

# ESTHER

## Chapter 4

### *Mordecai Persuades Esther to Help*

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. <sup>2</sup> But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. <sup>3</sup> In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>4</sup> When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. <sup>5</sup> Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why. <sup>6</sup> So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. <sup>7</sup> Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. <sup>8</sup> He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. <sup>9</sup> Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup> Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, <sup>11</sup> "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." <sup>12</sup> When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, <sup>13</sup> he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. <sup>14</sup> For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" <sup>15</sup> Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup> "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." <sup>17</sup> So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

**4:1** *tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes.* Visible demonstration of sorrow. (TLSB)

*went out into the midst of the city ... loud and bitter cry.* Mordecai obviously wanted to attract as much attention to himself as possible. (TLSB)

**4:2** Mordecai provoked confrontation by public protest and violation of palace dress code (TLSB)

*king's gate.* See note on 2:19. (CSB)

**4:3** See note on 3:15. The prominence of feasting throughout the book of Esther sets the fasts of vv. 3, 16 in sharp relief; a pair of fasts matches the prominent pairs of banquets (see Introduction: Purpose, Themes and Literary Features; see also note on 9:31). (CSB)

Judeans across the empire joined Mordecai's public expression of grief over their impending destruction. Although unmentioned, prayer would accompany these actions (Ezr 8:21–23; Jl 2:12; Jnh 3:8). (TLSB)

**4:4–12** The fact that the dialogue of Esther and Mordecai is mediated by Hathach reflects the prohibition against Mordecai's entering the royal citadel dressed in mourning (v. 2) and the isolation of Esther in the harem quarters. (CSB)

**4:4** *deeply distressed.* Hbr word suggests writhing in anxiety, being physically and emotionally agitated. (TLSB)

*sent garments to clothe Mordecai.* Esther's distress seemed not to have been caused by Haman's decree but by Mordecai's behavior. (TLSB)

*He would not accept them.* Must have suggested to Esther that the situation was serious. (TLSB)

**4:5** *go to Mordecai to learn.* Confined within the palace harem, Esther heard little outside news. She needed to find out why Mordecai was so upset. She may have experienced a growing sense of danger in her own situation. (TLSB)

**4:7** See note on 3:9. That Mordecai is aware of the amount Haman promised to the king is a reminder of his high position in the bureaucracy at Susa (2:21–23). (CSB)

*exact sum ... Haman had promised.* For Mordecai to have this information showed that he was well-connected within the palace. He also realized that the king had much to gain financially if this plot was carried out. (TLSB)

**4:8** *a copy of the written decree.* Mordecai's access to the actual document suggests that he might have been a government scribe. (TLSB)

*explain it to her.* The decree's implications may not have been immediately apparent to Esther. Mordecai wanted her to understand all that was involved, as well as how she should help. (TLSB)

*on behalf of her people.* Previously, Mordecai had told Esther to keep quiet about her Judean heritage (2:10). (Haman seems unaware of her nationality. Cf 5:11–12.) Mordecai now seems determined to call attention to Esther's heritage. Esther perhaps felt she was getting "mixed signals" from him. (TLSB)

**4:11** Herodotus (3.118,140) also notes that anyone approaching the Persian king unsummoned would be killed unless the king gave immediate pardon. (CSB)

The fact that Esther had not been in Xerxes' presence for a month indicates that they did not have a close husband-wife relationship. Given Xerxes' unstable character, Esther may have felt she had fallen from his favor. (PBC)

*put to death.* Persian law protected the king from assassination as well as from the vexations of citizens' petty concerns. Herodotus noted that anyone approaching the Persian king unsummoned would be killed unless the king gave immediate pardon. Esther may have recalled what happened to Vashti (1:19), and she chided Mordecai for not realizing her perilous situation. (TLSB)

*golden scepter.* Stylized weapon emblematic of royal authority. The whole story hinges on whether the king will hold out the golden scepter to Esther. (TLSB)

*these thirty days.* Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus obviously lacked a close husband-wife relationship. (TLSB)

