

## SESSION 3

# STAND DOWN

### ▶ ***The Point***

Surrendering to God leads to greater things.

### ▶ ***The Passage***

Esther 4:1-3,10-16

### ▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

We typically associate heroism with grand and glorious acts. Such actions often come with great risk. Heroic acts also can occur with little outward notice—but that certainly makes them no less grand and glorious. Take the heroes of the International Justice Mission (IJM). Their goal is to rescue boys and girls who are enslaved by trafficking. They employ thousands of lawyers who work in dangerous parts of the world to pry vulnerable children from the hands of their masters. Yet before they pick up a phone, write a legal brief, or ride along with local police to apprehend traffickers, they pray. IJM also takes their staff on spiritual retreats four times a year, and they gather in Washington, D.C., for a Global Prayer Gathering. With so much work to do, why don't they just jump into the fray? IJM knows that biblical justice begins not with actions or words, but in lament and worship before God. People often look to Esther as a great heroine in Scripture. And she was—but before she and Mordecai stepped into a risky, life-threatening moment of justice, they did something just as heroic. They sought God in prayer.

### ▶ ***The Setting***

The events in Esther occurred during the reign of King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes. After the king selected Esther as his new queen, she followed Mordecai's counsel and did not reveal her ethnic identity. Meanwhile, Ahasuerus promoted Haman. This Agagite, however, became enraged because Mordecai refused to bow to him. Thus Haman plotted to destroy all of Mordecai's people, the Jews. Haman succeeded in getting the king to issue an order to that effect.

# What does the Bible say?

## **Sackcloth and ashes**

(v. 1)—Mourners fashioned sackcloth from coarse material such as goat or camel hair. They also placed ashes on their heads or sat in ashes.

## **Esther 4:1-3,10-16**

**<sup>1</sup> When Mordecai learned all that had occurred, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, went into the middle of the city, and cried loudly and bitterly.**

**<sup>2</sup> He went only as far as the King's Gate, since the law prohibited anyone wearing sackcloth from entering the King's Gate.**

**<sup>3</sup> There was great mourning among the Jewish people in every province where the king's command and edict came. They fasted, wept, and lamented, and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.**

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**<sup>10</sup> Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to tell Mordecai,**

**<sup>11</sup> "All the royal officials and the people of the royal provinces know that one law applies to every man or woman who approaches the king in the inner courtyard and who has not been summoned—the death penalty—unless the king extends the gold scepter, allowing that person to live. I have not been summoned to appear before the king for the last thirty days."**

**<sup>12</sup> Esther's response was reported to Mordecai. <sup>13</sup> Mordecai told the messenger to reply to Esther, "Don't think that you will escape the fate of all the Jews because you are in the king's palace.**

**<sup>14</sup> If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this."**

**<sup>15</sup> Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup> "Go and assemble all the Jews who can be found in Susa and fast for me. Don't eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my female servants will also fast in the same way. After that, I will go to the king even if it is against the law. If I perish, I perish."**





## Esther 4:1-3 Commentary

**[Verse 1]** God wants His people to grieve injustice and call out to Him. Haman had succeeded in receiving from King Ahasuerus the money and personnel necessary to set his evil plot into motion. (See Esth. 3:11.) In contrast to God's concern over injustice, Haman's actions reflect unconcern regarding the tragedy about to occur in the kingdom. Meanwhile the events taking place disturbed and perplexed Susa's inhabitants. The city's populace demonstrated greater concern over the proposed injustice than did the city's leaders.

**Mordecai learned all that had occurred.** He apparently had more information, perhaps because of his responsibilities at the King's Gate, than the official notice contained. (See 4:7.) Mordecai's actions signified deep sorrow and humiliation. People commonly expressed grief in the Old Testament period in three basic ways: by tearing their clothing, by wearing **sackcloth and ashes**, and by wailing with deep emotion. First, tearing one's clothing provided a method of emotional release. Second, wearing *sackcloth and ashes* indicated mourning. Sackcloth garments, made of coarse material such as goat or camel hair, may have been shaped like a loose-fitting sack worn over the shoulders or may have consisted only of a loincloth. When mourners wore this harsh, black material next to the skin, it surely chafed their flesh. In addition to wearing sackcloth, mourners typically sprinkled ashes on their heads. These demonstrations of grief reflected both discomfort and humiliation.

Mordecai expressed strong emotions as well as strong convictions. In his grief he **cried loudly and bitterly**. This Hebrew phrase more literally reads "he cried a cry (that was) great and bitter." Mordecai's cry, however, represents more than a funeral wail. The Hebrew term rendered "cried" appears elsewhere in the Old Testament to identify a cry for help in times of distress. Where did Mordecai express his intense grief? He did so in **the middle of the city**. His public display of emotion called attention to the injustice taking place.

