

The Book of Esther⁶

Lesson 3

Esther Chapter 4 and 5

473 BC

Haman's edict against the Jews is sent from the king's palace on Nisan 13th. It will take three months for all of the provinces to receive their copies but Mordecai learns of the proclamation on the first day. He puts on sackcloth, covers himself with sooty ashes and sits at the king's gate mortified.

Esther^{4:3} And in each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes.

The Jews in the rest of Persia and Mordecai react to the edict with great grief over the decree, the Jews mourn with tears and loud cries of heartbreak. Their grief robs them of their hunger and they put on the garb of sackcloth and cover themselves with ashes.

Esther's Mourning

Esther^{4:4} Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept *them*.⁵ Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king's eunuchs, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him *to go* to Mordecai to learn what this *was* and why it *was*.

When the word of the edict reaches Esther, she, too, reacts with great pain and heartbreak. Hearing about Mordecai at the king's gate, she orders her servants to take proper clothing to him, but he refuses it.

Mordecai's Knowledge

Esther^{4:6} So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate.⁷ And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.⁸ He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people.

Esther wants to speak with Mordecai but she cannot. If the king had known he was her cousin she could have, but because their relationship is a secret, the king could misconstrue a meeting between the two. Esther trusts Hathach and sends him to gather the true story from Mordecai. Mordecai provides a copy, of the decree for Hathach to place in Esther's hands. He begs Hathach to implore Esther to plead with Xerxes on behalf of her people.

Esther's Response

Esther^{4:9} And Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther.¹⁰ Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him *to reply* to Mordecai:¹¹ "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that

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he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days." ¹² And they related Esther's words to Mordecai.

When Hathach relates the message to Esther, she quickly sends him to tell Mordecai that if she tries to approach Xerxes without his approval, he will have her killed. The king will have to call for her with the nod of his scepter when she steps to the door of the inner court. Just stepping to the threshold of the door without being summoned breaks the law.

Mordecai's Response

Esther^{4:13} Then Mordecai told *them* to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. ¹⁴ "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"

Mordecai sends Hathach to warn Esther that because she is a Jew, even being the queen will not save her life. She, too, will die. He encourages Esther to think that perhaps God has placed her as queen to save her people from Haman's edict. The fulfillment of the decree will rid the world of every known Jew and therefore, all the promises of God yet to be fulfilled by Him will be null and void. However, God has a plan. Haman's edict is not a surprise to God. Five years before, God had installed Esther as queen, to save the entire nation of Israel.

Esther's Request

Esther^{4:15} Then Esther told *them* to reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."

Esther understands her task but she knows she could be put to death before she has the opportunity to speak one word to Xerxes. The guard at the door to the inner court might cut her down for breaking the law when she seeks to speak to the king without being summoned.

Mordecai's Action

Esther^{4:17} So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.

Esther asks Mordecai to instruct all the Jews of Susa to grieve and mourn for her as if she has been found guilty of a great crime and sentenced to death. They know the law and Esther has set a three day time-clock in motion. At the end of the period, Persia's queen may be dead. She tells her maids the same story and they grieve too. The thought of the loss of the queen robs the maids and the rest of the Jews in Susa of their hunger.

Esther's Action

Esther^{5:1} Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance to the palace.² And it happened when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his sight; and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which was in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter.

Dressed in her finest royal regalia suitable for a formal or public appearance before the people or the king, Esther steps to the inner courtroom and waits for Xerxes to recognize her as he sits on his throne. She has broken the law by entering the inner court without being summoned by the king, but God's favor is on Esther. The king sees her and extends

his scepter as a gesture of acceptance. Esther will not die. The king has over-ridden the law with a wave of the golden scepter. To complete the formality, Esther must touch the end of the scepter.

Mordecai's Acknowledgement

Esther^{5:3} Then the king said to her, "What is *troubling* you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it will be given to you."

