

## June 27, 2021 | Esther: Fractured People Flawless God

### Week 5 | Esther 4 | "Pondering Providence"

#### Announcements:

- A brief Trustee Meeting after church next week.
- Organizing meals for Bruce Ribb.

No other place in Esther is God's absence so evident than in chapter four. Right where you'd think God should be mentioned, He is conspicuously absent. This blatant absence of God draws the reader into a conundrum: how should we resolve the tension between human agency and God's providence (i.e., free will vs. fate)? Frustratingly, the author of Esther seems content to leave the issue unresolved. And while that has bothered Christians throughout the ages, the effect is all too familiar. Rather than have some voice from the heavens explain what's going on, Mordecai, as well as we (the readers), are left to formulate our own conclusions. This is not unlike how we, in the real world, are left to ponder the providence of God in our every day. We rarely come to any definitive answers, but we know that God is at work. That, at least, is undeniable. But to what degree, and in what way exactly, is elusive and unknowable. Thus, what we have in chapter four is a lesson on how the follower of God should make decisions amid uncertainty. That in moments when we feel like we're groping in the dark, we should see our circumstances through the eyes of faith. Only then will a pathway forward present itself.

Let's dive into the text.

#### **READ:** Esther 3:1-3 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup>When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. <sup>2</sup>He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. <sup>3</sup>And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Again, let me remind you of the date: "the thirteenth day of the first month..." (Es. 3:12). That, as we know, is the same date as the eve of the Passover. So, instead of Mordecai making preparations to celebrate the Passover, he, as well as all the Jews of Persia, tore their clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went throughout the city streets mourning and lamenting the decree. The idea of people expressing themselves in this way may seem extreme to Western

readers, but this show of sorrow was not only standard during this time across cultural divides; it was also a way of showing protest to what had occurred. Thus, this is why we're told Mordecai mourned all the way to the "king's gate" in hopes that the Persian aristocracy would know the Jews were upset about the decree. But Mordecai had an ulterior motive in coming to the king's gate. He not only wanted to get the attention of the king, but he also wanted to get the attention of the queen, his adoptive daughter Esther. And that is precisely what happens.

**READ:** Esther 3:4-11 (ESV)

<sup>4</sup>When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. <sup>5</sup>Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. <sup>6</sup>Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, <sup>7</sup>and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. <sup>8</sup>Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. <sup>9</sup>And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup>Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, <sup>11</sup>"All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

Now, first thing, why did Esther send Mordecai clothes? Was she embarrassed? Did she think Mordecai's actions were too extreme as if he had breached some social norm? No and no. Esther sent Mordecai fresh clothes because she wanted him to come and talk to her personally, and, as long as he was dressed in sackcloth and ashes, he wouldn't be allowed to enter the palace.

Okay, so why did Mordecai refuse the clothes? Was it pride? Was he condemning Esther? No and No. He declined to change his clothes and thereby change his demeanor because the situation was unchanged.

How does Esther not know? If mourners were barred from entering even the gates of the palace, the palace itself must've been a bubble insulated from the world. What's more, Esther is apparently surrounded by good servants; had they known, there would've been very little reason for Esther to send messengers to inquire about Mordecai's actions.

Now, notice, while Mordecai not only knows of the decree and even the bribe Haman offered Xerxes, he does not know everything. Esther informs him of two critical facts: the first, and one which Mordecai would've been well aware of, is that no one can enter the king's presence unannounced; secondly, and this Mordecai probably had no knowledge of, Esther had not seen the king in at least 30 days. This seems strange to us, as Esther was queen. Would not Xerxes, the king, seen his own queen more than that? True. Under normal circumstances, that would be true. However, this was no typical marriage. Xerxes placed little value on Esther as a person apart from her beauty and what she can do for him in bed. She was no confidant of Xerxes. She was just a piece of meat. And, apparently, as is indicated by the 30 days, her favor with the king has waned since she became queen four years prior.

So, how does Mordecai respond?

**READ: Esther 3:12-17 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. <sup>13</sup> Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. <sup>14</sup> For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" <sup>15</sup> Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, <sup>16</sup> "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." <sup>17</sup> Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Mordecai's words are not intended to pressure Esther or meant to be overly harsh. The reality is that the pressure all the Jews were under was very real, and the harshness of their situation was undeniable. Any coercion we might feel from Mordecai is actually from the facts. The fact is, Esther, though queen, is a Jew. And if they will kill Mordecai and every Jew in the land, they will no doubt kill Esther as well. Mordecai's point is that while going before the king has a high probability of ending in death, refraining from going before the king seals Esther's fate.

