

Esther 06-03-28A

This is Tuesday, the 28th of March, 2006. We continue tonight our study in the Book of Esther, resuming in Chapter 4. Let's take a moment, as we always do, to make sure that this time is well spent. It will be an utter waste of time if God the Holy Spirit is not able to teach us, all of us, from God's Word, because we have failed to exercise our priesthood, have failed to avail ourselves of God's grace and receive cleansing and enablement for things that are not understandable to the mortal man, things that don't make sense to the atheist or the agnostic or the apathetic and indifferent believer.

We like to think that we are not apathetic and indifferent. We like to think that we are seeking to walk on that narrow path that God asks us to walk and go through that narrow gate that God asks us to enter. And to do that, we have to be sure and do it in God's power.

So, let's take a moment and pray. Father, it is a great comfort to know that we do not have to rely on our own strength and our own talent or our own ingenuity or our own wisdom to fulfill your plan and purpose. You have given us wisdom and righteousness and peace and sanctification in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you that we can be cleansed, that we can be thoroughly equipped for every good work through those things that you supply to us, through your Spirit and through your Word. And we ask your blessing on us as we study together. May each one here receive a blessing and find in your Word those things that will motivate, encourage and enable for every different aspect of service in the time that remains to us on this earth.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Esther started out as an orphan and without really seeking it, she has been swept up by events and now finds herself in a very unique position.

She is queen of the Persian Empire. She has a big secret that only she and her uncle know, or her cousin actually, Mordecai. And that is that she is a minority.

She is Jewish. And events have transpired in recent days as we pick up in chapter 4 where suddenly being Jewish is a great liability. This is something she cannot change, that she did not choose, and that endangers not only herself but thousands and thousands of people who share that particular characteristic.

There is no good reason for it. It doesn't make any sense. Why should being Jewish make a difference? Why should anyone care? And yet, all of these people are about to have their lives threatened and there is danger that they will lose everything, that they will disappear and be extinguished as a people.

Well, God of course knew this ahead of time. God is not alarmed. God is not surprised.

God is in fact using this circumstance to teach His people something and not just that generation of His people but every generation since. That's why the book of Esther exists and that's why we counted a great privilege to stop in the forward rush of events of our day to take a look at it and realize that God has timeless truths for us. There is actually practical, useful information for you and for me in this part of God's Word as with every other part.

So, what's going on here? Chapter 4 began. Mordecai learned all that had happened. Remember what had happened? Haman the Agagite got a burr under his saddle because Mordecai the Jew would not bow and he said, I'll not just wipe out Mordecai, I'll wipe out anybody that's even remotely connected to Mordecai, I'll wipe out the entire people of Mordecai.

They are the historic hereditary enemies of my family and my people so here I am in the good graces of the king and I'll use my influence and my craft and my cleverness to root these people out and destroy them. I won't have to worry about them anymore. So, Mordecai finds out about this.

He tears his clothes and he puts on sackcloth and ashes. What do you know about sackcloth and ashes? Does this do any good? Have you ever gotten a piece of bad news and you said, well, I think I'll just rip my clothes all up. Go to the fireplace, grab a handful of ashes and just smear them all over my head.

Is this productive? Does this really accomplish anything? Well, my first instinct is to say, what a waste of time and good clothing. Tomorrow you're going to be rooting around in the closet saying, honey, where's my spare robe? I just ripped my other one all up to shreds. It wasn't that easy.

They didn't have hot running water and stuff. You smear ashes and stuff all over yourself and street dirt and whatnot and then you say, well, now that I'm through with that, I kind of look grubby. It's not that easy to get clean in the ancient world.

So why would somebody go to all that trouble? Well, it has a purpose, doesn't it? Do you think if Mordecai was all by himself living on a mountaintop somewhere, he'd tear his clothes and smear ashes on his face? This communicates to other people, doesn't it? This is a public expression of distress, public expression of mourning. Now, from everything we're able to tell about Mordecai, he's an upstanding believer, isn't he? God is working through him to accomplish great historical things. And God typically does not use goofball believers to get important parts of his plan accomplished, right? I'm not saying there aren't some exceptions.

You have to wonder about men like Samson. He seems to have been kind of a loose cannon. I'm not sure he had a full deck of 52 cards.

God used him anyway. But Mordecai, we have no reason to think that he's not a faithful and diligent believer, right? Do we have any evidence to the contrary on Mordecai? He's certainly a man of integrity. He took in his cousin when she was orphaned at some inconvenience and cost to himself.

And he has stood by her and has very carefully guided her. And that's something we're going to see in this chapter tonight, chapter 4. There's something very interesting that we're going to see in our first lesson this evening. Mordecai puts on this sackcloth and ashes.

Historically, for hundreds of years in Israel and throughout the ancient Near East, if somebody rips up their clothes and smears ashes on their head, you know that there's something the matter. And what does it cause people to do? If I had showed up tonight, see

if my seminary training, they say, you know, grab people's attention. I should have just ripped all my clothes up and gotten a handful of ashes and smeared them on me.

And you'd come in and say, why are you looking like that? Right? I mean, would you not be mildly curious? Well, that's exactly what it accomplished in the ancient world. They didn't have email. They didn't have instant messaging.

They didn't have text messaging on the cell phone. They didn't have mail or the Pony Express. They didn't have telephones and voicemail boxes and all that.

So, how could you find out that there was something the matter with somebody? Well, you spot them across the street or down the road or in the middle of the village square and they look like they've been run over by a couple of ox carts carrying ashes. And you say, hey, what's the matter with you? Even from a distance. Even if you had thought, well, I'll pass by.

I don't really want to talk to Mordecai right now. I've got some shopping to do. I've got to pick up a donkey down at the donkey shop.

Whatever it might be. I've got to get some fresh hemp line or I've got to market some vegetables or whatever. When you see somebody all torn up like this, you go over and you say, what is the matter? This is a way of calling attention to oneself and saying, I'm in distress and I want to talk about it.

Does that make sense? And this apparently is a legitimate function to be in distress and share that information with anybody who will listen. There's not a thing in the world wrong with this. Now, Mordecai has chosen his place and time to advertise this distress, hasn't he? You don't necessarily do this 24 hours a day in any given context.

He didn't go rushing into the palace, did he? He didn't go rushing into a worship service, but he did pick his spot. What does he do? He went out into the midst of the city. The midst of the city is the place for dissemination of information, isn't it? He could have just sat in the gate, but there's only a limited number of people who would see him there.

He went up and down through the city. He's basically got a great big neon sign saying, Hey, something the matter with Mordecai? And everyone is saying, What's up? What's up? This is the fastest way in the ancient world to disseminate the information that there is a serious problem. So that's exactly what he does.

He cried out with a loud and bitter cry. Now, do you think Mordecai just couldn't handle his emotions? Why is he crying out with a loud and bitter cry? He's saying, Hey, Shushan! Everybody turns around. Who's yelling? Oh, it's the man in the raggedy clothes with the gray face.

Let's go see what he has to say. He immediately draws a crowd. He immediately communicates this word is going to spread by word of mouth very quickly.

So he goes all through the city, and he ends up as far as the front of the king's gate. No one could enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. So now that he's broadcast this information through the city, he's right there as close as he can get to Esther.

And this information spreads. Now, this was sort of an inside deal. Haman was trying to do this destruction of the Jews on the QT.

He arranged it with the king. He sends out the couriers. He's going to quietly recruit some people and say, Look, you can go sack these people and murder them and destroy them and take their stuff.

You keep the percentage. Send the rest back to the king's treasury. It's going to amount to \$120 million for the king, and you get to keep your cut, and this is all going to be great.

And it was kind of a quiet little background operation until Mordecai spilled the beans. Mordecai blew the whistle, so to speak. Pretty hard to ignore a senior government official.

Can you imagine if they had a press conference and Mr. Rumsfeld or Condoleezza Rice or somebody showed up looking like this, screaming at the top of their lungs with a loud and bitter cry? I mean, it would be world news, and that's exactly what happened. Look at verse 3. In every province where the king's command and decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Why would the Jews do this? The decree doesn't say who the people are, does it? That's a piece of private, secret information until Mordecai spilled it, and it just radiated out by the hour. It spread over square miles as people said, hey, they're fixing to destroy us. So Esther's maids, in verse 4, and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was deeply distressed.

Understandable. That doesn't take a lot of explanation. So she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and take his sackcloth away from him, but he would not accept them.

