

Esther's Oblivion, Enlightenment, Fear and Faith

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Preacher: Aaron Hoak

[0:00] When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city wailing loudly and bitterly.

But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing.

Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress.

She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city, in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.

[1:14] He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her.

And he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said.

Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned, the king has but one law, that he be put to death.

The only exception to this is for the king to extend the golden scepter to him and spare his life. But 30 days have passed since I was called to go to the king.

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer. Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape.

[2:24] For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place. But you and your father's family will perish.

And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this. Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai, Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa and fast for me.

Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law.

And if I perish, I perish. So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions. Please turn again with me in your Bibles to the book of Esther in chapter 4.

Esther chapter 4. I have a question for you tonight that's somewhat similar to the one that Pastor Martin asked us this morning.

[3:36] He asked us in the last week when trouble has arisen, how have you responded? By trusting in your own wisdom and strength and resources?

Or by turning to the Lord who delights in faithfulness, loving kindness, justice, and righteousness? And we have a similar question tonight, and that is more of a hypothetical question.

How do you or how would you respond to devastating news? What would you do when you got the phone call that no parent ever wants to receive?

What do you do when the doctor gives you the sobering news regarding yourself, your spouse, or your child? One of your parents, or your siblings, or a friend? How do you respond when tragedy strikes, not just personally, but nationally?

When terrorists blow up buildings and when hurricanes devastate entire major cities? What do you do when unjust laws are passed in the land?

[4:45] How do you respond to the news of the death of a loved one? Or the impending death of a loved one? Or your own impending death? How do you respond to unspeakable tragedy that touches you, or others around you in the church, or others around you in the church at large all over the world?

What is your response? I hope you have good answers for those questions about how you would respond. You're good theologians. You know the right answers to those questions.

And so you know how you think you should respond. But the question is, how would you respond? Would your response reflect the things that you know to be true?

Would there be an intimate connection between the theology that you hold true in your mind, and in your heart, and the way you live it out? Or would there be a disconnect?

A breakdown somewhere between what you know the Scriptures to teach, and what actually comes out of your mouth, out of your mind, and in your actions? Tonight from the book of Esther, we want to learn some lessons about how to respond to devastating news.

[6:05] Mordecai, Esther, and the Jews have something to teach us. Some of their response to what they've learned is going to happen to all the Jews is good and right. And some of it is something that has been lost on modern day Christianity, I think.

And we'll learn something about that. But some of their response is less than admirable as well. And we want to learn lessons from that also. May God teach us from His Word through these flawed characters.

These flawed characters that nonetheless He chose to use to protect His people and to bring glory to His name. May we, flawed individuals, learn how to bring glory to God's name in the face of devastating news, or in the face of everyday life, when difficulties and trials arise.

We'll see the story progress along very simple lines and pick up lessons along the way. We'll just see four things. Esther, oblivious. Esther, enlightened. Esther, afraid.

And Esther, emboldened. First, she begins out oblivious to what's going on. Then she's enlightened, which frightens her. And then she is given boldness to deal with the situation at hand.

[7:19] And so we begin with her oblivion. And it starts with all of this mourning for all of the Jews. Mordecai is in sackcloth and ashes. As all the Jews in Susa and all the surrounding areas where the edict has gone out.

You'll remember it all began with the bad blood between Haman, who is the king's right-hand man, and Mordecai. Mordecai refused to pay him honor by kneeling in his presence, which would have been a legitimate show of respect to one who is an authority.

Mordecai was stubborn on this point, and it probably went all the way back to the conflict between the Amalekites and the Israelites. And we talked about all this last time, but it's been a long time since we looked at chapter 3.

So this just by way of reminder. But when Haman heard about Mordecai's failure to kneel in his presence, his failure to give him that due honor and respect, he was enraged.

So much so that he wasn't satisfied just to get rid of Mordecai. No, he says, I'm going to settle this dispute between Israel and Amalek once and for all. And we're going to wipe out all the Jews.

[8:23] I'll get the king to help me with it. We'll have an edict. He's pretty much a pushover of a king. It shouldn't be too hard. I'll offer him some money. And we'll get the thing going.