Xerxes notices that his queen is troubled. She has risked her life to come into the presence of the king so her purpose for coming to the throne room that day must be important. Xerxes' response to her shows her great favor in his heart. "Half the kingdom" can be hers if she asks for it.

Esther's Request

Esther^{5:4} And Esther said, "If it please the king, may the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him."

During her three-day waiting period, Esther devises a plan. She will not immediately tell her husband of the devastation Haman has planned. She will prepare a banquet for the king and Haman to attend that day. After touching the end of the scepter, Esther invites her husband and Haman to her banquet.

Esther's Banquet

Esther^{5:5} Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman came to the banquet which Esther had prepared.

Xerxes falls for Esther's plan; after all, she is his wife and queen. Xerxes orders Haman to attend his queen's banquet.

King's Request

Esther^{5:6} And, as they drank their wine at the banquet, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done."

Xerxes realizes that the request for a banquet does not suffice to answer the king's question of his bride, so he inquires again, offering half the kingdom again. Why does Xerxes offer half the kingdom? It is a Persian saying which simply means nothing is out of reason for the queen to ask of the king.

Esther's Answer

Esther^{5:7} So Esther answered and said, "My petition and my request is: ⁸ if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet which I shall prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king says."

Esther is not willing to divulge her intentions at this meeting. It seems she still wants to indulge the favor of her king another time before she reveals her desire. She requests the return of the two on the following day. Is she timid. Is she unsettled in her heart? Has the Holy Spirit touched her soul and directed her to wait for a more opportune time? Perhaps the next day will provide a better setting for the message in her heart. The king agrees.

Haman's Disgust

Esther^{5:9} Then Haman went out that day glad and pleased of heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand up or tremble

before him, Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai. ¹⁰ Haman controlled himself, however, went to his house, and sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh.

Esther's delay brings about Haman's delight. He has been with the queen and he is the invited guest of the queen for another banquet on the following day. Outside the king's gate, Mordecai's presence in sackcloth disturbs Haman, his refusal to stand and bow before Haman enrages him. Mordecai is not fearful of Haman. Haman does not show his anger until he reaches his home where his friends and wife greet him, probably waiting to hear all about the queen's banquet.

Haman's Depression

Esther^{5:11} Then Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, and the number of his sons, and every *instance* where the king had magnified him, and how he had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king. ¹² Haman also said, "Even Esther the queen let no one but me come with the king to the banquet which she had prepared; and tomorrow also I am invited by her with the king. ¹³ "Yet all of this does not satisfy me every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

Haman is the picture of pride as he boasts to his family. His position as second in command of the Persian Empire combined with his power over the wealth and his special invitations to the queen's banquet room do not force Mordecai the Jew to bow in submission before him. Denied of the worship of Mordecai, Haman cannot be satisfied. He cannot look at all he has and overlook one Jew.

Zeresh's Counsel

Esther^{5:14} Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, " Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it, then go joyfully with the king to the banquet." And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.

Because Haman is second in command, his home is probably connected to the palace. Haman's wife, Zeresh, gives him a simple solution to his problem. She and his friends tell Haman to have a gallows 50 cubits or 75 feet high built outside his house. After having the mechanism for the noose erected the following morning, he can ask the king for the neck of Mordecai. Has Haman forgotten that the original edict which will bring about the death of all the Jews, put in place to rid himself of Mordecai? Had Haman handled just Mordecai in the beginning, the edict would not have been sent, Mordecai would not be in sackcloth, the whole Jewish nation would not be in terror and Esther would not be petitioning the king against Haman who has caused this entire debacle. But Haman is not in control of the king and his decisions.

King's Insomnia

Esther^{6:1} During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king.

Restless, the king calls for the chronicles of his reign to be brought to his chamber and read to him. The chronicles will remind him of the faithfulness of Mordecai and he does not sleep that night. When the sun rises, Xerxes will search for someone to honor Mordecai. Ironically, Haman will be chosen to fulfill his orders that day.