

Main Idea: In Esther 4 we see three responses to a crisis, namely the crisis of an imminent holocaust. This passage teaches us the importance of learning to see God in the crisis.

- I. Mordecai’s response to the crisis (1-2)
 - A. He mourned personally (1a).
 - B. He mourned publicly (1b-2).
- II. The Jews’ response to the crisis (3)
 - A. They mourned.
 - B. Instead of feasting, they fasted.
- III. Esther’s response to the crisis (4-17)
 - A. We see Esther’s distress (4-8).
 1. She learned Mordecai was in trouble (4).
 2. She sent Hathach to find out why (5-8).
 - B. We see Esther’s denial (9-14).
 1. Esther tried to make excuses (9-11).
 2. Mordecai forced her to face the facts (12-14).
 - This problem is *your* problem, too (12-13).
 - This problem is an opportunity for you to trust God (14).
 - C. We see Esther’s discernment (15-17).
 1. She admitted her need.
 2. She resolved to take action.

Application: Esther 4 teaches us the following lessons...

1. We need to learn to rest in God’s sovereignty.
2. We need to learn to live with unanswered questions.
3. We need to learn to live as stewards.
4. We need to learn that when we feel helpless, He’s not.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 66:1-6

How do you respond to crisis? In a broken, sin-cursed world, crisis is inevitable. We hear of them all the time. At times we face them personally.

From the world’s perspective, the events of life are haphazard and random. So there is no point to crisis.

You lose your job? That’s just the way it is. You come down with a terminal disease? Well, bad things happen to good people--just make the best of it. Fate rules. There is no such thing as "destiny" other than the one that you make for yourself.

I’m thankful for the book of Esther. The book of Esther says to us, "Not so!" There is no such thing as fate, not if there’s a God who is sovereign. And there is.

Interestingly, the book of Esther doesn’t even mention God once by name in all ten chapters. But He’s there. And while He seems distant at times, even disinterested, He most certainly is personally and strategically at work.

In the bizarre story that unfolds we see the hand of the Sovereign One. We discover that God, not fate, rules. What governs our lives is not chance, but providence.

I’m convinced we need the message of Esther today, perhaps more than ever. We’ve been breathing the air of secular, evolutionary humanism for so long that we’re skeptical of anything we can’t personally see or touch. And since God is Spirit, which means we

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Esther series at WBC in 1999.

can't see or touch Him, and since His ways are higher than our finite minds can fathom, we often wrongly conclude He's not there.

What is God doing in the world? Doesn't He see what's happening in Iraq or Syria, or the crisis in my home? Yes, we need Esther.

The book takes us to the fifth century B.C. It was a low time for God's people. Yes, the Babylonian captivity was over, and yes, a remnant had returned home, but most didn't. Most of the Jews remained outside of the Promised Land in disobedience to God's command. That includes the main characters of our story--Esther and Mordecai.

In the first episode (chapter one), the Persian king, Xerxes, threw a party, and called for his wife, Vashti, to display her beauty. She said, "I'm not coming." So Xerxes took her crown and banished her.

In episode two (chapter two), Xerxes authorized a beauty contest to find a replacement queen. The winner just happened to be an orphan girl named Esther. Soon after she enters the palace her cousin, Mordecai, is given a good job at the king's gate. The scene closes with Mordecai uncovering an assassination plot against the king, but instead of being rewarded, he's slighted.

Episode three (chapter three) records a series of horrendous events. A wicked man named Haman is promoted to Prime Minister status in the empire. Everybody bowed before him--everyone, that is, except the Jew, Mordecai. As a result, Haman was enraged and convinced Xerxes to pass a vicious edict. In eleven months all the Jews in the empire would be exterminated.

You know, crisis is a revealer. We can coast along through life, but when a crisis hits, it reveals the truth about us--what we're living for, and who we're trusting in. That's exactly what we see in Esther 4. In Esther 4 we see three responses to a crisis. Let's look at the responses, and then consider some lessons, a primary one, the importance of learning to see God in the crisis.

I. Mordecai's response to the crisis (1-2)

"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.² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it."

When the crisis hit, what did Mordecai do? He mourned in two ways...

A. He mourned personally (1a). When Mordecai learned of Haman's plot, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He was stricken with grief. And for good reason. He knew that *he* was the cause of the impending holocaust.

It was because of *his* refusal to honor Haman that thousands and thousands of Jewish men, women, and children would lose their lives. So he mourned *personally*. Secondly...

