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It's Time to Embrace Opportunity

2018 Time, Talent, Treasure Series

Esther 4:1-17

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A number of years ago my wife and I were on a trip to Africa and we had the opportunity to meet the sweetest young boy named Abraham. As we sat with Abraham, we heard his story, about how he had lost his parents and had been orphaned. He was living with his aunts in Kibera, the most densely packed slum on earth. And as we sat with this young boy, looked at him and heard his story, I was so struck by what a sweet boy he was. (Shows his photo on the screen) I was also struck for some reason by his shoes, because they pointed out to me just what a life of lack he lived, for I had walked through those narrow streets of Kibera. I had been in the filth and the squalor and seen the dead-end lanes both literally and figuratively that existed in that place. And I thought of Abraham day after day walking through that place, living that life, and I wondered, "What hope is there for him?" The answer is, "It depends, because God sovereignly places people in situations of great need and what happens from there may to some degree depend on whether or not we are willing to embrace opportunity."

That was certainly the case for a girl whose story is found in the pages of Scripture. If you have a Bible with you this morning, would you turn with me to Esther, Chapter 4? I want to take us back this morning twenty-five hundred years to the kingdom of Persia, and just get a glimpse of the life of Esther. We are going to zoom in on chapter 4, but first I need to set that up by giving you a little context of what has happened up to that point.

In chapter 1, in a drunken rage the king banishes his wife from his presence—the queen is removed from her position and banished forever. In chapter 2 the king decides to pick a new queen, and so, by decree, many young girls from throughout the empire are taken from their homes and brought to the palace to be a part of a harem of virgins for the king. Each of these girl's lives is now forever changed. Now they will have but one purpose—to make themselves attractive for the king. In fact, they will go through an entire year of beauty treatments before they are brought to the king for one night of his pleasure. After that night, each of these girls will be moved to another harem—from the harem of the virgins and now into the harem of the concubines—and they will remain there for the rest of their lives, never to find love and companionship with a man, never to marry and have a family, rather to be conscribed to a lonely and loveless existence, not even ever seeing or being with the king again unless he specifically asks for them, out of all of the women, by name.

One of the girls who was taken was named Esther. Esther was an orphan girl. Both her mother and her father had died and she is being raised by her older cousin. She is also living in exile in a foreign land as a part of the Jewish people who were forcibly removed from the Promised Land and sent with nothing into exile as prisoners. Now Esther is being taken from that home and the only family that she has known, and she is brought to the palace to be conscribed to the king's harem. Her adoptive father, Mordecai, does a couple of things. First he tells Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity so as to not be harmed as a member of the persecuted minority group. And second, like any good dad would do, every day he went to the palace gate and walked back and forth so that he might inquire and know how Esther was doing, so that he might care for the adopted daughter he

loves. Well, it ends up at the end of chapter 2, that out of all of the women, Esther is the one chosen to be queen.

In chapter 3 we are introduced to an evil man named Haman who rises to become the king's highest official in the land, but Esther's adopted father Mordecai distains him, and day after day refuses to bow in adulation before him. Haman becomes furious, and when he discovers that Mordecai is a Jew, he sets out not only to kill Mordecai, but to literally wipe out every living Jew. Hamen fools the king into signing an edict for the slaughter—in one day—of every single Jewish man, woman, and child. The decree is sent to every province in the empire. And chapter 3 literally ends with the people in mass confusion over this strange edict, and the king and Haman sitting down to drink. We pick up the story in chapter 4, verse 1:

> **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. He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. 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. Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept *them*.**
>
> (*NASB, Esther 4:1-4)

