

ESTHER 4

ESTHER'S ROYAL POSITION FOR THE DELIVERANCE OF GOD'S PEOPLE:

When dealing with Esther 3, we learned of the terrible conspiracy of Haman, the Agagite, to destroy all the people of Israel throughout the empire on one single day. A decree is written and an edict sent throughout the empire. This can not be changed; all Jews will die.

Of course the Jews everywhere were greatly distressed. To be sure, as we read in Esther 3: 7, the edict was sent in the first month of the year and would be carried out in the twelfth month. This fortunate time element gave the Jews almost a year to counteract. But time passes quickly. Sometimes you think that you have a lot of time, but before you know it, time is up and the ultimate reality must be faced. Sometimes you can say: time is on my side; after a year people will forget. But we all sense: not this time! This is very serious. The clock steadily ticks down to doomsday.

But what can the Jews do? The decrees and edicts of the Persian kings were irrevocable and unchangeable. It appears that the people of Israel have come to their *end*. First exile, loss of identity as a people in their own land, and now mass destruction everywhere. The enemies are preparing for the great event to kill all the much-hated Jews. The Jews are in the minority, ill-equipped, and it seems their doom is sealed.

SACKCLOTH AND ASHES

The reaction of the Jews everywhere is to wear sackcloth and ashes, indicating deep mourning. They were also fasting, wailing, and weeping. We find in 4: 1 and 2 that Mordechai also was dressed in sackcloth and ashes and that he went through the city "wailing loudly and bitterly". He went right up to the palace gate in this respect, but not any farther, for mourners were not allowed in the king's gate.

But Mordechai was close enough to the palace for Esther's maids and servants to notice his attire. And, of course, this tantalizing bit of news had to be passed on to Esther (4: 4), and so the queen also heard of Mordechai's actions.

The very fact that the Jews all wore sackcloth and ashes, fasted and mourned as well, is an indication that as a people they directed themselves to the LORD. For what effect would such wailing have on the pagan people who hated them? This activity only makes sense when seen in relation to the LORD, the God of

Israel. They call upon him in the traditional way reserved for serious occasions. See Daniel 9, where his moving prayer is recorded, “So I turned to the LORD God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes” (verse 3). Wearing sackcloth and ashes is acknowledged by our Lord Jesus Christ as a matter of *repentance* (Matthew 11: 21). So also here the Jews humble themselves before God and implore him for his grace.

The name of God is not expressly mentioned in this book, but we see here that Israel in this dire need goes to the LORD in the way that is proper and beneficial. The present danger brings to the fore how much Israel needs to seek the LORD and depend on him alone. Times of testing are meant to lead God’s people back to himself. Trials come so that our faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise to God (cf. I Pet 1: 7). This truth is evident in all the Scriptures and comes to the fore also here in the Book of Esther.

“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS...”

We are then privileged to follow the exchange which takes place between Mordechai and Esther. Not just a personal father to daughter talk, but one that touches on Esther’s royal position and Israel’s future. See verse 14 end, the very heart and core of the book, “And who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this?”

Esther has received a royal position. When you believe God’s almighty providence, you know that nothing happens by chance, Esther did not enter the royal palace to become a play-mate of Xerxes, but to be an instrument of the LORD! Now we see the true purpose of the LORD’s sovereign grace in the life of Esther and Israel. The LORD calls Esther to use her royal position in accordance with his sovereign grace for the deliverance of his people. We see how Esther is approached in her royal position, is challenged in her royal position, and responds to her royal position.

ESTHER READS THE EDICT

One gets the impression that almost everybody in Susa and beyond knows about the forthcoming massacre of the Jews, except Esther. We understand that Esther is confined to the palace, and to the harem section of the palace, which was strictly guarded. But, like a prison, a palace and even a harem have their own sources of information. Surely the maids and the eunuchs, who were allowed in and out of the palace, knew of the edict against the Jews? Will they not have told Esther about it?

Perhaps something was said. But at this point no one knew that Esther was a Jewish woman. Other things demanded priority than these unfathomable matters of state and politics. Esther was fairly isolated in the palace, and so we may conclude that she did not know much, if anything, of the plot against the Jews. She had not read the edict, because we learn in verse 8 that Mordechai gave to

Hathach, the eunuch, a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation...to show to Esther and explain it to her. The full impact of the edict must still be impressed upon Esther's mind.

