

IV. Pluck of Esther, Chapter 4

A. Cry

TEXT: 4:1-3

- 1 Now when Mordecai knew all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry;
- 2 and he came even before the king's gate: for none might enter within the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.
- 3 And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Today's English Version, 4:1-3

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes in anguish. Then he dressed in sackcloth, covered his head with ashes, and walked through the city, wailing loudly and bitterly, until he came to the entrance of the palace. He did not go in because no one wearing sackcloth was allowed inside. Throughout all the provinces, wherever the king's proclamation was made known, there was loud mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, wailed, and most of them put on sackcloth and lay in ashes.

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Bitter*: The tearing or rending of clothing, putting on sackcloth and throwing of ashes on the head were all actual, though symbolic, rites practiced by Jews (and other Semitic peoples) expressing grief and contrition. The English word is derived from the Hebrew word *saq* which describes a coarse, dark cloth, usually made of goat's hair. It was worn by mourners (II Sam. 3:31; II Kings 19:1-2), often by prophets to symbolize the actions they sought from their audiences (Isa. 20:2; Rev. 11:3), and by exiles (I Kings 20:31). No one seems to know the precise

form of the *saq*. Some think it was much like a loin cloth; others think it was like a burlap sack with openings for the arms and neck. Sometimes the garment was worn next to the skin (Jonah 3:6; I Kings 21:27; II Kings 6:30; Job 16:15; Isa. 32:11) but usually it was worn over another garment. Ashes were sprinkled over a person or he sat among ashes as a sign of mourning (II Sam. 13:19; Job 2:8; Jer. 6:26). Mordecai, having donned the symbolic dress of deep grief, went out into the middle of the imperial capital and began venting his feelings in loud, doleful, wailing which was customary in ancient eastern cultures. The Hebrew word *marah* is translated bitter. It is the same word used by Naomi when she said, "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21). This is what Mordecai was expressing. The rule that nothing mournful, of evil portent or distressing was to pass through the palace gates and into the presence of the emperor was another of the customs of the ancient east.

v. 3 *Baleful*: The same loud piercing funeral wailings and death cries were heard in every province where Jews lived throughout the vast Persian empire. People fasted and wept and lay in sackcloth and ashes. Literally, the Hebrew phrase is "sackcloth and ashes were spread out as a bed under many." The Hebrew word for *fast* is *tzum* and means *abstain*. Another Hebrew word for *fast* is *'innah* and means "afflict the soul." The word *tzum* is not used in the Old Testament before the book of Judges. Apparently, the original commandment (Lev. 16:29ff) was to "afflict" the soul which *later* came to be practiced by abstinence. It is altogether possible that the original commandment to "afflict the soul" (*fast*) did not necessarily demand abstinence. Jesus made drastic revisions to traditional practices of fasting (Mt. 6:16-18). Fasting or "afflicting the soul" has always had to do with the human need for mediation and intercession before God in times of stress and sorrow. The fasting of the Hebrew people in Persia at this time should certainly be considered as an act of supplication and intercession toward Jehovah for their rescue from the impending slaughter of Haman.

B. Crisis

TEXT: 4:4-9

- 4 And Esther's maidens and her chamberlains came and told it her; and the queen was exceedingly grieved: and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take his sackcloth from off him; but he received it not.
- 5 Then called Esther for Hathach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and charged him to go to Mordecai, to know what this was, and why it was.
- 6 So Hathach went forth to Mordecai unto the broad place of the city, which was before the king's gate.
- 7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and the exact sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.
- 8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given out in Shushan to destroy them, to show it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him, for her people.
- 9 And Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

Today's English Version, 4:4-9

When Esther's servant girls and eunuchs told her what Mordecai was doing, she was deeply disturbed. She sent Mordecai some clothes to put on instead of the sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then she called Hathach, one of the palace eunuchs appointed as her servant by the king, and told him to go to Mordecai and find out what was happening and why. Hathach went to Mordecai in the city square at the entrance of the palace. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him and just how much money Haman had promised to put into the royal treasury if all the Jews were killed. He gave Hathach a copy of the proclamation that had been issued in Susa, ordering the destruction of the Jews,

Mordecai asked him to take it to Esther, explain the situation to her, and have her go and plead with the king and beg him to have mercy on her people. Hathach did this.

