

# ESTHER

## 4:1-17

### Esther 4:1-17

Taught at our Sunday evening service, 6th November 2022 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

**Reading:** Luke 14:25-33

**Good evening. Let's pray.**

### Introduction

This is week 3 of 6 in our Bible study of the Old Testament book of Esther that was written by Ezra the scribe, with these events likely taking place around 516-506 B.C. (at the time of the Medo-Persian Empire). And while God is not mentioned by name, we see Him at work through His providence - the unseen rudder steering the ship.

### Overview of Esther

Tonight, we're going to study chapter 4 - and for context, here's what the earlier chapters have already covered, and where we're headed throughout the rest of this book:

- Chapter 1 (22 verses) - The King removes Vashti as Queen

- Chapter 2 (23 verses) - Esther is made Queen, while Mordecai uncovers a plot
- Chapter 3 (15 verses) - Haman plots against the Jews
- Chapter 4 (17 verses) - Esther agrees to help the Jews
- Chapter 5 (14 verses) - Esther sets a banquet while Haman plots against Mordecai
- Chapter 6 (14 verses) - The King dreams and Mordecai is honoured
- Chapter 7 (10 verses) - Haman's plot is unveiled but he is killed instead
- Chapter 8 (17 verses) - Haman's plot against the Jews is reversed
- Chapter 9 (32 verses) - The Jews overcome their enemies
- Chapter 10 (3 verses) - Mordecai's position remembered

## Overview of chapter four

So the pace will be a touch slower this week with just 17 verses, compared to the 38 we covered last week, and we'll see that the events of chapter four record Esther's agreement to help the Jews. Breaking it down a little more we see:

- v1-3 - Mordecai and the Jew's response to the news of their impending death
- v4-9 - Esther's enquiry to why they are mourning
- v10-12 - Esther's hesitation to put her life at risk
- v13-14 - Mordecai's reasoning as to why Esther should help
- v15-17 - Esther commits to help

## Chapter four

Let's get started on this chapter then. In the first 2 verses we read...

### Esther 4:1-2

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.

We might be concerned at rising energy costs, or perhaps about our mortgage at this uncertain time. But this is on a whole other level. When you think about it, it's worse than what we see in Ukraine - for this would mean the death of every single Jew in this vast kingdom. And it wasn't a hypothetical situation. Mordecai and the Jewish people knew that their lives were not simply at risk or threatened, but now set to be ended *by law* of the most powerful empire on earth at that time - an empire that spanned throughout Asia, Africa and Europe.

### Esther 4:3

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.

So as the news reaches each part of the kingdom it is met with the same response - and in it, no mention of prayer. Does that mean the Jews didn't pray? We don't know. But we do know they were in a period of rebellion. And perhaps we should consider that if we don't pray when we're able to pray, we'll not be able to pray when we need to - that is, we'll be so spiritually unfit that we'll not know where to start in our prayers.

And now, in this situation, no doubt all the people knew what it meant for their elimination to be set in law, for in this empire the law could not be changed, as had been seen in the situation with Queen Vashti. And likewise, at another time in Babylon, the law could not be changed there that resulted in Daniel being thrown into the lion's den. So, the people realised the seriousness of the law.

Surely we can sympathise with this horrible situation, even if we can't empathise with it - for it's not like a law such as this has been set in our lifetime. *However*, let's pause for a moment to consider that we too were indeed faced with an unchangeable law that would demand our lives. And that is the law of a just and holy God who cannot ignore sin. So too our situation was seemingly helpless. Likewise, ignorance or denial of the law wouldn't have changed the demands of it. And if it were not for Jesus dying in our place, we would ourselves perish.

If you are are not a Christian, the news that God *will* hold you to account for everything you've done in your life, and that no amount of good deeds will make up for the wrong you have done - that He will will hold you up against not your own standards, but His - should make you tremble. The Bible says in the book of Hebrews.

**Hebrews 10:31**

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

However, if you are a Christian - what gratitude you should have! What joy you should have! What wonder, awe, and amazement you should have at His marvellous grace! That He sent His own beloved Son to die for *you* - paying for your sin, so that you don't have to.

