

Understanding the Text

Esther's Decision

A. Mordecai's mourning.

1. (Est 4:1-3) He and the rest of the Jews lament their fate.

When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went as far as the front of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province where the king's command and decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

a. *He tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes:* Though Mordecai was anguished at all this, we remember also that his integrity was the cause of it. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry, but he would not change his mind and grovel at the feet of Haman to save himself or his people.

i. This was not only because of the personal integrity of Mordecai, but also because he knew the character of the laws of the Persians - that they could not be changed once decreed (Esther 1:19).

b. There was great mourning among the Jews: Mordecai's reaction was imitated all over the Persian Empire in public expressions of grief and horror.

2. (Est 4:4-7) Mordecai explains the problem to Esther.

So Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was deeply distressed. Then she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and take his sackcloth away from him, but he would not accept them. Then Esther called Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs whom he had appointed to attend her, and she gave him a command concerning Mordecai, to learn what and why this was. So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the city square that was in front of the king's gate. And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries to destroy the Jews.

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a. *Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her:* Esther, living in the isolation of the palace, had not yet been made aware of this decree. Before she understood the decree, she could not understand why her cousin Mordecai made such a spectacle of himself.

b. *And the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries to destroy the Jews:* Mordecai was well aware of the money motive that made king Ahasuerus receptive to this evil plan.

B. Mordecai's request.

1. (Est 4:8-12) His first request and Esther's appeal to him in response.

He also gave him a copy of the written decree for their destruction, which was given at Shushan, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her, and that he might command her to go in to the king to make supplication to him and plead before him for her people. So Hathach returned and told Esther the words of Mordecai. Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and gave him a command for Mordecai: "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, he has but one law: put all to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter, that he may live. Yet I myself have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days." So they told Mordecai Esther's words.

a. *That he might show it to Esther and explain it to her:* After giving a copy of the decree to Esther through a courier, Mordecai challenged her to intercede on behalf of her people before the king.

b. *Any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, he has but one law: put all to death:* Esther explained the difficulty behind this - she was only allowed to come to the king when called, and if she came on her own, she could be executed for daring to approach the king without an invitation.

i. Apparently, the life of a queen of Persia was not one of great intimacy with the king. Esther said, "I myself have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days" - meaning she had not seen her husband for an entire month.

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2. (Est 4:13-14) Mordecai's second request.

And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

- a. *Do not think in your heart that you will escape*: Mordecai reminded Esther that she could not remain insulated from this decree any more than anyone else.
- b. *If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place*: Mordecai's trust was in the faithfulness of God, not in the faithfulness of Esther. He knows that God will not let His people down, even if individuals let God down.
- c. *But you and your father's house will perish*: Mordecai reminded Esther that though the fate of God's people rested in God and not in her, her own fate depended on her own faithfulness to God.
- d. *Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*: Mordecai knew that God had promoted this orphan in exile for a reason - and Esther must have the courage and wisdom to see that reason and fulfill it.
 - i. This principle applies to us also. God promotes us or puts in a place for a reason, and we need the courage and wisdom to see that reason and to walk in it.
 - ii. "You have been wishing for another position where you could do something for Jesus: do not wish anything of the kind, but serve him where you are." (Spurgeon)
 - iii. "I believe that in dark times God is making lamps with which to remove the gloom. Martin Luther is sitting by his father's hearth in the forest when the Pope is selling his wicked indulgences: he will come out soon, and stop the crowing of the cock of the Romish Christ-denying Peter. John Calvin is quietly studying when false doctrine is most rife, and he will be heard of at Geneva. A young man is here this morning - I do not know whereabouts he is, but I pray the Lord to make this to be an ordination sermon to him,

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starting him on his life-work. I feel as if I were Samuel at Bethlehem, seedlings for David, to anoint him with a horn of oil in the name of the Lord." (Spurgeon)

3. (Est 4:15-17) Esther's decision.

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!" So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther commanded him.

a. *Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me:* Taking the determination of the Lord, Esther decided that she would go and make a bold appearance before the king, but only if she was supported by prayer and fasting.

i. Jesus reminded us that special spiritual battles sometimes require special preparation with prayer and fasting. Regarding a stubborn case of demonic possession, He said this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:20).

b. *And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!:* Esther carried a bold attitude towards her mission. She was determined to be obedient, no matter what the cost.

i. Jesus exhorted us to have the same attitude: Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul (Matthew 10:28). Paul was also an example of this attitude: To live is Christ, and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21).

