

# For Such a Time as This

SEPTEMBER 21–27, 2015 • TIMOTHY JAMES JOHNSON

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21 ~ *Read Esther 7:1-6, 9-10*

**A** close friend is retiring from a prestigious university. However, before she retires, she believes God has called her to address rampant social injustices in the institution, and she feels divinely appointed to expose these unjust circumstances.

Esther's story takes place during the captivity of the Jewish people in Babylon. The setting is the royal city of Susa, from which King Ahasuerus rules over the Persian Empire. Lives and fortunes rise and fall by mere pronouncements of the king's word. The antagonist is Haman, a powerful and ambitious man who intends to destroy the Jewish captives. The protagonists are Esther and her cousin Mordecai. Esther has been elevated as queen, but she has hidden her Jewish identity. Mordecai appeals to Esther to use her position as queen to neutralize Haman's plan. His appeal to Esther is this: "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esth. 4:14).

After a three-day fast, Esther courageously goes unannounced to the king's court (a potential capital offense) and invites him and Haman to a banquet where she brings to light Haman's evil plot. Today's scripture reading offers the moment of truth. Esther reveals the wicked plot. King Ahasuerus is infuriated, and Haman is sentenced to death.

But the true drama here is that God puts people—even captives of low status like Esther—in places to serve as instruments of God's righteous plans. This week's meditations explore the truth that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

*God, give me understanding and courage to be an instrument of your plans for peace and goodwill on earth. Amen.*

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Ordained Baptist minister, Emeritus Professor of Social Work, Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester, New York

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22 ~ *Read Esther 9:20-22*

**W**e generally mark birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries with celebrations—the manner in which most people benchmark their lives' progression. The core of these events calls the past into the present, which renews the value of what was significant in the past for moving into the future.

Historical events, both tragic and joyful, also provide cause for remembering and celebrating—but on a national scale. In today's scripture, Mordecai initiates an annual celebration of God's deliverance of the Jewish people from death in Babylon. The celebration of God's deliverance through Mordecai and Esther has deep roots in Jewish religious culture. Jews celebrate the occasion, called Purim, annually in March. At its core, Purim extols God's grace in the appointment of Esther and Mordecai as divine agents of deliverance of God's people from grave danger.

Many of us are familiar with a scientific experiment with light: An image or beam of light directed at one mirror, if reflected at just the right angle onto a second mirror, gives an infinite repetition of both the second mirror and the image. Mordecai's letter instructs that the Jews celebrate Purim by giving gifts of food to others and giving food to the poor. These acts of grace on the part of Jewish captives create an infinite mirror image of God's grace.

God appoints each of us to be an agent of grace. Each of us receives responsibility to move forward God's acts of kindness, justice, and love. We celebrate God's deliverance in gratitude by expressing concern for others' well-being as we do justice and love kindness.

*Teach us, O Lord, what it means to be called your agents in today's world. Teach us how to transform your grace into personal acts of love, justice, and peace. Amen!*

**A**mong memories of my childhood church was the practice of “raising hymns.” An old a cappella tradition from my African American Southern roots, it occurred during preservice devotional periods. Someone would spontaneously sing out a line of the song. The congregants would pick up the tune and repeat the singing of that same line. This call-and-response method of singing joined congregants together in worship and prepared them to enter a higher spiritual plane.

Scholars believe that Psalm 124, a “song of ascents,” is one of a group of psalm songs sung by worshipers on their way up to the temple in Jerusalem. In the psalm, a lead singer begins the testimony with “If it had not been the LORD who was on our side” and then calls for the worshipers to respond with the testimony, “Let Israel now say.” The psalm song testifies to God’s grace in vanquishing Israel’s enemies. Testifying leads worshipers to praise God by blessing the Lord who protects. The psalm ends with reaffirmation of dependence on God, “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” Imagine the spiritual frame of mind of the worshipers who have sung this psalm responsively before entering the Temple for worship.

Psalm 124 will have brought to the singers’ minds some of the great conquerors of the faith: Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Abigail, Samuel, David. Psalm 124 reminds them of the constancy of God’s delivering grace.

Psalm 124 should encourage each of us and our worshiping communities to testify publicly and often to God’s saving grace. Remembering God’s grace by recalling God’s divine appointment of people in our past provides divine resuscitation for our own callings from God.

*Lord, we remember and thank you for the mothers and fathers of our faith who lived out divine appointments in their lives.  
Amen.*

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24 ~ *Read Esther 9:20-22*

**F**or Esther, Mordecai, and the Jewish people, the threat of annihilation is past. Mordecai records for posterity the sad train of events along with the joyous sequel to which they led. The threat of death has evoked sorrow and mourning, but deliverance of the people leads to gladness and joy.

When Esther first hears that Mordecai sits at the king's gate wearing sackcloth and ashes, she tries to alleviate the symptoms by sending Mordecai a change of clothes. He rejects them. Mordecai's divine appointment for that time is to help Esther own a solution for the impending destruction. Esther is called to place her life on the line. (See Esther 4.) This is Esther's appointed time. Because Esther becomes a hero in the solution, the days of feasting and gladness are hers to own, along with Mordecai.

