

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 114** and ask **Question #1: Who are some of your favorite heroines?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 115** and the author's words of praise for the heroes of the International Justice Mission (IJM) in their work of rescuing boys and girls enslaved in human trafficking. These unknown individuals make a huge difference in the lives of children who suffer in this horrible injustice.

SAY: "Today we need believers who will surrender themselves and their agendas to God for His purposes."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 115: Surrendering to God leads to greater things.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us to yield our lives to Him.

SESSION 3 STAND DOWN



The Point

Surrendering to God leads to greater things.

The Bible Meets Life

Standing up for the sake of others can sometimes be easy: casting a vote, writing a check, or sending an email and making an appeal. Such actions are good, but they

require little from us. Sometimes, though, taking a stand doesn't sit well in the eyes of family, employers, or the community. When it's costly, what do we do? Esther faced just such a decision, yet she was willing to set aside her own self-preservation to see that justice was done.

The Passages

Esther 4:1-3,10-16

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.

Esther 4:1-3

- 1 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.
- 2 He went only as far as the King's Gate, since the law prohibited anyone wearing sackcloth from entering the King's Gate.
- 3 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.

KEY WORDS: 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.

Verse 1. God wants His people to grieve injustice and call out to Him. The focus of the Esther 3 reveals Haman as the initiator of this plan to exterminate the Jews. Haman had succeeded in receiving from King Ahasuerus the money and personnel necessary to set his evil plot into motion (Esth. 3:8-15). Meanwhile the events taking place disturbed and perplexed Susa's inhabitants. The city's populace demonstrated great concern over the proposed injustice.

Esther 4:1 details Mordecai's response to the king's order regarding the Jews' destruction. When **Mordecai learned all that had occurred**, his actions in signified deep sorrow and humiliation. He grieved that his people would perish because of the king's order.

1▶ 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. In Jewish practice today the mourners closest to the deceased individual still commonly tear their clothes during the funeral ceremony.

Second, wearing *sackcloth and ashes* indicated mourning. Sackcloth garments 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

STUDY THE BIBLE

Esther 4:1-3



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 118.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Esther 4:1-3.

GUIDE: Refer members to **PSG page 116** for background on the edict to destroy the Jews.

King Ahasuerus approved and funded Haman's ruthless plan ... sentencing all Jews to annihilation on a single day. This was ... an irreversible decision that would affect thousands of innocent people. It was truly an unjust law.

GUIDE: Use **KEY WORDS** on this page (**PSG, p. 116**) for an explanation of the phrase *sackcloth and ashes*.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** to provide further explanation to the phrase *sackcloth and ashes*.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 2 to describe how Mordecai expressed his intense grief and the widespread mourning of the Jewish people throughout the king's domain.

DISCUSS: Question #2

(PSG, p. 117): When was the last time you lamented over an injustice?

(Alternate: How do you typically respond when you feel targeted?)

TRANSITION: "In the next verses we will see an emotional interaction between Esther and Mordecai that sets the stage for future events."

next to the skin, it surely chafed their flesh. Today the custom of wearing black clothing at funerals is still retained to some degree. In addition to wearing sackcloth, mourners typically sprinkled ashes on their heads. These demonstrations of grief reflected both discomfort and humiliation. ◀

2▶ 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." The Hebrew term rendered "bitter" is marah—the same word that appears in Exodus 15:23 to identify the place where the Israelites found bitter water in the wilderness. 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. In Nehemiah 5:6 the term depicts the outcry of certain Jews who were being oppressed by their rich neighbors. The Septuagint records that Mordecai's wailing included the following statement: "An innocent people is condemned to death."

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.

Verse 2. 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. A more literal translation of the Hebrew text of the latter part of verse 2 is: "because none could enter the King's Gate in a garment of sackcloth." 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).

Verse 3. This verse depicts the widespread mourning that occurred among the Jewish people when they heard about it. 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. The people realized their need for God's deliverance and sought it through fasting, weeping, and wailing. This passage does not mention prayer, but the people's actions imply that their weeping and mourning were an act of seeking God. ◀

Esther 4:10-14

10 Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to tell Mordecai,

11 “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.”

12 Esther’s response was reported to Mordecai.

13 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.

14 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.”

3 ▶ **Verse 10.** God wants His people to look for His hand at work wherever He has placed them. Esther learned of Mordecai’s actions through her servants. When the queen sent clothing to replace Mordecai’s sackcloth, he refused the garments. Then Esther dispatched Hathach, one of her attendants, to Mordecai 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 instructed Esther to approach King Ahasuerus and plead with him for her people (Esth. 4:4-9). Verse 10 introduces Esther’s response that Hathach would deliver to Mordecai. ◀

4 ▶ **Verse 11.** In her response to her cousin’s instructions that she approach the king and plead with him on the Jews’ behalf, Esther reminded Mordecai of **the death penalty** that could apply to anyone approaching the king without first being summoned. The life of the individual who approached

STUDY THE BIBLE

Esther 4:10-14



15 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Esther 4:10-14.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 118**, to provide details regarding the communication between Esther and Mordecai.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 3** to provide the background for this passage from Esther 4:4-9.