And you remember, of course, that that's what took place. He talks the king into it. He pays him for his trouble. The king gives him his seal of approval. Put this on whatever law you want to make. Fine. Go do it.

Kill whoever you want. And an edict is issued that all the Jews on a particular day of a particular month would be killed. And that edict has gone out into all the land.

And as the king and Haman celebrated their great plan, the city of Susa was in an uproar. Because they didn't understand. The king didn't really fully understand what he was doing. Only wicked Haman knew what was in wicked Haman's heart.

Except, of course, the Lord. And so there's great mourning by all the Jews. You imagine you find out all of your people are going to be destroyed.

[9:19] Either all of your family, or take it as our country. All of our land. All of us to be destroyed in one day. And there would be great mourning in this land as well. Weeping and wailing.

And the response is what we might expect. Typical Jewish and other cultures mourned in this way as well. The tearing of the clothing. Putting on sackcloth and ashes. And lying even on sackcloth

and ashes.

And weeping and wailing and fasting. But there's something notably absent in the response of the Jews. What should go along with weeping and wailing and fasting and sackcloth and ashes? What's missing? There's no prayer. Often when the Jews mourned or wept or sought the Lord, they fasted, but they prayed with it. And here, as we've seen in the book of Esther, there's no mention of such a thing.

No mention of prayer. This is the book of the Bible where God's name is never mentioned. And I think that's much more than just a rhetorical device on the part of the author. I think he's working with what he's got to work with here.

[10 : 25] The author appears to be a firm believer in the Lord. The people that he's writing about. Weak faith at best. And so there's no mention of prayer likely because there wasn't prayer.

They should have been praying. When Daniel was in exile, mourning the sins of the Israelites that put him in exile. We read in Daniel chapter 9, So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes.

You see what went with Daniel's fasting, sackcloth and ashes? Prayer and petition. But it's missing here. In Mordecai and the Jews. No prayer. When King Jehoshaphat heard a great army was coming to destroy Judah, we read in 2 Chronicles 20, alarmed Jehoshaphat, resolved to inquire of the Lord.

And he proclaimed to fast for all Judah. He fasted, but what went with it? Inquiring of the Lord. Prayer. Seeing what the Lord would have for them. But there's none of this here.

We'll speak more of fasting later. But notice, at least now, that there's an absence of seeking God's face. And so we can learn a lesson right away. In the face of great disaster or tragedy or bad news, it's right and appropriate to mourn and to fast.

[11 : 44] But we must pray. We must be a people who bring our wants and our requests and our needs and our confusion and our lostness at knowing what to do.

We must bring these things to our God and make them known to Him and beg for His mercy. And that's sadly absent here. But Esther doesn't know all this is going on.

The city is in an uproar. And here she is, isolated in her palace, unaware. And so Mordecai positions himself as close as he can so word will at least get back to her. Hey, your cousin is in sackcloth and ashes.

He's weeping and wailing down by the king's gate. And when Esther hears that, she's greatly distressed. But it's distressed without knowledge. She doesn't know why she's distressed. She's distressed because Mordecai is distressed, but she doesn't know why he's distressed.

And maybe you can relate to that. It happens on a fairly regular basis in my house. I will hear a scream or a cry of terror come from the basement or upstairs. And some cries you can just sort of disregard.

[12 : 48] You know, it's no big deal. But there's other ones where there's genuine pain or fear or something. And I will jump up and I will run to the basement and see my son crying, bawling his eyes out. And I'm immediately concerned for his well-being and wondering if this is the time we're going to have to go to the emergency room.

And I'm distressed, but I don't yet know why. Well, I know why. It's because he's distressed, but I don't know why he's distressed. And then you see if there's blood and you see if there's anything that's crooked or broken.

And then you try to get him coherent so he can explain it to you. And Esther tries to do that with Mordecai. Mordecai, put some clothes on so he can get in the palace and let's have a calm, normal conversation here.