Now, why would she do this? Well, the maids, what kind of maids work for Esther? Are they Jewish maids? No, they're Persian maids. There's a lot of staff in the palace that Esther only has a limited selection of people to choose from, right? I'm sure she could hire and fire maids, but they're the Persian maids that are part of the palace staff. Esther can't say, you know, I'd really like to go out and get a bunch of these Jewish people and bring them in.

So these are Persian maids, and they evidently have not told her the whole truth, and she can't figure out what's the matter with Mordecai. And she says, look, you're going to blow the whole deal here. We've kept this secrecy up for five years now, and you're about to upset the whole apple cart.

Look, put these clothes on and be quiet. Well, he won't accept the clothes, and so she knows there's something really seriously wrong. So Esther, in verse 5, calls Hapak, one of the king's eunuchs, and this is really interesting, at least to me, because depending on which of the different texts you look at, this name, Hatak, is quite different.

The Jewish rabbis even wound up calling this guy Daniel. That's how many different variations there are of his name. But his name essentially means companion or trusted servant.

So this is different than the maids. They're sort of general purpose, interchangeable part hairdressers and beauticians and train carriers and slipper changers and nail polish appliers and things like that. But Hatak, he is more of her trusted butler, her trusted steward.

And that's what his name means, his trusted companion. So she calls Hatak. She's had five years to find somebody like him, and this is probably not the first time that he's conveyed information back and forth between Esther and Mordecai.

And she gave him a command concerning Mordecai to learn what and why this was. And this is really a great translation of the Hebrew. It's sort of elliptical.

In Hebrew, this says a command concerning Mordecai to learn what this and why this. What is this and why is this? What is up that you're acting so weird? Hatak went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him all that had happened and the sum of money that Haman had promised to put into the hands, put into the king's treasury in connection with destroying the Jews.

There's a big financial incentive. Even people who don't necessarily have an anti-Semitic hatred will be motivated by money. Haman is not relying on a big underground resentment on the part of the Persians.

In fact, a lot of the Persians probably appreciate the fact that they're making tons of money from their Jewish employees and kind of like Potiphar having Joseph running his affairs, Potiphar became one of the richest men in Egypt as Pharaoh would later experience. And so, there were a lot of people who might have sort of hesitated until they found out, well, look at all the money I will make if I turn against the Jews and help to burn them out. So, the money is a big factor and it's mentioned several times here.

Now look at verse 8. They 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 into the king to make supplication to him and plead before him for her people. Now, let's think about this. Think about it.

Mordecai is a Jew. Thousands of Jews all over the land. Esther is a Jew.

And the Jews are threatened with imminent destruction. So, Mordecai sends this messenger back to Esther and says you need to go into the king and plead that this does not happen. What's our logical conclusion from this? What do we conclude? We think, well, Mordecai wants the people to be saved and he's willing to ask Esther to endanger herself because he's willing to put her life on the line because he's worried about the Israelites, right? Isn't that pretty much it? Because she's going to come back and say, hey, Esther spoke to Hatak, look at verse 10, gave him command for Mordecai.

Actually, this is a word for Mordecai, not a command. All the king's servants, 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. Now, this goes all the way back to the days of the Medes before the Persians really became the high shoulder of the empire and took everything over.

One of the early Median kings got so nervous about security that he instituted a policy that nobody could come in. He was afraid he would be assassinated. And so he said, nobody is going to come in and personally transact business with the king.

He will transact business with the ministers, the trusted ministers, tried and true. They will come in and consult the king. Then they will go back out and give the word of the king to these people.

But we're going to establish this buffer around the king so that you don't have a thing happen like happened in Judges. Remember Ehud? Remember the story? Ehud is one of the best stories in Judges. He was a Benjamite.

What do we know about a lot of the Benjamites? They were part of that 20-something percent of the human race that are left-handed. So Ehud hid a sword up under his robes and he said, I need to go see the, I think it was the Moabite king. And they said, okay, fine, Ehud, go on in.

So he went in and said, hi there, king. Then he pulled that big sword out from under and rammed it up into the big old king and the king was so fat that the sword got stuck and Ehud couldn't get it back out. And so then he escaped out the window.

But he went in for a private audience with the king and assassinated him. Well, people said, that's no good. Kind of tough replacing kings at whim.

So the king of the Medes said, no private audiences with anybody. Nobody comes into my chamber unannounced. If I want to see a guy, I'll ask him in.

