

Notes on Esther 4

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B. Mordecai Persuades Esther to Appeal to the King – Chap. 4

The Jews mourn the decree

Verse 1

1. How did Mordecai act when he learned about the decree? Why would he be especially upset?

Mordecai's grief

When Mordecai heard of the decree that Haman had influenced the king to make, he felt deep sorrow and mourning. This was expressed by tearing his garment, wearing sackcloth, and crying out with a loud, bitter cry in the midst of the city (presumably publicly).

Mordecai, of all people, should have felt deep sorrow for the decree, since his conduct had occasioned it. Had he alone been threatened for his conduct, that would have been a great enough source of grief. But his conduct had led to a decree of destruction, not just against him or even against his own family, but against the whole Jewish population – all Jews, everywhere on earth. How much greater burden could a man have to bear? Surely it was cause for great sorrow.

Here and in the following story we see another great quality of Mordecai. He felt a deep sense of responsibility for the consequences of his own conduct. Unlike some, he was not indifferent to the suffering or sorrow that could come to others as a consequence of his conduct. It touched his heart, so he determined to do something about it.

Of course, this did not mean Mordecai was convicted that his conduct had been wrong. We will see that he continues to maintain the same conduct. The point is that it grieved him that Haman had reacted so sinfully to Mordecai's stand for truth.

(It may appear at this point that Mordecai did not yet know that his conduct had occasioned the decree, but v7 implies he did know.)

Verses 2,3

2. How did other Jews react? Explain the significance of sackcloth, ashes, and fasting.

The sorrow spreads among the Jews

He expressed his grief even as far as the gate of the king's palace. He could not, however, enter the gate, because it was against the rules for one who was wearing sackcloth to enter.

Mordecai's grief was shared by Jews in every province. As the decree arrived and was made known, the Jews recognized the danger they faced. They mourned, fasted, wept, and wailed, lying in sackcloth and ashes.

Mordecai informs Esther of the decree, and asks her to intercede.

Verse 4

3. What did Esther do when she heard Mordecai was so distressed? How did he respond (v4)?

Esther seeks to console Mordecai

To this point Esther had not heard about the decree. She did not yet know that her own husband, influenced by Haman, had decreed the death of all her people! Her servants (maids and eunuchs) were the ones who informed her, but apparently they just told her that the Jews were grieving, perhaps specifically that Mordecai was wearing sackcloth at the gate.

It seems doubtful that these people knew she was a Jew. So far as the record states, she had not yet made this known (2:20). They may have known she had some friendship with Mordecai, or they may have simply informed her of the matter as news (since it had stirred up the whole

city – 3:15). Even now it appears that they did not inform her the specifics of the case and its effect on her own people, since Mordecai later explained this to her. But she knew the Jews were grieving, especially Mordecai, and this was enough to cause her distress.

She responded by sending Mordecai better clothing to wear instead of the sackcloth, but he refused it. Apparently she sought simply to comfort and cheer him. But his grief was too great to be so easily set aside. Keil suggests that maybe she offered these garments so that, without the sackcloth, he could then enter the gate and talk to her about what was troubling him. When he refused, however, she found a different way to communicate with him.

Verses 5,6

4. Whom did Esther then send to Mordecai, and for what purpose?

Esther communicates with Mordecai through her eunuch.

When Mordecai refused to be comforted or to come to her, Esther then sent an apparently trusted servant named Hathach to talk to Mordecai. She wanted him to learn the reason for Mordecai's distress.

Hathach accordingly met Mordecai outside the gate in the square of the city. Apparently this was a place of public access, and there Mordecai could go, even in his sackcloth.

Verse 7,8

5. What information did Mordecai send to Esther, and what did he ask her to do?

Mordecai explains the problem to Hathach.

Mordecai then explained to Hathach (so he could tell Esther) about the decree and what it would mean. Mordecai, however, knew more than just the decree. By some means he had learned who was responsible and even how much money Haman had offered to pay into the king's treasuries to bring about the Jews' destruction.

I do not know that this means the king had decided to accept the money from Haman (cf. 3:9,11). But it would show Esther how devious Haman was and how deeply determined he was to accomplish his purpose.

Mordecai urges Esther to plead for her people with the king.

To help Esther see for herself what the problem was, Mordecai even sent her a copy of the decree itself. Note here the value of documenting our statements, especially when they involve an accusation against others. People need to know that our accusations are really true, and there is special power in personal eyewitness of the evidence.

Mordecai then gave instruction to Esther to go herself to talk to the king and appeal to him on behalf of her people. Note that Mordecai did more than just grieve over the problem. He had a plan for dealing with it. He knew Esther was in a position to influence the king, so he asked her to use her situation as a means to benefit God's people. Likewise, when we face difficult circumstances, we may grieve and must ultimately trust God for deliverance, but we should also consider what we can do about the problem and use our opportunities to resolve it.

Note that, at this point, if not before, Hathach would have learned Esther's nationality. The only possible exception would have been if Mordecai had communicated with Esther by means of a sealed letter (though the language does not seem to imply this). If in fact he did learn her nationality, he must have been a trusted servant indeed to keep this matter from eventually coming to the attention of the people, especially the king.

Esther seeks to avoid the duty.

Verses 9-12

6. What reason did Esther give for not going before the king? How long had it been since the king had called for her?

As a faithful servant, Hathach delivered Mordecai's message to Esther. Esther then responded with a message sent back to Mordecai.

Esther's first reaction to the instruction was much like that of Moses when God called him to go tell Pharaoh to release the Israelites. All she could do was to look at the difficulties and make excuses. And she had good cause for concern! She pointed out that Persian law forbade anyone to enter the inner court where the king was, unless the king called him to come. Any who entered unbidden would be killed, unless the king held out his golden scepter to him. Then the person would be spared to have an audience with the king. So Esther feared to go unbidden to speak to the king.

Further, she pointed out that she had not been called to an audience with the king in the previous thirty days. This would indicate that she foresaw no opportunity to speak to the king – it was not like she had an appointment with him every day! Furthermore, the fact he had not called might indicate he did not particularly desire to see her. This would make it especially dangerous for her to go.

Such objections would naturally arise in anyone's mind in such a case. No doubt there was legitimate cause for concern. One might also remember Ahasuerus' treatment of Vashti as a sign of how he treated queens who displeased him. If Esther's request likewise angered the king, he could easily decide to eliminate another queen and replace her.

Keil wonders why she did not simply send a message to the king and request an audience. This alternative, however, does not appear to have been considered by anyone in the case. Perhaps such was simply not allowed. Or perhaps she feared she would be required to give her reasons for wanting an audience, and that might require her to reveal too much (especially in light of Haman's power) when she was not personally able to plead her case to the king. In any case, this alternative for some reason was not given serious consideration.

Had any of us been in Esther's place, we would no doubt have also been concerned about these problems. Yet it was also clear that such objections would not relieve her of her duty. When we consider the grave consequences to her people, we should clearly see what her duty was. And as Mordecai eventually pointed out, she was destined to die if the decree was carried out and her nationality became known. So why not risk her life now in the hope of saving as many Jews as she could. Doubtless in her heart she knew what her duty was. But like all of us, she hoped to find a different solution that did not involve such danger. How many times do we make excuses facing circumstances of far less consequence!

This message was then delivered to Mordecai.

Mordecai replies to Esther's excuses

Verse 13

7. What did Mordecai warn Esther about in v13? In what sense is this also true of us if we fail to serve God?

Mordecai's response comprises one of the richest sections of the book. Though God is never mentioned, Mordecai's reply reveals deep faith in the providence of God. In stating his views, he helps us to a much deeper understanding and appreciation of God's providence.

Mordecai reminds Esther that, as a Jew, the decree applies to her too.

Mordecai first reminded Esther of the personal danger she would face if she refused to aid God's people. She herself was a Jew. She need not think, though she was queen, that she would escape perishing with the other Jews. In fact, he assures her that, if she refused to help, she

would perish despite the fact he is convinced God would then find some other means to save the Jews (see v14).

We too need to consider such lessons as this. We may fear the problems we may face if we serve God, but we need to have a much greater fear of the consequences we will face if we do not serve God (Luke 12:4,5). Yes, people may oppose us, mock us, reject us, or even persecute and kill us if we do God's will. But we will suffer eternally if we do not serve God. Do not think that we can neglect our opportunities to do God's will and yet escape punishment. And do not think we are exceptions to God's laws because we have special privileges in life: power, money, fame, or military might.

Note that Mordecai did not accept Esther's excuses, but neither did he deny the danger. He simply pointed out that the case was such that she must act despite the danger. In much smaller ways (usually), we face similar situations. The case is not that we face no hardships or that we can ignore the hardships. Rather, the nature of the situation is such that we need to act despite the hardships!

Further, Mordecai did not allow his personal attachment to Esther to sway his judgment about what she needed to do. Surely he too recognized the danger she faced, and he was concerned for her. He had raised her and repeatedly proved his love for her. But he overcame his tendency to seek her protection and insisted that she must act despite the danger. So at times we face situations where natural attachments and emotions might lead us to seek the safety and protection of loved ones. But we must overcome those tendencies when necessary to urge loved ones to act in ways that God's will requires. As with Mordecai, we must remember that they face a worse danger if they disobey God than they do if they displease men.

Esther had made excuses. Mordecai responded by offering encouragement to do right. That is what we must do for other Christians and loved ones. We must not be easily persuaded to give up our stand for what is right, simply because people resist it. We must persist when the will of God is at stake and the consequences are great. People who make excuses at first may yet be persuaded if we persist.

Verse 14

8. What did Mordecai say would happen if Esther did not speak up (v14)? On what basis could he know this to be true?
9. Explain Mordecai's statement: "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Think: Do we always know what purpose God may have for putting us in a certain position? Explain.)
10. Special Assignment: **Define** providence. List and explain several lessons we can learn about providence from v14.

Mordecai expresses confidence in God's plan.

Mordecai states his conviction that Esther would suffer if she did not use her position to benefit God's people. He says she and her father's house would perish. Yet even if she did fail to act, he was confident that God would find some other means to save His people.

How could he know this? He knew the Jews were God's people, and the promises of God to Abraham required that his descendants must continue, not be destroyed. Despite his grief, Mordecai knew somehow God must spare the nation so that the promised blessing on all nations (salvation through Christ) must yet come. Many Jews might suffer; many might even be slain. Yet the nation must live on to fulfill God's plan. This is a firm statement of God's providence working in the world to accomplish His purposes.

He also affirmed that Esther may have come to power as queen for the very purpose of being useful to God's purpose as this very time. Compare this to the story of Joseph, who came to political power at the time needed to save the Israelites. Here again was strong evidence of Mordecai's faith in God's providence.

Note lessons we learn here about God's providence.

1) God's power still works in the world, even today, to accomplish His purposes. All that He has promised must come to pass. He is able to make it come to pass. There are things He may determine to do that we do not know what His determination is. But when He has revealed His will, we can be sure that He has the means to bring it to pass (as Mordecai knew God would spare Israel based on His stated promise). So sometimes we can know what He will do, because He has said so. Other times we may not know, because He has not spoken regarding the matter. But we can be sure that He has a plan to carry out His will, and He has the power to work in the Universe to accomplish His will. And we can be sure that, whatever that plan entails, it will be good in the end for those who are faithful to Him.

2) Mordecai also knew that God may use human agents to accomplish His providence, but He does not necessarily depend on any particular human agent. In this way, He does not violate the free will power to choose of any individual. He could use Esther, but she still had the power to choose whether to respond to His will or not. If she chose not to do so, He would use some other agency. God has many resources and many ways to accomplish His will. He is not limited by man's choices, but the choices any individual makes will determine whether God will bless or punish that individual.

3) God is able to work in providence without miraculous means. There is no miracle (an event impossible by natural law) anywhere in the book of Esther, yet it is evident that God is working. So today, the age of miracles has passed. When we teach that, some people argue that the conclusion is that God does not work in the world at all any more. Such statements show ignorance and lack of faith in God's providence. He proves in stories like this that He is perfectly capable of bringing about His will on earth even without miracles. Since miracles have ceased, He is still able by providence through natural law to accomplish His will.

For further information, see our article about miracles and direct revelation at our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

4) God may work long in advance of an event in order to have the arrangements made to accomplish His will when the time comes. Mordecai said that Esther may have come to this place of authority for this very purpose. God has the power to know ahead of time what will happen, so He can work as needed to prepare for the situation when it arrives. Then when the time comes, everyone and everything is in place to accomplish His plan.

5) Furthermore, we humans often cannot tell, even when we see events unfold, what God's intentions are; and sometimes we may not even be sure that He is the One who is causing some event. Mordecai said, "Who knows whether ..." He had faith God would accomplish His purpose, but he could not know ahead of time who or what means God would use.

So today people are mistaken when they attempt to read "signs" to reveal God's will for them by interpreting events around them. They are likewise mistaken to claim, based on what they see or experience in life, that "God led me to do such and such," or "I just knew the Holy Spirit was leading me to ..." God's will is revealed in Scripture. Other than that, we cannot know what His will and plans are, nor do we know for sure how He is working in any given situation. Nevertheless, though we may not know how, like Mordecai, we can be sure that God is working to achieve His goals.

6) Even though Esther could not be sure God intended to use her, yet Mordecai insisted that she should do what she could do in the circumstance. She should seek to further His cause and aid His people. She had special advantages, so she should use them.

Likewise, we too must use our blessings and advantages to do God's will, even though we may not know how God intends to work out His will here. As parents, we have a unique opportunity to teach our children. As employees, we may influence other workers. If we have wealth, we may support gospel preachers and help the needy. If we are able speakers, we may preach the

gospel. If we have singing ability, we may be song leaders. Whatever advantages we have, we should seek to use them for the Lord.

It likewise seems to me that we should use what advantages we have in our nation to help bring about God's will for His people. And we do not have to know for sure what the outcome will be of any situation to do this. Esther used her position as Queen. Paul later used his advantages as a Roman citizen. American Christians should likewise use the advantage we have to vote for candidates that we believe will further decency and good morals. The fact other people do not have these advantages does not excuse us from using them when we do have them, just as the fact other people are not queens did not excuse Esther from using her position as queen. And we do not have to know for sure what God's plans are before we act. Esther did not know God would use her to save His people, but Mordecai still taught that she would be punished if she did not try to use what advantage she had to accomplish God's will.

Esther agrees to make an appeal to the king.

Verses 15-17

11. What decision did Esther make? What did she want people to do on her behalf?

Esther agrees to speak to the king.

Having considered Mordecai's appeal and reasoning, Esther sent him her response. She determined that she would go before the king as Mordecai had instructed.

She said, "If I perish, I perish!" We all ought to admire and imitate such courage. We should be willing to serve God according to His will regardless of what price we may have to pay. No matter what the problems, difficulties, or dangers must be, we must proceed. If we perish, we perish. But God will still be pleased and will reward us eternally. Esther's courage should inspire us.

Note she said that such an act would be against the law. Actually, it would be against the law only if the king did not choose to recognize her. But even so in that case, she would be obeying God rather than men, so it would still be right for her to so act (Acts 5:29). We too should have the courage to violate human law when necessary to obey God.

She first sought God's blessings by fasting.

Before making her request of the king, she determined that she and her servants would fast. And she requested that all the Jews in Shushan join her in this fast. God is not mentioned, but that is the purpose of fasting (see the examples in Ezra and Nehemiah). She seeks to make request of God before she makes request of the king.

This too should be our attitude. Esther was about to work for God, and we have many works we do for Him that we also want Him to bless. Let us appreciate the value of prayer, so we ask His blessings on our work for Him. Sometimes our work too involves some dangers. Let us cast our burdens on Him in prayer. Fasting too can serve a useful purpose in our lives.

Having learned of Esther's decision, Mordecai joined her and did as she requested (i.e., he urged the people to fast on her behalf).

So the scene is set for Esther to go before the king to make request to save the people from destruction.

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