

DHW
BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 4

ESTHER 4

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the announcement of the king's decree instigated by the wicked Haman was carried out on the eve of the 14th day of Nisan, which was the day the Jews had been annually commemorating their stupendous deliverance from bondage in Egypt for about one thousand years ago! But this time their joyful commemoration of their deliverance had turned to mourning and bitter sorrow. There could not have been a worst time to announce the decree. It must have been Haman's doing for he hated the Jews. From India to Ethiopia, the Jews were mourning and lamenting. Surely in the minds and hearts of the Jews, they would hope for another deliverance, just as God delivered them from the oppression in Egypt. Chapter 4 records the providential care and concern of the Jews, the chosen people of God. Although God is not mentioned explicitly, His unseen hand controlling the flow of events is unmistakably evident.

The chapter begins with Mordecai representing the Jewish response to the edict which sealed the Jews for destruction. In his grief, Mordecai sought his cousin Esther to plead with King Ahasuerus for the lives of the Jews.

While chapter 3 focuses on the plans and actions of the non-Jews to destroy the Jews, chapter 4 focuses on the plans and actions of the Jews. Chapter 4, therefore gives an interesting study in human relationship under adverse and dire situations.

A suggested outline of the chapter is as follows:

- (1) Every Jew in every province in the empire is mourning and lamenting (4:1-3);
- (2) Esther finds out the real reason concerning Mordecai's problem (4:4-9);
- (3) Esther relates to Mordecai through Hatach that it is difficult for her to approach the king (4:10-12);
- (4) Mordecai convinces Esther to risk her life for her people (4:13-14);
- (5) Esther is persuaded to approach the king at the risk of her life (4:15-17).

STUDY THE WORD

Every Jew is Mourning and Lamenting

The king's edict for the destruction of the Jews was posted to every nook and corner of the empire. Every Jew in every province was mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing. Many also lay down in sackcloth and ashes. These actions were typical of the ways in which the people expressed their deep grief. Mordecai *rent* (tore) *his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes* (4:1). He went to the city centre and bitterly cried out with a loud voice. He came even to the king's gate where he had daily entered to go to work. But this time he might not enter the gate because it was forbidden by Persian law that those

who wore mourning clothes might not enter. He created such a sight and sound that he was probably the talk of the town. One wonders why he put up such a scene. Was he genuinely unhappy or repentant for what had happened by blaming himself? Or that he was doing this because he wanted to get the attention of Esther, whom he thought was the only person who could help him and the Jews. Mordecai's behaviour could be a combination of all these.

Esther Finds Out Mordecai's Problem

If Mordecai's intention was to gain the attention of Esther, he succeeded. Esther's maids and chamberlains told her about Mordecai. Precisely, how they came to know is not stated, while Esther knew nothing at all. Her maids were many and they could move around in the palace more freely to do their work. They could have received news about what was happening in the city from their friends. On the other hand, Esther was generally confined to her chamber. This also shows how isolated Esther was from her people. The maids and chamberlains probably knew that Mordecai was closely related to Esther because earlier during the time when she was put up as a candidate to be the queen of Persia, he had asked about her. So they informed Esther of Mordecai's plight.

On hearing about Mordecai, Esther was deeply distressed. Thinking that Mordecai's mourning was about his personal distress and not about the decree, Esther sent him a change of clothes so that he should take off his sackcloth garment. Understandably, Mordecai refused to accept Esther's offer. This refusal on his part would

cause Esther to inquire further regarding his problem. In this regard, Mordecai succeeded. Consequently, Esther sent Hatach, the king's handpicked chamberlain who was assigned to attend her, to find out from Mordecai *what it was, and why it was* (4:5).

Hatach met Mordecai, who told him *all that had happened to him*, and even the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave a copy of the king's decree which was circulated in Shushan for the destruction of the Jews to be given to Esther.¹ And Mordecai finally ordered her to approach the king to plead for *her people* (4:7, 8). In presenting his case to Esther through Hatach, Mordecai did not mince his words with non-essentials. He effectively gave four pertinent factors.

Firstly, Mordecai told Hatach everything that had happened to him. He must have related the incident about his refusal to bow down to Haman, giving the reason that he was a Jew. That was the reason he gave to his fellow colleagues in the king's gate, thus hiding behind religious reason for his action. Secondly, he divulged that Haman offered a large sum of money to the king. This shows that Mordecai held a high position in the king's court to have access to this information. The implication is clear, that Haman bribed the king to get the latter's approval for the decree. Thirdly, by giving a copy of the decree to Esther indicates that Esther was not illiterate but that she could read. The copy of the decree was a strong evidence

¹ Writing materials in those days could be clay tablets, parchment (skins of animals) or papyrus (pronounce, per-pye-rus, made from a plant).

to convince Esther. Finally, Mordecai's charge to her -- *to make request before him for her people* – would reveal her ethnicity (4:8b). He had previously told her to conceal her ethnicity. Esther had done well to keep her Jewish heritage secret. In so doing, Mordecai had put Esther's life in danger too. Hatach would now know and he could tell Haman. It is clear that Mordecai used this as a means of compelling Esther to approach the king to plead for him and *her people*.

Hatach told Esther *the words of Mordecai*. It means that Hatach did not add nor censure anything that Mordecai had told him. Evidently, Hatach was a trustworthy servant. Apparently, he did not tell Haman about what had been told to him—the bribery, and the fact that Esther was a Jew, and the charge to Esther. He knew about the decree to destroy the Jews. If he had informed Haman, the turn of events could have been different. We can say that God's providential hand was at work on behalf of His people. Hatach's special appointment by the king to serve Esther was therefore not coincidental. Mordecai should have sought the LORD God Almighty first rather than pleading with King Ahasuerus through Esther for deliverance. It tells us that Mordecai's religious conviction was more nominal than fervent.

