



# Central Peninsula Church

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Esther 2:19-4:17

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## Defining Moments

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SERIES: *For Such a Time as This: Study of the Book of Esther*

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What if I told you that the difference you make in this world will be determined by the choices you make in the few defining moments of your life? Think about it.

Adam and Eve's defining moment came in that split second decision they made to listen to the serpent and eat from the tree in disobedience to God's command. Think of the fallout from that one decision!

Cain's defining moment came when he acted on his deep seated resentment and killed his brother Abel.

Abraham's first defining moment came when he obeyed God's crazy command to leave everything that was familiar to him and take his family to a place he had never even seen.

Another came when out of fear he decided to pawn his wife off to Pharaoh, pretending she was just his sister. Like all of us, Abraham made some good choices and some bad ones.

A defining moment came for Moses when he overcame his own fear and stood in front of the king of Egypt and said, "Let my people go!" Later, he faced another when overcome with rage he struck the rock that God had told him simply to speak to.

Matthew, the tax collector, knew it was a defining moment when Jesus of Nazareth walked by his tax booth and said, "Follow me!" The Gospel tells us, "He got up and followed him." For all of us, the most basic of defining moments comes when we hear the call of Jesus Christ and throw caution to the wind and follow him.

Defining moments come for groups of people as well: families and churches and nations. I think of Winston Churchill speaking to a discouraged nation in the House of Commons, June 18, 1940. He said, "Let us brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and it's Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say, 'This was their finest hour.'"

I want to talk with you this morning about these defining moments. I want to help you recognize them when they come and I want to help you respond to them in a way that maximizes the impact of your life for the kingdom of God.

Last week we began studying the book of Esther. Esther is a young Jewish woman living in exile in Persia. She is an orphan, raised by her older cousin, Mordecai. She is beautiful in form and in face; so much so that King Ahasuerus has chosen her as his new Queen. She moves into the palace and begins to live a life of privilege and luxury. And yet Esther is about to be thrust into a defining moment of such proportions that the existence of the entire Jewish race hangs in the balance. This moment would determine if she would move from being a beauty queen to a saint; from living the life of an empty-headed sex symbol to that of a passionate intercessor in the high risk adventure of living for God.

From the story of Esther we can learn three things about defining moments.

### I. Defining moments often come in the darkest times.

The first thing we learn is that defining moments often come in the darkest of times; times of crisis, times of discouragement, times of brokenness.

It didn't start that way for Esther and Mordecai. As I said, Esther has been made Queen. Things seem to be going well for her. She's the envy of all the young women in the empire. Things aren't going so bad for Mordecai either. In 2:19 we see that he is "**sitting at the king's gate.**" That's significant. In the ancient world the king's gate was a place where justice was officially dispensed; it was like a courtroom in our society. That sounds like a funny place to hold court, but understand that the king's gate was a walled complex of buildings where all kinds of official business was transacted. It's very likely that Mordecai had some kind of official position, perhaps as a judge, as a result of Esther's influence.

It was as he was at the king's gate that he received some very important information. Look at 2:21-23.

**"In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. But the plot became known to Mordecai, and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence."**

We're not told why, but Bigthan and Teresh are ticked off at the king and plot to assassinate him. They guard the king's door which means they're about as close to the king as you can get. But somehow Mordecai discovers their scheme, sends word to Esther, and Esther informs the king who has them both hanged on the gallows. By the way, that probably means they were actually impaled on a stake. In those days, if someone was guilty they didn't mess around. The whole thing, including Mordecai's good deed, is recorded in the official annals of Persia.

This is one of those places where a chapter break is unfortunate because there is a strong connection between the way chapter 2 ends and chapter 3 begins. "**After these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who were with him**" (v.1).

Now wait one minute! What's going on here? Mordecai's the one who saved the king's life, right? Why isn't he promoted instead of Haman? Acts of loyalty were rewarded generously by Persian kings, but Mordecai doesn't even get thanked.

Life's not always fair for God's people, is it? Maybe you've been there. You've put the time in, you've worked the hardest, you came up with the idea, you've been the most

supportive of your boss, but you didn't get the promotion. It happens all the time. Life isn't fair. Why? Because of evil. These are dark times. Guys like Ahaseurus are making the decisions and they don't always do what's right.

