

Esther Goes Before the King on Behalf of Her People

Esther 4

Esther 4:1-3 - *“When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry.² He went as far as the front of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth. ³And in every province where the king’s command and decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.”*

Background Notes

Mordecai the Jew would not bow the knee to Haman, who had a very high political position in the Persian government, and that infuriated Haman. When Haman found out that Mordecai was a Jew, he manipulated the Persian king, Xerxes, into issuing an edict commanding that all Jews be executed on a certain day.

Haman was able to persuade the king to issue this awful decree based on a lie - that the Jewish people threatened his Empire, because they refused to obey the king’s laws. And Haman promised that he would pay a huge sum of money into the King’s treasury – no doubt he intended to obtain this money by plundering the property of the Jews.

So the evil edict was sent out to all the provinces of the Persian Empire, from India to Ethiopia, and as far as Greece. This communication would have been sent by couriers, probably a system similar to the Pony Express. Esther 3:13-15: *“And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king’s provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions. ¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as law in every province, being published for all people, that they should be ready for that day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out, hastened by the king’s command; and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan the citadel. So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed.”*

How do you think Mordecai felt at this point? Did he wonder, “If only I had just bowed to Haman, this would edict would never have happened!”? Would all the Jews be eliminated because of his refusal to bow to Haman? Whether Mordecai had these thoughts or not, he had done the right thing in not paying homage to Haman. In that culture, bowing to Haman would be an acknowledgement that Haman was a god.

Respect, but not reverence, for civil authority should be the believer’s position - then and today.

Doctrinal Points

1. There is a time and place for public protest.

After the edict was issued, Mordecai did not sit idly by and do nothing. He cried aloud, tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes - signs of mourning and grief. Notice that it was not silent mourning. Verse 1: *“He tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry.”*

Mordecai undoubtedly knew the well-known passage from Ecclesiastes, written by King Solomon about 500 years before the time of Esther, that for everything in life there is an appropriate time. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, *“To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven,”* and verse 7 says, *“A time to tear and a time to sew.”* A time to tear, or tear apart, is the idea of rending garments as a sign of mourning. Mordecai realized that this was a time for mourning. It was also a time to speak out, as the rest of Ecclesiastes 1:7 says: *“A time to keep silence and a time to speak.”*

The citizens of Susa must be made aware of the horror of Haman’s plans! So undoubtedly Mordecai wailed loudly and bitterly in the middle of the city, to get the public’s attention and to set the example for other Jews to do the same thing. This was a time to mourn, and to speak out in public protest. This was not a time to be silent.

Notice that Mordecai *“went as far as the front of the king’s gate”* - to get full public attention. He did this at some risk to his own life, because Haman was certainly looking for any excuse to do away with Mordecai. No person clothed in sackcloth was allowed to pass through the king’s gate, and for Mordecai to come close to the king’s gate might have given Haman an excuse to have him arrested. But this was a time and place for public protest, regardless of the risk involved.

When our own government enacts laws that deny the right to life for the unborn, or change the traditional and biblical definition of family and marriage, it is time for public protest, both in writing and in speaking out. There is a time and place for public protest.

2. There is a time and place for personal courage.

Esther 4:4-17 - *“So Esther’s maids and eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was deeply distressed. Then she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and take his sackcloth away from him, but he would not accept them. ⁵ Then Esther called Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs whom he had appointed to attend her, and she gave him a command concerning Mordecai, to learn what and why this was. ⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the city square that was in front of the king’s gate. ⁷ And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries to destroy the Jews. ⁸ He also gave him a copy of the written decree for their destruction, which was given at Shushan, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her, and that he might command her to go in to the*

king to make supplication to him and plead before him for her people. ⁹ So Hathach returned and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

¹⁰ Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and gave him a command for Mordecai: ¹¹ “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, he has but one law: put all to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter, that he may live. Yet I myself have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days.” ¹² So they told Mordecai Esther’s words.

¹³ And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: “Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king’s palace any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴ For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

¹⁵ Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ “Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!” ¹⁷ So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther commanded him.”

When Esther heard Mordecai was publicly mourning, she had no idea why he was grieving. Apparently the king’s wives and concubines were sheltered from outside events, including the news. She may have thought he was mourning the death of a close friend, and that’s why she sent him a change of clothes to replace the sackcloth. This was the practice in that culture.

When Mordecai refused the clothes, Esther sent one of her servants out to inquire about what was going on. Mordecai sent word back, telling Esther of the plight of the Jews, and of Haman’s wicked scheme to eliminate them. He advised Esther to go in and appeal to the king for her people. Esther sent word back to him, reminding him of the dangers of going before the king if not summoned - and she had not been summoned for 30 days. No doubt Queen Vashti’s fate was in the back of Esther’s mind.

Mordecai sent word back to Esther that if she did not do something, she herself would not escape death. However, Mordecai was confident that God would send deliverance for the Jews from some other source - an indication that Mordecai knew and believed the special promises for the Jewish people that God had made to Abraham and the patriarchs.

Mordecai believed that it was not by chance that Esther had been made queen for this very purpose, and at this particular time, to deliver the Jews: “For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”(v14).

At this point Esther realized that there is a time and place for personal courage. She informed Mordecai that she would go before the king, even though it might be at the cost of her own life. And then Esther spoke those well known words from the book of Esther: *"If I perish, I perish."* Esther realized that there is a time and place for personal courage, and she met the challenge.

We don't know when God may call us to a special time and place of personal courage. That time came for Daniel. It came for John the Baptist. It came for Martin Luther, when he stood for the truth and said, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." The time for personal courage may come for you, and it may come for me.

We can be sure that when those times of testing come, God will be there to give us the courage that we need. Hebrews 4:6 says, *"He gives grace to help in time of need."* There is a time and place for personal courage.

Practical Application

Can you say, *"If I perish, I perish?"*

Esther came to the point where she was able to say, with personal courage - and mean it - *"If I perish, I perish."*

Can you say that? Can I say that? Christians hiding Jews in World War II came to that point of personal courage. Christians in many Muslim-majority lands may come to that point of courage today, when they refuse to turn from their faith in Jesus Christ.

However, this application refers to other tests than courage in the face of physical death. Can you say, "If I lose my job because I will not lie, then so be it?" Can you say, "If I lose my position as a teacher because I will not teach evolution as a proven fact, then so be it - I lose my position?" Can you say, "If I lose my reputation as a scientist because I will not toe the party line of the Big Bang theory, then so be it?" Can you say, "If I lose a comfortable income as a doctor because I will not perform certain kinds of surgery, then I'll lose that money?"

Can you say, *"If I perish, I perish?"*