

# 3

## Stand Down



*Who are some of your favorite heroines?*

QUESTION 1

*Surrendering to God leads to greater things.*



## 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 action 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.

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# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

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## **Esther 4:1-3 (CSB)**

**<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.**

King Ahasuerus approved and funded Haman's ruthless plan to thoroughly eliminate the Jewish people and plunder their possessions (Esther 3:10-11). The edict was published throughout Persia, sentencing all Jews to annihilation on a single day. This was, by all accounts, an irreversible decision that would affect thousands of innocent people. It was truly an unjust law.

When Mordecai learned of the edict, his first response was deep and vocal lament. The original Hebrew language describes Mordecai's crying out as a deep and guttural wailing. As a part of his grief, Mordecai also tore his clothes and wore sackcloth and ashes. In the ancient Near East, this was common practice for mourning. We can reasonably assume that Mordecai's actions also reflected a deep call to God. Mordecai's grief was profound, yet it did not keep him from his duties inside the King's Gate; that would have been a violation of palace decorum. His lament and dress were known, though, and word of his actions reached the queen (4:4).

Mordecai wasn't the only one in mourning. The Jewish population throughout the Persian Empire received the news and lamented their fate. Surely their public acts of weeping, fasting, and wearing sackcloth and ashes disrupted daily life in the empire. We can only wonder how the other people groups might have viewed this behavior. Were they stirred by the impending doom that faced their neighbors? Did any of them lament with the Jews?

***When was the last time you lamented over an injustice?***

**QUESTION 2**

Lamenting—calling to God in deep distress—should be an important part of our own reaction to injustice. Expressing such grief is neither unspiritual nor reflective of a lack of faith. Far from it! Prophets like Jeremiah and Habakkuk lamented the spiritual state of Israel, and Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). We can—and should—express our anger and displeasure over injustice done to others. But we can also be confident that God hears our hearts, just as He heard the cries of the Israelites over injustice (Exodus 3:7-8).

### ***Esther 4:10-14 (CSB)***

<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.”

Mordecai’s cries against the impending injustice against the Jewish people did not go unheard. 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. This was Ahasuerus’s kingdom, and he had total power.

Esther had only limited access to speak to the king. 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.

*What’s your reaction to the exchange between Mordecai and Esther?*

### QUESTION 3

This seems extreme, but it was common in the palace of those with absolute authority.

Yes, Esther could die if she went before the king, but Mordecai wanted Esther to understand the reality of what faced the Jewish people—*her* people. To be silent in the face of this injustice would not be enough to save Esther's life. If Haman's genocide happened, Esther's heritage would be discovered and she and her family would not be spared.

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. This is a sober reminder that God desires to use us in His mission, but He is not dependent on our obedience.

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). 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.

Esther faced a pivotal decision. Everything she had experienced and learned throughout her life would come down to one singular choice. Would she see her life, not as her own, but as God's?



**Esther 4:15-16** (CSB)

**<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.”**

When Mordecai’s appeal reached Esther, she could have selfishly remained silent and hung on to her position, rationalizing that she could possibly avoid death herself. Yet, even though she was settled into the palace and married to the king, Esther was still, at the heart of the matter, a daughter of Israel.

Before she acted, Esther called for a fast by as many Jews as Mordecai could assemble and tell quickly. People typically fasted for one day—and then only during the day—but Esther asked for an unusually long, unbroken, three-day fast. Although the Scripture does not mention that the people prayed, the purpose of fasting was to seek God in prevailing prayer. And the Jews certainly needed to join together in seeking God’s help and intervention in this crisis!

Esther would not take action and go before the king until the people first went before God. Then Esther left the matter in God’s hands: “If I perish, I perish” (v. 16). Esther trusted in God’s ability to deliver, but ultimately trusted His sovereign will.

Today, many Christians around the world face imprisonment, torture, and even death for being followers of Christ. Few, if any of us, may ever have to face the choice of denying Christ or dying, but we are all called to give up our lives, die to ourselves, and follow Jesus. We do not live for ourselves; we live for Christ—and we should stand up for those who have no voice. Let’s bring the good news of God’s kingdom to the world by proclaiming the gospel and by the witness of our acts of mercy.

***How would you summarize Esther’s response to Mordecai in these verses?***

**QUESTION 4**

What can we learn from Esther about following Christ?

QUESTION 5

"No one can sum up all God is able to accomplish through one solitary life, wholly yielded, adjusted, and obedient to Him."

DWIGHT L. MOODY

## LETTING GO



**Like Esther, we each face problems that appear hopeless at first glance. How do you approach these? Rate yourself on the following scales.**

I easily recognize when I'm holding on to a problem I need to surrender to God.



I regularly submit my concerns to the Lord in prayer.



I seek God's response and am confident in His guidance.



## LIVE IT OUT

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 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?

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.**



My thoughts