B. He mourned publicly (1b-2). Verse 1 says he went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. We in the West are conditioned to keep our grief private, but there are cultures where outward signs of grief are not only acceptable, but expected.

Mordecai went right up to the king's gate (which was where he worked), but could go no further. There's a sense of helplessness in that statement. He did not have access to the person who passed the edict.

So in the face of crisis, all Mordecai could do was mourn. Let's notice a second response...

II. The Jews' response to the crisis (3)

"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." How did the Jews respond?

A. They mourned. Remember how chapter three concluded? In verse 15, couriers were sent to publish the edict to the far regions of the empire. In village after village, the response was the same. When the Jews heard what was coming, they mourned, wept, and wailed. But they did something else which the narrator points out in verse 3.

B. Instead of feasting, they fasted. There's a contrast in the book of Esther between feasting and fasting. Xerxes feasted in chapter one. Xerxes feasted again in chapter two when Esther became queen. And still again in chapter three when he and Haman toasted to their wicked scheme. There are ten banquets mentioned in the book.

But in the middle of all this feasting, we find the fasting of chapter four. It's impossible to force God's hand. But throughout the Bible fasting is a means by which people turned to God and expressed repentance. The people of Nineveh fasted in Jonah 3, and God had mercy on them. In Esther 4 we see a case of national, Jewish mourning.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but allow me to say it. When there's cause to fast it's inappropriate to feast. Why did the Jews fast? Because innocent people would soon die. In fact, in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the LXX) we're told what Mordecai was wailing, "An innocent people is condemned to death." In the face of gross injustice, the Jews mourned and fasted.

And I ask this question. Do we have cause to mourn today? In the past four decades years, more than fifty million unborn children have been murdered in our country. This coming year, another million will lose their lives. Ought we not be saying with Mordecai, "An innocent people is condemned to death!"?

The fact of the matter is this. Our country is heading for disaster. Lest you think I'm being melodramatic I invite you to check the historical records. There has never been a nation that has ignored God's Word and God's holy standard without experiencing the severity of God's wrath. Not one.

This is not a time for mindless feasting. We've been lulled to sleep by our prosperity. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted (Matt 5:4)." This is a time for mourning.

The reason is *sin*. We don't like to hear that but it's true. God is holy, He hates sin, and He will deal with sin. That's why He sent His Son to the Cross. God does not overlook sin. He *deals* with it. And now so must we. By repenting. By praying for repentance. By believing in His crosswork and proclaiming it to others.

A century ago E. M. Bounds made this observation:² "If every church would discard the entertainment business, cease making God's house a house of merchandise, make His house the house of prayer, and commit itself in penitent earnestness to prevailing prayer, our revival steam would run ocean floods and all our churches would be aflame with God's glory..."³

The third response to crisis is Esther's.

²Taken from *Prayer and Revival*.

³A fitting prayer of national mourning is found in Lamentations 3:40-66.

III. Esther's response to the crisis (4-17)

Esther went through three phases in response to the crisis. First...

A. We see Esther's distress (4-8). Listen to the narrative of verse 4, "When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress [the Hebrew literally means "writhed in pain"]. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them."

You get the sense from verse 4 that Esther didn't seem to know about the edict. She's living in the palace, secluded from the "real" world. She has servants who run her errands for her. It was through them that she learned that...

1. *She learned Mordecai was in trouble (4).* It wasn't the edict that distressed Esther--at least not yet. It's what she heard about Mordecai. He's wearing sackcloth and wailing loudly at the city gate.

What's wrong with him? She doesn't know. So she sends him a new set of clothes. Why? Perhaps she's fearful he's going to lose his job (or his life) if he doesn't stop his radical actions. More likely she sent the clothes so he could enter the palace and she could find out what the problem was. But he refused her offer. So...

2. *She sent Hathach to find out why (5-8).* "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.⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate.⁷ 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.⁸ 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."

So Esther sent Hathach. Hathach met Mordecai right in front of the king's gate--remember, that's where Mordecai worked, comparable to our City Hall. And Mordecai told him everything--about the coming holocaust, as well as the amount of money Haman promised (which suggests Xerxes hadn't declined the offer as it may appear in 3:11). He even gave him a copy of the legal document (where he got it we're not told) with this exhortation: "Take it to Esther. Let her read for herself the predicament we're in. Then urge her to go to the king and beg for mercy."

