

I Will Go to the King: If I Perish, I Perish

4: 4-17

DIG: How does the view of women reflected in Esther's story compare with how women are viewed throughout the world today? What are women valued most for today, both in the secular culture and in either the Church or messianic synagogue? How did Esther embrace her culture's view of herself? How did it hurt her? What made this bold transformation in Esther so unlikely? What changed in her to make it possible?

REFLECT: How does Esther's story show us that God values and works through us to advance His kingdom today? How is she a role model for us? Can you think of a defining moment in your life based on your identification with God's people? Can you imagine a crisis in which you would go against the law, as Esther did, to find a solution? Can you say by faith, as Esther did: **If I perish, I perish.**

These verses present three stages of a conversation between Esther and Mordecai although they never spoke face to face. First, Esther simply sent clothes to Mordecai (4:4-5), but he would not accept them. In the second exchange, Esther sent Hathak to find out why Mordecai was grieving, who sent back a copy of the Jewish death sentence (4:6-8). Their third dialogue was a longer discussion that explains Esther's understanding that to approach the king would take planning for the urgency of her daring decision.

Although seemingly separated from direct contact with Mordecai during the five years of her marriage to King Ahasuerus, Esther still loved him as the one who raised her. When her eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress because he was wearing sackcloth and ashes. Those who waited on the queen knew of her affection for Mordecai, but didn't know they were related. Esther was cut off from news outside the palace and did not know about Haman's plan of genocide against her people. So misunderstanding why Mordecai was in sackcloth, she sent him clothes to wear. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them (4:4).

Esther dispatched a messenger to find out what was wrong. She could not go herself because her Jewish identity was still a secret. Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why (4:5). The name Hathak may come from the Persian *hataka*, which means *good*. If so, this man lived up to his name. Ahasuerus had apparently been careful to

choose a man of integrity to wait on his queen, and had been willing to release him from his own service to hers.⁵⁸

There was nothing private about their meeting. So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate where everyone gathered (4:6). In Oriental cities this open square was used as a market place. There 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 (4:7). Evidently copies of the edict were posted on the city wall for all to see. A copy delivered to Esther herself would reveal the grim reality of what was ahead for all Jews in Persia - including her.

The messenger, therefore, returned with double bad news. First, He gave him a copy (the word *patshegn*, which is a Persian word for a copy of the writings, is found only in Esther 3:14, 4:8, 8:13 and nowhere else in the TaNaKh) of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her (4:8a). And secondly, he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people (4:8b). Mordecai had summed up the situation quickly. Action had to be taken immediately if the Jews were to be saved, and there were only two people in a position to help the threatened community: Esther as queen, and he himself as the queen's cousin. He recognized the responsibility for his people that his special position placed upon him, and his first duty was to rouse Esther to an equal sense of her responsibility. It was the time for her to reveal her Jewishness.

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said (4:9). Suddenly Esther's ability to keep everyone happy wasn't working. She could no longer rely on her ability to please. The king and Mordecai, the two most important men in her life, were sure to butt heads. She couldn't obey them both. Furthermore, instead of having someone to think for her and to take care of her, Esther needed to think and take care of herself. Not only that, multiple thousands of her people would die if she failed to act. Suddenly a voiceless Esther needed to find her own voice and speak out for her people, and all within a political system that mandated her silence. This young woman who never had to think for herself, take a stand, or fight a battle needed to stand up to the most powerful man on the earth, a man whose strongest political enemies trembled in his presence. And Esther knew all too well what he was capable of doing. She hadn't forgotten what happened to the last woman who crossed him. She had Mordecai's undying support - along with all her people. But the fact remained: Esther had to act alone.⁵⁹

Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai (4:10), "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 they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives (4:11a). The etiquette of the Persian court was very strict. Except for the seven eunuch's, no one could approach the king unless introduced by a court usher. Like all heads of state, Ahasuerus needed to be protected from assassination and the aggravation of a kingdom full of people's problems (see Exodus 18:15-16). He did give audiences at his own discretion and personal invitation, but even his wife had no right to approach; however, the law had been passed with unlawful intruders not lawful wives in mind.⁶⁰ To come into the king's presence without being summoned was a capital offense, and the offender would be immediately executed by the king's attendants unless the king, by extending his golden scepter, showed his approval of the act.