It does take some doing, however, before Esther really comprehends the seriousness of the situation. Have her isolation in the royal chambers, her official position and duties as Queen of Persia rendered her insensitive to what is going on around her in the common world? This is not something which might only affect a young woman called to be queen. There are many people so carried away by the busy-ness of daily life, the constant, recurring problems that they never rise above these to survey what is going on in the world. Who cares about the big picture of our society and the world, when we can hardly understand the little picture of our days and hours?

In verse 4 we read that when Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordechai, she was "in great distress". She is worried about Mordechai, but it does not appear that she knows exactly why he is acting this way. It must be some personal thing, or maybe even a family matter. A friend or relative has died, perhaps. Esther does not know yet of any other possibilities.

Notice what she does. When it says that she "was in great distress", one of the reasons for this is that Mordechai, wearing sackcloth and ashes, can not enter the area of the king's gate, where she might be able to communicate with him. That is probably also the reason why "she sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth...". For her the matter is more an outward problem. Mordechai should not dress this way, no matter what the reason, for he is now a Persian official, and she needs to maintain contact with him.

THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE SITUATION

But Mordechai refuses. Esther begins to understand that something more serious is going on. It is not that she is dim-witted, but who would have thought of the king's edict and Haman's outrageous plan? Esther acts decisively. Her next step is to send Hathach, one of the eunuchs assigned to her by the king, to find out what Mordechai's problem is, and why he is in mourning.

In the verses 6-8 we get a very detailed description of everything that Mordechai says to Hathach. It says: Mordechai told Hathach everything that had happened: his refusal to bow for Haman, the exact amount of money to be paid, and even the text of the imperial edict. It is all the evidence needed to show Queen Esther that the Jews are in a very real and great danger. And we might think that Mordechai's manner and method are a bit dramatic, but he needs to convince Esther of the seriousness of the situation, so that she does not shrug it off as something that will not happen.

For Mordechai does more. It says at the end of verse 8: and he told [Hathach] to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. There is only one who can in these circumstances offer real help:

Esther must go to the king and beg for mercy! She is the queen, and she can convince Xerxes that this edict is wrong. Mordechai approaches her in her “royal position”. And Hathach the eunuch is to *urge* Esther to go to the king. The eunuch knows the situation now, and he has some influence on Esther as her bodyguard and attendant.

ESTHER’S ROYAL POSITION

So Esther is approached in her royal position. God has in his sovereign grace decided to place her in the royal palace, even as Queen of Persia, so that she might benefit his people. Mordechai does not hesitate to appeal to Esther for her help, and his appeal is almost like a command: you must go!

There are certain tasks from which you cannot get away in life. They simply surface, need to be done, and we have to do them. They come with the territory, as it were. If we recognize that God is *sovereign*, and that nothing happens by chance, then we have to tackle what is placed on our path. Whatever that may be. We are approached in our calling, our office as believers, as Christians. We may be taken by surprise, even taken aback, but there are things that present themselves to us, and we can not pass them on to others.

We have to do them, in the strength of the Lord! Anger, complaining, rebellion, whatever, will not help: we have to do what is placed before us by the Lord! And if we do not *accept* our calling, we run the risk of damaging not only ourselves but also others, children of the Lord. Of course, we may never do, and are never asked by the LORD to do whatever conflicts with God’s Word. On the contrary, the Lord asks only what is in accordance with his Word. But then we cannot walk away from it.

RECOGNIZING GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

What things are we talking about? Everyone receives his own challenges in life not just once, but more than once. We do not have to face Esther’s calling, for her position was unique. I do think here of what we can do for and in the church of the Lord Jesus of which we profess to be living members. We can be negative, stand at the side-lines, and complain, have all kinds of criticism on the way things are being done, but that is of no real help to anybody. Why not give time, energy, and gifts where these are needed? We all have to exercise our responsibility in the church in accordance with God’s will. What can we do, also, for the brotherhood in this world that does face persecution or opposition?

There are also personal challenges. Why do I or my child have this or that handicap? Why must I deal with this sickness? Why did I lose a child, or even more than one child? Why did one or more of my children grow up to reject the Lord and his covenant? Why do we not receive a child altogether? Why do I have all these problems, and others appear so problem free? No one is problem-free. What is more important is to recognize God’s sovereignty. That he is the LORD,

and no one else, also in your life. That he places us where we must be and tests us, refines us, purifies us for his kingdom. Recognize God's sovereignty: do what he calls you to do, and if you can not do it alone, do it with the help of the saints and under the blessing of God!