Essentially, Mordecai is saying, “My sweet daughter, your death, as well as mine and all your kin, is all but assured if you do not go before the king.”

But notice that Mordecai's optimism is not some foolhardy plan. His assurance is based on the presence of God, though he does not explicitly say so. He says, "[relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place.](#)" Meaning, while Esther is clearly their best shot at survival, God undoubtedly can make way for the Jews to survive even if Esther fails. God's plans are not so easily thwarted by our failures.

Mordecai then places Esther right in the providential plan. He says, essentially, “Esther, my Hadassah, it is for this very reason that you have been made queen of Persia: to save the Jews. God has placed you here, and if he has, victory must be more than just a possibility but a certainty.”

Esther is convinced. In fact, she's so convinced that she then **commands** Mordecai and all the Jews to hold a three-day fast. Fasts usually only went for one day and only from sunrise to sunset. So, this three-day fast was extreme. Especially considering that this day is the eve of the Passover, Esther meant for all the Jews everywhere to abstain from the Passover itself.

Now, Esther saying, “...if I perish, I perish,” is not fatalistic resignation but a courageous declaration! They are not, “Whelp, guess I'll go before the king and die.” They are, “I will go before the king, even if it ends up killing me.” What's more, Esther is not overly dramatic. As we saw, she is in genuine danger, and the probability of her success, while not a complete lost cause, is not in her favor. And yes, many of us already know that she survives. But I'd argue she is an exception to the rule, not the standard. Many a courageous few have stood up to the immoral majority and lost their lives because of it: [William Tyndale](#), [Abraham Lincoln](#), and [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), just to name a few.

### **So, what's the takeaway?**

**We can never presume to know how God will work, but we can always assume God will work according to His will. And, this one thing we know, His will for those who love Him is absolute.**

**READ:** Esther 3:14 (ESV)

[<sup>14</sup> For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"](#)

Mordecai is no prophet. He doesn't know the inner workings of the mind of God, nor has God revealed his plans to Mordecai. God remains silent and veiled behind the curtain. What

Mordecai does know, however, is that being God's chosen people, the Jews will be saved one way or another, either by Esther or someone else. And while that is an undeniable fact for Mordecai, he still doesn't know how exactly God will make it happen. Thus, the only thing that Mordecai can turn to is the scientific method: observe, question, research, hypothesize, test, analyze, and conclude.

- The observation: The Jews are facing certain annihilation.
- The question: Will God save his people? Yes. How?
- The research: For Mordecai, it is far too much of a coincidence that the sitting queen of all Persia just so happens to be a Jew during a time when all Persian Jews are about to be butchered.
- The hypothesis: Mordecai's words, "[Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?](#)" are not pure speculation on Mordecai's part. He's drawing a conclusion based on the facts in front of him. In other words, he's formulating a working hypothesis.<sup>1</sup>

To find out how the rest of the scientific method plays out, we'll have to continue reading. But, suffice to say, Mordecai had a strong hunch that the only reason Esther even became queen was for "such a time as this." Mordecai neither underestimates Esther's predicament nor overinflates Esther's potential; instead, he trusts in God's providence. He knows how dangerous Esther's role is and how likely she is to succeed. But even when those odds are stacked against God's goodwill for his people, Mordecai concludes, "How can we fail?"

**READ:** Romans 8:28-39 (NKJV)

<sup>28</sup> And we know that [all](#) things work together for [good](#) to those who [love](#) God, to those who are the [called](#) according to [His](#) purpose. <sup>29</sup> For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. <sup>30</sup> Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, [who](#) can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He [not](#) with Him also [freely](#) give us [all](#) things? <sup>33</sup> [Who](#) shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It*

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<sup>1</sup> Reid, Debra, *Esther*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Volume 13, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), p. 104.

is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

<sup>37</sup> Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **So, what's the takeaway?**

We can never presume to know how God will work, but we can always assume God will work according to His will. And, this one thing we know, His will for those who love Him is absolute.

So, we may not know the details of God's plan. And, very likely, we will go our entire lives without knowing why certain things happen to us. But this one thing we do know is that God loves us, and His will for us is good. And "all things" will work together for His good in the end. That means if the bad that we experience in this life can work together for His good. Even the worst things in life can be used for the furtherance of God's good work. And someday, even if we, like Esther, are faced with certain death, we can say, as she did, "if I perish, I perish." Why fear death when God makes us victors over even the grave through Jesus Christ our Lord?

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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TEXT: Esther 4

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: