

Sermon 6: Esther 4:1-17: Coming to a crossroads

OUTLINE

Mordecai's mourning
Esther's choice

INTRODUCTION

Why is it that we need to go through hard times before we get serious with God? C. S. Lewis has famously said, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Pain and difficulty are not only the megaphone of God to rouse a deaf world but the calloused and indifferent believer as well. One pastor talks about how unbelievers are saved through difficulty, ‘I think of a nuclear physicist in our church in Scotland who attended out of deference to his wife and three young daughters. He listened to the sermons with an air of polite indifference; he accepted a copy of John Stott’s Basic Christianity but remained secure in his scientific shell. It was only when his fourth child, a son, died at eleven months that the megaphone sounded. Recognizing that his worldview was inadequate to deal with tragedy and loss, he found himself reaching beyond his shadow land to find himself caught up in the embrace of the God who is there. By this terrible necessity of tribulation God conquered his rebel will and brought him to the place of peace.’¹ Esther chapter 4 is an example of how difficulties in our lives area crossroads for us to either choose God or not. It is a crossroads for Mordecai and Esther. Haman has schemed to wipe out the people of God; will they now turn to Him or from Him? Will they only be believers in name or in fact and practice? Mordecai and Esther we have noted have been unimpressive in the faith department, they may up to this point have retained some cultural identity as Jews but little religious conviction has been seen. Suddenly persecution and calamity arrive and their faltering faith is tested, will it stand or fall; will they choose the hard road or the easy road? We will look at our two main characters in turn, Mordecai’s mourning; and Esther’s choice.

Mordecai’s challenge

V1, ‘When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king’s gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king’s gate clothed in sackcloth. ³ And in every province, wherever the king’s command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.’ Haman has been able to twist the arm of the king with a bribe to sanction a law that will allow Jews all over the Persian empire to be slaughtered and plundered. Even if the majority of law abiding citizens do not take advantage, many criminal and opportunistic people; or any who have a racial ax to grind will be all in. What is God doing, how does one respond to such a situation? Has God abandoned Israel? If so is it worth serving Him? Or is God doing something else? What does walking by faith and not by sight look like in this situation? Mordecai as well as many of the Jews turn to God and not from Him, this can be seen by their acts of mourning. Mordecai

¹ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/pain-gods-megaphone> accessed 11/10/2023

unable to approach the King directly puts his race and religion on display crying out to God for an intervention.

The book of Esther we have noted has no explicit mention of God's name; of prayer; worship; sacrifice. In fact even the sins or acts of obedience are described and not prescribed. This has made it hard for us to know when our characters are being good or bad; faithful or faithless. A number of lenses have to be employed to help us evaluate what is going on. As we come to Mordecai's response to this calamity we use the lens of scripture to help us interpret Mordecai's and the Jews reactions. Although the word repentance is not used it is implied in the use of fasting, weeping and lamenting in 4:3 echoed elsewhere. Joel 2:12-14 gives us a clue as to why Mordecai is doing what he is doing, "Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?' Mordecai is not just being theatrical, he is not trying to put on a show like a hunger strike hoping for public sympathy. He has been brought to the end of himself and is cast upon God in repentance.

You would think that with an event like the exile Israel would learn its lesson and they would be good Israelites moving forward, doing all things right once they are allowed to return to the land. This we see is not the case because this is the nature of our sinful condition. Ezra and Nehemiah return to the land, and there are challenges and there is compromise and there is a need for national repentance because of intermarriage, Ezra 9-10. Then shortly after the return to the land, the central feature of Israel's religion the Temple which needs rebuilding, the rebuilding process stalls and prophets need to be sent to reignite their zeal. Here are Mordecai and Esther, he has a comfortable government position, she has a comfy life as the favoured concubine. Mordecai has become aware that his future, and more importantly the future of his people are at stake and suddenly he is faced with a choice. Will he see that God is in control and has allowed this situation to develop because He is responding to Israel's ongoing sin in holiness either to judge or chastise and repent; or will he think God is weak has forsaken them and hand himself over to self-destructive depression? When calamity fell upon Jerusalem Jeremiah taught the people of God to use these as times of refection and repentance, Lam. 3:40-42, 'Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven: "We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven.' This calamity will lead not only Mordecai but Esther and all of God's people to a time of mourning, 4:3; 16. These comfortable exiles were shaken to the core and they dug deep into their faith; dealt seriously with their sins; and prayed hard because of this difficulty and returned to the Lord.

What about you? Has God used or is using some difficult situation to purify your faith? 1 Pet. 1:6-7, 'In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.' We can choose to respond as if God is not good; not wise; that we are not sinful; or we could even find an ability to rejoice. Have we been so comfortable that we need to be brought to our senses through difficulty? Now granted this is not the only reason why we go through difficulty, but this is the means that God uses to

cause a turn around in Mordecai and Esther's life. They say there are three types of people; those who learn from others mistakes; those who learn from their own mistakes; and those who don't learn. Will we learn from others mistakes and return to the Lord? Will we be shaken out of our complacency being reminded that though exiles we cannot grow cold and indifferent among the nations but must fulfill our calling as the people of God? Or will we have to learn the hard way? Will we put away our sins or will we provoke discipline?