**4:12–16** The themes of the book of Esther are most clearly expressed in this passage. Mordecai's confidence for the Jews' deliverance is based on God's sovereignty in working out his purposes and fulfilling his promises. Their deliverance will come, even if through some means other than Esther. Yet that sovereignty is not fatalistic: Unless Esther exercises her individual responsibility, she and her family will perish. Cf. Mt 26:24; Ac 2:23 for similar treatments of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. (CSB)

**4:13–14** Illustrates that royal family members could often turn on one another. Mordecai reminded Esther that the king's palace was not a safe haven for her, that her life was in jeopardy whether or not she approached Ahasuerus. (TLSB)

**4:14** *another place.* Closest thing in Esther to an overt reference to God's presence and power. In any other book of the Bible, we would expect God to be named as the One providing deliverance for His people. But throughout Esther, God remains behind the scenes, doing His work in secret. (TLSB)

*your father's house will perish.* Not a curse but an emphasis on the personal nature of the danger. (TLSB)

*such a time as this.* Cf. Ge 45:5–7 in the Joseph narrative. (CSB)

Mordecai's question showed that he was beginning to realize why Esther had become queen of Persia. God was directing affairs so that His people might be saved from destruction. (TLSB)

Until this time Esther and Mordecai probably did not realize why Esther had become queen of Persia. God may provide us with position, possessions or talents which enable us to serve the cause of the gospel. God's kingdom will come, either with or without us. God's Will shall be done, either with us or without us. But each time we pray the Lord's Prayer we are praying that his will may be done by us and that his kingdom will come in part, also through our efforts. God gives us opportunities to be his co-workers in the work of the gospel. We should not let opportunities pass us by. We dare not squander our chances to be of service because we are too fearful to risk our position or even our life for the sake of Christ and his gospel. (PBC)

**4:16** *fast.* See note on v. 3. Prayer, which usually accompanied such fasting, was presumably a part of this fast as well (see Jdg 20:26; 1Sa 7:6; 2Sa 12:16; Ezr 8:21–23; Ne 9:1–3; Isa 58:3; Jer 14:12; Joel 1:14; 2:12–17; Jnh 3:6–9). The omission of any reference to prayer or to God is consistent with the author's intention; absence of any distinctively religious concepts or vocabulary is a rhetorical device used to heighten the fact that it is indeed God who has been active in the whole narrative (see Introduction: Purpose, Themes and Literary Features). (CSB)

Fasting often occurred from morning until evening, over one day's duration (Jgs 20:26; 2Sm 1:12). Esther's severe fast showed how critical this time was for her and her people. The fast stands in contrast to the feasts that occur throughout Esther. Fasting normally included praying, so Esther's request became an invitation for the Judeans to petition divine deliverance. (TLSB)

*I and my maids will fast.* Note the rhetorical symmetry: Where once Esther and her maids had received special foods (2:9), now they share a fast. (CSB)

*if I perish.* Cf. the similar formulation in the Joseph narrative (Ge 43:14). (CSB)

These oft-quoted words show Esther's faith, courage, and humility. She did not assume that she was going to accomplish her mission, and she was ready to sacrifice herself in the attempt. 1 Clem: "Esther also, being perfect [complete] in faith, exposed herself to no less danger, in order to deliver the twelve tribes of Israel from impending destruction. For

with fasting and humiliation she entreated the everlasting God, who sees all things; and He, perceiving the humility of her spirit, delivered the people for whose sake she had encountered peril” (ANF 1:20). (TLSB)

**4:17** *ordered*. Esther had matured and was no longer taking orders from Mordecai. As queen, she gave direction and leadership, and Mordecai quietly and quickly obeyed. (TLSB)

**Ch 4** Mordecai is shocked by Haman’s edict and goes into public mourning. Esther gradually comes to realize the seriousness of the situation and pledges her life in an attempt to save her people. Like Esther, God may provide us with positions, wealth, and talents that enable us to serve the cause of God’s people and the Gospel. Yet, we all have been guilty of exhibiting weak faith by our failure to act. Thanks be to God, in the fullness of time He sent our Deliverer to redeem us from every failure. Unlike Esther, our Deliverer had to die for His people and the whole world. He freed us to serve under His rule as His witnesses. • Dear Jesus, Your kingdom expands through Word and Sacraments. Grant me golden opportunities to be Your witness. Amen. (TLSB)