**[Verses 2-3]** The inspired biblical writer noted that Mordecai **went only as far as the King's Gate** as he publicly expressed his cry of protest and grief. He carefully followed Persian protocol in demonstrating his concern over the proposed injustice against his people. Apparently, Persian etiquette required that an individual never upset the king. Thus mourners typically did not express grief in the king's presence. (See Neh. 2:1-2.) This verse depicts the deep and widespread mourning that occurred among the Jewish people throughout Ahasuerus's kingdom. Their actions mirrored Mordecai's response to the king's decree. The Jews **fasted, wept**, and lay in sackcloth and ashes. From a human perspective this verse represents the low point of the story. God's people were doomed to death unless someone delivered them. From a spiritual perspective, however, this verse also embodies a high point in the narrative. The people realized their need for God's deliverance and sought it through fasting, weeping, and wailing. Although this passage does not mention prayer, the people's actions imply that their weeping and mourning were an act of seeking God.



## **Esther 4:10-14 Commentary**

**[Verses 10-11]** God wants His people to look for His hand at work wherever He has placed them. Esther sent clothing to replace Mordecai's sackcloth, he refused the garments. Then Esther dispatched one of her attendants to learn the reason for his actions. Mordecai informed Hathach of the decree ordering the Jews' destruction and gave Hathach a copy of the document to show to Esther. Mordecai's message also instructed Esther to approach King Ahasuerus and plead with him for her people. (See Esth. 4:4-9.) Verse 10 introduces Esther's response. Esther reminded Mordecai of **the death penalty** to anyone approaching the king without first being summoned. Esther may have been mildly reproaching Mordecai for commanding her to appear before the king. (See v. 8.) Persian custom did permit a person to send a message to the king requesting an audience with him. Perhaps Esther felt she could not feasibly make such a request because the king had not summoned her **for the last thirty days**. That fact could well signal the king's displeasure with her. An alternate suggestion is that Esther did not send a message to the king because she would have been required to state her purpose, something she was not yet ready to do.

**[Verses 12-13]** Esther's response was reported back to Mordecai. Mordecai's response was direct and to the point. His message included a warning for Esther. She should not assume that she would **escape the fate of all the Jews** simply because she held the position of queen. Her royal status would not save her from the consequences of Haman's edict directed against all Jews. In reality, Esther had no safe choices. If she approached the king uninvited, she faced danger. If she did nothing, she also confronted peril.

**[Verse 14]** Mordecai counseled Esther that if she refused to take a stand for her people, she and her father's house would **be destroyed**. The Hebrew verb also means "to perish." The same verb appears in Esther 4:16, where Esther expressed her resolve to go to the king, saying, "If I perish, I perish." The construction of the phrase **keep silent** in the original language signals that Mordecai emphasized these words. The context makes clear that Mordecai warned Esther of the consequences if she failed to speak up for her people. Mordecai confronted Esther with her options. Approaching the king involved the risk of her death. Refusing to approach him, however, would mean the certain demise not only of Esther, but also of Mordecai. They would experience the decreed fate. The word **time** appears twice in verse 14. Its basic meaning relates to time viewed as an opportunity or season. In deciding whether or not to approach the king, Esther needed to reflect on God's purpose for her life. God had guided in the process of her being selected as queen. He had providentially chosen her for service, for the unique task of helping to rescue His people. He had brought her to a crisis situation where she faced a decision. Would she choose to use her position as queen to aid in God's deliverance of His people at that opportune time in history?



10 minutes

# STUDY THE BIBLE

## NOTES

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### ALTERNATE QUESTION:

*How can we involve others as a support system in times when we need to take a stand?*

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## Esther 4:15-16

**15** Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: **16** “Go and assemble all the Jews who can be found in Susa and fast for me. Don’t eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my female servants will also fast in the same way. After that, I will go to the king even if it is against the law. If I perish, I perish.”

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Esther 4:15-16 on page 102 of the PSG.

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from page 102 of the PSG.

- ▶ Even though Esther was settled into the palace and married to the king, she was still, at the heart of the matter, a daughter of Israel.
- ▶ Esther would not take action and go before the king until the people first went before God in prayer and fasting.
- ▶ Esther trusted in God’s ability to deliver and His sovereign will.

**DISCUSS: Question #5** on page 102 of the PSG: **“What can we learn from Esther about following Christ?”**

**DO:** Direct group members to complete the activity “Priorities” on page 103 of the PSG. As time permits, encourage volunteers to share responses.



*List the important actions Esther and Mordecai took in order of priority?*

Fasting    Praying    Enlisting others    Appealing to the king  
 Grieving    Defining the problem    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

*Why did you list them in this order?*

*Consider a problem you are dealing with or may in the near future. How does evaluating Esther and Mordecai’s method of dealing with this situation help?*

**LEADER PACK (OPTIONAL):** Make copies of **Pack Item 10**, the “Prayer and Fasting” handout, for each group member. Ask group members to consider beginning or continuing this spiritual discipline as a response to this session.

### PRAYER AND FASTING

We find people who practiced prayer and fasting throughout the Bible. Fasting is often used to help us focus on God and to show to have a deeper experience with God.