All of us could wish to live free of tragedies and sorrows, but in the matter of living we will always face woe. Yet in the face of trouble, the psalmist writes of the transformative power of God to change sorrow into joy: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all" (Ps. 34:19). From Esther and Mordecai and countless other Bible stories, we note that in the midst of troubled times, the Lord makes divine appointments that change sorrow into joy. God uses people as instruments of change.

Are we listening for God's call in the midst of our own life's troubles and sorrows? Do we hear God's call to be agents of transformation as we offer ourselves to break down any barriers to abundant living for others?

*Lord, give us ears to hear your call, tender hearts to respond to others' sorrows, and transformative courage that changes sorrow into joy. Amen.*

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 25 ~ *Read Mark 9:38-41*

Shortly after completing high school, I worked at a dairy in the refrigerator storage building. The environment was dank, cold, and unpleasant; my coworkers were rough-hewn men. One coworker was particularly profane and insensitive. One afternoon while working with this man and utterly despairing of him and the job, I heard him begin to sing in a remarkable baritone voice, "There's Not a Friend Like Jesus." My dismal experience became holy ground. From that encounter I realized that God does not limit divine appointments to those who actively seek them. They also come by God's decision to accomplish the divine will for a particular time and circumstance.

Jesus has commissioned the disciples to proclaim the kingdom message and cast out demons. Imagine the shock of these newly minted disciples when they encounter a person who is *not* a follower of Jesus casting out demons in his name. The passage implies the disciples' failed attempt to have the man cease and desist. Unsuccessful in that endeavor, they seek Jesus' counsel. Jesus, ever the revolutionary, gives a shocking answer: "Whoever is not against us is for us." I figure this took the wind out of the disciples' sails. But then Jesus takes the matter even further, indicating that even the lowly act of giving a cup of water in Jesus' name merits reward.

Whether our calling leads to astonishing acts like casting out demons or the mundane act of giving water in Jesus' name, every calling from God has sacred significance. God uses surprising circumstances and unlikely persons to accomplish God's will. How wonderful it is to be surprised by God's voice speaking in unlikely places and in unexpected ways.

*We thank you, Lord, that you use unlikely people in unlikely ways to accomplish your will. Amen.*

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26 ~ *Read Mark 9:42-50*

**E**arlier in the week, I used the metaphor of infinite mirror reflections to describe the aggregate impact of God's people reflecting God's grace. Today's scripture focuses on the polar opposite of this metaphor. It deals with the consequences of being a stumbling block to faith, being "ungracious." It contains a sobering message of dire consequences expressed in language that confronts us with unwelcomed and frightening ideas: being drowned, cutting away body parts, unquenchable fire, and consignment to hell. The scripture creates tension and great discomfort in us.

Jesus relays the message to his disciples and to us that as God's people the way we live in the world is a sober and weighty responsibility. It carries with it rewards or consequences. Jesus speaks of placing "a stumbling block before one of these little ones." "Little ones" may refer to those young in the faith, all the "Christ following" adherents to which Jesus' message led. In biblical metaphorical language we hear Jesus saying in effect, "Better to maim yourself than cause another person to stumble."

Again, the familiar metaphor of people of faith as salt is put forth to describe how we are to live in the world. Implicit in the scripture is the summons to season the world with God's grace. We are appointed to the preservation of God's creation and of those who serve God. Setting aside our doubts about hell-fire language, we acknowledge that God is love, and love covers a multitude of sins. We recognize this outpouring as grace. How does living out our divine appointment as the people of God keep us from causing people to stumble?

*Gracious God, where I find stumbling blocks to faith, help me build bridges of love and grace. Amen.*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27 ~ *Read James 5:13-20*

**F**aith goes beyond believing; rather, the good news of the gospel is inextricably bound with communal living. James calls us to actualize our faith. Today's reading presents prayer and singing as two staples used in communal expression of faith. The communal importance of songs and singing resonates with words from Ephesians that God's people should "be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves" (5:19).

We benefit from the divine appointments of others. Note James's instructions in case of sickness: "Call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil." In the case of sin, James presents communal confession as a sacred act of faith that leads to reciprocation with communal prayers. He offers Elijah's use of prayer to exemplify the power and effectiveness of the prayers of the righteous.

We began the week by reflecting on the divine appointments of Mordecai and Esther to save their people from destruction during the Babylonian captivity. Mordecai wore sackcloth and ashes and wailed. Esther fasted. We can assume that in these rituals, prayer was embedded as a segue to answering God's call.

Imagine a job posting by God: Wanted! Persons to fill divine appointments. Responsibilities: rescuing victims of social injustice—including the poor, sick, hungry, women, children, immigrants, and those who live alternate lifestyles. Also wanted! Persons to fill divine appointments to rescue perpetrators of social injustice. No experience necessary. A willing heart is essential. Equipment provided: power and effectiveness through prayer. Please respond.

*God, may we not limit your call to the extraordinary and miraculous. Remind us of our call to fill divine appointments within our everyday lives. Amen.*