



Esther - Chapter Four

II Esther 3:1-9:17 - Main Action (continues)

Summary of Chapter Four

When Mordecai hears of Haman's plot he goes into mourning and he also passes a message to Esther to approach the king on the matter. She had not been called into the presence of the king for a month and an unsolicited approach on her part could lead to her death. Therefore, she asks Mordecai to gather all the Jews and fast for her. She would gather her maids and do the same.

II.b Esther 4:1-17 - Esther Agrees to Help the Jews

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; ² he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. ³ In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Esther 4:1-3

Put on sackcloth and ashes with fasting and weeping and lamenting were both traditional ways of expressing grief in the ancient Near East, including Israel: <<Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days>> (Genesis 37:34), <<Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them; and all the men who were with him did the same>> (2 Samuel 1:11), <<Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on

the ground and worshipped>> (Job 1:20), <<They throw dust on their heads and wallow in ashes; they make themselves bald for you, and put on sackcloth, and they weep over you in bitterness of soul, with bitter mourning>> (Ezekiel 27:30b-31), and: <<When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes>> (Jonah 3:6).

Although Mordecai was anguished at all this, it is remembered also that his integrity was the cause of it. He was wailing 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. 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; refer to Esther 1:19.

For no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. The ban on such behaviour in the king's gate is understandable, given its unseemly character and the strict court etiquette reflected elsewhere in the book; refer to Esther 1:8, 3:12 and 4:11. This is also reflected in: <<*In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served to him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before*>> (Nehemiah 2:1). The king's gate was the location where dignitaries and officials met for judgement and business; refer to the comment made on Esther 2:19.

There was great mourning among the Jews. Mordecai's reaction was imitated all over the Persian Empire in public expressions of grief and horror. Yet they would again know joy as God's chosen people: <<*You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy*>> (Psalm 30:11).

⁴ When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them. ⁵ Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. ⁶ Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, ⁷ and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

Esther 4:4-8

Esther's maids and her 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.

She sent garments to clothe Mordecai. Given the ban of v.2, Esther probably feared for Mordecai's safety. She wanted him to appear in the appropriate manner so that he would not bring undue attention to himself.

The exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai was well aware of the money motive that made King Ahasuerus receptive to this evil plan. The king had no real incentive not to accept Haman's plans for it would not cost as much as Haman promised to pay into the king's treasury for permission to enact genocide. He was going to profit from the actions of Haman.

Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. After giving a copy of the decree to Esther through Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, Mordecai challenged her to intercede on behalf of her people before the king.

⁹ Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹ 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law – all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.'

Esther 4:9-11

If any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law – all alike are to be put 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.

There is but one law. The law in this matter was absolute, without any qualifications or exceptions. The strict court etiquette shows the king's total power over the lives of his subjects (v.2).

I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days is an indication that the king's love for Esther may have begun to wane, making Esther's task even more difficult. However, the actual reaction by the king later will indicate that Esther was very much still in favour and it had probably been matters of state that had kept them apart: <<*As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favour and he held out to her the golden sceptre that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the sceptre. The king said to her, 'What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom'*>> (Esther 5:2-3).

¹² When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³ Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴ For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.'

Esther 4:12-14

Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. Mordecai reminded Esther that she could not remain insulated from this decree anymore than anyone else. Once it was made known that she too was a Jew then her fate would be sealed. The queen was not above the law.

For if you keep silence at such a time as this. There may have been a temptation for Esther to say nothing believing that she would be protected by her royal position. After all, it had been said before that: <<*Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time*>> (Amos 5:13). However, Esther also knew in her heart that there was: <<*a time to keep silence, and a time to speak*>> (Ecclesiastes 3:7b). This was a time to speak out and to take action to save her people for she was not only a Jew, she was also their queen.

Relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews. Despite his emotional turmoil (v.4), deep down Mordecai is sure that the Jews will survive. 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. This reflects his faith that God will protect his people although the text does not make this explicit.

From another quarter. Mordecai does not seem to know what other source of help would appear but he expresses confidence that God will somehow rescue his people.

Your father's family will perish. Since Mordecai is sure the Jews will be delivered, his statement that Esther and her family will perish presumably means that they will be punished for Esther's refusal to act. God is apparently the one who will punish them, although again, this is not explicitly said. Another possibility is that her family name would be lost to history instead of being continually honoured by the Jews every year since because of her courage and her faithfulness.

Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this is the strongest hint yet of Mordecai's belief in divine providence. It is a statement that can apply to all believers who may lead what appear to be mundane, nondescript lives in the greater scheme of things, yet God has a plan for them - great or small.

Charles Spurgeon commented, "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."

¹⁵ Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ 'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.' ¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Esther 4:15-17

Hold a fast on my behalf. This is not a spontaneous outpouring of grief as in v.3, but an organised activity aimed at increasing Esther's chances of success, through earnest prayer – the strongest indication yet of Esther's and Mordecai's faith in God as fasting and praying are intrinsically linked: <<*At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God, and said, 'O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens'*>> (Ezra 9:5-6), and: <<*When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven*>> (Nehemiah 1:4).

It should be noted that it was not just Esther responsibility to fast and pray but a call for the whole community to do so. This is something that the church could also consider when it calls upon God to work in a particular situation.

If I perish, I perish. Esther realises that God cannot be manipulated, even by fasting: <<*If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship*>>

the golden statue that you have set up'>> (Daniel 3:17-18). Jesus, too, demonstrates this principle that God can be trusted to act righteously but cannot be told what he must do: <<*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done*>> (Luke 22:42).

Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. Mordecai had raised Esther as if she were his own daughter but now she is the queen and thus her instructions to him come as a royal command and not a friendly suggestion or request between cousins.