

## **Esther: God Save the Queen**

### **Esther 4**

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

When we last left the story of Esther, the decree to annihilate the Jews, with an agonizing 11 month waiting period, had been issued. And the capital of Susa, where our protagonists are living, was bewildered, the city in an uproar. Today, in chapter 4: We shall make three points. The Cries in verses 1-5; The Charge in verses 6-11, and the Courage in verses 12-17.

#### **I. The Cries**

First, then, the Cries. Esther chapter 4, verse 1: When Mordecai learned of ALL that had been done. We'll see that Mordecai knows about more than the actual decree. He knows the backstory. He's well-connected. He's a political actor. His ear is to the ground. That's how he foiled the assassination plot against the king. When he heard all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.

Who knows what he thought? Was it his own pig-headed pride in not bowing to Haman that provoked this? Or was it his loyalty to anti-Amalekite principle? The story leaves the question open. In any event, sin or virtue, this is traditional Jewish liturgy, full bodied action, for expressing grief. It's a form of dramatic identification with death itself. You smear the dust of death all over yourself, and lay down in it. Usually its done AFTER a disaster. Here its happens BEFORE a decreed disaster. The hope is that (perhaps) it will be effective at turning away the coming woe.

The Jews in every province – throughout the whole Empire – upon receiving the edict – follow Mordecai in one communal, international, act of mourning. Involving fasting, weeping, and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. It's a stark contrast to the cosmetic treatments (food) of Esther and her haram. Normally, this (esp. the fasting) would provoke prayer and repentance and self-examination (it did at Nineveh in the book of Jonah).

It may have here, but our narrator, mysteriously, insists on not referencing God or any addresses to (or from) God. The narrator tells the story like a detached Gentile observer (speaks of Mordecai the Jew, Esther's people). It is a lovely

corrective to a sort of piety that thinks God is absent – from someone’s thoughts or words – simply because he’s unmentioned.

There is a real danger of the trivialization of holy things by their overuse. By some reflex need to insert something Christian every so often, just in case somebody forgot. It’s as if God should have painted “Praise the Lord” across the sky, so that the heavens could tell the glory of God a little more clearly. Creation is a (repetitive, liturgical) telling, a speaking of God’s divinity, his nature, his glory, his power – everyday. But its indirect, its subtle, and done without express reference to the Creator.

One can tell, perhaps the most dramatic story of deliverance – after the Exodus – in Israel’s history. One can tell it at length, one can tell it to great dramatic effect, one can tell it as the Word of God included in the canon of Holy Scripture, without a single reference to God. And that’s what our narrator does here. Its not a defect. Its part of the genius of the Book of Esther.

So, we have great grief, and presumably, but not explicitly, prayer. But Mordecai is tactical even in his grief. Notice v.2: He went only as far as the king’s gate because no one clothed in sackcloth, was allowed to enter it. The king doesn’t want to deal with people’s mourning. The palace is sumptuous, elegant. It’s a place of feasting – mourn elsewhere.

Mordecai, who worked at the gate, is now a temporary outsider. But he is mourning in public AT THE KING’S gate. Because he wants to make this a political matter. He is trying to get Esther’s attention – and he succeeds.

Esther’s eunuchs and female attendants tell here about Mordecai. Aside: its hard to see now how her staff could not figure out, that Esther was Jewish – Mordecai’s Jewishness in defying Haman, and now in sackcloth and ashes, is on full display – and his connection to Esther is clearly intimate. Yet, in her palace isolation, she doesn’t know anything about the decree against the Jews. And her response is superficial. She doesn’t even ask about the cause of the grief. She just sends a change of clothes. Maybe she’s helping him get into the king’s gate, maybe she just concerned about appearances – stop making a scene or my Jewishness will be exposed.

In any event, she’s in distress, but she’s not mourning like Mordecai and the Jews scattered abroad. Mordecai is the Jew. Esther is still primarily a Persian. Mordecai refuses the clothes. Finally, belatedly, Esther sends a mediator, the King’s eunuch assigned to her, one Hathak, to find out what’s troubling Mordecai and why.