That is what the Lord Jesus did perfectly. Face the challenge of his life, even death and hell, to redeem his people from their sins. Whatever was cast on his path by the divine lot, the true *pur*, he took it and did it; whatever was needed, he gave, until he had nothing left to give, because he had given all, and had emptied himself (Philippians 2: 6, 7).

ROYAL SUMMONS REQUIRED

When the servant of Esther comes back to the royal harem and tells Esther all that Mordechai has said, she must have been utterly shocked. This is devastating news: all her people to be killed on one day, their possessions plundered, it is almost incredible. It says in verse 10: then she instructed [Hathach] to say to Mordechai, "All the kings 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."

You may think about this "law" as you wish, and no man or woman should have such power over fellow human beings, but this is the empire of man and not the kingdom of God about which Esther is talking, and she has a point. She can not just go in to the king without summons and uninvited, *nota bene* with a request to have him repeal an imperial decree which cannot be revoked to start with. It would be sheer suicide. Nowadays people would say: be real, get with the program!

She adds to this, "But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." Apparently the queen did not see the king on a daily basis. Xerxes had many concubines with which to pass the time of day or night. Perhaps the king has waited so long to see her for a reason, and she would then endanger herself by going to his inner chamber. After all, Xerxes had also decreed that every man be master in his house. Woe to the wife who would break the rules.

A HARSH REPLY?

I think that most explainers rightly state that Esther is not opting out here. She was not afraid or cowardly, but she was rightly hesitant. Mordechai must understand that her position as queen is limited, and she can not do everything. This may be a situation that goes beyond her allowances and capabilities, and she could even become the first victim of the coming holocaust. Esther says: you may summon me, even God may summon me, but I have not been summoned by the king!

Mordechai's reply seems at first a bit harsh, kind of nasty, lacking proper understanding for this poor girl. He says: don't think that you will escape in the

safety of the palace. And he is right! There was always rivalry in the palace, and especially in the harem. One of her rivals could easily have her killed as a Jewess. Perhaps Vashti, if she is still sneaking around in the harem, might make use of the opportunity to get rid of the reigning queen with impunity. Even in the inner chambers of the palace, one is not safe from the devil and his henchmen.

Then follows a remarkable word in verse 14: 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. This is either deeply insulting to Esther or it gives evidence of a deep faith in God. Mordechai says: relief and deliverance will arise from another place! He does not doubt that somehow God will deliver his people from this genocide. The LORD always finds a way to save. He does not depend on any single person, also not on Esther, the queen. If we refuse to our own spiritual detriment to accept God's challenges in faith, he will find others. God will raise up another saviour in the place of Esther, if she remains silent.

For shirking her duty, she will herself be punished. Notice how Mordechai states: your father's family will perish. The name of your father will be wiped out completely. That is a serious matter. Esther's family will sink into oblivion. It seems to be such a negative way to approach Esther, but in fact it is very true. Hard truth, perhaps, but truth nonetheless.

A TREMENDOUS CHALLENGE

But that is not the last word. Mordechai issues to her a tremendous challenge: (see the end of verse 14), "... and who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this? Who knows? Mordechai does not know for sure, neither does Esther, but it could very well be that God has placed her there in the palace precisely to deal with this terrible threat of genocide! Sovereign grace, indeed: God puts people, even young people, where he wants to thwart the evil-doers' plans. The challenge is: Esther, go with God! Go in faith! Do what you can, and then bear whatever comes, for you are doing this for God's people, in his service, and to his glory! Think about it: why did God allow you to become queen? Perhaps precisely for such a time as this. Before the crisis comes, God's people are already in place.

Mordechai asks: who knows? The way in which this is presented, indicates that Mordechai himself is convinced of the answer. Why would God have guided things in such a way that Esther became Queen of Persia? This royal position is not received by chance or without reason. In Mordechai's mouth, the question is rather a profession of faith: what other reason can there be for Esther to have come to this position? Did she place herself there? Or is this the doing of the LORD?

