

FOR SUCH A  
*Time*  
AS THIS

*Secrets of Strategic Living  
from the Book of Esther*



RAY C. STEDMAN



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*Feeding the Soul with the Word of God*

*For Such a Time as This*  
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# I AM ONLY ONE

## *The Background*

When I was growing up in Montana, people left their doors unlocked and their windows open at night, sleeping serenely and safely in their beds. Today we live behind doors that are locked and dead-bolted, with iron bars on our windows. The world has changed in many ways since I was a boy—and not for the better.

We live in a world plagued by war, terrorism, mass starvation, crime, pornography, child abuse, and every other form of human evil. Oh, there have been improvements in technology, in mechanical conveniences, in treatments of diseases and injuries. But in all of the aspects of our lives that really make us *human*—the way we treat each other, our respect for God and morality, our regard for human life—our society has become increasingly corrosive, demeaning, and destructive.

If an unborn child becomes inconvenient, we abort that child. If an aging parent becomes too much of a burden due to Alzheimer's or physical infirmity or some other medical condition, there are doctors and judges who will help us euthanize that parent.

Computer technology, which has the potential of doing so much good in the world, is increasingly used to destroy human lives and relationships through the propagation of pornography, including child pornography. Films and TV shows saturate our society with images of incredible violence, appalling immorality, and the destructive values of a godless culture.

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Against such an onslaught of wickedness and inhumanity, we might feel overwhelmed, wondering, “What can one person do?” But God has never accepted that excuse from His people. The Scriptures give us many stories of great events that were shaped by the obedience of individual believers acting in response to God’s call. Again and again in times of crisis and decision, God called a single individual to take a courageous stand and make a difference.

God called one individual, Joseph, to speak His words and carry out His will in the pagan land of Egypt. God called one individual, Moses, to confront Pharaoh and deliver the nation of Israel from bondage. God called one individual, Daniel, to take a lonely, courageous stand against the blasphemy of the prideful king in Babylon. God called one individual, Nehemiah, to lead His people back to their homeland to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

And here, in the book of Esther, we will see God call one Jewish woman during a time of great crisis and peril. We’ll see Him use a selfless, obedient young woman to deliver a nation from genocide.

Many times in human history, God has searched for that one person who would be *His* person for a time of moral or spiritual crisis—and that person could not be found! The prophet Ezekiel records the Lord’s lament, “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, *but I found none*” (Ezekiel 22:30, emphasis added). And the prophet Isaiah declared:

The LORD looked and was displeased  
that there was no justice.  
He saw that there was *no one*,  
he was appalled that there was *no one* to intervene.  
(Isaiah 59:15–16, emphasis added.)

What tragic words! God seeks a few bold followers who will stand in the gap, who will seek justice, who will speak His truth in our own time of crisis. What a tragedy it would be if He called *your* name—and you did not answer. What a tragedy it would be if you simply shrugged and said, “I’d like to help—but what can one person do?”

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What can one person do? In his poem “Lend a Hand,” Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909) offers a resounding answer to that question:

I am only one,  
But still I am one.  
I cannot do everything,  
But still I can do something;  
And because I cannot do everything  
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

God seeks a few bold individuals who will say, “I am only one, but still I am one, and I will be God’s instrument for such a time as this.” Make sure that when God calls your name you are ready and willing to stand up and be counted.

## AGAINST THE TRIUMPH OF EVIL

The story of Esther is the story of one faithful servant who answered God’s call. This is not merely a quaint tale from a distant time and a remote culture. The story of Esther is profoundly relevant to our times and to our lives. The story of Esther is as much about *you* as it is about Esther. If you can read the story of Esther without being personally and profoundly changed, then you have completely missed the point of the story!

The key statement of the entire book of Esther—the one statement that expresses the theme of the story—is found in Esther 4:14, where Esther’s cousin Mordecai says to her, “And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

For such a time as this! God placed Esther in a strategic position for a purpose. And she was God’s chosen instrument “for such a time as this.”

And you, my friend, are also God’s chosen instrument for such a time as this—for the time of crisis and peril in which you live. God may not have placed you in a *royal* position, as he did Esther. But he has placed you in a *strategic* position in your home, your neighborhood, your office or factory, your church, and your community. And God has placed you where you are for such a time as this.

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Just as Esther could not afford to be passive but needed to yield herself to God's will, you and I must be willing to act in obedience to His will and His Word. As the Irish statesman Edmund Burke once wrote, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

### LIKE A NOVEL

Esther is one of the most neglected books in the Bible. Many people have told me, "I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on the book of Esther." The book is neglected not only in the pulpit but also in most Christians' personal devotions and Scripture study.

This is amazing, because the book of Esther reads like a great novel. It has everything a good page-turning story should have—unforgettable characters, romance, intrigue, suspense, arch-villainy, murder, betrayal, action, and a thrilling climax. The book of Esther also has something that's hard to find in most novels today: A powerful theme, guaranteed to challenge and change you if you simply dwell in its truths and apply them to your life.

Oh, and one more thing: The book of Esther is unlike any other novel you have ever read in one important respect: This book is absolutely, literally *true*. This is a richly detailed account of actual historical events, and there are parallels between this account and other historical records of the time (such as the account of King Xerxes' invasion of Greece in *The Histories* of Herodotus).