This edict goes out and Mordecai discovers it. He hears of this as the Jews are all over the empire. He tears his clothes—a sign of mourning—and he puts on sackcloth and goes right to the palace. He is weeping in bitterness and wailing, and Queen Esther's attendants hear of this and they tell Esther, "Mordecai is weeping at the gate," and Esther writhes in pain. Now what's interesting is that the next verse will reveal to us that Esther was not writhing in pain over the edict regarding the Jews. Even though she was there in the palace, she knew absolutely nothing about it. She was purely in agony because Mordecai, her adoptive father, was in sackcloth at the gate. We must think and believe that with the loving daughter she was, her heart was broken to know that something was so troubling the only family member she had. At the same time, the text hints to us she may have also been deathly afraid, because Mordecai had instructed her to, "Fly under the radar; don't make a scene; don't reveal your Jewish identity, and now here he is making a public spectacle of himself right in front of the palace. So she sends clothes out to him to have him get dressed but he refuses. And afterward, in verse 5:

> **Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king's eunuchs, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him *to go* to Mordecai to learn what this *was* and why it *was*. So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him** (right there in the city square in front of everyone) **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.** (Vs. 5-8)

It's important in verse 8 that we read that he gave an actual *written edict* to be handed to Esther, for if he had simply told Esther what had happened, Esther, inside the palace, wouldn't have believed it was true. She would have thought, "Mordecai, you must be mistaken. There is no way an edict so

heinous would have been issued." And she might have easily said, "I don't even know what's going on. I'm not going to do anything with this." But when she sees it in writing, sealed with the king's ring, there can be no doubt for Esther of the reality of the situation. No matter how heinous the edict was, it was true and her very own people are literally facing extermination. So Mordecai appeals to her as the queen to go to the king and implore and plead on behalf of *our people*. But there's a problem. Verse 9:

> **Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him *to reply* to Mordecai: "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." They related Esther's words to Mordecai.** (Vs. 9-12)

Imagine what it would have been like to be Esther—an orphan girl, lost both of her parents, raised by a cousin, living in exile in a foreign land as a persecuted minority. And then as a young girl, literally taken from that only home you've only known, put in a harem for the pleasure of a volatile king, and she knows what that king is like. She knows what happened to the last queen, and she is not in the inner circle. She makes it clear to Mordecai, "*He hasn't even called for me in thirty days*; *it's not like we're super close, here. Oh, and by the way, there is a law that if you go to the king without him requesting you, the immediate sentence is death."* She must have been utterly terrified. But Mordecai responds. Verse 13:

> **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?"** (Vs. 13-14)

Great purpose is found at the convergence of great need and great opportunity. It is in the places God has sovereignly put you that you can find His great purpose for you if you will simply open your eyes to see and embrace the need in front of you. Mordecai challenges Esther in her fear. He tells her that everything has changed. There is no longer a strategy for skillful silence. There is no hiding. Now is the time to stand and act, and he helps her to see that perhaps this is the very reason behind all that has happened to her in her life. Perhaps she is who she is and perhaps she is where she is for the very purpose of embracing the convergence of this massive need and this sovereign opportunity. It could very well lead to her life's greatest purpose.

Where is your great purpose found? Thankfully it's probably not literally risking your life to prevent an actual heinous mass genocide, but the principle is the same. It's found where need converges with opportunity, based on where God has sovereignly placed you. It's right here. It's in your homes...your neighborhood...your church, and in the opportunities God is giving us together to be His hands and His feet in our community and around the world. But perhaps some of you don't like your present circumstances. Perhaps what's happened in your life or what is happening in your life feels a lot more like adversity or even tragedy rather than opportunity. Maybe you don't even like who you are, let alone where you are.

Well, keep in mind Esther didn't have a choice as to where God allowed her to be, but she absolutely had a choice in regard to how she would respond in the situation. Mordecai tells her, "*Who knows, maybe all this stuff that's happened to you has made you who you are and put you where you are for such a time as this. Maybe this is your moment of great opportunity."* You know it's interesting, the book of Esther is the only book in the entire Bible where the name of God never appears, but I believe His presence is clearly seen all over its pages. I believe that's intentional and important that we might understand that God is present even in those times when it may seem like He is completely absent and silent, and He just may be orchestrating our circumstances to place a need before us that will become the opportunity for the great purpose of our lives. But here's the catch. Just as Mordecai told Esther, "Opportunity is fleeting," *our* days are fleeting, and if you don't step into the opportunity God has in front of you, it will quickly slip through your fingers. Just as Mordecai wisely counseled Esther, "If you don't act, deliverance will come from somewhere else, but destruction may come upon you."