## **II. The Charge**

Which brings us to the second point – the charge. Hathak goes to Mordecai, and Mordecai tells him “everything that had happened to HIM.” Seems a little selfish to put it that way. But, from the storyline point of view, he is THE Jew, the representative Jew.

And here, we see he knows more than what is contained in the edict. He knows even the amount of blood money that Haman promised to pay. Killing is one thing. Killing for profit is even more appalling. He knows/is hoping this will rouse Esther’s righteous indignation.

So, there is no doubt about the information: He gives the eunuch a copy of the decree of genocide. And tells him to explain it to Esther. And then boldly tells him to instruct Esther – to charge her – to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. Notice that: HER people.

Now, Hathak the eunuch at least, knows Esther is Jewish. To this point Mordecai has insisted, that she hide her Jewish identity. Now he insists, the time for that is past. Will she acknowledge, and identify herself with Mordecai, and with the Jews grieving throughout the 127 provinces? Esther replies: And she doesn’t explicitly refuse, but this is basically a refusal. It’s done respectfully, but in our day and age, it could be reduced to something like: Are you joking?

All the people of the king’s officials, and the provinces, knows that anyone who approaches the king w/o being summoned, is by law put to death, unless the king extends the golden scepter to them. Everybody knows this Mordecai. Access is strictly controlled, even for the Queen. Think of what you’re asking me to do. You’re asking me to repeat Vashti’s crime of insubordination and defiance of the King’s edict. To expose my Jewishness (you’ve told me to hide!), and thus tell the king I’ve been deceiving him. To break the law, and essentially confirm Haman’s charge, that Jews don’t keep the laws.

This is a venture with no reasonable hope of success. You are sentencing me to death. Besides: The edict CANNOT be revoked. This is the voice of caution. The voice of prudence and safety. And there’s one more thing: 30 days have passed since I was called to go to the King. And he’s not sleeping alone. I don’t have the relational leverage you think I have Mordecai. The guy hasn’t even seen me in 30 days. *His ardor has cooled. We’ve been married five years now (Queen: 7<sup>th</sup> yr. – Now: 12<sup>th</sup> yr.). I am not his chief joy anymore.* That’s the charge. The Jews need mediator, a savior. Esther responds with: do you grasp the high, the excessive cost, of being the mediator?

### **III. The Courage**

That brings us to the third point – the courage. Mordecai will press in hard, desperately and eloquently. He gets Esther’s response, and he sends back this

answer – and this is tough, tough, tough, love. Most important words in book: Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape. Talk about going for the jugular.

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know what you're thinking: this decree won't touch you. You'll have the protection of the palace, and (virtually) nobody knows you're a Jew. Esther does seem to be the safest Jew in the world at this point. But Mordecai says: don't think you will escape. For, if you remain silent at this time. Providence hems us in. History forces momentous things upon us. There are critical moments of decision in every life. This is yours, Esther. If you remain silent, relief and deliverance for the Jews, will arise from another place.

Again, there is no pious jargon here. He could have said: The Lord will deliver us by some other means. Rather, there is this magnificent presence of God, pulsating under the surface everywhere – PRECISELY BECAUSE – he isn't visibly present anywhere in the narrative. Its like looking at a famous painting. And because the author's face is not actually IN the painting – or the author doesn't sign the painting – you don't see the author in the painting. Whereas, of course, to a skilled eye, the author is everywhere in the painting – much of God's painting/ writing is done that way.

Anyway, Mordecai says: Relief and deliverance for the Jews, will arise from another place. How does Mordecai know this? He knows the covenant promises about Abraham and his seed. And when God told Abraham about his innumerable seed Paul said that God peached the GOSPEL to Abraham.

So, what is happening here is – Mordecai is preaching the gospel to Esther! He is challenging her false sense of security, he is undermining her understandable fears. He's reminding her – indirectly to be sure – that the covenant purposes of God are unthwartable. And those promises have a curse attached. Those who bless you, I will bless; and those who curse you; I will curse. And there is an allusion to that curse when Mordecai says: if you remain silent, deliverance will arise from some other place – BUT you and your father's house will perish.

This is a not so veiled threat: God will punish you – perhaps even through me, Mordecai, disclosing your Jewish identity, if you don't respond to my plea. Will you walk by sight, and be a Persian who lets the Jews perish, or will you walk by faith, and identify with your people? Knowing that those who curse them will perish? It's a call to take up the burden, to pay the price, of being the mediator. And, Mordecai concludes, WHO KNOWS, but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

Again, there is a tempered humility here. An acknowledgment, that we see through a glass, partially, darkly. Mordecai knows the big picture promises of God, but he doesn't know the details of what God is doing in situations. Who knows, the prophet Joel says: if you fast and mourn, *maybe* God will relent and

not bring disaster. Same thing here from Mordecai: Who knows? It's possible. Its not certain. But the God who appears to be absent, is the God who sees and knows, whose providence rules over kings, and he is the ultimately decisive actor.

This is Esther's hour. This may be her life's purpose. She should steel herself and assume it is. She can't run or hide – she must plunge into the fray. It's a Churchillian moment, a Churchill like appeal: Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire, and its Commonwealth, last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."

And the appeal works. Esther believes the gospel. And here the balance of power shifts in the narrative. She no longer takes instruction from Mordecai – she gives it to him. She is no longer his adopted cousin. She is his Queen, the political and moral leader of the Jewish nation. For it turns out that this woman, who we knew was beautiful, and compliant, and shrewd, has a backbone of steel. And will now (henceforth) display extraordinary political skill, and moral and physical courage.

She tells Mordecai: to gather the Jews in the city for a lengthy 3 day fast on her behalf. Her and her attendants will also fast. And she commits with these famous, courageous, and moving words: I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.

The language is not that perishing is an option – the language communicates the idea that perishing is almost inevitable. This is confessing God before men. This shouldering the cross and taking up the call to die as the mediator for the Jewish people. And in a reversal: Mordecai goes away and carries out all of Esther's instructions. We are set on the edge of a cliff. In three days, Esther launches out into the darkness. Her fate, and the fate of HER people, hanging in the balance.

One final application here, we will call it mediation: It is a mistake to look at the Esther story, and try to apply it DIRECTLY to ourselves, and our need to be decisive, or bold. She points first to Jesus, not to us. Esther undoes the one act of Mordecai. Jesus undoes the one act of Adam. She will save the physical seed of Abraham, and Christ, THE seed of Abraham, will save the spiritual seed of Abraham throughout the world. Esther prefigures Jesus, who lived in glorious splendor. Who did not need to empty himself to identify with us. Who would be handed no golden scepter, no stay of execution, by either the Roman & Jewish authorities or by his heavenly Father the King. With him it was not: if I perish, I perish, but I have come to perish. I MUST perish. Her courage and bravery points to his courage in facing the just wrath of the King. It is only in this MEDIATOR – who Esther points us to – that we can – and indeed should - then speak of our need to be decisive, to be bold.

We should be encouraged, because both Esther and Mordecai, have pasts, which are far from perfect. Which seem to include some pretty shady and questionable decisions. It doesn't matter what you've done wrong in the past. God can and will still use you mightily if you place yourself and your comfort at his disposal. Like Esther, we are called to be willing, as soldiers of the cross, to have our safety disrupted, to take risk, to act. To impact the world. Like Esther, for you to be right where you are in your life this morning, is a long string of providential twists and turns, a long string of mistakes... of noticed and unnoticed coincidences, of mysteries, a long complex bit of story-telling, by the seeming absent Writer of all historical narratives. Who knows? Maybe you have come into the kingdom for such a time as this? Indeed, you have. Believe the gospel of Jesus the Mediator, follow him, and like Esther, lose your life in order to save it. Amen.

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