

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

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 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 (CSB)

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.

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."

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."

Esther 4:1-3 Commentary

Verse 1: Haman had succeeded in receiving from King Ahasuerus the money and personnel necessary to set his evil plot into motion (Esther 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 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, were not comfortable to wear. 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." 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 Nehemiah 2:1-2).

Verse 3 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.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

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Esther 4:10-14 (CSB)

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.”

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
What are some fears that often keep us from doing the right thing?

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READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Esther 4:10-14.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 100 of the PSG: “What’s your reaction to the exchange between Mordecai and Esther?”

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGES 100-101): Mordecai sent a copy of Haman’s edict with Esther’s servant so that he could explain the situation to her and tell her to go and plead with the king on the Jews’ behalf.

- » After seeing the edict, Esther sent her servant to communicate with Mordecai that, even though she was the queen, her power to act was limited. Even the queen was forbidden to go into the king’s presence unless specifically invited. To go before the king unannounced could result in Esther’s death.
- » Mordecai’s faith is evident here. A tragedy awaited the Jews, yet Mordecai was confident that God would be faithful and preserve His people. It was just a matter for Esther to decide if she would be the instrument God used.
- » Mordecai ended with a strong appeal that alluded to the providence of God: “Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this” (v. 14). It was no twist of fate or accident that Esther 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.

TRANSITION: The next verses reveal Esther’s response to this pivotal decision.

Esther 4:10-14 Commentary

Verses 10-11: Esther sent clothing to replace Mordecai's sackcloth, but 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 (Esther 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 (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 past 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 reply 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.

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?

Esther 4:15-16 Commentary

Verses 15-16: 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 (Daniel 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.

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" (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. 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

NOTES

PRAYER AND FASTING

We find people who practiced prayer and fasting throughout the Bible. Fasting is refraining from eating food for a period of time to have a deeper experience with God.

- ▶ The primary purpose of prayer and fasting is the pursuit of God's kingdom as one seeks to better know God and His will (Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Psalm 69:12; Matthew 6:12).
- ▶ Sometimes all the people in the nation fasted (Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 4:15-17).
- ▶ People fasted to repent and to seek God's forgiveness and mercy (1 Samuel 7; 2 Samuel 12:15-23; Jonah 3).
- ▶ Several passages describe the abuses connected to fasting (Isaiah 58; Zephaniah 7:1-7).

In the Gospels, hypocritical individuals and groups who were proud of their spiritual selves made sure everyone knew how spiritual they were by making their fasting public. Jesus provided a much needed correction to this practice in Matthew 6.

WHEN YOU FAST
 Watch your face, so that your fasting isn't obvious to others.
 Look normal, don't attract attention to yourself.
 Don't be sad, just between you and God.
 If you fast to draw attention, that is your reward; others will notice, but not God.
 Read Matthew 6:16-18

3 TYPES OF FASTING
Partial fast - involved a restriction of one's diet rather than total abstinence from food (Daniel 10:3).
Normal fast - abstaining from food, but not from liquids.
Absolute fast - avoidance of both food and liquids (John 19:18; absolute fast apparently lasted no more than three days).

LENGTH OF FASTING
 Suitable to suit
 28 hours
 Number of days (most popular) 1, 3, 5, 31, 40.
*The length of the fast is determined by your health, season or any other considerations before you decide to fast.

LEADER PACK: In advance, make copies of **Pack Item #10, "Prayer and Fasting"** handout, and distribute one to each group member. Summarize what it means to fast and what the Bible says about it. Explain that prayer and fasting help us to let go of our preferences and surrender to God's plan instead.



SAY: "As you surrender to God, consider what He is leading you to do 'for such a time as this.'"

GUIDE: Lead group members to consider the responses to the Bible study listed on page 104 of the PSG.

- » **Read.** Learn about the needs of a vulnerable people group in your community or some place around the world. Websites such as EndItMovement.com, Compassion.com, and IJM.org can give you insight into the plight of others.
- » **Pray.** Ask the Lord to open your eyes to injustice and move your heart to act on behalf of the vulnerable.
- » **Act.** Let this study move you to bold and risky action. In what ways can you speak out on behalf of the vulnerable? In what ways can you leverage your time and resources on behalf of this cause?

Wrap It Up

SAY: "This week, assess where God has you for this season of life. Your location, career, and relationships are all things God can use if you allow Him to do so.

Approach this season for the opportunity it is: your time to honor God and make a difference in the life of someone else."



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