Esther's choice

As we continue we see that there is an exchange between Mordecai and Esther. At first she sees Mordecai mourning and all she wants to do is help, but the help is rejected, v4, 'When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.' This leads to her trying to get to the bottom of the problem, she sends someone to find out what is wrong and she hears the news, and gets given a command, v5-9, 'Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. ⁶ Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, ⁷ and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. ⁹ And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.' Mordecai issues a challenge that Esther go into the King's presence and beseech him of behalf of the Jews to do something, using her position to help.

Mordecai has had a crisis of faith and he has repented and turned to God in prayer. Esther now stands at the same crossroads. She spells out the cost of what is being asked of her as she offers excuses, v10-11, 'Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, ¹¹ "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days." Excuses are funny things aren't they. Sometimes they are obviously false, but so many of our excuses have truth in them. It is true that there was a rule where only 7 people in the kingdom called 'friends' had the right to enter the king's presence without an invitation. The historian Herodotus records the truth that if anyone came unsummoned they could face death. But these truths act as a veneer to hide our duty or our sin. Our hearts didn't want to do the right thing; or they wanted that sin, and the facts are a convenient justification that we can use to fool others, but not God or ourselves.

So Mordecai offers the bruise of a friend and gives her the hard word, v12-14, 'And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. ¹³ Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴ For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" One of the signs that Mordecai has made a positive move towards his faith is his calling Esther to do the right thing, where once he was

pretty passive in allowing her to do the wrong thing. We all need people in our lives who will confront us in our sin. Do you need to be this person; do you need someone to confront you like this? He makes a number of points. Firstly, don't think that being in a palace you will be passed over. In other words, don't be an ostrich that sticks your head in the sand hoping the problem will not affect you. V14 is an interesting point because it has been taken by most commentators to be a point of faith on Mordecai's part, that even if Esther does not act, God will raise up help from somewhere else. Here is Mordecai renewed in his faith, praying and fasting to a God who has mercy; to a God who has already restored Israel to the land; who is repenting and expecting God to respond in mercy; and now he admits that God is sovereign and will act to preserve His people. Not only that we can detect a technically sophisticated doctrine of concurrence. Mordecai is not saying God will do a miracle working apart from means, but rather that God will use some means and raise up help through someone else. Mordecai does not know who God's instrument is, but He is certain that God's protection of His people, as part of the fulfilling of the promise to Abraham will come to pass. Mordecai is not presuming to be a prophet who knows exactly what God is doing, no but he is assuming the general way in which God uses means, in particular people to bring His will to pass. And like Esther our duty is not to procrastinate and know what God's will is right now, waiting to be told by a sign or an audible voice that it is our place to get the job done. The challenge is, will you be a partner with God, will God get His will done through you, or despite you. Mordecai is not doubting whether God's will can fail, it will come to pass, but rather debating who His willing or unwilling instrument is. Mordecai challenges Esther to be that instrument, not because she knows God's mind but by doing the right thing. Many of us have agonized over what God's will is, Mordecai is not asking whether you know God's mind but whether it is in your power to do something. Are you in a position to meet a need; to render a service? Then do it, not because you have had a word, but because it is the right thing to do.

If we were going to look for Christ in this section it is at this point that v14 would beat us a path to Christ. The Bible is full of saviors who have failed. Adam failed his race; every judge; every King, even the best like David and Solomon. But God has raised up a Savior for sinners from their sins by providing Jesus Christ. God has provided a sin bearer to die our death; He has provided a federal head who has kept the law on our behalf; He has provided a trailblazer who has been resurrected as the firstfruits of a greater harvest. When it comes to being delivered from our greatest enemies God has provided Christ, but have we received Him?

How does Esther respond? V15-17, 'Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." ¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.' Does she think herself untouchable because she is the favored concubine; does she just focus on herself right now and what she needs; does she make a choice to abandon the faith of her youth and her people and double down on her Persian identity? No challenged by Mordecai's example; challenged by His faith, she makes a choice. Here is a girl who is in her late teens or early twenties having to make a choice which will change her life forever. Will she own her faith, her God, her people and take whatever consequences come; or will she hide? Will she do the right thing though it is costly; though it could cost

her life and bring terrible consequences upon her head; or will she put off the hard decision hoping it will all go away? Which is better to live like a coward; in sin and comfort being concerned only with your own affairs; or dying for the truth, in obedience to God, selflessly serving others? She chooses obedience to God not an easy life, we can see this in her words, 'if I perish, I perish.'

Like Esther we can grow comfortable in our assimilation, but then an opportunity to get out of our comfort zone, and risk our situation to do the right thing sits before us. Will we just continue sitting in our comfort, or will we do the right thing even though it may cost us? Maybe you are a young person here today and you are faced with a choice like this. Do you face the choice of going public with your faith; of associating yourself with God's people and facing the consequences? Esther is at a crossroads and she makes the right turn. If we are looking for Christ in this text here is another place we can look. Someone who is royalty risking their royal position and putting their life on the line to save their people. This is what Christ has done for us casting the mold for costly service.

Difficult times and difficult choices are part of God's sovereign purposes to make us more holy. Mordecai was not a good instructor in truth but a model of doing what is necessary to get ahead. But when he came to a crisis he leaned into his faith and learnt to believe God's promises; to instruct and confront sin instead of enabling it. Esther who was brought up with compromise taught to seek self-advancement in Persia; she learnt faith in God and to embrace the costly obedience of being identified with God's people. What do you need to learn from this text today?