You'll notice the cat's out of the bag now. When Esther went to the palace, Mordecai told her to keep her family background a secret (2:10). But now he specifically tells Hathach that the Jews are Esther's "people" (4:8).

Phase #1 was Esther's distress. Here's phase #2...

B. We see Esther's denial (9-14). One of the most common reactions to injustice is *denial*. Denial shows up in lots of ways. We can deny by clinging to ignorance. "I don't want to know what's happening in the world. If I don't know then I won't feel so bad about doing nothing!" Or we can deny by distorting the situation, "Ah, it's not that bad. Besides, what can I do about it? I'm only one person." In Esther's case...

1. *Esther tried to make excuses (9-11).* "Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said.¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai,¹¹ '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 gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

Basically, Esther's trying to excuse her non-involvement. After hearing the message Mordecai sent to her through Hathach, she sends Hathach back to Mordecai with this response: "Listen, cousin, *everybody* knows what you've asked me to do is impossible. It's the law. Nobody can approach the king without him taking the initiative. And he hasn't called for me in thirty days. If I did what you asked, I could be killed. It's not my fault. I just can't do anything. Sorry."

Esther's got a point. She well remembers what happened to her predecessor, Vashti. Vashti learned the hard way what can happen when you stand up for "principle" with a fickle man like Xerxes.

Esther is a pawn in the possession of a self-absorbed dictator. The word that comes to my mind is *helpless*. Haman devises a plot, and she can't stop him. Xerxes ignores her, and she can't approach him. She's helpless. She can't do anything.

Or can she? According to Mordecai she can. Listen to what he says to snap Esther out of her denial in verses 12-14: "When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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?'"

Esther made excuses, but...

2. *Mordecai forced her to face the facts (12-14)*. In essence, he told her...

- This problem is *your* problem, too (12-13). Don't be naive, Esther! You may be living in the king's house now, but that won't protect you from Haman! This isn't just *my* problem, and this isn't simply somebody *else's* problem. This is *your* problem, too. What's more...

- This problem is an opportunity for you to trust God (14). I'm challenged by Mordecai's perspective in verse 14. In effect he tells Esther, "Cousin, if you remain silent relief and deliverance for the Jews will come from *somewhere else*."

Wait a minute. How did Mordecai know that? He's in a helpless and hopeless situation. No one can change the heart of the most powerful ruler in the world, can he? No one can stop this wicked scheme of Xerxes and Haman, can he? No one can rescue the Jews from this diabolical edict, can he?

To which Mordecai says, "Someone will. Yes, someone *will*. Esther, if you remain silent, deliverance will come from another place, but it will come."

How could Mordecai be so sure? Apparently, he knew God's Word. He knew that this wasn't merely some personal problem. What's at stake here is the very *plan of God*.

Centuries before Mordecai came along, God made a promise to Abraham, and repeated it to his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. In essence He said, "I'm going to bless you. I'm going to bring hope to this sin-cursed world through your descendants."⁴

⁴ See Genesis 12:1-3

Mordecai knew that. He knew that the Jews were God's chosen people. He knew what the prophets had foretold. In the fifteenth century B.C. Moses announced that *The Prophet* was coming.⁵ In the tenth century, God told David that one of his descendants would one day rule the world.⁶ In the eighth century, Isaiah revealed that Immanuel was coming, a virgin born Jew who would be God-with-us.⁷ Micah said he'd be born in Bethlehem⁸. In the sixth century, Daniel revealed a succession of four kingdoms [known from hindsight as the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman kingdoms], ultimately to be conquered by the Messiah, a Jew.⁹

There was no way that Xerxes and Haman could succeed. God would not allow His promises to fail. God would deliver His people, if not by Esther, then through someone else.

Beloved, can God keep His promises when wicked men oppose Him? Can God fulfill His plan when a godless ruler is on the throne?

Here's what faith is all about. Faith is taking God at His Word no matter how you feel, no matter how the circumstances look, no matter what. We're saved by taking God at His Word, and we must live the same way--by taking God at His Word.

Have you ever noticed that when trials hit, some people crumble and others shine? What makes the difference? It boils down to this. Those who shine are those who *know God*. Not just know *about* Him, but know *Him*. His character. His promises. His Word.

Here's what sustains us when life is caving in all around us. Like Mordecai, we must learn to cling to the promises of a God who cannot lie.