COMMENTS

v. 4-6 *Grief*: When the queen's servants told her of Mordecai's wailing and mourning and that he had dressed himself in the customary dress of bitterness of the soul, Esther was exceedingly grieved. The Hebrew word is *vatihechalechal* from the root word *chul* which means *writhe, twist and tremble in pain*. Esther was more than curious about Mordecai's public display of grief. He was her father and she has the power and the resources to send him immediate relief in a royal way now. Like any loving daughter, Esther hurts when her father hurts. She is determined to help. It may be also that she sent Mordecai clothing to replace his sackcloth so that he might enter through the palace gate and come to her chambers to communicate his plight. But Mordecai sent the servants back empty handed. He kept his sackcloth on and continued his wailing. Esther's agony for Mordecai was even more intensified and she then sent Hathach, a royal servant of high standing. The Hebrew pronouns (demonstrative and interrogative) are idiomatic, *mah—zeh, mah—zeh*; that is, Hathach was to report back to Esther the "why and wherefore" of Mordecai's public display of grief. Haman and Xerxes would not have confided their plot against the Jews to Esther, even though they did not yet know she was a Jewess. Eastern potentates were not accustomed to counsel with their wives about affairs of state.

v. 7-9 *Gory Details*: Now that he was sure Esther would hear the reason behind his mourning and allow it to continue for the needed impact upon the public, Mordecai told the whole story to Hathach so it could be relayed to the queen. Mordecai related how he had refused to bow down in the presence of Haman; how Haman had bribed the emperor for 10,000 talents of silver; how the emperor had issued a decree that all Jews should be slain because of Mordecai's actions. Mordecai apparently thought the

exact sum of the bribe was important information Esther would need for the intercession he was going to insist from her. Perhaps he felt Esther would be thus equipped to better appeal to Xerxes' conscience. Whatever the case, Mordecai had a copy of the whole royal decree made and instructed Hathach to "declare it unto her." Some infer from this that Esther was unable to read the Persian language. Mordecai charged Esther (the Hebrew word is *tzvah* which is usually translated *command, order*) to go before the emperor and intercede on behalf of *her* people. Whereas Mordecai had before commanded Esther not to make known her racial origin, now he apparently feels that the only significant influence that might be brought to bear to save the Jewish people would be the queen's ethnic relationship to them. This action, as we shall see, would be critical to the very life of the queen herself. Not only would the revelation that she was a Jewess put her life in jeopardy, but even the seemingly harmless act of approaching the emperor's presence without being summoned was to incur the death penalty. Esther had to decide between the crises of her personal danger and the danger to the whole race of her people. Would she be willing to lay down her life for others? Would you?

C. Contingency

TEXT: 4:10-12

- 10 Then Esther spake unto Hathach, and gave him a message unto Mordecai, saying:
- 11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except those to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.
- 12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

Today's English Version, 4:10-12

and Esther gave him this message to take back to Mordecai: "If anyone, man or woman, goes to the inner courtyard and sees the king without being summoned, that person must die. That is the law; everyone, from the king's advisers to the people in the provinces, knows that. There is only one way to get around this law: if the king holds out his gold scepter to someone, then that person's life is spared. But it has been a month since the king sent for me."

COMMENTS

v. 10-12 Esther's first reaction was to remind Mordecai of the widely known law of the Persian monarchs about approaching his presence without being given the emperor's personal permission to do so. It was not only widely known but widely respected! The law was that "whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king . . . who is not called . . . he be put to death, except those to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre." Herodotus confirmed the existence of such a law but wrote that were six persons to whom the law did not apply (III. 84. 118). In the *bas reliefs* and other inscriptions of the Persian ruins of Persepolis the Persian emperor is always pictured with a scepter (*sharbith* in Hebrew, meaning, *rod, staff* or *club*) in his hand. The purpose for this law was probably to protect the emperor from assassination and from trivial and inane audiences with every Persian who might have "an axe to grind." Whatever the case, the law had its desired effect; it inspired fear of approaching the monarch unless bidden by the monarch himself to do so. Esther's immediate concern was fear for her life. It is not until Mordecai's sharp rebuke that Esther begins to consider the consequences of opting for her own personal safety.

D. Courage

TEXT: 4:13-17

- 13 Then Mordecai bade them return answer unto Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.
- 14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house will perish: and who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?
- 15 Then Esther bade them return answer unto Mordecai,
- 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.
- 17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Today's English Version, 4:13-17

When Mordecai received Esther's message, he sent her this warning: "Don't imagine that you are safer than any other Jew just because you are in the royal palace. If you keep quiet at a time like this, help will come from heaven to the Jews, and they will be saved, but you will die and your father's family will come to an end. Yet who knows—maybe it was for a time like this that you were made queen!"

Esther sent Mordecai this reply: "Go and get all the Jews in Susa together; hold a fast and pray for me. Don't eat or drink anything for three days and nights. My servant girls and I will be doing the same. After that, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. If I must die for doing it, I will die."

Mordecai then left and did everything that Esther had told him to do.

COMMENTS

v. 13-14 *Reality*: Esther is human; Mordecai is human. They are ordinary people caught up in the struggle between good and evil, courage and cowardice. Esther's first reaction to the impending holocaust is self-preservation. Others may have to suffer but she will not risk her life in an action that is sure to bring death. Perhaps she thought the problem would go away in time; perhaps she thought she could be of more help to her Jewish people by staying alive as queen than by being a martyr. Surely Esther was not so hard-hearted as to have no compassion at all for her Jewish brethren, especially her uncle Mordecai and his family! Surely Esther was not so totally self-centered that she gave no thought at all as to how Mordecai, at least, might escape the edict of genocide upon the Jews.

Mordecai immediately sent back a message to Esther that would bring her face to face with reality. He reminded her that since she was a Jew too, and that her ethnic origin was now known (4:8), she need not think she will escape the massacre just because she lives in the palace. In fact, once it is known by the emperor and Haman that she is a Jewess and that she concealed this fact while being chosen as Vashti's successor, Esther might be one of the first to be slain!

Mordecai pleads with Esther that she seize her opportunity to be a heroine. Mordecai believes it is divine providence that has placed his adopted daughter in the position of queen of Persia for just such a time of great need by God's people. It is interesting that the word translated *relief* is the Hebrew word *ruach* (usually translated *spirit*). It probably means that, if Esther does not help save God's people then deliverance (*natzal*, Heb.), and the great sigh of relief (*ruach*, Heb.) that goes with deliverance, will come from some other source. If Esther does not seize her opportunity and exercise her responsibility, her father's house will perish and be disgraced. Where did Mordecai get the idea that Esther was probably chosen queen of Persia through providence in order to help deliver her people from their enemies? From God's word! The Jews in the captivities had some of the scrolls of the Old

Testament (cf. Dan. 9:2). Mordecai, as a child, like Jewish children centuries before him, had studied the Old Testament. He knew the providence of God had put Joseph in Egypt to deliver his people from famine; he knew the providence of God had put Moses in the palace of Pharaoh to deliver his people from bondage; he knew about David and a host of other Jewish heroes (even recent ones like Daniel) who by the providence of Jehovah had been put in circumstances and times of great danger. Mordecai knew that at great personal sacrifice these heroes of God had to willingly choose to be used by Him for delivering His people. Mordecai's challenge to Esther was based on the historical certainties of God's past dealings and His promises to fulfill the covenant made with Abraham through the prophets. Mordecai's evaluation of the situation was not based on human possibilities, but upon the certainties of God. The people of God today (Christians) have not only the historical certainties Mordecai had but a "covenant enacted upon surer promises," the historical certainties of the New Testament—specifically the victory over sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

v. 15-17 *Resolution*: How soon Esther answered, we do not know. We presume she took time to think through Mordecai's great challenge. One does not decide hastily to lay one's life on the line. Esther's reply is not one based on an unreasoned emotionalism, or arrogant self-confidence or fatalistic desperation; it is the result of searching, rational, earnestness based on Mordecai's warnings and challenge. Esther also believed in God! Her reply to Mordecai must be interpreted in the light of her proposal for a three-day fast. Esther's request for fasting is for the very purpose of intercession and supplication to Jehovah—there can be no other objective in mind! It certainly is to Esther's great credit that she looks immediately to God and not man for help. It is interesting to see that some of her "maidens" (attendants) were godfearing and would intercede to Jehovah through fasting also. Perhaps they were Jewish maidens; but they may have been Persian maidens influenced in the Jewish religion by Esther.