Personal Bible Study

Esther 3 brought us to the central crisis of this book. We saw that Haman, the second in command of the Persian Empire, had convinced Ahasuerus to order everyone to bow to Haman as he passed by.

Of course, the people did so in fear for their lives. All except one: Mordecai, who alone stood up against compromise in doing homage to man rather than to God. Haman was furious as a

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result. Just getting back at Mordecai wouldn't be enough. Instead he wanted to destroy all the Jews and remove them from getting in the way of his self-seeking plans. Haman first cast lots (*pur*) to decide when the destruction was to take place. He craftily fooled Ahasuerus into authorizing the destruction of these people by playing on Ahasuerus' greed, superstition, and ego.

Copies of this decree were distributed throughout the land via the Persian Pony Express. The chapter ended in an unusual way: "So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed" (Esther 3:15, NKJV). So we come to Esther 4, in which the crisis begins to reach its peak. Being Jewish, Esther was in just as much danger as her people, although she was now the queen. She and Mordecai will discover in this chapter the hand of God's sovereignty at work in arranging all of these things, and they would have vital decisions to make that would effect the survival of Judaism and the people of Israel.

Guided Questions:

1. Jews throughout the Persian Empire received word that their day of destruction had been decreed under the wicked supervision of Haman.

- What was Mordecai's reaction to this edict?
- How did the other Jews throughout the Empire similarly react to this news (v. 3)?

Our Western culture has wrongly minimized and squelched the display of emotions. Even in times of grief we feel pressured to just "pull ourselves together," and "get over it." This was not so in the Jewish culture, nor elsewhere in the Eastern world. We need to understand that if we are grieving, there is no reason to "just snap out of it," but to express our grief and burdens and give them over to God. There is "a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4, NKJV). God wants us to seek Him honestly, and to know that He loves us anyway. How will He bring healing in our lives as we take our burdens and cares to Him?

2. Through Hathach, Mordecai commanded that Esther should go to Ahasuerus, supplicating (to implore, seek mercy like a weaker person from a stronger one) and pleading that he would save their people. The shocked Esther sent a reply.

- What fearful thing did she relate to Mordecai, and why was this a particular concern at that time (v. 11)?

3. We too faced a fate we could not escape, for the Law said we are all doomed to die because our sin. Just as King Ahasuerus would have to extend the golden scepter of acceptance and forgiveness to repeal the death sentence, so God had to reach out His "golden scepter" of forgiveness to mankind, because nothing we could do in trying to cover our sin would make any difference, for there is "but one law: put all to death" otherwise. Read the following

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passages and record how God has offered us His “scepter” and made us His own. (Romans 5:6-11; 2 Corinthians 5:21 Ephesians 1:3-9; 2:1-10)

4. In Esther 4:14 we see the principal theme of the book, which is that God takes care of and delivers His people, but He doesn't always show us how until the right time. All of the things that Esther had experienced up to that moment (including being taken away from her people), and all that seemed negative as well as positive happening to her, had worked together to place her in such a setting for such an appropriate time and season for her to make a difference.

5. What bold decision did Esther make (v. 16b)? How Mordecai respond to Esther's boldness (v. 17)?

6. We are struck by Esther's bold statement that she would go in to the King, although it was against his law, and “if I perish, I perish!” or “If I must die, I am willing to die” (v. 16, NLT). The potential salvation of her people and fulfilling God's will for her life far outweighed the cost to herself. Many have died for their faith because they were unwilling to deny God, and boldly accepted His will as supreme. What are some of the ways we see this attitude reflected by the beloved apostle Paul in the New Testament? Acts 20:22-24, 21:13; Philippians 1:19-21; 2 Timothy 2:8-10, 4:6-87. As God builds our lives to become more what He wants them to be, we will face difficulties, even mourning and grief, and seemingly negative situations that make it seem like maybe He isn't in control or has abandoned us. But we have seen that God is at work in our lives in even those things, and He often uses difficult situations to move us into the place He wants us to be to fulfill His plans. God won't force you to make the right choice, as we saw today, but when the time comes, He will give us the ability by His grace and His Spirit to make the appropriate choices.

What are some of the difficult situations that you have faced in your walk with the Lord?

What has He taught you through your circumstances and trials?

How has He moved you into the place He has desired you to get to so you can accomplish His will?

How have the things we learned today helped you through these times in your life?

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