No way. Mordecai's mourning. And Esther doesn't realize the significance of the situation. And so, this servant that's been assigned to her to meet her every need, Hathak, is sent back and forth between Esther and Mordecai so that they can communicate.

And Mordecai will explain it to her. But before we move on to Esther being enlightened, the reason that she was in oblivion and ignorance was in many ways her own fault.

[14 : 02] It was her compromise that had landed her in the king's palace. Her refusal, as we saw, to stand up and do the thing that was right and honorable and noble.

Her actions to this point have isolated her from her people. She's even not made it known who her people are. And so, there would be no reason for her to have access to them.

And so, she doesn't know what's going on. She's isolated herself. She's compromised with the king and has put herself in a place of oblivion and ignorance regarding God's people.

Hidden away in the king's palace. She doesn't know what's going on with the very people that she refuses to own as her own. One commentator says, in the same way, when we compromise with the world, we easily find ourselves becoming isolated and distant from God's people.

And out of touch with God's concerns in the world. Just as Esther did. Esther compromised. She didn't make stands when she should have and she found herself isolated.

[15 : 10] And do you know that your actions can do the same thing for you? Do you know that you, by compromising with the world, by making the world more important than the church and the people of God, you too can become isolated.

And not know what's going on in the people. Do you know? I'm going to ask you tonight. Do you know what's going on with the people sitting right next to you and all around you in these chairs? Do you know what's going on in their lives?

Do you know their struggles? If they were distressed, would you know why? Or have you so insulated yourself in your happy little life that you have no concern for them?

And should you see someone in distress, you'd have to ask, like Esther did, what's the problem? A test for us tonight. Did you know that in this church right now, there are individuals who are so financially stretched that they don't know if they'll make it from paycheck to paycheck?

Did you know that there are people who have undergone or are undergoing difficulty in their marriages? Do you know that there are people in our congregation that have strained relationships with their children that are in desperate need of restoration and in desperate need of our prayers?

[16 : 27] Do you know that there are families bearing the great burden of caring for sick and ailing and aging loved ones? Do you know that there are families here who have loved ones and in some cases, our own members themselves who have advanced cancer, severe dementia, heart trouble, have suffered strokes, have emphysema, Crohn's disease, severe chronic headaches, other severe sicknesses and illnesses?

Do you know that about the people in your own church? Do you know that there are families caring for children with severe disabilities? Do you know that there are families that have suffered miscarriage in recent months?

Do you know that there are families in our church who suffer unspeakable grief daily because of unsaved spouses, children, parents, siblings, and other relatives?

Do you know that there are people in our church that work such long hours at work and it puts such a load and burden upon them that they're unable to sleep at night? Do you know that there are people who are trying to find their way in life and are sad and discouraged and frustrated?

Do you know that there are people who are facing life-altering decisions and don't know what to do and need wisdom? Do you know that there are those who have family members who have died, who feel that pain every day long after we have forgotten it?

[17 : 53] Do you know what's going on in the lives of the people sitting right next to you? Or have you, by your actions, isolated yourselves? I don't care, they're older people, I've got my friends, whatever.

Have you isolated yourself to such an extent that some of what I said is completely foreign to you? And there's other things that I don't even know. Burdens that people bear.

Now some of this can be attributed, if we don't know some of these things, to people not drawing attention to themselves and not making these things known. And that I understand. But have you made it your goal recently to find one person and to dig deep into their life and to know what's going on with them and to ask them, how are you?

And to mean something more than just how you're doing and hope they don't say anything more than fine so that you can move on. Do you know what's going on in the lives of the people? Or if you saw them distressed, would you be like Esther?

Or if you're distressed, you're distressed, but you don't know why they are. Do you know what's going on with God's people around the world?

[18 : 57] Do you know that we have missionaries facing significant discouragement, depression, oppression, lack of meeting space, other challenges? You know that the church all around the world is facing severe persecution, suffering, and even death for their faith.

Are you aware what's going on with your brothers and sisters in Christ? And if you're aware of it, have you taken any time to mourn with them? Have you taken any time to fast and to pray for them?

Have you taken any time to come alongside them and to put your shoulder under the burden with them and carry it with them? Or are you like Esther? Content in your cushy life in the palace?

Really don't know what's going on with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Are you isolated from God's people or integrated with them? Esther teaches us a sad lesson of the dangers of not knowing what's going on with your people, with the people of God.

And so we see that she's oblivious. Secondly, we see that she's enlightened. And now we see the reason for the mourning explained. Mordecai sends the news through the hand of this messenger, this servant that's been assigned to Esther.

[20 : 09] And he explains all of it. The edict against the Jews even includes a copy of the edict so that she can see it with her own eyes. Even he somehow knows the going price, what Haman paid for the king to be willing to do that.

And Mordecai doesn't just inform Esther. He calls her to act. He says, look, you're our one hope. You're our one connection to the king. You're the one person that can do something about this. And so he tells the messenger down in verse 8, and the NIV is a little soft here. Towards the end of the verse it says, And he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence, to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Mordecai didn't tell this messenger to urge her. He told her to command her. The word is command. He said, you go to Esther and you command her to go into the king and to plead, to beg for mercy before the king.

You notice how Mordecai's tune has changed all of a sudden. Remember Esther's obedience to him at this point? Conceal your identity. Conceal your identity. Don't let him know who you are. Don't tell him you're a Jew.

[21 : 25] And she's obeyed him. She's done exactly what he requests. But now, now that Mordecai's own actions have landed all of the Jews in a whole heap load of trouble. Serious trouble. Complete annihilation sort of trouble.

Where there won't be any of them left. And really, it's Mordecai that's put him in this boat. In his refusal to pay respect to Haman. Now his tune changes. He says, go plead with the king for mercy for her people.

You tell Esther to plead for her people. See how different that is from don't let them know who your people are? That her people should just sort of jump off the page at us. Hide your identity.

Hide your identity. Esther, go make sure the king knows who you are. And plead for mercy. Now he wants her to claim with pride her Jewishness. And he commands her to do something he's been unwilling to do until it was a matter for him of personal pride.

To stand up and be named with God's people. He and Esther had so assimilated into Medo-Persian culture. That they now find themselves in deep trouble. And now they must identify themselves with God's people.

[22 : 33] Or risk being destroyed. Well, Esther, having been enlightened, is now frightened. In the third place, she's afraid. And understandably so. She's not excited about the prospect of going to the king to plead for mercy.

In addition to the fact that she's hidden from him her true identity. You can't imagine he's going to be too pleased to find out about that. Why didn't you tell me you were a Jew? And then this whole edict of Haman that he wanted to do might have made more sense to me.

And I might have not gone through with it. You can imagine that he wouldn't be too pleased to find out that his wife, his queen, the woman who was queen with him over all the land of Persia, had hidden her identity.

He's not going to be too pleased about that. But then there's this decree on top of that. And she wants to make certain Mordecai understands what he's asking. So she says to Hathak, go back to Mordecai and you make sure that he knows what everybody else in the kingdom knows.

That anybody, queen, doesn't matter, queen or anybody, anybody that goes into the presence of the king, unsummoned, is going to be put to death. And you can almost imagine that this was one of those decrees they thought up like they did back in chapter 1 about opposing Queen Bashti.

[23 : 47] They had all had a little too much to drink and said, you know what, the king's getting bombarded. Let's say that anybody comes into the king is going to be put to death. And then

nobody will approach the king anymore.

It's one of those unalterable edicts of the land of Persia. Doesn't sound like too wise of an edict. And Mordecai, in wanting Esther to seek the king's face and seek an audience with him, is asking her to sign her death warrant.

There's one exception, and you can almost imagine that this was a second edict that came a little bit later when he realized he was going to have to kill somebody that he didn't want to kill when they came into his presence. That's speculation, but just given how things have run in Persia to this point.

Anyway, there's an exception. If the king sees you come in, even though he hasn't summoned you, and he's pleased with your presence, if he extends that golden scepter, then you're welcome and you won't be put to death.

And so you might think, well, good, Esther, you're the queen. He loves you. He handpicked you out of all these virgins. And you were pleasing in his sight.

