God Can Use Us

Printed Text • Esther 4:1–3, 9–17

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **IDENTIFY** Esther's and Mordecai's commitments, **FEEL** confident in making commitments without respect to potential personal harm, and **MAKE** commitments despite personal risk.

In Focus

Miriam had just sat down with Celeste in the company cafeteria when several women from the firm's accounting department took a table near that and began chatting. Soon, the noise from the women made it difficult for Miriam and Celeste to concentrate on their conversation. Then, Celeste remarked, "I know it's wrong, but I can't stand those people!" Miriam was taken aback by Celeste's comment. Celeste continued, "They don't believe in God, just in that Muhammad or whatever. All I know is that they're all going straight to hell! They own every gas station in town, and now that this company is hiring them, they are taking our jobs. It's just wrong! They come over here to America but want to maintain their own ways, as if they think they're better than us. If this country is good enough for them to come to, then they ought to dress like us." Miriam was speechless as Celeste voiced her frustration about the Somali women the firm had recently hired.

Miriam was shocked by the hatred in Celeste's words but chose to remain silent. She recognized that Celeste had crossed the line, but Miriam also wondered that many people at the firm would blame her if something happened to Celeste. Moreover, Celeste was not the only one at the firm who harbored strong anti-immigrant sentiments.

Have you ever been in a situation where you had to take a stand, knowing that you would face backlash? How did that make you feel?

Keep In Mind

Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. (Esther 4:16, KJV)

"Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die." (Esther 4:16, NLT)

Words You Should Know

Perceived (Esther 4:1) yada' (Heb.)—Means recognizing or coming to understand or know.
Rent (v. 1) qara' (Heb.)—Tear or rip into pieces.
Gave him commandment (v. 10) tsavah (Heb.)—Ordered or commanded.

Say It Correctly

Mordecai. MOR-duh-kai.
Hatach. hay-**TAWKH.**

KJV Esther 4:1–3, 9–17

1 When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;

2 And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

3 And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;

11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or women, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.

14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

NLT Esther 4:1–3, 9–17

1 When Mordecai learned about all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on burlap and ashes, and went out into the city, crying with a loud and bitter wail.

2 He went as far as the gate of the palace, for no one was allowed to enter the palace gate while wearing clothes of mourning.

3 And as news of the king's decree reached all the provinces, there was great mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, and wailed, and many people lay in burlap and ashes.

9 So Hathach returned to Esther with Mordecai's message.

10 Then Esther told Hathach to go back and relay this message to Mordecai:

11 "All the king's officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter. And the king has not called for me to come to him for thirty days."

12 So Hathach gave Esther's message to Mordecai.

13 Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed.

14 If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai:

16 "Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die."

17 So Mordecai went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

The People, Places, and Times

The Medo-Persian Empire.

The people known in the Bible as the Persians are a combination of two groups—the Medes and the Persians. These two groups were descendants of ancient Indo-Iranian tribes. Persians were a nomadic group, primarily concerned with agriculture and raising livestock. The Persians controlled the southwestern portion of the Iranian plateau. The Median Empire came under the control of the Persians during the rule of Cyrus the Great; however, the two groups continued to exhibit a dual nature in the kingdom. In 539 BC, Cyrus led a combined army of Persians, Medes, and Elamites to conquer Babylon.

The Persian Empire was thus expanded west to the Aegean Sea, and, more importantly, the land of Judah came into the Persian domain. Babylon served as the religious and commercial capital of the Medo-Persian Empire. Shushan was the site of the royal palace and the administrative center of the empire. Darius (the next king after Cyrus) was tolerant of the Jews, who were busy trying to complete the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem and reestablish their lives in Palestine. The relations between Darius and the Jews were relatively peaceful and free from strife.

The reign of Xerxes I (Ahasuerus in the book of Esther), the son of Darius the Great, began in 495 BC. Serious errors in judgment marked Xerxes' reign, including angering the Egyptian priests by

looting their temples, enraging the Greeks by burning Athens, destroying the temples of Babylon, and forbidding the Jews to complete the building of the walls of Jerusalem.

Background

After the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon, he issued a declaration permitting all the conquered nations in exile in Babylonia to return to their homelands. As Babylonia declined and the kingdom of Persia rose, 70 years of exile for Judah came to an end. The Jews had finally been allowed to return to their homeland. Surprisingly, only a few participated in the return. Many of the Jews had become comfortable, and they had elected to remain in the land of their captivity. Mordecai was among this large population of Jews who, although free to return to Israel, chose to remain.

The book of Esther recounts the story of Hadassah, also known as Esther, a Jewish orphan from the tribe of Benjamin. Esther's guardian was Mordecai, the nephew of Esther's father (Esther 2:15). Mordecai was a servant in the palace of King Xerxes I. During the third year of his reign, Xerxes hosted a royal banquet. As a grand finale, the king summoned Vashti, the queen, to appear in her regal attire to display her beauty and enhance the king's glory. Vashti refused, and a humiliated Xerxes deposed her for this act of disobedience. In the seventh year of his reign, Xerxes selected Esther from all the beautiful virgins in his kingdom to replace Vashti as his queen. Esther followed Mordecai's counsel and did not reveal to the king that she was a Jew. When Mordecai uncovered a plot to kill the king, he informed Esther, who in turn reported it to her husband, the king. He had the would-be assassins executed.

In chapter 3, we are introduced to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, a prime minister in the royal court. Mordecai alone refused to bow and reverence Haman in recognition of his advancement by the king. When asked why he would not bow before Haman, Mordecai revealed for the first time that he was a Jew. Haman was enraged and would not allow this slight to go unpunished.

He approached the king and told him of an alleged act of treason (3:8). Haman pointed to the religious differences of the Jews and purported to the king that these differences posed a threat to national security. Haman offered a huge sum of money to Xerxes to proclaim a certain day as the time when anyone in the kingdom could kill every living Jew he encountered and then confiscate their property. Unknown to Xerxes, Haman had a personal agenda, and he was using the king to annihilate all the Jews in the empire. The king was unaware of Esther's ethnic identity, and so when he authorized the decree, Xerxes was unaware he was signing her death warrant.

At-A-Glance

1. Mordecai Mourns for His People (Esther 4:1–3)
2. Mordecai Challenges Esther (vv. 9–12)
3. Mordecai Expresses Confidence in God's Plan (vv. 13–14)
4. Esther Commits to Confrontation (vv. 15–17)

In Depth

1. Mordecai Mourns for His People (Esther 4:1–3)

When Mordecai learns of Haman's decree to kill all the Jews, he is immediately overcome with sorrow and grief. He tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. This was the attire worn by the ancient prophets to indicate they were in mourning. Mordecai's mourning was not done in private. He went into the center of the city and began to cry and wail loudly. This further demonstrates the sincerity of Mordecai's grief. We can reasonably assume that a part of Mordecai's sorrow lay in the fact that his refusal to bow down to Haman had caused the catastrophe that now threatened the life of every Jew in the kingdom.

Like Mordecai, the hearts of present-day Christians should break when they perceive or understand that their actions have caused pain or suffering to others. Mordecai was not alone in grieving the fate of his people. As the written decree arrived, Jews in every province shared Mordecai's grief. Their mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing are evidence that they recognized the terrible danger they now faced. Like Mordecai, they put on sackcloth and ashes.

2. Mordecai Challenges Esther (vv. 9–12)

In verses 4-8, Esther and Mordecai have a back-and-forth dialogue through the messenger Hatach. After explaining Haman's decree, Mordecai then instructs Esther to go herself to talk to the king and appeal to him on behalf of her people. When Hatach delivered the message to Esther, her initial response was avoidance. Esther could only look at the difficulties of the situation and make excuses for why she could not help. In the message she sent back to Mordecai, Esther reminded him that Persian law forbade anyone from entering the king's inner court unless the king first summoned them. Unless the king held out his golden scepter to an uninvited guest, the person would be killed. Esther went on to explain that she had not been called to the king in the previous 30 days. This would indicate that she foresaw no opportunity to speak to the king.

3. Mordecai Expresses Confidence in God's Plan (vv. 13–14)

Mordecai did not accept any of Esther's excuses. He wanted Esther to act, despite the great risk. Mordecai responded to her excuses by offering her encouragement to do right. He told her, "Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews" (v. 13). Here Mordecai was direct with Esther and warned her that she could not hide behind the crown. He insisted that she, too, would suffer if she did not use her position to benefit God's people. Mordecai said that she and her father's house would perish.

His next statement was outstanding. He told Esther that even if she did fail to act, he was confident that God would find some other means to save His people. While the name of God is not mentioned in the text, it is clearly divine intervention to which Mordecai refers. The law of the king was universal and final at that time. Mordecai expressed the belief that only God can override a royal decree and that only the will of God can supersede the king's will. Mordecai also proposed Esther may have come to power as queen for the very purpose of applying to

God's purpose at this very time: "who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (v. 14).

4. Esther Commits to Confrontation (vv. 15–17)

After considering Mordecai's appeal, Esther sent her response. She decided that she would go before the king. Her determination is expressed in her simple declaration, "If I perish, I perish!" Esther's statement is not one of resignation, nor should we view it as fatalistic. Instead, Esther's remark is a statement of faith. She was willing to serve God, according to His will, regardless of the price she may have needed to pay. Esther was demonstrating great courage in her decision to obey God rather than men. While she had the resolve to face the king, she also knew that she must prepare. Before making her request of the king, she realized the need for her and her servants to fast. Esther called on all the Jews in Shushan to join her in this fast. After he heard of Esther's decision to confront the king, Mordecai demonstrated his support for Esther and urged the Jews to fast on her behalf.

Search the Scriptures

1. What did Mordecai do "when he perceived all that was done" (Esther 4:1)?
2. How did the Jews respond to hearing the king's commandment and decree? (v. 3)
3. How long did Esther tell Mordecai to have the Jews fast? (v. 16)

Discuss The Meaning

1. What actual power did Esther have or not have in the Persian court? Discuss how this influences your view of her actions.
2. Consider times in your own life when you might have been challenged to use what you have been given for the benefit of others who were being oppressed. How did you respond?
3. There are no affirmations of personal faith made in the book of Esther nor any explicit references to prayer or repentance made by either Esther or Mordecai. Does this make it more difficult for you to view this account as an example of Esther committing to God? Why or why not?

Liberating Lesson

In this lesson, Esther, a Jew, found herself in a position of power and influence as queen in the court of the Persian emperor. When the Jewish people were threatened, her cousin challenged her to consider if God had raised her to a position of power "for such a time as this." We should consider times in our own lives when we might have been called upon to use our influence for the benefit of others who were being oppressed. How did we respond? Let us consider our commitment to God. He is calling on us to use what He has given us "for such a time as this!"

Application For Activation

If your commitment to Jesus Christ is sincere, ask God to give you greater insight so that you can recognize and address the injustices that occur around you every day. First, it would be beneficial for you to enter a period of fasting, prayer, and targeted Bible study.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Esther 4:1–3, 9–17

1 When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry; 2 And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

When Mordecai, Esther's cousin and adoptive father, learned of the diabolical decree to annihilate the Jews, he "rent" (Heb. qara', kaw-**RAH**, meaning "to tear in pieces") his good clothes and royal robes and put on sackcloth, rough clothes worn as a sign of suffering, lamentation, and desperation. He adorned his face with ashes. Sackcloth and ashes were a widely used show of mourning in the ancient Near East. Jacob wore them when he thought his favorite son Joseph had died (Genesis 37:34). All the Israelites in Jerusalem wore them when Nehemiah read them the Law and they realized how much they had been failing to do in reverencing God (Nehemiah 9:1). When Jonah delivered God's message to the Ninevites, the king decreed that he and everyone beg for mercy in sackcloth and ashes. Even the animals were to show how sorry they were (Jonah 3:5-8)!

Leaving the sanctuary of the palace, Mordecai stood out in the open streets and "cried" (Heb. za'aq, **ZAH**-ak, meaning "to call out for help") with a loud voice. He was careful not to dishonor the palace with his lament; however, Mordecai protested the fate of the Jews openly and loudly!