No unannounced visitors. Well, this policy went all the way down from the Medes through the Persians, through Darius and all the way down here to Ahasuerus. And it's just the law of the land.

So, no one can come in there who has not been called except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter. If somebody dares come in unannounced, the king, it's essentially the same as when the Roman emperor would stick his thumb out and say up or down. You're basically under sentence of death unless the king, when he holds out the golden scepter, is basically pardoning you for a capital offense.

You have committed an offense worthy of death by coming unannounced and holding out the scepter is a gesture of pardon. And you've basically been forgiven this felony death penalty offense. So you go in there and you're guilty and you're lined up for the executioner and then the king says, well, I'll give you back your life by holding out this golden scepter.

By the way, we know that the scepter was golden because the secular historians like Herodotus and Xenophon and some of these guys wrote about Cyrus the king who's going to come a little after Ahasuerus. And they talk about the fact that he has a golden scepter and that was the symbol of rule. Just like you have those big things that the Romans carry around.

I forget the name of them. We used to have a couple of them on the back of a dime. Maybe they still are on the back of a dime.

I forget what they call those things. It's a column looking deal with shrubbery on the top. It's a symbol of ruling authority.

You see the... Oh, they're not prelates. What are they called? The Roman guys who were rulers before they really had Caesars. Consuls would carry these things around.

These big column looking deals with a spiral wrap around them. Well, that is a symbol of ruling authority. Well, in the same way, this scepter is a symbol of ruling authority.

It was handed down from king to king from the Medes through the Persians all the way down. So, that's what he's got to do. So, they told Mordecai Esther's words.

Now, look at what Mordecai says in verse 13. 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. 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. Now, think about that for a minute.

What is Mordecai really concerned with when he sends this message to Esther? Is Mordecai worried that the Jews won't be delivered unless Esther acts? He's worried that Esther won't survive this experience. Esther might say, you know, going into the king unannounced, I could be killed. Mordecai says, look, you are certain to be killed if you don't go in.

Mordecai says, look, I'm not worried about the Jews. Now, how can Mordecai say this? He flat out says, look, if you are silent, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place. By the way, you know what the word relief is in Hebrew? Ruach.

Spirit. Life. Breath.

It's, uh, I forget, King James may translate this as, uh, it's like respiration or something. Ruach. Ruach Elohim is the Spirit of God in Genesis chapter 1 that moved over the face of the waters.

But Spirit, life, relief, breath, and deliverance. Now this word for deliverance is a word that means to be snatched out of danger. To be plucked away from destruction.

To be sort of lifted up. And when I see these two words together, Ruach and plucked up, it reminds me of Ezekiel, where God grabbed him by the hair of the head and just lifted him up and took him to Jerusalem. Mordecai says, look, God's going to exercise Spirit and deliverance on behalf of his people.

If you don't act, God will save them another way. The Jews are not going to be destroyed. Now how can he say that? Well, there are innumerable references to the fact that God will deliver his people.

Deuteronomy 32, 26 and 27. God says, I won't let you be destroyed because I don't want your enemies talking and saying the Lord doesn't have any power. In 1 Samuel 12, 22.

The Lord will not forsake his people for his great namesake because it has pleased the Lord to make you Israelites his people. In Isaiah 54, 17. Isaiah is already written down and available in Mordecai.

No weapon formed against you shall prosper. Every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their righteousness is from me, says the Lord.

Isaiah 54, 17. Mordecai evidently knows this scripture. And he says, look, I'm supposed to stand up and condemn this tongue that is speaking out against the people.

This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and Mordecai considers himself a servant of the Lord. Jeremiah 30, 11. I am with you, says the Lord, to save you though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you yet I will not make a complete end of you, but I will correct you in justice and will not let you go altogether unpunished.

Same thing in Jeremiah 33, 24-26. God says, If my covenant is not with day and night, if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth, then I will cast away the descendants of Jacob and David, my servants, that I will not take any of his descendants to be rulers, and so on. I will cause the captives to return, God says, and I will have mercy on them.

Jeremiah 33, 26. These are the promises of God and Mordecai takes them at face value. He says, The people are not going to be destroyed.

I am not worried about that, but you will certainly be destroyed if you remain silent. You and your father's house. How much of Esther's father's house is left? Interesting that Mordecai brings up the fate of her father's house when she is basically the sole representative of her father's house.

Well, more about that when we come back from the break.