Initially, she tried to dodge the unwelcomed responsibility, reminding Mordecai, "But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king" (4:11b). Haman had access to the king, but Esther did not. Apparently she did not expect to see Ahasuerus any time soon. She didn't request an audience, possibly thinking it would take too long. This is but one example of how dysfunctional life had become in the palace at Susa.

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai (4:12), he was noticeably unmoved by her predicament. In light of the looming holocaust, her excuses meant nothing to him. He warned her that she could not hide. The message he sent back to her must have sent chills up her spine: Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape (4:13a). Mordecai gets right to the point when he tells the queen that even if she should decide to continue to hide her Jewish identity, as he had previously advised, she would still face certain death.

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place (4:13b). Some have seen in the phrase, from another place, an implied reference to ADONAI because in rabbinical Hebrew, God is sometimes referred to as "the Place" where all creation exists (see Genesis Rabba 68). Mordecai did not say that help for the Jews would come from "the Place," but merely from another palace. Though Mordecai is not pictured as a pious man who was righteous in his dealings before God, he at least had a sense of the covenantal relationship between the LORD and Israel. His is expressing his confidence that the Jews will not face annihilation, but will be helped through some other human agent. Mordecai's thinking was that while Esther's life may be in jeopardy if she goes before the king uninvited, her fate is certain if she does not.⁶¹

But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this (4:14)? **Providence!** Without precisely telling us how he came to the conclusion, **Mordecai** reveals that he believes in God and His guidance in individual lives. He implies the LORD's ordering of world events, whether the rulers of the world want to acknowledge it or not. This was, of course, faithfully affirmed by the prophets of ADONAI (**Isa 10:8, 45:1; Jer 1:15; Eze 7:24**).

Everything the situation demanded went against the grain of her upbringing, her conditioning as a woman, her well-established habits, and her natural preferences. **Mordecai** was calling **Esther** to break **Persian law** and risk her life. Her first battle, then, even tougher than facing **Ahasuerus**, was to face and overcome herself.

Once **Esther** grasped the urgency of her calling, she commanded **Mordecai**, "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me (4:15a). Nothing is said about **Esther** praying, although prayer always accompanied fasting in the TaNaKh. Today many **Jews** observe what is called the **Fast of Esther**, which is based on this verse (see **Bw - The Fast of Esther**). She continued: Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. Fasting was usually for one day only. It was mandated on the Day of Atonement (**Leviticus 16:29-31**), but other than that was voluntary for a specific event (**First Samuel 14:24; Second Samuel 1:12**). For three days meant until the third day when she planned to appear before the king. This fast pointed to the seriousness of the situation and her need for spiritual strength.

My attendants and I will fast as you do" (4:15b-16a). Her first action was loaded with significance, if we are not careful, it slips right past us. There is a transformation taking place in **Esther**. She is growing right before our eyes. Her response shows us that she has not merely been intimidated into submission by **Mordecai's** authority, for it is not one of resigned acceptance but one of firm conviction. This was the crucial turning point in **Esther's** development. Up till now, though queen, she was nevertheless completely under **Mordecai's** authority and care. Now she is the one who sets the conditions and gives the orders.⁶² Therefore, it marks a major shift in her relationship with **Mordecai**.

Esther's reply is also a confession of faith, although it was not stated in overtly religious language. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law (see **Ac - The Book of Esther from a Jewish Perspective: King Ahasuerus**). And if I perish, I perish (4:16b). Just because **Esther** was providentially brought to her influential position did not mean that life would be easy or that God would not test her faith (**James 1:3** and **First Peter 1:7**).

Thus, it changed her relationship with **Mordecai**, who **went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions (4:17)**. When **Mordecai** obeyed **Esther**, our image of the central character in the book changes, and **she** becomes the initiator of events. The transition is marked by **the king's** rewarding, not punishing, **her** crime in **5:1-5**.

The defining moment in **Esther's** life was brought to a head by circumstances beyond **her** control. It seemed that **she** was caught between the Gentile world in which **she** lived and the Jewish world in which **she** was raised. That is, between the world and **her** faith. But we need to understand that **her** dilemma is our dilemma. Circumstances hem us in and demand that we commit ourselves to act with courage and exercise faith. Regardless of the situation you are in, choose God. Be on His side because His purposes are far greater than yours. **And who knows? Perhaps you have come to your present situation for such a time as this!**