[24 : 49] He threw a big... Surely he'll receive you, Esther. But Esther says, 30 days have gone by. And the king hasn't called for me. Maybe the novelty of this beautiful queen is worn off a little bit.

One commentator, I think rightly, says that these 30 days are not a good sign, since doubtless the king had not been sleeping alone. He had his concubines to choose from, these other virgins that hadn't become concubines yet.

But, and Esther hadn't been to him for 30 days. And so things aren't looking good for Esther to go into the king and to plead for mercy. There is no guarantee he'd be glad to see his handpicked queen.

And so Esther says, you take that message back to Mordecai. And make sure he understands what he's asking me to do. And so the messenger goes back. And he delivers that message.

And then, Mordecai seeks to persuade Esther otherwise. And we see now that in the fourth place, Esther is emboldened. She's made bold.

[25 : 52] She's made brave. She's at least made willing. And he says to her, via a mediary, a go-between, he says, Esther, you're a Jew too.

And if you don't go and plead with the king, this thing's going to go down. Just as it's been decreed. And don't think that just because you're in the royal palace, you're going to be spared. You're one of the Jews that must be killed.

And so if you don't go to the king, your death is guaranteed. It's a certainty. Your position in the palace won't save you. Because the decree is irrevocable.

But if you do go, there's a chance the king will extend his scepter. And your life will be spared at least for the moment. And then you'll have opportunity to plead for all of the Jews. And there's a chance that all of the Jews could be spared.

And so you're dead if you don't go to the king. And you're maybe not dead if you do go. So go. And plead with the king. And then comes a puzzling statement from Mordecai.

[26 : 57] And I really don't know what to make of this. Some commentators think here finally is a great show of faith on the part of Mordecai in verse 14. Others are not so confident.

And I'm on the fence tonight. And I'll tell you that freely. And I'll let you all decide for yourselves. And you can look there at verse 14 again. He says, Possible that it's a statement of real faith on Mordecai's part.

Still doesn't invoke the name of the Lord, which is very troubling to me. But maybe floating around somewhere in Mordecai's mind that he says, Through all his assimilation, And he still remembers what it is to be the people of God.

And to know that God is faithful to his people. And won't allow them to be destroyed. He's made promises to his people. He's a God of Chesed that we heard about this morning.

Covenant faithfulness. Promise keeping. And maybe he remembers that. And so he's confident that regardless of what happens, Whether it's you, Esther, or whether it's somebody else, God will deliver his people.

[28 : 11] The Hebrew is ambiguous. It could just as easily read, For if you remain silent at this time, Will relief and deliverance for the Jews arise from another place?

Esther, you're our only hope. Will it come from another place? Hebrew word order is ambiguous. It could be a question. It could be a statement. It could be a statement of doubt on Mordecai's part.

Or a statement of faith. The optimist, Ennis, likes to think that it's a statement of faith. And maybe it was. The doubter, Ennis, looks at his track record up to this point and says, There's not a lot of reason to have confidence to this point that it was a statement of faith.

And then he asks, And who knows, But that you have come to royal position at such a time as this. For this very reason.

To be able to deliver God's people. Mordecai still apparently believes in some sort of providence. Yes, God has put Esther where she is.

[29:19] But see, I'm already putting God back into it. And Mordecai didn't. And so I don't know how much to give him credit for. I really, I don't. I'm going to be transparent tonight. But perhaps there's a glimmer here of remembering that God does all things well.

And for the good of his people and for his own glory. And maybe, and who's to be an interpreter of providence? But maybe Esther, you're in this place to be God's instrument to deliver the people. Maybe it's more a resignation to faith.

A concept that would have been familiar even to the Persians. Maybe faith has placed you here at this time. I don't know. I'm troubled that he doesn't mention God. And Ian Duguid asked this question.

And he asked it of us. And is there a connection between our theology and the way we really live? He says, How can people who confess an orthodox creed week after week, so easily and completely lose track of the implications of that theology whenever problems emerge in daily life? There is often a disconnect between our theology and the way we live. We know that God does all things well. We know that God is working all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

[30:34] And we believe that wholeheartedly. And we know that God does all things that they might renown to His glory. But we're in the middle of the great difficulty.