Writing to Christians in Ephesus, the apostle Paul wrote:

**Ephesians 2:14-16**

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.

That is, you were once surrounded, as it were, by the 10 great cannons of the 10 Commandments, aimed and ready to fire at you on the Master's command, yet He turned them on His Son so that you could go free. Yes, this passage in Esther is talking of the terrifying situation that the Jews found themselves in. But don't read past this without considering the terrifying situation you were in. Or, if you are not a Christian, the terrifying situation you *are* in.

So back in Esther, we read:

#### **Esther 4:4**

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.

Imagine how you feel when walking into a room to find someone in floods of tears - "What's wrong?!" you wonder. That's no doubt the emotion in Esther right here, for she doesn't know the situation, and she sends the gesture of new clothes to Mordecai who refuses them.

#### **Esther 4:5**

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 she moves from wondering what is wrong, to *asking* what is wrong via Hathach, who no doubt was known to Mordecai who himself was also part of the king's household staff at this time.

#### **Esther 4:6-7**

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.

Again, this was in the 10's of millions of £ at today's equivalent. Not that any amount of money could have changed the law that had been set. But even changing the king's opinion of the matter might prove difficult as this was financially to his advantage.

#### **Esther 4:8**

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.

Esther will now know the awful truth of what has been set in law, knowing that there would be limited time to find any way to mitigate this awful plan. But what seems to weigh most on her is Mordecai's request for her to go and plead with the king, for we read:

#### **Esther 4:9-11**

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."

This is a very legitimate concern, because the king indeed had this power. His role wasn't merely a ceremonial or representative one like we see with kings and queens today - rather he had absolute power. Also, we've already seen in chapter 1 how he treated Queen Vashti, removing her from office and from his life for disobeying him.

Esther's concern was that she could be put to death for going before the king without him requesting her presence. And that concern doesn't seem unreasonable, given that the king had not asked for her in 30 days - that doesn't exactly say she was top of his mind at this time!

But we see this famous response from Mordecai, who we should not forget had raised her and cared a great deal about her:

#### **Esther 4:12-14**

So they told Mordecai Esther's words. 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?"

There are a few lessons in this incredible response.

First, Mordecai notes that Esther will not escape the destruction of the Jews because of who she is - in a sense saying "don't think you're special!". And like Esther, neither your position or who you are qualifies you for special protection from adversity. Rather, like her, those things qualify you to serve in a particular place, at a particular time, in a particular way.

Second, we see Mordecai speak with full confidence that deliverance will come to the Jews even without Esther's help. Where is that help going to come from? As mentioned this is the most powerful kingdom on Earth, spanning 3 continents. Help is not just around the corner. That means we must conclude that Mordecai is either deluded, or he (knowing the history of Israel) had full confidence in God, knowing His promise to Abraham, ergo that He had not finished with Israel.

Therefore, what he says to Esther is in effect "look, you don't *need* to help - but helping will actually be for your own benefit!". And so it is for us - I guarantee you that you will be blessed so much if you serve God. What is the greatest shame is the Christian who, having been saved by God, sits back and gives no thought to how he might serve his Saviour. Not only is that unimaginably rude, it also deprives that person of so much blessing. Others first is the order of the Christian life. And that starts with putting God first.

Now third, Mordecai makes this famous statement - "who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this". Wow. He's saying "Esther, maybe this whole situation, which God foreknew, is *exactly* why God has you where you are. Esther had providentially been placed in the king's palace as his queen at this precise moment.

And that begs the question, where has God placed *you* at this precise moment? *Why* has he placed you there? And what are you going to do with it? The situation you are in may not be comfortable, it may be filled with uncertainty, you may even be going through a trial or tragedy - but that doesn't mean God can't use it. In fact God may have led you there precisely for the benefit of others. I was talking to my brother this weekend, who many of you know is facing his own trials again with his job situation, and he noted what we read in Luke chapter 4...

#### **Luke 4:1-2a**

Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil...

That is, Jesus was led into the wilderness, not for His benefit, but for ours. Who knows how God will use your situation - whether it be a good or difficult one - to speak to others? Who knows what doors it will open speaking to those in your life who don't know God as their Saviour? Who knows what example this will be to your children, or your church family?

So stop and consider for a moment...

Why has God placed you in the job you're in with the colleagues you have? To what end has God blessed you with the salary you have and the material things you hold in your hand? Why has God blessed you with the home you have? What does God have for you to do in your family? Why has God placed you in this church? And why has God blessed you with the skills or knowledge or wisdom you have? Or why has God led you into the wilderness of your trial? What does He want to accomplish - not only in you, but in others - through that?

And like Esther was faced not only with something to reflect on, but something that required action... are you doing all you should be with these things?

Yes, God doesn't need you to accomplish His will and purpose. But what if that's His plan? Mordecai was confident that help would come from another place if not Esther. But what if she had not acted in this moment? With the benefit of hindsight, we can see what a tremendous impact her actions made. So don't miss doing what God has for *you* to do!

Let's continue in this chapter...

#### **Esther 4:15-16**

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 Esther commits to taking this big, and potentially fatal step. But first, she commits to fasting - and asks others to do the same. Now, it doesn't say they prayed. But when we look at Mordecai's confidence that help will indeed arrive - even if Esther were not to help - I can't help but wonder if they were thinking back to how God delivered Israel out of Egypt in miraculous circumstances. And how in that situation it was once again a Jew who had been placed within the palace of a foreign land to deliver them (in that case Moses).

Was there not a single Jew who prayed at this moment? That would be surprising to me, despite their rebellion. Certainly they hoped to accomplish something through this fasting. And this certainly makes me think about how much I should pray ahead of big decisions and key moments in my life. I hope it does for you too.

But I think most of all let's draw our attention to Esther's attitude here - for she is willing to put her life at risk for the sake of what God had her there to do. Are you?

You may recall something I've shared before, how David Livingstone, who was a missionary to Africa, was once offered help as someone said "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you." He replied, "If you have found men who will come only if there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come even if there is no road at all."

Are you a fair weather Christian? Will you only serve God when it is convenient to do so? Or will you prioritise Bible study, or attending a church meeting, or doing something practical in the building, or serving others, or witnessing to others in this town ahead of your own convenience, comforts and desires? Let me put it another way; What are you willing to risk? What are you willing to give up?

Are you willing to forgo being married? Or having children? Or time with your children? Or time with your friends? Or a promotion or job change? I'm not saying that God will ask you to do these things - but it is in the realm of possibility, and I greatly admire those who have so faithfully given up things for the sake of the call of Christ.

"Oh, what a relief God hasn't called me to be a missionary" you might think. "Oh, how good that He's not prompted me to move to another part of the country". "Oh, how good that He has simple things for me to do". Don't be so forgetful, for we have read before Jesus' words in Luke 14:

#### **Luke 14:25-33**

Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'? Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.

You and I need to lay down our *lives*.

One commentator notes that after receiving some advice from Augustine, a young man asked him why he was telling him to stay away from this and to avoid that. "I have to live, don't I?"

"Do you?" Augustine is said to have replied.

Do you? Do you? Paul Said "I die daily," Paul said. "If I perish, I perish," Esther concluded. And Jesus said "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

What is it that God has for you to do? I don't know, but perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Ask the Lord what He would have you do where you are in life right now.

The last verse of this chapter says...

#### **Esther 4:17**

So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther commanded him.

That was, he went and fasted with all the Jews in the city. Did they pray? We don't know for sure - though again it would be shock if none did. Would it be a shock if you didn't pray? or would it be a pleasant surprise if you showed for a prayer meeting? We have a prayer meeting this Thursday evening, and I want to ask you to be there. Yes, there are many other pressing needs we each have in life. But what is more needful than prayer? If you can't make this Thursday - no problem. *But* if you have *never* been to a prayer meeting, you're not following the example of the early church.

## Application questions

This is an incredible chapter, with an incredible example, and there are many things it should cause us to think about in our own lives. As we go through this coming week, I encourage you to ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you understand the seriousness of your sin? Do you mourn over it?
- Why has God placed you where you are right now?
- What are you willing to give up for for the sake of serving Him?

**Let's pray.**