The story of Queen Esther takes place in Persia, which corresponds to modern-day Iran, during a time when the people of Israel were held captive in that land. To this day, there is a sizable Jewish population living in the Muslim state of Iran—the Mizrahi (or "Eastern") Jews, who are descended from the Jews in Persia during the time of Esther.

The book of Esther tells us how the Jewish festival of Purim came to be—the celebration of the Jews' deliverance from the genocidal plot of Haman nearly 2,500 years ago. Also in this book we see the first major outbreak of the irrational, genocidal, anti-Semitic hatred that has so afflicted the Jewish people for centuries—right up to our own time.

Esther is one of three books in the Bible primarily about women—the book of Esther, the book of Ruth, and the Song of Solomon. Each book is a delightful and engaging love story on the surface—but each contains hidden treasures of meaning just beneath the surface, embedded in the form of types, symbols, and metaphors.

This precious and wonderful book has been the subject of much scholarly controversy down through the years. It has had its share of critics and even opponents. That great leader of the Reformation, Martin Luther, once complained, “The book of Esther I toss into the Elbe [River]. . . . I am such an enemy to the book of Esther that I wish it did not exist.”<sup>1</sup> This statement shows that even a great reformer of the church can be stubbornly wrong about God’s Word.

## HER STORY IS OUR STORY

One of the most unusual features of the book of Esther is the fact that the name of God never appears in its pages (the only other book of the Bible that does not mention God by name is Song of Solomon). There is nothing about the story of Esther that is distinctly “religious”—that is, there is no reference to worship or faith, nor any prophecies of Christ, heaven, or hell. Many people wonder why this is so.

The answer, I believe, is that the story of Esther resonates with our own stories, our own experience—and in our own lives. It is often hard for us to see God at work. He often seems invisible and silent and uninvolved—yet, as the story of Esther clearly shows, even when we can’t see Him, He is at work in our lives, arranging events and circumstances to accomplish His good and loving plan for our lives.

Queen Esther’s story is our story. She was thrust into a time of great crisis and peril—both for herself and her people. She was called upon to demonstrate character qualities of courage and faithfulness. In order to save her people from destruction, she needed to risk everything, including her own life—not rashly or wantonly, but with wisdom, skill, and reliance on God.

You and I face tremendous challenges in our daily lives. We may not be called upon to save an entire culture from genocide—but we may be called

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upon to risk our finances, our security, our reputations, our friendships, and even our very lives to serve God and others at such a time as this.

What are the needs and the perils you see around you today? Maybe there are children at risk in your neighborhood, and they need someone to come to their aid and say, “God loves you, and I am here to help you.” Maybe there are troubled youths or pregnant teens who have nowhere else to turn, and you sense God telling you, “I have placed you here for such a time as this.” Perhaps you see your neighbors or your church or your community or even your nation entering a time of great crisis. You feel God tugging at your heart and whispering to your conscience—“Now is the time! I am calling you to stand in the gap for such a time as this.”

You may think, “But how do I know if it’s really God speaking to me? I can’t see Him. I can’t hear His voice. God seems distant, even absent.” Exactly so! That’s how Esther felt! Perhaps that’s why God’s name does not appear in the book—could it be that He wants us to see how His people should respond in times of crisis when He seems invisible and silent?

And as you read through the book of Esther, you will see that God is not absent. Invisible, yes; absent, no! His actions are on every page and in every line. He is not named in the story, but He is truly the Author and Prime Mover of the story.

And He is the Author and Prime Mover of your story and mine.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of the book of Esther take place in the royal courts of Susa, one of the oldest cities of the world. Susa was located about 150 miles east of the Tigris River. The Iranian town of Shush now occupies the site where the splendid royal city of Susa once thrived.

You may wonder how Esther and her fellow Jews came to be in Persia, so far from their homeland in Palestine. To answer that question, we must go back to 2 Kings 25. There we read that the army of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, surrounded Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. After a siege lasting a year and a half, the city ran out of food and the people began to starve. The Jews made a last stand against the besieging forces, but the

Babylonians were victorious. The invaders captured the city, destroyed the temple and the royal palace, and ransacked the city. They broke down the city walls, took everything of value from the city, and led the people of Jerusalem into exile in distant Babylon. These events occurred in 586 BC.

Almost fifty years later, in 537 BC, the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great conquered Babylonia. Cyrus gave the Jewish people permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city (see 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–2). Many of the Jews returned to the Promised Land and rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and its walls (as recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).

But a number of Jews remained behind and settled in the Persian Empire. Their descendants, the Mizrahi Jews, still live in Iran to this day, practicing their Hebrew faith and traditions (including the Feast of Purim, which celebrates the story of Esther) in the midst of one of the most fiercely Islamic cultures in the world.

Now that we have examined the background of the book of Esther, I have a suggestion: Before you go on to the next chapter in this book, I'd encourage you to open your Bible and read through the book of Esther. It's a short book, about the length of one or two chapters in a standard novel. You can easily read the entire book of Esther in a single sitting—certainly in less than half an hour. I know you'll find it a fascinating and rewarding story.

After you've finished, pick up this book again, and let's explore the book of Esther together.