

**The Book of Esther: A Defining Moment**  
**Esther 4**  
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Last week Act III ended with a close-up of Haman and King Ahasuerus, clinking their whiskey glasses together after Haman's odious edict, toasting their shared power and success. Then, the camera panned out over the city, with the clink of their glasses now being drowned out by the cries of confusion outside the palace walls.

The confusion at the end of chapter 3 is somewhat ambiguous. Presumably, the Persians are as confused as the Jews, just in a different way. Perhaps they are perplexed, or even grieved, by the king's order to murder so many of their neighbors. Some may have greeted the edict with greedy anticipation, anxious for the opportunity to settle old scores or to get rich in the vacuum that will surely be left when all the Jews are wiped out. The fact of the matter is that we're not told the precise nature of the confusion. It is dramatic but it is tantalizingly unspecific.

**Act IV, Scene 1:** But as the curtain rises on Act IV, the focus becomes wrenchingly specific. One man stands alone in the spotlight: Mordecai. We see him tearing his clothes in the traditional Middle-Eastern gesture of mourning. He puts on sackcloth and ashes and goes through the city "wailing with a loud and bitter cry." His wanderings culminate at the palace gate where he stops and stays, though we get the impression that he might have entered the palace itself were it not for the fact that he is woefully out of compliance with the palace dress code.

We are struck immediately by the very public nature of Mordecai's grief. He seems to want to attract as much attention as possible. This is understandable given the very human urge to unmask injustice, especially injustice on such an overwhelming scale. His grief is great, but it is in proportion to the gravity of the situation. This sets Mordecai's character in stark contrast with Haman and Ahasuerus, whose hallmark has been a consistent display of disproportion.

Obviously, Mordecai is grieving the impending destruction of his people, but we are left to wonder if there is anything more to his outpouring of pain and loss. Does he feel any personal responsibility for the Jews' peril? Would he have acted differently had he known the consequences of refusing to bow down to Haman? To what extent is his behavior a personal issue? A moral issue? A

religious issue? Does he now regret it? The narrator is absolutely silent about such questions, so we must be content to leave them unanswered. But, part of the genius of Esther is that it prompts us to ask them in the first place.

Verse 3 broadens the focus again so that we see that Mordecai's grief is but a sample of the great spasm of grief that grips the Jewish people throughout the provinces of Persia. Such a panorama is the narrator's way of showing us that the fate of Mordecai and the fate of his people are inextricably intertwined. The identification of one with the other is now set as irrevocably as the fateful edict.

**Act IV, Scene 2** moves the focus from the palace gate to inside the palace walls. Esther, too, is "deeply distressed" by the news brought to her by her attendants. But, at least at this point, that news doesn't seem to include the details of the king's decree. Instead, her distress is due to the fact that Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate in sackcloth and ashes. It is only when he refuses the garments Esther sends to him that Hathach, the king's eunuch, is dispatched to "go to Mordecai to learn what is happening and why." (4:5)

Verses 4 and 5 are wonderfully revealing. First, they call our attention to the contrast between life inside the palace and outside it. We got an important glimpse of that at the end of chapter 3 when Haman and Ahasuerus sit down for a drink while all Susa is thrown into a panic. These verses highlight how isolated the palace really is. Information is tightly controlled, presumably by Haman himself. Despite the edict being proclaimed far and wide by the king's state-of-the-art courier service, the news has not spread within the palace itself.

The second thing these verses reveal is Esther's growing sense of personal danger. Her maids and eunuchs evidently know about her association with Mordecai or they would not have thought it important to bring her the news about his inappropriate behavior at the palace gate. How long can she keep her own religious identity secret with Mordecai carrying on in public like this? And, part of her distress may well stem from confusion over Mordecai's "mixed signals." First he tells her to keep quiet about her Jewishness, and now he seems determined to call everyone's attention to it!

At Esther's request, Hathach seeks out Mordecai in the open square of the city. In this very public venue, Mordecai tells Hathach the whole story of what has happened to him. He includes in his telling "the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews." How does Mordecai know this? That conversation between Haman and Ahasuerus

took place within the palace, after all. Evidently information leaks out of the palace better than it leaks in to it. This is significant not only because it reveals that Mordecai knows how much it is worth to Haman to destroy the Jews, but because it also reveals that Mordecai is well connected. Perhaps that shouldn't come as a big surprise given that it was Mordecai who got wind of the assassination attempt in time to alert the king. One can learn a lot, it seems, by keeping one's ear to the ground at the palace gate.

Finally, Mordecai produces an actual copy of the king's decree. He gives it to Hathach that "he might show it to Esther, explain it to her and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people." There are no more mixed messages—Mordecai's intentions are clear. In issuing this charge, he effectively counteracts his own previous orders about Esther keeping her identity a secret. Esther is to abandon all attempts at anonymity and plead for her people. In Mordecai's mind, her fate is as inextricably linked with the Jews as his own. But, how will Esther hear it?

