Ester (Esther) ~ Part 4

Mordekhai Appeals to Ester

This section opens with **Mordekhai** learning of **Haman's** plans to annihilate the **Jews** (3:12–14) and **Mordekhai's** response of mourning. The forms of mourning mentioned in vv. 1–3 were common throughout the ancient **Near East**; as the decree to annihilate the **Jewish** people reaches them, they each respond with visible signs of agony.

4 [1] When Mordekhai learned everything that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and went out through the city, lamenting and crying bitterly.

He tore his clothes. Since most people of this time period owned very few sets of clothes, this action took on great significance. This seems to have been the most commonly practiced form of visible mourning in the ancient Near East (e.g., Genesis 37:34; Job 1:20; 16:15; Isaiah 37:1). *sackcloth:* Coarse, uncomfortable cloth made of goat or camel hair. *ashes* Another visible sign of mourning (compare Jeremiah 6:26; Isaiah 58:5; 61:3; Ezekiel 27:30). This action symbolized complete desolation and probably identification with the dead. *Crying bitterly***:** an emotional outburst expressing complete desperation. The prophets described wailing as an appropriate response to impending judgment - and, by extension, the response here is applied to another imminent threat (e.g., Isaiah 13:6; Jeremiah 4:8; Amos 5:16–17).

[2] He stopped before entering the King's Gate, since no one was allowed to go inside the King's Gate wearing sackcloth.

It seems that those who came in contact with the **king** were expected to appear cheerful; since **Mordekhai's** appearance shows visible signs of mourning, he could not enter the area where the **King** might be present (see Nehemiah 2:1–3).

[3] In every province reached by the King's order and decree, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing, as many lay down on sackcloth and ashes. [4] When the girls and officials attending Ester came and informed her of this, the queen became deeply distressed. She sent clothes for Mordekhai to wear instead of his sackcloth, but he wouldn't accept them. [5] So Ester summoned Hatakh, one of the king's officials attending her, and instructed him to go to Mordekhai and find out what this was all about and why.

There is no indication of how much time elapses between **Mordekhai** and others learning of the edict and when **Ester** learns of it. **Ester** responds by trying to stop **Mordekhai** from mourning, perhaps because she is concerned it will compromise his position as a royal official: He cannot conduct his business in the royal compound while clothed in **sackcloth**. **Mordekhai** refuses to cease his visible mourning. **Hatakh. Ester** regards this man - who has not been mentioned until now in the narrative - as trustworthy, despite his role in the royal court. **Hatakh** could have been appointed by the **King** to serve Ester, and thus he may have been more loyal to her than the **King**, or he could have been an ally of **Mordekhai's**.

[6] Hatakh went out to Mordekhai in the open space in front of the King's Gate, [7] and Mordekhai told him everything that had happened to him and exactly how much silver Haman had promised to put in the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.

10,000 **talents** of silver (this is the 330 tons in Part 3). This emphasizes that it is not just hatred but also greed at work behind the edict. **Mordekhai** has also somehow learned this insider information, which the **Hebrew** text seems to imply was only part of **Haman** and the **King's** discussion.

[8] He also gave him a copy of the decree for their destruction issued in Shushan; so that he could show it to Ester, explain it to her, and then instruct her to approach the king, intercede with him, and implore his favor on behalf of her people.

Mordekhai's possession of a copy of the decree indicates that he is a person of some importance or at least of means.

[9] Hatakh returned and told Ester what Mordekhai had said.

The courier was told to **explain** the decree. Either **Ester** was illiterate, and the decree had to be read to her, or it was written in **Persian** and had to be translated into **Aramaic**. **Mordekhai** was certainly aware of the danger he was putting **Ester** in by telling her to *intercede* with the **King**, but their situation was desperate. It is interesting how he emphasized that the **Jews** were *"her people,"* the same people he had previously commanded her not to identify with (2:10).

[10] Then Ester spoke to Hatakh and gave him this message for Mordekhai: [11] "All the king's officials, as well as the people in the royal provinces, know that if anyone, man or woman, approaches the king in the inner courtyard without being summoned, there is just one law—he must be put to death—unless the king holds out the gold scepter for him to remain alive; and I haven't been summoned to the king for the past thirty days."

12 Upon being told what Ester had said, Mordekhai 13 asked them to give Ester this answer: "Don't suppose that merely because you happen to be in the royal palace you will escape any more than the other Jews. 14 For if you fail to speak up now, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from a different direction; but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows whether you didn't come into your royal position precisely for such a time as this."

Ester's response to **Mordekhai** through **Hatakh** reminded him that coming to the **King** unbidden was certain **death**. Such a law was understandable in the **Persian Empire** with its long history of political assassinations. The one exception to this rule was if the **King** allowed an uninvited person to approach him, signified by his extending **the gold scepter**. Some assume that **Ester's** statement in v. 11 indicated that her absence from her husband was because she had fallen out of favor with him or that his passion for her had waned. Thus, the **King** might be less likely to respond to her unexpected presence and request. On the other hand, her purpose may have been only to tell **Mordekhai** that, in the normal routine, she did not see the **King** often, and that this request would require her to make an unscheduled - and dangerous - visit.

15 Ester had them return this answer to Mordekhai: 16 "Go, assemble all the Jews to be found in Shushan, and have them fast for me, neither eating nor drinking for three days, night and day; also I and the girls attending me will fast the same way. Then I will go in to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

Often in times of crisis **God's** people would **fast** and **pray**, seeking **God's** help and deliverance (Judges 20:26; 1 Kings 21:9; Jeremiah 36:9). **Fasting** took on an even more prominent role in the postexilic community (Ezra 8:21–23; Nehemiah 1:4; 9:1–2). But this **fast** was unusually long, highlighting the severity of the threat to the **Jewish** people. **Ester's** last comment to **Mordekhai** in this chapter (**If I perish, I perish**) is not just resigned fatalism.

17 Then Mordekhai went his way and did everything Ester had ordered him to do. [1]

Verses 12–17 serve as the turning point in the development of **Ester's** character. In 2:20, we are told that she **"obeyed" Mordekhai's** orders, as she always had while he raised her. Now **Mordecai** went and did everything **Ester** had ordered him.

You might be struggling with a sense of purpose and feeling unequipped to make a difference in others' lives. Reflect on how **Ester** took a bold step into the unknown for the sake of her people. Decide to identify one person in your life who is struggling or in need, and commit to reaching out to them this week, offering help, a listening ear, or an invitation to coffee to talk. Just like **Ester**, taking that first step can fulfill **God's** purpose for your life.

[1] Ester 4:1-17.