Esther Relates Her Problem to Approach the King

Having heard Hatach's report, Esther understood the problem. She responded straightaway to the charge that Mordecai had put to her. She explained that to approach the king without being summoned, even though she was the queen, meant certain death. Josephus the Jewish historian wrote of Persian kings:

“Round his throne stood men with axes to punish any who approached the throne without being summoned.” All the king's servants, and the people of the empire were aware of this law. This would include Mordecai and Hatach too. The only escape was if the king held out his golden sceptre to the person who dared to approach him without being summoned. Esther further informed Mordecai that for the past thirty days the king had not called for her. It means that the king had slept with other women. Surely the king had not been sleeping alone. This was not good for Esther. She could have fallen out of grace. The chances that the king would extend his golden sceptre to Esther if she would approach him without being called seemed unlikely. There was no guarantee. Esther would therefore be risking her life.

Another way would be for Esther to request an audience with the king. But her request might be turned down. There was no guarantee, and probably the request had to be made through Haman. If she was turned down, any future request might not be possible, and she might never have a chance to present her case. The risks were too great. Godly wisdom was much needed in this matter. So Hatach went to Mordecai to convey her words.

Mordecai Convinces Esther

But Mordecai would not accept Esther's refusal to approach the king. He impressed upon Esther that she should not think that she could escape from being killed just because she was sheltered in the king's palace. Mordecai continued that if she should remain silent at this time, *then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from*

another place. This was followed with his prediction that Esther and her father's household would also be destroyed. Seemingly trying to be more persuasive, he remarked that *who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this* (4:14)?

Was Mordecai harsh and heartless in his response to Esther's reply? One can understand that he was desperate. As far as he was concerned his cousin was the only person who could have access to the king and who could help. Esther was in a very risky position. He was determined to get Esther to carry out his idea. Was Mordecai confident that deliverance might come from another quarter indicating that he was thinking of God? And his last words were that Esther's present position was an act of providence. If Mordecai had been a strong religious Jew, he would have mentioned the name of God—God would raise someone to deliver His people, and it was God who placed Esther in her position for such a time as this. But Mordecai did not explicitly say that. His remarks were vague. Mordecai had faith that help might come from another place, and had placed squarely on Esther's shoulder the grave responsibility to carry out his idea. But why be vague? It looks like Esther had no choice but to succumb to Mordecai's idea.

Esther Prepares to Risk Her Life for Her People

Consequently, Esther responded to the crisis facing her people with extraordinary courage and faith. She told Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Shushan to *fast for her, neither eat nor drink three days, night or day* (4:16). She and her maids too would fast likewise. And after the three days she would go to

the king, even though she would be breaking the law, and if she should perish, so be it.

Fasting by the Jews was always associated with prayer to God. Mere fasting is meaningless. Fasting was one way of demonstrating that one was serious. However, it was not the act of fasting or prayer *per se* that was going to produce the desired result. Rather it was the power of God who would act according to His will. In this matter of fasting and praying, Esther demonstrated in a veiled way that she was depending on God to help. Like Mordecai, she did not explicitly say that God would help should they fast and pray. Her words, *If I perish, I perish*, was solemn and serious. She was willing to put her life on the line for the sake of her people. That was commendable. So her outburst could be one of resignation. Would God use such nominal Jews as Mordecai and Esther to save His people?

Mordecai went on his way and did according to what Esther had told him to do. This was the first time that Mordecai took instructions from Esther.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Haman intended to commit genocide, and in particular, to annihilate the Jews throughout the Persian empire. The Jews were God's chosen people. Would God allow him to destroy all His people and thwart His eternal plan and purpose of the world through the nation Israel? The answer is never! Although God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, and that Mordecai and Esther did not seem to be fervent and devout Jews, yet God would not go back on His Word and break the covenant-promise He made with Abraham. In this chapter, there were instances where things could take

another direction that could result in the realization of Haman's plan. Esther's special position as queen was providential, and Mordecai was right in thinking that she was the only mediatrix for her people. God had placed her there for such a time as this. His idea could have been thwarted had Hatach divulged his plan to Haman. This too was providential as Hatach, who was a very trustworthy and loyal servant, was specially appointed to personally serve Esther. The fact that Esther was willing to lay down her life for her people by breaking the law of Persia, with no guarantee that the king might grant her audience, intimates the work of God in the hearts of His people. Our God is great and good for His people. This truth should encourage us that in whatever circumstances we are in, even when it concerns the will of God, He will intervene. In this regard we also learn one important truth about the ways of God. He uses any human being whether he or she is a believer or a backslider or an unbeliever. God is sovereign. He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy, and He does as He pleases. Yet we know that God is not despotic, sadistic and capricious. God is holy, just, and righteous. He never moves without His plan and purpose.

In times of crisis, we should first seek the Lord for His guidance and help. We should not be like Mordecai who sought the king first. We should seek the Lord first and then human agents whom He would use to fulfil His purpose. We should be forthright in our dependence on Him but Mordecai made only a veiled reference to God when he tried to persuade Esther to carry out his idea. God has explicitly conveyed through the Apostle Paul that we should confidently approach Him that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need

(Hebrew 4:16). It is foolish on our part not to appropriate this assurance of God. Having the knowledge of God or theology is good provided it is being applied to our everyday living. Often Christians know a lot of theology but in their everyday living they always resort to their own ways and ideas instead of applying God's truth. AMEN.