**Act IV, Scene 3:** Hathach relays Mordecai's message to which Esther responds with one of her own. Has Mordecai forgotten, she asks, that the punishment for approaching the king in the inner court without an invitation is death? "Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone may that person live." She then adds a piece of ominous information that even Mordecai and his well-placed sources could not have known: "I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days." Is it possible the king's ardor has cooled, making Esther's welcome all the more uncertain?

Some commentators have not been very kind to Esther, construing her hesitation as cowardice or selfishness. Yet, I think it unfair to blame her for being cautious, especially given the fate of her predecessor Vashti. Instead, I see her comments as indicating how clearly she is thinking which is no small feat under the circumstances and how much she has learned about the customs of the Persian court. Most importantly, Esther's words reflect the ways in which her character has grown since we last saw her. She has learned to think and act for herself and is no longer content to take orders from Mordecai without carefully considering their wisdom and their consequences. She is deliberate in her approach to problems—both now and later—and that sets her apart from her predecessor.

The palace rules regarding how an audience with the king is conducted choreograph the plot in two chapters that are yet to come, chapters 5 and 8, but more than that, the rules focus all our attention on one highly dramatic moment.

The whole story hinges on whether or not Ahasuerus extends that golden scepter. We remain spellbound waiting to see what happens.

Meanwhile, Hathach continues to shuttle back and forth between the queen and her uncle. Mordecai's reply to Esther's latest message contains far and away the most well-known phrase in the book of Esther. "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (4:13-14)

Mordecai's argument for Esther's intervention is impressive. First, he makes his case based on her Jewish identity. She can die now or she can die later, but either way, her life is in jeopardy. For his second argument he switches tactics and says, "you know, you may not be the only means of deliverance here." What he has in mind is not clear, but it is the closest thing in the entire book to an overt reference to God's presence and power to intervene in the interests of his people.

After working the providence angle in a negative way, Mordecai now puts a more positive spin on it. "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Of all his arguments, this one is simultaneously the most powerful and the most personal. Here we glimpse again the concerned guardian, pacing back and forth in front of the harem, worried about the fate of the young woman he has raised as his own daughter. There is a sense in which these words summarize and attempt to make sense of all that has happened to Esther so far. They acknowledge in one breath all her pain and all her possibilities.

We can't be sure which, if any, of Mordecai's arguments wins Esther over. We only know that she agrees to go along with Mordecai's plan. Hathach makes another trip back to the gate to let her uncle know. "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

Esther's reply is revealing in many ways. First, it is saturated with humility and piety. She does not assume that she is going to accomplish the mission single-handedly—contrast that with Haman who was so confident in his plan that he went ahead and set the date for the Jews' destruction even before he asked the king. Esther's reference to fasting acknowledges that she is relying on others—and on God though the reference is not direct. Second, her words demonstrate uncommon

bravery. If there was any question about her courage before, it is put to rest with her terse, “If I perish, I perish.” Third, she has completely identified with her kindred. The fate of the Jews is now as much hers as Mordecai’s. Finally, she shows the resolution and self-possession of a true queen. Verse 16 reads like a battle plan, and Esther is clearly the general. Even Mordecai seems to recognize this role reversal. The scene concludes with the words, “Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Let us consider how Esther’s story speaks to us today. First, this story says something important about the nature of grief. Mordecai took his demonstration of grief all the way to the place where he drew his paycheck and didn’t even try to hide his despondency. The men with whom he worked saw him at his worst and most vulnerable. Grief needs an outlet, and those who are grieving need support. We are steeped in a culture where any show of distress is weakness and weakness is abhorrent. And, we’re growing more and more uncomfortable with expressing emotion and being in the presence of others who express it. Church, we need to be the place that radically diverges from the culture for those who mourn. If you’ve got it all together, if your life is perfect, if there is no loss or disappointment in your life, you don’t need to be here. The church is the place for messy people with messy lives, people who know what it is to suffer and who need to cry. This needs to be the place where it is safe to take off the Super Hero mask and just be yourself.

I want to point out that listening is a huge part of how we support and encourage those who are hurting. Too often we want to fix people or at least fix the problems in their lives. Initially, Esther sent out a set of new clothes to Mordecai, hoping that would solve whatever ailed him, but she did so before she had even asked why he was distressed. Ask. Listen. Be present. Those are our gifts to one another.

Third, I am struck by the evolution we see in Esther, as her Jewish identity gradually became her own. The question for us is, who do we identify with? Jesus had the audacity to ask us to identify with the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the marginalized—to make their concerns our concerns, their problems, our problems. When we do that, it will no longer be an option for them to suffer while we sit comfortably in our palaces, unaffected. We will be called to action, just as Esther and Mordecai were. Are we listening?

Finally, each of us has a sphere of influence. These spheres differ in size and location but one thing they have in common: we are placed where we are for a

purpose. In your particular family, your particular social circles, your particular job, this particular church—you are where you are for “just such a time as this.” God is inviting you to live into your destiny as one of his beloved family right where you are. None of our destinies will be fulfilled easily. All of them will require difficult decisions, some so hard we don’t think we can do it. These become the defining moments that make up our lives, and my hope and prayer is that each of us will make the hard choices, will walk the narrow path, will bear the cross our destinies include so that, like Esther and Mordecai, we will be found faithful.

Amen.