3 And in every province, whithersoeverthe king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

As news of the king's "decree" (Heb. dath, **DAWTH**, meaning "law, edict")—acquired through Haman's trickery—spread abroad to all in the land, the Jews were overcome with grief and were "mourning" (Heb. 'ebel, **AY**-bel), a word usually used to describe people grieving a death. Perhaps the Jews are so worried and resigned to their fate that they are already observing their

own funerals. In response to Mordecai's example and as was customary for the Jews when facing a formidable foe, they began "fasting" (Heb. tsowm, **TSOME**), "weeping" (Heb. bekiy, bek-EE), and "wailing" (Heb. micped, mis-**PADE**). These three terms are not common in the Old Testament, but are often used in conjunction with each other. Where there is fasting, there is usually weeping. Where there is wailing, there is general mourning.

9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai. 10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai; 11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

As Mordecai initiated a plan of salvation for the Jews, his former colleague in the king's court, Hatach, a eunuch who served in Xerxes's court, who became the messenger between Mordecai and Esther. Esther replied to his message with an excuse of a certain "death" (Heb. muwth, **MOOTH**, meaning "to have one executed"), unless the king called for her presence or was so moved to hold out his scepter of protection and acceptance should she arrive without him calling for her. Esther says "all the king's servants" know this rule, which would include Mordecai. Mordecai knows the danger he is asking his cousin to face. He knows how capricious their king can be.

12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.

Fearing that Esther had forgotten her roots, Mordecai cut to the chase. He challenged her fears with the reality that once she was found out to be a Jew, even her life ("thyself," Heb. nephesh,**NEH**-fesh, meaning "soul, life") would not be spared ("escape," Heb. malat, maw-**LAT**, meaning "to slip away"). Many in positions of power think the problems of the world can't touch them. Whether their walls are money, fame, or power, they hope to be protected from the consequences of their actions. Mordecai warns Esther, however, that she's not special. God does not bring us to positions of power to hide behind them.

14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Mordecai further challenged Esther, saying that if she remained undercover, comfortable, and silent, deliverance for the Jews would surely come. However, Esther could still be killed or "destroyed" (Heb. 'abad, aw-**BAD**, meaning "be exterminated, perish, vanish"), and her father's house with her. Esther is an orphan, the last of her father's household. Mordecai exhorted Esther to consider whether she had been set in the queenly position ("kingdom," Heb. malkuwth, mal-**KOOTH**, meaning "royalty, royal power, sovereign power") so that she might be in a position to speak up in this crisis.

There are some aspects of salvation history— God's grand plan for His people, His church, and the world—that we humans are too small to mess up. Hallelujah! Mordecai knows that God's not done with the Jewish people, so even if Esther does not act, the Jews as a whole will be protected somehow. He also knows that God disciplines those who disobey His clear laws and those who ignore the clear opportunities to do good that He gives. Finally, Mordecai knows this is one of those opportunities. What an honor to be called to take part in God's grand scheme for the universe.

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. 17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Upon Mordecai's urgent insistence, Esther finally received the message and the courage to respond, given her position as queen. She sent a message beyond the palace walls to Mordecai to have all of the Jews in the region of "Shushan" (Heb. Shuwshan, shoo-**SHAN**, meaning "lily" also named "Susa") sanctify a fast on her behalf. Susa was the royal residence of the Persian empire, a major city, where apparently many Jews had remained after being allowed to return to Canaan.

Esther does not just ask others outside the palace to pray for her; she prays for herself too. Esther calls the servants assigned to serve her also to fast and pray. Esther, being covered on the outside and on the inside, found the courage to reconcile her willingness to die, or "perish" (Heb. 'abad, aw **BAD**, meaning "to perish, be destroyed"), with the stark realization that she was to serve her people in this time of national crisis and attempted ethnic cleansing. Risking her very life, Esther chose this path of cultural dishonor and civil disobedience to effect Jewish national salvation.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday
Putting the Needs of Others First
(Philippians 2:3–8)

Tuesday
Finding Courage and Strength in the Lord
(Psalm 27:1–14)

Wednesday
Being Strong in the Lord's Power
(Ephesians 6:10–20)

Thursday

Mordecai's Mourning and Message

(Esther 4:1–8)

Friday

Mordecai Reminds Esther of Her Purpose

(Esther 4:9–14)

Saturday

Esther Calls a Fast and Resolves to Act

(Esther 4:15–17)

Sunday

Esther Approaches the King and Finds Favor

(Esther 5:1–5)