The great trial. On the verge of utter annihilation for our people. For God's people, say. And all of a sudden, our theology starts to shift a little bit.

And we start to say, Why God? Or how could this be? Or how am I going to make it through this? And maybe there's that disconnect between Mordecai's theology and his practice at this moment. And he remembers something of providence, but he doesn't even invoke the name of the Lord in his great distress. But for us, we who believe in the providence of God, does your reaction to sudden calamity and trial demonstrate it?

I hope you have something more than a generic, I hope we make it through this sort of response. I hope you say, God knows the purpose for which He's placed me there.

[31:37] Is that your response when great difficulty comes to you in life? Your opportunities to honor God may look very different from Esther's. But do you have strong faith to affirm that all things come from God's hand, and so seek to glorify Him in whatever circumstances He sets before you?

And so, can you say, instead of who knows, can you say, I know, I know that God has brought this. And you fill in the blank.

God has brought this sickness. This job opportunity. This job loss. This death. This promotion. This friendship. This move or relocation. This natural disaster.

This car trouble. This building project. This pregnancy. This miscarriage. This bad weather. Which usually for us, usually means this inconvenient for us weather. This financial trouble.

This traffic jam. This financial windfall. This annoying phone call. This opportunity. This interruption. This change of plans. This missed flight.

[32:40] This lost piece of luggage. This small town tragedy. This terrorist attack. This busy schedule. This sick relative. This unconverted loved one.

This debilitating old age. This impossible decision. This rebellious child. This special needs child. This opportunity for service.

This uncertain future. This evangelistic opportunity. This whatever. You fill in the blank. I know that God has brought this to me as an opportunity for me to exercise faith.

today. And so to bring him glory. And that he's brought it to me for my good. Can you confidently say that? Instead of a sort of wishy-washy response like Mordecai's almost seems to be.

I'm not asking you to be interpreters of providence. Who knows? Maybe God has brought you to this place for a particular reason. But you do know for certain that he's brought it for your good and

for his glory.

[33 : 39] That much you do know. You don't need a who knows in front of those. These are promises from God's word. And so whatever circumstances he places you in. Whether you're on the verge of delivering God's people.

Or whether it's something of much at least for that number of people of much less significant importance. Whatever it is. You know that it is part of God's plan.

And in his providence. It's funny to me. And I've done this. Sometimes when unique things happen to us.

Or our paths cross with someone else in a unique way. We say, how providential. Well, duh. Isn't everything that happens to us?

Does it even need to be said? I mean, it's good to say it and to be reminded of it. But it's not just those things that are unique and our attention are drawn to. It's everything that comes to us in life.

[34 : 39] It comes from the hand of God. The question is, do we live like we believe that? Do we respond like we believe that? Is there a connection between what we believe and what we think, what we do, and what we say in the midst of great trouble and trial?

It seems that Mordecai and Esther at least have a hint of the right response. But it's wanting because it's devoid of God's name. And may we not be found wanting in our replies to great trouble and trial that come to us.

I want to take note here now of Esther. There is something admirable here, I think. She nobly consents to go along with the plan. She's willing to make a go of it.

Okay, I'll go to the king. She has a request. Gather all the Jews that are in the city and have a fast for three days and three nights. And I'll do the same with my servants.

And then I'll go to the king. And if I die, I die. Hard to say if that's a statement of noble bravery or a resigned hopelessness, but she's willing to do it. And for that, she's to be commended.

[35 : 49] Because should the king not extend that scepter, her life is over immediately. There's no waiting the rest of these ten or whatever months are left before the edict takes effect and the Jews are destroyed. Her life could be gone in a moment.

And so it is courageous of her. And there is something noble and heroic about what she does in being willing to go to the king. But you notice she doesn't take it lightly. She says, let's have a fast. Fast for three days. That's unusually severe fast even for the people of Israel. Their fasts were usually shorter, limited to a meal or a day perhaps. But this, for three days.

She understands that what happens between her and the king could have national implications for the survival or destruction of the Jews. They realized the weight, the moment, the significance of the situation and they treated it accordingly.

And so a three day fast was an appropriate response for them. Lacking though it is in prayers, we noted earlier. As they mourned, they should have prayed and they didn't.

[36 : 51] And now as they seek God's face and ask for His blessing, or at least that's what they should be doing. They're fasting. Fasting is right. They should be adding prayer to it as well. And it's an appropriate response for us as well.

Fasting is something that should be practiced by God's people today. Jesus expected that we would fast. If you look at the book of Acts, you see that it was practiced in the early church. And it should be practiced by the church today. And since we note this practice here in Esther 5, we want to take a moment to talk for a few minutes about fasting and some principles related to it. Fasting is not a manipulative technique to sort of twist God's arm. God, this is really important to me. And so I'm going to fast along with my prayer. But it is an expression that we recognize the significance of particular situations, of particular prayer requests, of particular trials, of particular decisions that need to be made.

And there's a physical connect there. As you feel the hunger pains in your stomach, you're reminded again to go and to pray. And you can take the time for the meal that you give up and take that time and spend it in focused prayer.

[38 : 12] Fasting and prayer go hand in hand. And fasting, don't misunderstand, doesn't so much change the way God hears or answers our prayers, it changes the way we approach prayer. It's part of our mindset in expressing that we understand the great significance and importance of this particular problem.

It can be individual or corporate. Just one person can do it of their own accord. Or it can be done together as the body of Christ, as the people of God, as we see here in Esther 4.

A corporate fast where all of the Jews in this city gather together to fast. There can be various purposes for which fasting is practiced that we glean from the Scriptures.

And I don't have time to go to each place where fasting is mentioned and develop a theology of it tonight. I'm going to give you a list of ten purposes for fasting. And I'm lifting these right out of Donald Whitney's book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, where he has gleaned from Scripture occasions that are appropriate for fasting.

To strengthen prayer. To seek God's guidance. To express grief. And isn't that what we've seen here in Esther 4? As they mourn, they express grief by their fasting that they're about to be destroyed.

[39:22] To seek deliverance or protection. And isn't that what they're doing here? Esther says, three days we need to fast to seek deliverance, to seek protection. That's the purpose of the fast here. It can be done to express repentance or return to God.

To humble yourself before God. To express concern for the work of God. To minister to the needs of others. To overcome temptation and dedicate yourself to God.

Or to express love and worship to God. And so the question is, if you're not fasting, if you don't fast, or if you've never made it a practice, and it's a question I have to ask myself as well, why not?

And we could take time, we're not going to, to make it clear from the New Testament that it's expected of God's people. It wasn't just an old covenant practice. Why not?

There are a myriad of occasions that warrant it. I would encourage you and challenge you to take a look and plan to fast at some point during the next month. Look at the next month and see where you might miss even just one meal.

[40:33] You have a big decision coming up perhaps. Take some time to fast and pray over it. You've been concerned for a brother or sister in Christ and the church and the deep waters, the great difficulty that you're going through.

You're not living in oblivion. You know what your brothers and sisters are doing. Take some time. Just one meal even. Just fast. And then give yourself to a period of focused, intense prayer for that person.

It's a biblical practice. And we need to recover the lost and the biblical practice of fasting even as we see it practiced here.

Esther agrees to go in to the king. If I perish, I perish. Few of us here will ever have occasion to be so heroic for the cause of the church that your story will be recorded and remembered by generations to come.

Few will have an Esther-like moment where your action or inaction will be the occasion of the rise or the fall of God's people. Well, that's depressing. Tell us we're not a bunch of heroes.

[41:45] Tell us we're not very important. Tell us we're not very great. Not the message at all.

Does that make the fact that you might never have a moment like Esther's, does that make your life and daily activity any less significant than hers?

Are you somehow less important than she is? And the answer to those questions is a resounding no. Can you ever attain to her level? Yes. Esther is not that great.

Esther's God is great. And it's in fulfilling your duties to this God from day to day in a manner that is pleasing to and glorifying to God, recognizing His sovereign hand in whatever comes to you.