To make matters worse, Haman is described here as an Agagite. If you know your biblical history, you know that King Saul was told by the prophet Samuel to kill all the Amalekites. Why? The Amalekites had attacked Israel years earlier after they left Egypt, and so God promised Moses he would erase the memory of this people from under heaven. But Saul disobeyed God and spared the king of the Amalakites, Agag. The Agagites, descendants of the Amalekites, got their name from Agag. For all these years, the Agagites hated the Jews. And now this Agagite gets the promotion! That's like pouring some serious salt in Mordecai's wound. But just wait, it gets worse. Things get personal between Haman and Mordecai. Look at 3:2, **"And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage."**

Haman was a guy that no one really respected; why else would the king have to command people to bow down to him? But Mordecai still refuses on the grounds that as a Jew you only bowed down to God. Haman is furious. **"When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him who the people of Mordecai were; therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus"** (v.5-6).

Here's another classic example of overreaction. A private battle of wills results in a plan to annihilate an entire race of people. That's a little excessive, wouldn't you say? But it all goes back to this ancient conflict. The rest of the chapter describes how Haman went about his plan. Haman was a superstitious man, so he cast lots, which were called Pur, in order to ascertain the right time to attack the Jews. He then goes to the king and tells him about "a certain people" who have their own law and refuse to obey his. How ironic! It was one of these Jews who saved the king's life! But he asks the king that they be destroyed and he even offers to put a large sum of money in the king's treasuries. Some of that money would come out of Haman's own bank account, which no doubt was substantial, and some of it would be plundered from the Jews. Money always plays a big role in these things. He gets the king to agree to his plan, which is no surprise; this king is always doing what other people tell him to do! He even gives Haman his signet ring so he could send out an edict all over the kingdom with the king's stamp to kill every Jewish man, woman and child. The actual day of slaughter was eleven months away. Imagine living in the misery of knowing what awaited you! He not only wanted to kill them, he wanted to torture them. The edict is sent out and the chapter ends on this note,

**"A copy of the edict to be issued as law in every province was published to all the peoples so that they should be ready for this day. The couriers went out impelled by the king's command while the decree was issued in**

**Susa the capital; and while the king and Haman sat down to drink, the city of Susa was in confusion"** (v.14-15).

Isn't that something! Here we see the King and Haman sitting by the pool, sipping wine coolers, while the whole city is in a state of confusion and shock as a result of this edict! Talk about being calloused! Talk about evil! Talk about darkness!

These are the events that set the stage for Esther's defining moment. And this is how it so often is. Our defining moments come because of the rise of evil; evil in our culture, evil in our own hearts. It is often the evil that pushes us to act, to do something, to make a choice.

The fact that millions of unborn babies are aborted every year may create a defining moment for some of us as we consider what to do about it. For some, that evil has been the catalyst for opening their home to an unwed mother. The fact that we still have severe racial prejudice in our society, or that there are still those who are homeless and hungry, may create a defining moment for others. I've known people who have allowed their own experience of sexual abuse to become a defining moment in which a powerful ministry is grown.

Sometimes the evil is in our own hearts. I can remember a defining moment in my own life. I was a new believer. But I was in a serious relationship with an unbeliever. I knew it was wrong, but for months I tried to rationalize it. As each day passed I became more convicted, and more uncomfortable. Pretty soon I realized the pain of staying in this relationship was greater than the pain of getting out. And so the darkness and sin in my own life created for me a defining moment in which I had to act, and I thank God that I did.

Defining moments often come in the darkest times. Times where evil has had its day, whether it's in our culture or in our own lives.

## **II. Defining moments confront us with the opportunity to act decisively in behalf of God's kingdom purposes.**

This brings us to the next principle. Defining moments confront us with the opportunity to act decisively in behalf of God's kingdom purposes. Let's look at how this opportunity came to Esther.

When Mordecai heard about the decree, look what he did, **"When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. And he went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth"** (4:1-2).

Mordecai isn't a guy to hide his emotions. This was the way people expressed grief in those days. We're much more restrained, which I'm not convinced is all that healthy. But this wasn't something you did around the king. The king didn't want anyone raining down on his party. He wanted happy people around him. But Mordecai isn't the only one mourning. **"And in each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes"** (v.3).

Imagine being a father and hearing this edict and looking into the eyes of your eight-year-old daughter. Imagine the shared pain during those days. Have you ever noticed how things like this bring people together? We saw that in the days after September 11. There was this sense of solidarity among us. We

were looking out for each other. We came out of our homes and met our neighbors, in some cases for the first time. Shared hardship forces us to grab hands and pull together. I like what Chuck Swindoll says, "Suffering never ruined a nation. Hardship doesn't fracture families. Affluence does! But not suffering. Not hardship. It pushes everybody to the same level with the same goal: survival."

Even Esther will get in on the grief. In v. 4 we're told that when Esther hears about the sorrow of her people she "**writhed in great anguish.**" Apparently isolated in the palace, she hadn't heard about the edict. So the first thing she does is send Mordecai a new set of clothes. I think she was afraid that the king would hear of how he was acting. But Mordecai refuses her offer. I don't blame him. Esther is trying to tell him, "Mordecai, whatever it is, we'll be okay. I'm the Queen and you're my cousin and we don't have to worry." But Mordecai knows this is bigger than just the two of them. Have you ever received offers of false comfort? Offers of band aids for things that require a tourniquet? That's what this must have felt like to Mordecai.

So Esther sends her main assistant, Hathach, to find out more about what's going on. Look at 4:6-8,

**"So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate. And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people."**

Mordecai lays it all out on the table. He's careful. He sends a copy of the edict. He calls her to act, to go into the king and intercede for her people. But Esther sends Hathach back with this message in v. 11, "**All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days.**"

Esther says, "You don't understand, Mordecai. You don't just barge into the king's office without an invitation. Even as his wife, I could get killed for that. He has to invite you in. And I haven't been invited in for a month." Quite a marriage, huh? After just three years Ahaseurus has fallen out of love just as quickly as he fell into it. It would be easy for us to judge Esther here. But it's important that we see that she was in great danger. Most of us will go through our entire lives without having to make a life and death decision quite like this one. I think it's actually helpful to know that Esther really was afraid. Do you know people who have no fear? Can you relate to them? No. But we can relate to Esther. Esther feared. You see it in her response to Mordecai.

But Mordecai's not finished. After he hears Esther's initial response, he sends back to her and says,

**"Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have**

**not attained royalty for such a time as this?'"**  
(vv.13-14).

There are some verses in Scripture that should just stay etched in our minds. These are two of them here. This is one of the greatest "turning point" speeches ever given. Never underestimate the power of words. Words can do damage, but words also have the power to arouse in us loyalties and noble passions we didn't even know we had.

Remember the second principle: Defining moments confront us with opportunities to act decisively in behalf of God's kingdom purposes. Notice I said "act." It wasn't enough for Esther to FEEL bad. She already "writhed in great anguish." Sometimes we think it's enough if we just feel bad about something. But feeling bad never really accomplished anything. Think about how God accomplished our salvation. "For God so loved the world, he felt really bad about their situation." No! For God so loved the world, he gave..." He felt something and DID something. He acted.

There was risk involved for Esther. Defining moments usually present us with costly choices. You may never be asked to risk what Esther risked, but you may have to risk losing friends. You may have to risk losing your job or your promotion. You may have to risk losing your money or your comfort. Esther had it made. Talk about comfort! Talk about security! But I love what Mordecai says. He says, "Esther, don't be fooled. There is no security in holding on to your palace comforts. Don't you think for one minute you can escape by hiding behind your crown." He's right! We hold onto our own stuff because we think that's where our security lies, but is there any security apart from God?

The issue in these defining moments is always the same: who am I? Or maybe I should put it this way: whose am I? Am I a Persian beauty queen or am I a Jewish exile? Does my life belong to me to do what I want to do with it, or does it belong to God? There are those defining moments in our lives when we have to count the cost and, as it was said of Moses, "**chose to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin**" (Heb. 11:25). Who are you? Are you a man or woman of this world, enjoying all the pleasures of this life, well thought of by all? Or are you a man or woman who lives with the constant tension of what I would call "a dislocated heart?" Dislocation means I live in this world but I don't belong to this world; my heart is dislocated, my heart is invested in another kingdom, another world. I can't sit around and enjoy myself with all the comforts of this life when I know MY PEOPLE are suffering and I can do something about it.