Here we have the key to the entire book! We noted earlier that the name of God is not mentioned in this book. It could be that this is an indication of deep humility before the LORD because of Israel's sins which led to the exile and dis-

persion. But even if God's Name is not named, faith is expressed in him, in his sovereign grace, his almighty providence: who knows but that you have come to this royal position for such a time as this? Here it is still a question, but it will become in Israel a recurring profession: saved by sovereign grace! People have their plans and motives, but God fulfills his counsel of redemption in Jesus Christ! How could we ever doubt it?

It is like Joseph many years before had said to his brothers. Things happen, lives are altered, sometimes sinful things are done with evil intent, but God never loses control. Joseph said to his brothers who begged for mercy, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50: 20). Esther may see her position in that light also: God intended it for good, for the saving of many lives! Mordechai challenges Esther to look at her life in a covenantal way, that the LORD through her maintains his covenant of love with his people in their time of need.

A SPIRITUAL APPROACH

So Esther is challenged in her royal position. Will the Queen of Persia become intercessor for Israel? Let us see how she responds to her royal position. Esther could very simply take immediate steps and boldly request an audience with the king. March right into the throne room, and say: now listen here, dear husband, what kind of a dumb plan is this? But that would have been foolish and lethal. Another approach is required, one that is deeply *spiritual*. It says in verses 15 and 16, "Then Esther sent this reply to Mordechai: go, and 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".

Esther understands that she cannot do this work on her own. She needs to be properly prepared for it. She needs the approval and support of the LORD. She does not say it in those exact words, but what else can she mean? What's the sense of fasting other than to seek the help of the LORD? She also enlists the support of the whole Jewish community in Susa, about six hundred people at most. They, too, must fast, with her. Her own "maidens", those who serve the queen, some of whom may have been Jewish, will fast with her as well, out of solidarity, or upon her orders. For the situation is serious. The future of Israel does not lie in the hands of a young woman, but in the hand of the LORD.

ESTHER'S LIFE IS IN GOD'S HANDS

Note that Esther does not speak here about *prayer*, but only of fasting. We do know from the Scriptures elsewhere that fasting is always accompanied by prayer. One abstains from food (fasting) in order to be more directed to God (prayer)! You cannot do the one without doing the other, really. Why is not "prayer" mentioned? This is, perhaps, for the same reason that the name of God

is not mentioned in the entire book. Not mentioning something can actually be a (literary) form of emphasizing it. See also on this passage the interesting notes in the NIV study Bible.

Esther will place herself before the LORD in heaven before she goes to the king of Persia. God alone can direct the hearts of kings. If it is the LORD's will that she be spared, then this will happen. She is aware also of the worst scenario: and if I perish, I perish. If she should be killed because of insubordination, let it be so, for she has then given her life in a just cause! This is not some kind of a statement made impulsively -as Peter later did: "Lord. I will go with you through death and hell!- but this is a true appraisal of the situation. And if I perish, I perish. Her life is in the LORD's hands, where else? It is not a bitter resignation but it is the power of faith: there is always safety in the hands of the LORD

IN THE WAY OF FAITH AND FELLOWSHIP

Mordechai has then heard enough. He goes away from the area before the gate to carry out all of Esther's instructions. The congregation of Israel will be gathered to stand behind her and around her. Their lives are bound with her life. Together they must place themselves under God's sovereign grace. This grace does not mean that God never uses people, for he does, but it means that every human effort must meet divine blessing to succeed.

We must do what we have to do in the way of proper faith and fellowship with God and his church. That's what we learn here. Esther does not go off half-prepared, impulsively building on her own feminine mystique, thinking she'll bowl over the king of Persia and sweep him off his feet. She humbles herself before the LORD, fasts, directs herself to him constantly and continuously, commending herself and her people to God. She pleads only on God's covenant promises, whereby he has always and still remembers his people. And this will lead to great blessings for her and her people.

She is Queen of Persia, but still a daughter of Zion, a handmaiden of the LORD. That always comes first. We can be many things in this world, but first we are children of God by faith and members of Christ! We seek the fellowship, support, and prayers of that communion in Christ, and so we meet the challenges of the day! How could we function properly in our daily tasks if it is not from out of the communion of saints? Esther's responds to her royal position with humble trust, and yet strong faith, in the God of Israel! That will win the day. It always does.

And we may plead on the perfect work of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has received a name above every name! We need not be afraid, when we approach him, that he will refuse us to come near. His hand will be outstretched open before us: come, into the presence of my Father!