Something Esther wasn't very good at. That you find your great purpose in life. You know that your goal, wherever God lands you, wherever He puts you, whatever circumstances He brings you, is to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever.

And so long as you are fulfilling that purpose, you are doing something great. Greatness isn't measured as the world might think. True greatness is profound in fulfilling your calling in life, whatever that calling may be.

[42:59] Your, if I perish, I perish, might not be so dramatic. But if you're taking a stand for the truth, it can be just as noble. It might not have national implications, but it might profoundly affect you or your family.

If I take a stand for the truth here, if I get fired, I get fired. If I'm the object of mocking and scorn, then I'm the object of mocking and scorn. So be it. If I lose a friend, I lose a friend.

I'm kicked off the team. I'm kicked off the team. But whatever I do, I'm going to seek to honor my God and not be ashamed of my Lord. That is greatness for the glory of God.

Taking whatever situation God puts you in and responding accordingly. Responding in faith.

Believing that God has brought it to you. Responding in prayer.

Seeking His face. Admitting your lack of understanding. Your lack of ability. Turning to Him and trusting in Him who is faithful. Who is just. Who is righteous. And not trusting in your own self.

[43 : 59] Your own wisdom and strength. And resources. Understanding that it's His wise plan to bring you good. And finally tonight, I hope that you're thankful that you have a mediator who wasn't so reluctant as Esther.

She was hesitant to go. Fearful that she might face death. Our Savior went willingly to His death as a mediator between us and our Heavenly Father.

He laid down His life so that we might have life. He gave of Himself that we might enjoy of His fullness.

It's a good thing that there's a mediator for us. If we admit it, we're much too like Mordecai and Esther. We're flawed.

We respond poorly when trouble and trial come. We need forgiveness just as much as they did. We compromise like they did.

[45 : 04] And so we need the blood of the Savior just like they did. Their faith, weak as it was, had to look forward and anticipate the coming Messiah. Our faith looks back and knows that He has come.

That He has died in our place so that we do not have to die. We need forgiveness and help just like they did. And Jesus is that great Savior of sinners, that great help, the great mediator between God and man.

If you know Him tonight as your mediator, give Him thanks and praise. We're not deserving of it.

We're unworthy at best. And so we ought to have hearts full to overflowing with gratitude.

And go from here determined to not be ashamed of your Lord, to be willing to take a stand for Him, to do that which is right and pleasing to Him, to respond rightly. Say, God, give me strength for these things.

Determine to do it in His strength, not your own. But if you don't know this mediator tonight, you're not living for His glory. You have isolated yourself from God's people because you don't want to be a part of Him.

[46 : 07] You can come tonight and know this mediator. You can come and find salvation, full and free, and be drawn into this people of God and know what it is to seek to bring Him honor and glory for all the days of your life.

May God make it so. Our Father, we thank You that we do indeed know Your name. We pray that You would forgive us the times we've been unwilling to take Your name on our lips when there's been a disconnect between what we believe and the way we live.

We pray that You would give us grace to see all things as coming from Your hand and to trust You that You do all things well. Give us that sure confidence, that strong faith whereby we can face whatever You bring to us.

Strengthen our faith. Forgive us for our weakness. Forgive us for our poor responses to difficulty and tragedy in the past. We pray that You would make us to be a people that live the way we say we believe.

And so bring honor and glory to Your name. Give special grace and help to those in our midst this night that are going through severe trouble and trial and difficulty. Give them to see Your hand in the midst of it.

[47 : 17] Give them the ability to say, I know that whatever the Lord has brought me is for my good and for His glory. Give them that grace, that strength. For such strength to be able to say that and to believe it and to live it can only come from You.

And so we pray that You would help us. And we give You thanks this night for Your Son, our Savior, our mediator, without whom we have no hope, without whom we can't even come into Your presence and pray.

And so we come asking these things of You, begging Your blessing, giving You thanks, and we do it through our Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen. Now may the God of peace Himself give You peace at all times and in every way.

The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Amen.