- *Esther’s servants reported the news to her, and she was overcome with fear.*
- *She sent clothes to replace Mordecai’s sackcloth, but he refused them.*
- *Esther sent Hathach, a trusted servant, to find out why Mordecai was acting in such a way.*
- *Mordecai told him about the decree ordering the slaughter of the Jews.*
- *Mordecai gave Hathach a copy of the decree to show to Esther. He instructed her to go to the king on behalf of her people.*

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 4 on page 121 and this page to explain the law that did not allow anyone to approach the king unless he summoned them. The death penalty could apply to anyone who committed this crime.

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 5 to show that Mordecai explained Esther should not assume she would escape the fate of her people.

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 6 on this page through page 124 to provide information about verse 14, which is key to understanding the Book of Esther.

- *Silence is not an option.*
- *God will provide relief and deliverance from another source.*
- *You and your father's family will perish if you do nothing.*
- *God placed you where you are for such a time as this.*

the king without being called would be spared only if the king extended his **gold scepter** to that person. Apparently everyone knew this law. Such a law appeared justifiable because the Persian Empire had a long history of assassinations. In fact, less than 10 years later, an assassin murdered King Ahasuerus while he slept. Thus Esther may have been mildly reproaching Mordecai for commanding her to appear before the king (v. 8).

Persian custom did permit a person to send a message to the king requesting an audience with him. Why didn't Esther follow this procedure? 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. Thus Esther may have viewed it as pointless to request an audience with him. 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. The Hebrew text does not specifically identify who did the declaring or reporting. Because the verb is plural, apparently more than one individual was involved in relaying the message from Esther to Mordecai. Most likely Hathach was one of the messengers who delivered the communication between the two cousins.

5 ▶ Mordecai's response was direct and to the point. He did not address Esther as a Persian queen. Instead he gave her advice as his adopted daughter. Mordecai's 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. Because Esther was Jewish, approaching King Ahasuerus was no more dangerous for her than not approaching him because Haman's edict also assured her doom. ◀

6 ▶ Verse 14. This verse provides the key to understanding the entire Book of Esther. It emphasizes the main subject of the book, the theme of divine providence. God would not allow His people to be completely destroyed. His long-range plans for them would reach a climax centuries later. God had

chosen to send the Messiah through the Jewish people. Jesus, born of the Davidic line, would live, die, and rise again to make provision for the redemption of people of every race and nationality from sin.

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 verb commonly means "to die." 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 term Abaddon is derived from this verb. That transliterated noun appears in Revelation 9:11, where it identifies the Hebrew name of the angel of the abyss, the king of the locusts in the first woe.

The construction of the phrase **keep silent** in the Hebrew signals that Mordecai emphasized these words. The basic idea behind the verb is the absence of communication. That lack of communication can be expressed either by not hearing or by not speaking. The context of Esther 4:14 makes clear that Mordecai warned Esther of the consequences if she failed to speak up for her people.

The Hebrew word translated **relief** comes from a verb meaning "to be wide" or "to be spacious." The noun literally designates "a space" or "an interval" Thus, the term comes to signal distance or freedom from distress. It means "respite" or "relief." The word rendered **deliverance** derives from a verb meaning "to rescue," "to save," or "to deliver." It appears in the Old Testament in the sense of both physical and spiritual deliverance. The noun form occurs only in Esther 4:14.

Mordecai told Esther if she refused to speak up, the Jews would experience deliverance **from another place**. What does this intriguing phrase mean? Some Bible scholars view it as a veiled reference to God. Others interpret it as an allusion to another human source of rescue—perhaps Mordecai himself or another Jewish official about whom we have no knowledge. In either case the Jews' preservation would ultimately result from God's providential care for His 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. Taking into account Mordecai's statement that the Jewish people would experience deliverance from another source if Esther refused to act, other Bible scholars interpret the reference to the destruction of Esther and her father's house as God's specific judgment on them if Esther refused to speak up on behalf of her people.

The word **time** appears twice in verse 14. The Hebrew term can convey a variety of meanings, including "time of

GUIDE: Ask someone to read the following on **PSG page 119:**

*"This one statement reminded Esther of the unlikely path she had been on and the potential power she held in her hands. It was no twist of fate or accident that she had gone from an unknown Jewish girl to being the queen of Persia. We can see the hand of God at work, and that is likely what Mordecai wanted Esther to see. **Could it be that God put you here, in this time and place, to act on His behalf and to save His people?**"*

DISCUSS: Question #3 (PSG, p. 119): What's your reaction to the exchange between Mordecai and Esther?

SAY: "We often use the phrase 'open door of opportunity.' At this stage of life we must be aware of open doors of divine opportunity and be willing to walk through them."

DISCUSS: Question #4 (PSG, p. 120): Can you identify a time when God placed you in a situation for "such a time as this"?

(Alternate: How do you respond to the statement: "All that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing"?)

TRANSITION: “In the next verses we will see Esther’s heroic response to Mordecai.”

STUDY THE BIBLE
Esther 4:15-16



10 minutes

READ: Read Esther 4:15-16.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 7** to explain what Esther did in response to her circumstances:

- She asked Mordecai to gather the people to pray and fast for three days.
- After that, she would approach the king.

LEADER PACK: Distribute copies of **Item 10: Prayer and Fasting** Handout. Use this as a guide to explain examples of fasting, types of fasts, and how to act when fasting.



an event,” “usual time,” “proper time,” or “appointed time.” 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? ◀

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.”

7 ▶ Verses 15-16. God desires His people to trust Him and surrender to His work. Verse 15, quite similar in purpose to verse 12, provides a narrative link that moves forward the drama of the Book of Esther. A very literal translation of the Hebrew is: “And Esther said to cause to return to Mordecai.” In other words Esther responded to Mordecai’s message regarding her need to reflect on God’s purpose for her life. Verse 16 records Esther’s response to the great challenge that confronted her. Would she take the risk involved? Would she be willing to stand down—to submit to God’s purpose for bringing her to the royal position of queen? Would she act to save her people?

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 (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 (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 **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. The two fasts mentioned in this chapter (Esth. 4:3,16) contrast with the feasts mentioned at the beginning and conclusion of the book (see 1:3,5,9; 9:17-22).

Following the three days of fasting and prayer, Esther would approach King Ahasuerus even though it was **against the law**. The Hebrew word translated *law* appears 20 times in the Book of Esther. In the CSB the Hebrew term is rendered "decree" in Esther 4:8, "edict" in 2:8 and 4:3, and "regulation" in 2:12. The term possibly is a loanword from the Persian language. 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" (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. ◀

8 ▶ 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. ◀

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 8 to explain what Esther meant when she said, "if I perish, I perish."

- *She understood the gravity of the situation.*
- *She had come to grips with the danger involved in acting on her people's behalf.*

GUIDE: Refer members to the following points on **PSG page 121**.

This passage has much to teach us about what it means to follow Christ:

1. *Praying and fasting.*
2. *Living on mission for God.*

DISCUSS: **Question #5**

(PSG, p. 122): What can we learn from Esther's response to Mordecai in these verses?

(Alternate: How can we involve others as a support system in times when we need to take a stand?)

DO: Ask volunteers to share responses to the activity "**Do Something, Not Nothing**" on **PSG page 122**.

LIVE IT OUT**5 minutes**

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:**
Surrendering to God leads to greater things.

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 123)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Encourage group members to consider the many things we can learn from this turning point in the life of Esther. God is always at work around us whether we are aware of it or not. Be prepared for the moment when He suddenly makes clear what He is doing and what your part will be in His work.

PRAY: "Father, help us to always be ready when You reveal Your ways to us so we will say 'yes' to You."

LIVE IT OUT

Recall moments in your life when you were at the right place at the right time to make a difference. As you surrender to God, consider what He is leading you to do "for such a time as this."

- ▶ **Read.** Learn about the needs of a vulnerable people group in your community or some place around the world. Websites like imb.org, compassion.org, and ijm.org can give you insight into the plight of others. Let the weight of the injustices sink in.
- ▶ **Pray.** Ask the Lord to open your eyes to injustice and move your heart to act on behalf of the vulnerable.
- ▶ **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.



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Bronze vase decorated with bull and horses in high relief; from Susa, which was the setting for the Book of Esther.

Haman's genocidal scheme would eradicate all Jews. Upon learning that the king had enacted Haman's plan into law, Mordecai tore his clothing, dressed in sackcloth, covered himself with ashes, and cried bitterly. In ancient cultures, tearing one's garments was a common reaction to bad news, such as the death of a relative or the defeat of an army. Sackcloth was a coarse, dark fabric fashioned from the hair of camels or goats. Mordecai's reactions were biblical expressions of grief.

Tears are more of a biological or emotional reaction rather than a

cultural expression to some deeply felt loss. But every civilization observed certain expressions of grief and mourning.

The Persians believed the dead were punished in hell or rewarded in heaven. Funeral rites took place immediately after death. Persians left their dead in exposed locations for the flesh to decay or for scavengers to consume it. Mourners, all dressed in white, conducted the burial procession in silence in order not to interfere with prayers for the dead. During the first three days after death, the deceased's family fasted, prayed, and sacrificed to the gods. Later the family buried the bones in graves to await the judgment day.

Every ancient Near Eastern culture exhibited sorrow. Signs of grief like crying, were universal. Others, such as wearing sackcloth and ashes, were widespread throughout the region.

The excerpt above is from the article "With Sackcloth and Ashes" (Winter 2016-17), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

When we surrender our lives to God it leads to greater things forever.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, "Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All," on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.



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