One of the things that will keep us from doing something is the fact that we can't do everything. We say, "What does it matter if I do something or not?" Well, I'll tell you what, it matters to who YOU are. It matters to your character. Yes, God can always use someone else. As a matter of fact, Mordecai tells Esther that. He says, "If you don't do it, Esther, God will raise up someone else!" You see, it doesn't all hang on us. Our bad choices don't get in the way of God accomplishing his sovereign purpose for his people. The issue is, do I get to participate in what he's doing? And if Esther is any indication, we CAN make a difference. Esther is a testimony to the power of ONE!

I attended the funeral of a friend about 6 months ago. She was a woman in her forties with 5 children. At her service, I saw the difference one person can make. For years she traveled to Mexico with 400 high school students who were building houses for the poor in the name of Christ. Her job was to head up all the food preparation for those kids while they worked. That's what she did, and the impact of that choice was massive. The kids she served, the other parents she brought into that ministry, the fellowship they shared as they worked, the modeling of servant leadership she provided, all that made a huge difference.

You say, "Well, what should I do?" One of the things that will help is to recognize that your placement isn't coincidental, it's a result of the sovereignty of God. Mordecai says, "Who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" God is never even mentioned in that line, but he just oozes out of every word! You can't do everything, but you can do something, and the key to doing something is to look at the situation you're in, the gifts you've been given, the unique opportunities, the particular acquaintances, the things you deeply care about, as your GOD-GIVEN opportunities to act decisively on behalf of God's kingdom purposes.

And Esther did just that. Let's look at her response. **"Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 'Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.' So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him"** (vv.15-17).

### III. Defining moments require the prayerful support and fellowship of God's people.

Is that a great answer or what? Is this a great woman? She probably has just a few moments to think about it, and this is what she comes up with. Some defining moments are like that, you know. They come and go quickly. The moment a student must decide whether or not to cheat on an exam, or a husband on his wife, or a taxpayer on his return. It's that quick.

Here is the third principle - defining moments require the prayerful support and fellowship of God's people. Here is where we see the real wisdom of Esther. She doesn't just plow into the king's presence as an act of bold faith. She summons the Jews to fast for three days, THEN she will go into the king, and if she perishes, so be it. She realizes she is part of a bigger community of people. She sees the bigger picture. These people are God's people. They're in exile because of their sin. Together they must return to the Lord, as the prophet Joel said, **"with fasting and weeping and mourning."** (Joel 2:12). This was a way of crying out to God, seeking God's face, even repenting as a group.

Far too often we view our defining moments as moments where we go it alone, where we muster up the

courage and act. But we need others to join with us in seeking God. She knows, "It's not just about me. It's about us. We need to join together."

### CONCLUSION

How about you? Are you there yet? In what way might this moment be a defining one in your life? Like Matthew at the tax booth, is this a day for you to say "yes" to Christ's invitation to follow? Maybe you have said yes already, but you've gotten off track. You have so concealed your faith in Christ that people who know would hardly believe if you told them about it. But you know, now it's time. It's time for you, like Moses, to choose to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than the passing pleasures of sin. Maybe you have been sitting and listening and soaking up the teaching here, but you know it's time to get to work; it's time to find a place of service. Like Esther, don't let this time pass. It's not enough to feel it. You have to DO something. You have to count the cost. You have to live as one who is dislocated. You have to see the bigger picture and join with God's people in seeking God's face. Who knows, maybe you have come to your present situation for such a time as this.

There is an old hymn. May this be our prayer today.

God of grace and God of glory,  
on thy people pour thy power;  
Crown thine ancient church's story,  
Bring her bud to glorious flower.  
Set our feet on lofty places;  
Gird our lives that they may be,  
Armored with all Christlike graces,  
In the fight to set men free.  
Grant us wisdom,  
Grant us courage,  
For the facing of this hour,  
For the facing of this hour.

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