundred men in Susa and seventy-five thousand elsewhere. But although granted specific permission to plunder, the Jews did not do so. Throughout the empire they celebrated their victory on the fourteenth of Adar with feasting and the exchanging of gifts, but their enemies were still sufficiently strong in Susa for Esther to request permission to fight there the next day as well, and to expose the corpses of Haman's ten sons killed the day before. Permission was granted, and so the Jews in Susa fought also on the fourteenth, killing three hundred people but not taking any plunder. Thus they celebrated their victory on the fifteenth of Adar, instead of on the fourteenth with the rest of the Jews throughout the empire (ix 1-19).

Mordecai kept a record of these things, and later wrote to all the Jews, commanding them to continue to observe Purim on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar (the holiday being named after the *pur*, or "lots," which Haman had cast to determine the propitious day for the pogrom) as the days of salvation and deliverance, and to observe them with feasting and gladness. Later on, to re-enforce Mordecai's command, Esther used her authority as queen and as the people's heroine to write a letter to the Jews throughout the empire, encouraging them to observe forever both days of Purim (ix, 20-32). With Mordecai as his prime minister, the king's fortunes and programs prospered; Mordecai himself grew in power and influence among the Persians and in the affections of the Jews (ch. x).

Esther, like *Ecclesiastes* that provided our text for the first message in this series, is an Old Testament Wisdom book; it is probably neither pure fiction nor pure fact. It may be characterized as an historical novel. It has more in it of nationalistic passion than religious devotion; yet it witnesses to a profoundly held conviction which has always characterized the faith of Israel and thus of the Christian Church - namely - *God is working His purpose out in the history of the world and He uses persons open to His call to be the instruments of His purposes*. Esther found her destiny in the gracious purposes of God to rescue His people.

This conviction is rooted in faith in God's sovereign gracious purpose to redeem the world. We can use the term predestination - God is a God of covenant. He

wills to be the God of us human persons and He created us to live in covenant community with Him. This is His predestinating will. That term scares us. It has been terribly abused, entangled with speculative philosophical notions that have made God too often a monster and the human person a puppet. Yet, rightly understood, predestination is the source of our confidence and our peace. God is for us - God will redeem the world, renew the whole cosmic order, gather His children, rebellious, guilty, anxious and untrusting though they be, to Himself and we shall dwell in the brightness of God's eternal kingdom. Predestination simply points to God's decision, God's intention that precedes everything.

Predestination speaks of pre-decision, not pre-determination, as though everything is mapped out and set in ironclad mechanical fashion ahead of time. Everything that happens is not pre-determined. Everything that happens is not the will of God.

God deals with us in a gracious personal relationship. God created us in His image endowing us with freedom and responsibility. He invites us to join in the movement of His Kingdom and the adventure of realizing the world's salvation, but God is not a divine bulldozer cutting a swath through all cosmic, historical and human obstacles; God is not a divine steamroller crushing and squashing all in His path. God invites cooperation, but tolerates opposition. And yet, and here is the mystery, His children who have come to trust Him live in the confidence that finally *His purposes of love, of sovereign grace will be realized.*

All of this is evident in the words of Mordecai to Esther:

...deliverance for the Jews will appear...

The question in Mordecai's mind was not whether God would come to the aid of His people; it was only when and where and by whom. Mordecai confronted Esther in a calm and deliberate manner. He was confident under pressure. Disaster loomed in the near future; yet there is no panic; he is not biting his fingernails. He simply sets forth the situation inviting Esther to act, to put herself at God's disposal for the salvation of His people. Mordecai is not paralyzed by fear or overcome with anxiety.

Nor is Mordecai a superficial optimist who simply whistles in the dark, hoping the evil will be denied by a cheery, if hollow exterior. The crisis is real; the situation is serious; tragedy may well be the outcome. His word to Esther is that if she keeps silence she need not think that her privileged position as Queen will secure her safety; she will be exposed to the same suffering and possible death as are all of her people. *Faith in God's redemptive purpose, confidence in God's sovereign grace does not mean insulation from the suffering and tragedy of human existence.* There is no safe island free from the ravages of human sin and the scourge of evil. Is it not paradoxical that precisely the Jewish people who have suffered so tragically throughout the centuries are the people who give to the world this faith in the God of history Whose sovereign grace will prevail?

In *Fiddler On The Roof*, the closing scene silhouettes the villagers of Anotevka and their wagons piled with their worldly possessions, leaving the village, on the road again seeking some safe oasis in a world that has visited pogroms and persecution on them, driving them from place to place but seldom giving them rest for long.

Mordecai is no superficial observer of human existence. He knows he may die. He knows Esther may die. He knows his generation may be wiped out from the Persian empire. But he knows something more. God will not die, nor will His purposes finally be defeated - finally, "deliverance will appear."

And then this, too, is so vividly illustrated in the story: *God's sovereign grace operates, not apart from but precisely through the human agency of His people.* This is the challenge Mordecai puts to Esther:

Who knows whether it is not for such a time as this you have come to royal estate?

Who knows, Esther, but that your rise to position in the Kingdom might not have been for just such a moment. In the Greek translation of the Esther story, the word for time is not *chronos*, ordinary time, the succession of moments and minutes and hours and days - the word from which we get chronology. Rather, the word is translated *Kairos* - the moment weighted with eternal significance, the opportune time. The critical moment, the moment which will shape and determine all succeeding moments of chronological time. The *Kairos* moment is the moment in history in which is unleashed the sovereign, gracious power of God which moves history along toward the goal of God's determining. It is a "hinge time" on which swings the future. It is the moment of great opportunity for those who would put themselves at God's disposal to be the instruments of His purpose.

It may be missed.

Jerusalem missed it and Jesus wept over the city, crying,

*If only you had known, on this great day, the way that leads to peace!
But no; it is hidden from your sight...because you did not recognize God's
moment when it came.*

But it may be captured and one may sense that one's life, one's destiny is caught up in the gracious purpose of God to bring salvation to the world.

Such a view of human existence, historical reality and the sovereign purpose of God is far removed from a pagan fatalistic view of things. God is not playing chess with us, moving us about on the board of history. There is genuine human involvement, sometimes yielding to His gracious will, sometimes resisting His

sovereign purpose. But through it all – and again – this is the mystery – God is working His purposes out. He has contingency plans.

Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day, “Say not we are the children of Abraham” as though only through them could God's purpose come about, for, Jesus said, “God can raise up of these stones children to Abraham.”

God will not coerce us. But our stubborn rebellion will never paint God into a corner.

All does not depend on us; that would be too heavy.

But God will use us if we are willing, and to be caught up in God's great movement to bring about His kingdom is to find life's highest and best; it is to be finally satisfied, fulfilled, happy with a joy that will never fade but only grow through the eons of eternity as we live in the brightness of His eternal presence.

Esther made her choice; she captured the moment; she was used of God as an instrument of salvation for God's people. She took the risk, saying, "If I perish, I perish." In total commitment to the purpose of God, she found her destiny.

There is no higher privilege or richer gift.

Reference:

Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (The Anchor Bible Commentaries). Doubleday, 1971.