And lately I have personally been immersed in awareness regarding just how fleeting opportunity is. It seems for me like it was just yesterday when Cynci and I moved our family back to Lincoln for me to come on the staff of Lincoln Berean. I mean it feels like just yesterday. But this is what my family looked like when we moved back here. (shows photo on the screen) Now you don't need to make any funny remarks about how I look in that picture. Look at those kids. That little baby was two weeks old. Our Danny, just last week we moved him out of our house as he begins the next phase of his life as an adult on his own. It seems like just yesterday, that was us. And today, it's gone. Cynci and I have been reflecting on the situation and we have realized that never again in our lives will we have the opportunity as mother and father to build into the lives of young children. That opportunity for us is forever gone—and we either missed it or we didn't. The reality is, some of both. I'm certain that out of my foolishness or my selfishness I missed countless opportunities over the years to effectively invest in the lives of those boys. But oh how thankful we are, that somehow by the grace of God that's not the predominate story. Somehow God enabled us, and we literally chose millions of times to die to self in order to invest in those four little guys and help them become godly men—and we are forever grateful! I believe that if you asked any of our four now young men, I believe they would tell you we didn't miss it—and we're so thankful!

If you're a parent of young kids, even a grandparent, there is a need in front of you, and that need creates an opportunity which could just be a part of your life's greatest purpose if you'll embrace it and not miss it. But oh how the days go by. And can I say one other thing about parenting from what I see in our current generation? If your parenting is such that your children believe themselves to be the center of the universe, you're already missing it, because we are not called to worship our children. We are called to disciple our children, to mold and shape them, and invite them into the presence of God and be on mission for Him, that they might know Him and be used by Him for the rest of their lives. I'm so thankful that Cynci and I not only loved our kids but sought to bring them into the mission with us. Already, all four of those men have been involved in significant ways in changing lives right here in Lincoln and all around the world. You know, it's in that context of the mission that I've had another reminder just how fleeting are our days.

Most of you know that I lead our work of church planting in South Asia, and over the years God has done incredible things. We have been privileged to raise up, recruit, train, send and support hundreds of leaders, and through those leaders, over ten thousand people have been reached. But one thing happened in the process of all of this that I could have never imagined. Here on the screen are the pictures of just eleven of the leaders we have worked with over the years. And I can think of each one of these brothers, of being with them as we launched new ministries, talking about

strategy, and then they went out and executed those things—living on mission and on purpose! But what I never would have realized or expected is that every one of those brothers has completed his race. All eleven have died—all of them were younger then me! Most all of them left behind a wife and children. We don't get to decide how many days we have. But we do get to choose what we'll do with the opportunities God puts in front of us, just like Esther. Verse 15:

> **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.** (Vs. 15-17)

Wow! Wow! Esther calls for a three-day fast, and then she declares afterward she will go into the king, even though it's against the law, with a sentence of death. She says, **"If I perish, I perish."** Wow! Esther embraces the opportunity created by the need, and what is the outcome? In chapter 5, she goes before the king, and in verse 2 we read:

> **When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his sight; and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which *was* in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter.**

Esther steps into the opportunity created by the enormous need in front of her, and in so doing she becomes the queen that God created her to be! Throughout the rest of the book we see that God gave her wisdom to skillfully reveal Haman's evil plan to the king, and in an incredible twist of plot, Haman ends up being hung on the very gallows he constructed to kill Mordecai. So instead of the Jewish people being destroyed, they end up seeing a historic victory over their enemies, even while they were in exile. It's an incredible story—a staggering picture of the sovereignty of God! It's still celebrated and marked to this day by the Jewish people every year as the *Festival of Purim*.

It is also a reminder to you and me that God can and will use even us if we are willing to embrace the opportunities that He brings. But what if Esther had chosen to not embrace this opportunity? Well, of course, we can't fully know. Perhaps as Mordecai said, "*Deliverance would have come from somewhere else,*" but I think it's safe to say we wouldn't be talking about Esther this morning. I wonder about that scenario, because I have personally felt the sting of missed opportunity.

Two years ago I was back in the city of Mumbai, a place I actually go quite frequently. And we were once again taking some people from Lincoln Berean to see Mumbai. It's really like nowhere else on the earth—a city of twenty-three million people, sixty percent of whom live in slums! And we were taking these friends down to the red light district where young girls had literally been sold—some even by their own families—into sex slavery, and were now living as prostitutes. I had been there a number of times, and so while the people we were with were showing our friends around who were from Lincoln Berean, I happened to be looking around, and I noticed this little boy. I went and began to talk with him, and I began to hear his story. I learned that he was born out of the accidental pregnancy of one of the prostitutes in a brothel, and as I stood with this little boy, looking into his eyes, I kept thinking, "What hope is there for him? He had nothing to do with where he was born or where he now grew up. What will his future be?"

I left that area, and as I was flying out that evening to come back here—to this! —and on the plane I began to journal and process these things, and I said to the Lord, "Lord, I can't do this anymore. I

can't keep doing this." The "this" was going to Mumbai and seeing these needs and not doing something about it. You see I had been going and visiting Mumbai for twenty years! It was twenty years ago that I first went to the slum that is accurately portrayed in the movie *Slum Dog Millionaire,* and there I saw the desperation, the human brokenness, even a baby lying on the side of the road in the squalor. All these years have passed, and still we haven't really done anything about it. You know, for these decades I have dreamed and imagined this picture. It's a picture of an army going out from this place to change the world. And while many people in this place are engaged in many meaningful ministries, the picture that I've had simply has not come true. I only point a finger in one direction, and that's right at me—because somehow I have failed to create and to communicate enough opportunities for more of you to get to be engaged in being used to change lives among the world's most needy. So on that flight I began to pray, and for the past two years I've been praying that God would change this.

We processed it together for quite some time as a *Global Outreach Leadership Team,* and we realized two things had to happen. 1) We needed to open up more partnerships and more opportunities in places with strategic need around the world, and 2) we needed more leadership, more help on our team to help more of you have the chance to get in the game. When we realized we needed leadership, we knew exactly where to turn. Last week you all had the privilege of meeting Jason Harms who is our new pastor of *Global Engagement*. This morning I want to show you a little glimpse of Jason's story because I think it shows you a little of his heart and how God might use him to help us in this. Some of you have seen it before. It's a video we showed three years ago, but I think it's worth seeing again so let's take a look.

> *"Hi, my name is Jason Harms. This last summer I got the opportunity to lead an amazing group of high schoolers on a mission's trip to India. About two months before we left I went on a scouting trip with Jeff Petersen, and one of the places we went to was Mumbai. It was completely overwhelming. There are people everywhere; there are cars honking; there is just chaos—the epitome of a concrete jungle. This specific area is the red light district and this is a huge hub for sex trafficking. We were going to this place called (name hidden). They're an open door for girls who have been sex-trafficked. So we go in and we go upstairs and get to meet the people. One of the things that I had asked was if it was possible to go around and actually see the places, see these buildings where these girls are kept. I thought we might just be walking around the buildings praying, but it was a little different than I expected. We walked into this building and I really had no idea at first where it was, but it was actually one of the brothels. It is probably the darkest place that I could imagine. There are about three floors of just girls in these rooms that are like cells, and customers are coming in and out, and it was literally probably one of the hardest things I've ever seen! You know I looked into rooms and I saw customers and I hated them! I saw these pimps that were standing there and I absolutely hated them! One of the most difficult things was to know what to do with this experience. Everything seemed so negative to me. So I brought it before the Lord and just kept praying for the next two months before we left again. One of the things that God really laid on my heart was the fact that He loved the pimps that were in there; He loved these customers in there. The very people that I hated, He loves them just as much as He loves me. Two months later we get the opportunity to go back. The students, obviously we didn't bring them into the brothels, but we brought them to (name hidden) and during the time when they were talking to them and helping them, I asked, 'Hey, could I go back into this brothel and pray for these girls again as I feel like God has kind of changed my heart a little bit.' The very first person I run into is a pimp inside the doors and I thought, 'You know what? I don't think this is just ironic; I think God has put this person in front of me.' So I looked at him—I*

