

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church,
10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

**DHW BIBLE CLASS
LESSON 4
THE BOOK OF ESTHER
CHAPTER 4**

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the announcement of the king's decree instigated by the wicked Haman was carried out on the eve of the 14th day of Nisan, which was the day the Jews had annually commemorated their Passover Feast for about one thousand years! But this time, their joyful commemoration of their deliverance was turned into mourning and bitter sorrow. There could not be a worse time to announce the decree. It must have been Haman's doing for he hated the Jews. From India to Ethiopia, the Jews were mourning and lamenting. Surely in the minds and hearts of the Jews, they would have hoped for another deliverance, just like God's deliverance of them from the oppression in Egypt.

This chapter records God's providential care and concern for the Jews, His chosen people. Although God is not mentioned explicitly in this book, His unseen hand controlling the flow of events is unmistakably evident. The LORD is not bound by time and space when He works. Man is. God fulfils His promises to us as the omnipresent and omnipotent God. Time and tide are in His sovereign hands. He allows all things to happen according to His

timetable. They definitely include the incidents of evil in the lives of His people, the Jews.

The chapter begins with Mordecai representing the Jewish response to the edict which sealed the destruction of the Jews. In his grief, Mordecai sought his cousin Esther to plead with King Ahasuerus for the lives of the Jews. While the previous chapter focuses on the plans and actions of the non-Jews to destroy the Jews, this chapter focuses on the plans and actions of the Jews for deliverance. It therefore would provide an interesting study of Christian behaviour in adverse and dire situations.

OUTLINE

1. Mourning and lamenting everywhere (vv.1-3);
2. Reason for mourning and lamenting (vv.4-9);
3. Reasons for disobedience (vv.10-12);
4. For such a time as this (vv.13-14);
5. If I perish, I perish (vv.15-17).

COMMENTARY

**Mourning and Lamenting Everywhere
– 4:1-3**

The king's edict for the destruction of the Jews was posted in every nook and corner of the empire. Every Jew in every province was mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing. Throughout the whole Persian Empire, many Jews donned sackcloth and laid down in ashes. These were typical ways in which the people of that time expressed their deep grief. Mordecai "rent (tore) his clothes, and put on sackcloth with

ashes.” (v.1). He went to the city centre and cried bitterly with a loud voice. He even went to the king’s gate where he had been ministering daily. This time, he was forbidden to enter into the king’s gate. It was forbidden by Persian law for those who wore mourning clothes to enter.

One wonders why he made such a scene. Mordecai’s behaviour was understandable. He was identifying himself with his people. He understood very well the dire straits his own people were in. Total extermination was in store for his people if nothing were done to stop this great injustice. Mordecai stood his ground in not bowing to Haman in worship. For that, his own people in the Persian Empire faced total annihilation. The vindictive nature of evil man knows no bounds when it comes to the destruction of God’s work and God’s people. There was no one he could turn to for help except Esther. The edict bore the signature of the Persian King and he knew it could not be revoked. He sought the attention of Esther.

Reason for mourning and lamenting – 4:4-9

Mordecai succeeded in getting Esther’s attention. Esther’s maids and chamberlains told her about Mordecai’s disposition. Precisely how they came to know about that is not stated. Esther did not know anything beforehand. Her maids were many and they could move around in the palace more freely while carrying out their duties. They could have received news about what was happening in the city from their friends. On the other hand, Esther was generally confined to her chamber. This also shows how isolated Esther was from her people. The maids and chamberlains could have learnt about their relationship

at the the time when Esther was put up as a candidate for the role of Queen of Persia. Mordecai had enquired about her. Hence they must have deduced that they were related and considered it necessary to inform Esther of Mordecai’s plight.

On hearing about Mordecai, Esther was deeply distressed. Thinking that Mordecai’s mourning was about his personal distress, Esther sent him a set of clothes to replace his garment of sackcloth. If the king had seen Mordecai in his sackcloth, he could be put to death. Understandably, Mordecai refused Esther’s offer. This rejection caused Esther to further inquire about the reason behind his mourning with sackcloth and ashes. Consequently, Esther sent Hatach, who was the chamberlain the king handpicked for her, to personally find out from Mordecai “what it was, and why it was”. (v.5).

Hatach met Mordecai, who told him “all that had happened to him”, and even about the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also passed a copy of the king’s decree¹ to destroy the Jews that had been circulating in Shushan to Esther. Mordecai finally directed her to approach the king to plead for “her people” (vv.7-8). In presenting his case to Esther through Hatach, Mordecai did not mince his words. He effectively gave four pertinent factors in support of his charge to Esther.

Firstly, Mordecai told Hatach everything that had happened to him. That would have included the cause that

¹ Writing materials in those days could be clay tablets, parchment (skins of animals) or papyrus (pronounce, per-pye-rus, made from a plant).

had given rise to the present terrible situation. He must have related the incident of his refusal to bow down to Haman and of his admission that it was on the account of his being a Jew. Secondly, he divulged that Haman had promised the king a sum of money (The access to such information shows that Mordecai held a high position in the king's court). The implication is clear; Haman had bribed the king to get the latter's approval for the decree. Haman was all out to destroy the Jews. Thirdly, the copy of the decree given to Esther would be irrefutable evidence that the intention of the decree was true and not just hearsay. It should serve to convince Esther that her own people were indeed in dire straits. She must act to protect them in whatever way possible. Finally, Mordecai's charge to her would have revealed her ethnicity – "to make request before him for **her people**" (v.8b). Previously, he had told her to conceal her ethnicity. Esther had done well keeping her Jewish heritage secret. Now he told her not to hide her ethnicity any longer. She must help.

Hatach told Esther "the words of Mordecai". It means that Hatach did not add or censure anything that Mordecai had told him. Evidently, Hatach was a trustworthy servant. Apparently, he did not tell Haman about what had been told to him—the bribery, and the fact that Esther was a Jew, and Mordecai's charge to Esther. He knew about the decree to destroy the Jews. If he had informed Haman, there would be a drastic turn of events. We can say that God's providential hand was at work on behalf of His people. Hatach's special appointment by the king to serve Esther was definitely not accidental.

Reasons for disobedience – 4:10-12

Having heard Hatach's report, Esther understood the problem. She responded straightaway by addressing the charge that Mordecai put to her. She explained that to approach the king without being summoned, even though she was the queen, meant certain death. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote of Persian kings: "Round his throne stood men with axes to punish any who approached the throne without being summoned." All the king's servants, and the people of the empire were aware of this law. This would include Mordecai and Hatach too. Escape from death was possible only if the king would hold out his golden sceptre to the person who dared to approach him without being summoned. Esther further disclosed to Mordecai that for the past thirty days, the king had not called her. It could mean that the king had found more favour with his other wives than with Esther. This did not augur well for Esther. She could have fallen out of grace of the king. The chances that the king would extend his golden sceptre to Esther looked slim. There was no guarantee. Esther would therefore be risking her life if she were to approach the king on her own accord.

A safer way seemed to be for Esther to request for an audience with the king. However, that might take too long and the urgency of the matter demanded immediate action. Furthermore, her request might be turned down because the request might most likely be made through Haman. If her request was turned down, any future request might not be possible, and she might never have a chance to present her case. The risks were too great. Godly wisdom was much needed in this

matter. So Hatach was again sent to convey her thoughts to Mordecai.

Verse 11 is the longest verse in the entire book of Esther and is replete with reasons for disobedience. Contrast this with verse 16 where Esther relented and in obedience uttered, “if I perish, I perish.” Obedience settles the mind swiftly whereas disobedience brings about vexations and vacillations, spelling the lack of faith in God.

For such a time as this – 4:13-14

Mordecai would not accept Esther’s reasons for refusal to approach the king. To her, he raised the issue of her safety despite being sheltered in the king’s palace. Mordecai continued to tell her that if she should remain silent at this time, “then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place”. This was followed with his prediction that Esther and his father’s household would also be destroyed. Seemingly trying to be more persuasive, he remarked that “who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (v.14)

Was Mordecai’s response to Esther harsh? There was a sense of desperation. He viewed his cousin as the only person who could help at this time. Esther was in a very risky position. Nevertheless, he was determined to get Esther to carry out his plan. Was Mordecai’s confidence that the deliverance might come from another quarter suggests that he was thinking of God’s sovereignty? His comment that Esther’s present position was an act of providence argued strongly for his cause. Mordecai’s arguments were very convincing.

First, he argued that Esther would eventually be killed alongside the rest of

her people. It was only a matter of time that her ethnicity would be exposed. Second, it was her privilege to help God’s people at this time. He was certain of deliverance regardless of Esther’s decision to consent or decline to help. Someone else would be sent to deliver the Jews. He maintained that it was Esther’s duty and honour to intervene on behalf of her own people. Third, Esther was not where she was by accident. She had been put in her current position by the higher hand of God. Therefore, it was only right for her to go intercede for her fellow Jews.

If I perish, I perish – 4:15-17

Thankfully, Esther responded to the crisis facing her people with extraordinary courage and faith. She told Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Shushan to “fast for her, neither eat nor drink three days night or day” (v.15). She and her maids would fast likewise. After the three days, she would go ahead to approach the king despite breaking the law; if she should perish so be it. This was an appeal to God for help. The prayers that they made were the key to the solution of this entire problem. The faith and trust of God’s people must be strengthened in the process as they see God’s deliverance. Deliverance by God is easily done but God wanted His people to pray so that they might be aware of His presence, guidance, and power of deliverance.

Fasting by the Jews was always associated with prayer to God. Mere fasting is meaningless. Fasting was one way of demonstrating how serious one was. However, it was not the act of fasting or prayer *per se* that was going to produce the desired result. Rather, it was the power of God who would act according to His will. In this matter of

fasting and praying, Esther demonstrated her trust and dependence on God. Her words, "If I perish, I perish.", was solemn and serious. She was willing to put her life on the line for the sake of her people. That was commendable. So her outburst could be one of submitting to God's will.

Mordecai went on his way and did according to what Esther had told him to do. They were now in unity with a common spiritual goal. What better way is there to draw God's people together to pray than a common calamity?

PRACTICAL VALUE

Haman intended to commit genocide, and in particular, to annihilate the Jews throughout the Persian empire. The Jews were God's chosen people. Would God allow him to destroy all His people and thwart His eternal plan for the world through the nation of Israel? The answer is never! Although God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, God would not go back on His Word and break the covenant-promise He made with Abraham. In this chapter, there were instances where things could take a direction that could result in the realisation of Haman's plan.

Esther's special position as queen was providential, and Mordecai was right in thinking that she was the only mediator for her people. God has placed her there for such a time as this. His plan could have been thwarted had Hatach divulged his plan to Haman. This too was providential that Hatach, a very trustworthy and loyal servant, was specially appointed to personally serve Esther. The fact that Esther was willing to lay down her life for her people with no guarantee that the king might grant

her audience, intimates the work of God in the hearts of His people.

Our God is great and good to His people. This truth should encourage us in our faith that in whatever circumstances we may be in, God will intervene. But even if God were not to intervene, our faith and trust in God must not diminish. God knows best and he will do what is best for His people always.

In this regard we also learn one important truth about the ways of God. He uses any human being whether he or she is a believer, a backslider or a unbeliever. God is sovereign. He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy, and He does as He pleases. Yet we know that God is not despotic, sadistic and capricious. God is holy, just, and righteous. He never moves without plan and purpose. AMEN.

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

MONDAY: Esther 4:1-9.

TUESDAY: Esther 4:10-17.

WEDNESDAY: Esther 4:1-17.

THURSDAY: Esther 4:1-17.

FRIDAY: Esther 4:1-17.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the response of Mordecai and the Jews to Haman's plot tell us about the Jews in Persia at that time?

2. What do you think are Esther's reasons for sending clothing to Mordecai? Why did he refuse it?

3. In what way was Hatach a very reliable and trusted courier?

4. Why was Esther initially reluctant to approach the king to save her people and herself (vv. 10-11)?

5. What was Mordecai's compelling argument?

6. How did Esther prepare herself to do according to Mordecai's instruction?

7. What does Esther 4:12-16 tell us about Esther's character, priorities, and beliefs?

10. Esther declared: "If I perish, I perish" (v.16); is it a cry of resignation or a cry of faith in God?

8. Why do you think Esther wanted all the Jews in Shushan to fast for three days with her (4:16)?

11. Think of a situation to which God called you when obeying meant facing great risks. What was your first reaction, and what were your feelings when God called you?

9. Though God is never mentioned in the book of Esther, chapter 4:14 does carry an air of divine intervention. Do you think the writer intended this? Why or why not?

12. In this chapter how do we see God's sovereignty and people's responses working together?

13. What character qualities must you show in order to do the right thing which God calls you to do?

14. How can people who hold to a Bible-believing faith so easily lose track of the implications of that faith whenever problems emerge in daily life?