Life didn't make sense to Job, but he could say, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth (Job 19:25)." Nor did life make sense to Joseph when he was wasting away in prison, though innocent. What kept him going? Hear his later testimony in Genesis 50:20, "God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Quite frankly, the death of Jesus didn't make sense either, at least not on Friday. When Joseph and Nicodemus put Him in the tomb, it looked like Satan had won and God's plan had failed. But then Sunday came...just like God promised it would one thousand years earlier in Psalm 16:10.

Yes, Esther, there's a problem. And yes, it's *your* problem, too. But remember this. This problem is merely an opportunity for you to trust God.

I love Mordecai's statement at the end of verse 14. It's probably the key statement of the whole book: "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this."

I challenge you to view your life through this lens. You are where you are right now because the Sovereign Lord placed you there "for such a time as this." There's something that the Lord is wanting to do in and through your life for His honor.

Some of you are thinking, "That can't be. You don't know my life. I've blown it. I've sinned. My life's a mess now and it's my fault."

⁵ Deut 18:15

⁶ 2 Samuel 7; Ps 132:11

⁷ Isaiah 7:14; 9:6

⁸ Micah 5:2

⁹ Daniel chapters 7-12

May I remind you of something? Esther and Mordecai had blown it, too. They shouldn't have been in Susa in the first place. Esther shouldn't have participated in a beauty contest that involved immorality, and shouldn't have married a pagan, non-believing Gentile king. Mordecai shouldn't have proudly refused to honor Haman.

They shouldn't have. But they did, and were responsible for their choices. Yet God is greater than our past failures. He can make something beautiful out of our lives no matter what we've done. He can use us *for such a time as this*. Aren't you glad?

The question is, are we willing? Are you willing to surrender the controls of your life to the Sovereign Lord and say, "Have thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way. Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after Thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still."?

We've seen Esther's distress and her denial. Now phase #3...

C. We see Esther's discernment (15-17). "Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ '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.' ¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions."

Do you see a change in Esther? She's no longer in denial. She's exhibiting discernment which is evidenced by two actions.

1. *She admitted her need.* There's no mention of prayer, but she does call for a three day fast. She knows that she and her people need help—God's help. But she did more than admit her need.

2. *She resolved to take action.* Once the fast was done she said she'd go to the king. Was she optimistic? I love how the Bible doesn't hide the flaws of God's people. Listen to Esther's final words (16), "If I perish, I perish."

Do godly people ever struggle to obey God? They sure do. But a godly person refuses to live by his feelings. "Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

So what happened when Esther went to the king? We'll find out... next time. But for now, we must ask a critical question. How does Esther 4 apply to us?

Application: Esther 4 teaches us the following lessons...

1. *We need to learn to rest in God's sovereignty.* For some, this is a new thought.

Listen to the words of C.H. Spurgeon, "There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought to more earnestly contend to than the doctrine of their Master over all creation--the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands--the Throne of God and His right to sit upon that throne...for it is God upon the Throne whom we trust."

God is in control of everything. Do you believe that? Then *rest* in it. The doctrine of God's sovereignty can be an anchor for your soul. In God's sovereign wisdom He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to the Cross. Was His death an accident? Nor was His

resurrection three days later. It was the fulfillment of the plan of God. So choose today to rest in His sovereignty.

2. *We need to learn to live with unanswered questions.* Life is not always black and white. It wasn't for Esther and Mordecai, nor will it always be for us.

Yes, God can deliver us *from* trials—He can heal a cancer, or change the heart of your obstinate boss. However, my observation is that usually He takes us right *through* trials. And He invites us to trust Him.

3. *We need to learn to live as stewards.* The fact is this. We exist for God, not God for us. We were created by Him and for Him (Romans 11:36).

Answer this. Does God *need* us? No. He's totally self-sufficient and needs nothing to fulfill His plan. But it is His plan to use us. He decrees the means as well as the end. God chooses to use human instruments—like Esther—to accomplish His intentions.

What are we to do? He wants us to see ourselves as *stewards*. Listen to 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."

What does that mean in practical terms? It means this. What we have we have because God entrusted it to us. Our jobs, our houses, our neighbors, our money, our talents, our contacts, our experiences. It's all a gift from Him. The day is coming when we will give an account of what we've done with what He entrusted to us. Did we use it for His honor, or did we simply hoard it?

It's true. What you have and where you are right now is not a matter of coincidence. God has orchestrated it—for such a time as this. Are you willing?

4. *We need to learn that when we feel helpless, He's not.* God delights in helping the helpless. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to rescue *sufficient* people? No. *Helpless* people. When we were without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6). Do you need help today? Look to the Helper.