didn't know what to say—and the first words that came out of my mouth were, 'Hey, man, what would you say is the purpose in your life?' He looked at me like he saw a ghost. (I had some translators with me so that's how we were talking back and forth) but he proceeded to talk, and through the next thirty minutes he actually opened up and was curious about this whole idea of what does it mean to have purpose in your life? I was able to then share the gospel with him—crazy! —and through the end of it he said, 'I would like to know more about this Jesus that you serve.' I was able to connect him with the pastors at (name hidden). One of the things that they specifically do is find jobs for pimps to be able to get outside of the industry. So through all of this, through somebody from Lincoln, Nebraska, who has no connection with the pimps there, who has no experience talking with people there, God used me to do something pretty crazy! God can do some incredible things through us if we are willing to just step out by faith and say, 'God, how can we be used?'"

I have seen such need like that in so many places around the world, and now that Jason is on board, we are opening up new opportunities for you to be engaged in helping meet these needs. Great purpose is found at the convergence of great need and great opportunity! Now is the time, so please, can we do something together about this...about helping more broken lives all around the world? In two weeks we're sending Jason back to Mumbai where he will meet with some potential partners that we might get involved with and in the game on an ongoing basis in that place. And as you heard last week, we're also opening up other opportunities all around the world. Think of all of the people that call this their church home—thousands of people! How many people who are hurting and broken could God use us to change? A thousand lives? Two thousand? Ten thousand? What an opportunity! We together could literally be used of God to change thousands of lives among the neediest people on earth—for when we choose to embrace the opportunity God puts before us, we have the unbelievable privilege of not only seeing Him show up, but getting to be a part of His great deliverance and transformation, just as Esther did, just as Jason did, just as many others have! I began this message talking to you about a little boy named Abraham who we met in Africa—and I wondered what his future would be. Well, I can tell you with certitude that that day was the beginning of a completely different future for Abraham because Cynci and the team from *Hope Venture* decided to start a student sponsorship program in Africa for kids like Abraham from Kibera and other places in Kenya—and Abraham was the first student sponsored by some people back here! And this summer a team went with the *Hope Venture* to Africa and held a camp and a spiritual retreat with those sponsored students, and they got to hear Abraham's story. He talked about his peers when he was a boy, and how he watched them heading down a path toward crime, drugs, and for several of them even already death. But his story is different. This is Abraham today, (current photo) and in just a few months he graduates from high school, and on the weekends he is involved in building into the lives of other young kids in his corner of the world! When we embrace the opportunity created by need, we find great purpose, and a life can literally be changed just like Abraham's was. But make no mistake: Opportunity, like life, is fleeting, and the time is now!" Every day matters, for every day is a chance for you and me to help change a life. So, what are we waiting for?

Lord Jesus, we thank You so much for how good You have been to us. And Father God, we don't want to miss the opportunities You place in front of us. Lord, it's easy for us to be in our own world and to think tomorrow, but the days, they slip away. God, may we see the opportunities You are giving us today and may we embrace the opportunity to meet needs, that we might find great purpose for Your glory! In Jesus' name, Amen.

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