The resolution of Esther is that God's will may be done—she is willing to accept it. Jacob uttered a similar resolution when he

sent some of his sons back to Egypt for release of his hostage sons (cf. Gen. 43:14; "And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."). Jesus decided to fulfill God's will with perfect resignation, "... nevertheless, not my will but thine be done..." (Mt. 26:39). We are told that our prayers, if we expect them to be answered, must be with the same resignation to the will of God (I Jn. 5:14-15).

We should like to close this chapter by quoting the conclusion of a masterful sermon, "If I Perish, I Perish," by our good friend, the late Charles A. Willbanks, preached at the Ozark Bible College Preaching Convention, Joplin, Missouri, February 18, 1959:

"Let us never forget that in this great drama of human history, a time element is involved. Mordecai said to Esther, 'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Esther needed to do something—now!

"Esther had to act at once to save a people committed to destruction. The same is true for us. Unless there are some drastic changes, statisticians tell us that 14,800,000 persons will go to meet their God unprepared before next year.

"The Persian decree for the destruction of God's people could not be changed. It was a cruel, hideous plot which meant only death; and it could not be changed! But another decree was sent out enabling God's people to arm themselves for the battle. We face a similar situation today.

"The very nature of God, which provides freedom of choice, means that sin is present all about us and the wages of it is death (Romans 6:23). The whole human race is committed to destruction, for all have sinned (Romans 3:23). This verdict cannot be changed. But thanks be to God, we can arm ourselves for the battle; we can 'put on Christ'; we can 'put on the whole armour of God, that (we) may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil' (Ephesians 6:11; Galatians 3:27).

"Esther's fears were allayed, her appeal was effective, and her people were saved by her timely intervention. A nation rises up to call her blessed. What, may we ask, will be the cause of gratitude that others may feel for our having lived and faced our own times of decision?"

There is a time element for all of God's dealing with men. Sometimes God reveals the length of that time; sometimes He does not. He gave Hezekiah an additional 15 years of life (cf. Isa. 38:1-8); God gave the false prophet Hananiah two months to live (Jer. 28:1-17). The Lord gave the Jewish nation 490 years from the "going forth of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" until the coming of the Messiah to accomplish God's work and prepare themselves to receive Him (Dan. 9:24-27). The Jews did not receive the Messiah (on the whole) when their time came so God took the kingdom from them and gave it to others (Mt. 21:33-46). We are now living in the "times of the Gentiles" (cf. Lk. 21:24; Rom. 11:11-36). After these times there will be no more time! Generally speaking God has numbered man's life-span upon the earth to be about 70 years (Psa. 90:9-12). Soon they are gone and we fly away. So let us put every day we have, each day at a time, to do what our hands find to do to glorify God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. There are times of rejoicing for those who believe in God (such as at the coronation of Esther); but there may also be times of mourning and supplication (such as at the decree for the slaughter of the Jews).
2. When such times of mourning and intercession are called for, godly people (like Mordecai) will not indulge in selfish release from the need for contrition, even when, in all innocence, suggested by others.
3. Great biblical heroes and heroines were made, nor born!
4. Great biblical heroes and heroines were as human as we are.
5. Decisions to choose or refuse great responsibilities in relation to the will of God should not be made without intercession and supplication.
6. If we do not carry out our responsibilities toward the kingdom of God, God can raise up others who will.
7. Resignation to the will of God is not fatalism.

CHAPTER FOUR

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does Mordecai's action in putting on sackcloth and ashes and fasting say about the godliness of the book of Esther?
2. What was the original meaning of "fast"?
3. Why did Mordecai feel it necessary to mention the exact sum of money Haman had offered Xerxes?
4. Why did the emperor of Persia forbid people to come in unto him unless he extended the golden scepter toward them?
5. Why would Queen Esther be in danger of losing her life?
6. How could Mordecai believe God had brought Esther to the throne for this time?
7. Why do we conclude that Esther's resolution was not just human fatalism?
8. Is the providence of God involved in the length of our individual lives?