- ▶ The primary purpose of prayer and fasting is to help us focus on God and His will (1 Kings 18:26; 2 Kings 19:18; Psalm 139:2; Matthew 6:17).
- ▶ Sometimes all the people in the nation would fast (1 Kings 18:26; Esther 4:16).
- ▶ People fasted to request and to seek God's forgiveness and mercy (1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 12:16; Isaiah 58).
- ▶ Some of passages describe how individuals and groups who were proud of their spiritual status were more responsive to how God would bless them by making their fasting public. Some passages describe how God's response to this practice in Matthew 6.

**WHEN YOU FAST**

Worship God, so that your fasting will draw you closer to Him.

Fast to seek God's will and to seek His forgiveness and mercy.

If you fast to show others, make sure your motives are pure and that you are not trying to impress others with your fast.

Read Matthew 6:16-18

**3 TYPES OF FASTING**

Partial fast: involves a restriction of one's diet, often based on religious or health beliefs.

Planned fast: observing from food, but not from health.

Absolute fast: abstention of both food and liquids (this type of absolute fast is typically used to enter their lives).

**LENGTH OF FASTING**

Fasting is a personal choice.

Readers of the Bible (Leviticus 16:29, 31; 23:29)

\*This may mean you need to go to the doctor if you have health issues or are taking medication. Please consult your doctor.

## Esther 4:15-16 Commentary

**[Verses 15-16]** God desires His people to trust Him and surrender to His work. Esther responded to Mordecai's message regarding her need to reflect on God's purpose for her life. Even though she had become queen, Esther still identified with her people. She recognized she needed their spiritual support in the mission she had accepted. Thus Esther instructed Mordecai to gather the Jews in Susa and have them **fast** for her. The reference to fasting implies both prayer and fasting. Not only did Esther need the support of her people, but also and more importantly, she knew that her people's deliverance depended on God's intervention.

Fasting meant refraining from eating food. Through fasting people sought to know God in a deeper experience and to discern His will. The Scriptures identify three main types of fasting. First, a partial fast involved a restriction of one's diet rather than total abstinence from food. (See Dan. 10:3.) Second, a normal fast meant abstaining from food, but not from liquids. Third, an absolute fast included avoidance of both food and liquids. (See Acts 9:9.) An absolute fast apparently lasted no more than three days. Esther requested her people to engage in an absolute fast. She stipulated that the Jews in Susa not to **eat or drink for three days, night or day**. Esther and her maidens also would fast in the same manner. Of course, prayer accompanied such fasting. Esther obviously believed that God responded to His people's prayers.

Following the three days of fasting and prayer, Esther would approach King Ahasuerus even though it was **against the law**. In ancient Persia the law consisted of what the king desired. Four times in the Book of Esther this Hebrew term rendered variously as "edict" or "law" is connected with "the king's command" (Esth. 2:8; 4:3; 8:17; 9:1). Approaching the king without first being invited required great courage. That Esther would die if the king did not extend his scepter to her demonstrates the severity of Persian law. Esther's words, "**If I perish, I perish,**" reveal that she understood the gravity of the situation. She had come to grips with the danger involved in acting on her people's behalf. Both Vashti, whom Ahasuerus had dethroned, and Mordecai had previously displayed courage when confronting crisis situations. Vashti demonstrated courage by refusing to humiliate herself to satisfy the king's desire. Mordecai showed bravery by refusing to bow to Haman. Esther's actions reflected even greater valor. Although God's providential care for His people had brought Esther to the position of queen, she accepted the challenge that could have cost her life. She chose to violate the king's command for the sake of her people.

Some Bible scholars have interpreted Esther's statement, "*If I perish, I perish,*" as an expression of resignation or fatalism. However, I believe her words assert her courageous determination and willing submission to God's leadership. She chose to stand down—to submit to God's purpose for her at the risk of losing her life.



5 minutes

# LIVE IT OUT

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to page 104 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following options:



## Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Read.** Learn about the needs of a vulnerable people group in your community or some place around the world. Websites like [imb.org](http://imb.org), [compassion.com](http://compassion.com) and [ijm.org](http://ijm.org) can give you insight into the plight of others. Let the weight of the injustices sink in and impact you.
- ▶ **Pray.** Ask the Lord not only to open your eyes to specific injustices but to move your heart to pray on behalf of the vulnerable. Pray consistently. And pray with fervency.
- ▶ **Act.** Consider ways you and your group can speak out on behalf of the vulnerable. You can also partner with organizations meeting a need, using both your time and resources to get involved.

## Wrap It Up

**TRANSITION:** Read or restate the final paragraph from page 104 of the PSG:

There are many kinds of heroes in this world, but none who make as significant an impact eternally as those who act in partnership with God. Before acting, be sure to get down on your knees in prayer.

**PRAY:** Conclude by asking God for wisdom to know His will and courage to surrender to it. Thank Him for the privilege of serving Him in His mission to win others to Christ.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at [BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra](http://BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra)