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C1310 – March 13, 2013 – Esther 4:1-17
Esther's Bravery

Last Wednesday I was giving my presentation in Houston so we have been out of Esther for two weeks and therefore we want to review the first three chapters before we move into the fourth chapter. This book was really meant to be read in one sitting so I hope you are reading it. All I can do is add some additional insight by reading it a little closer and bringing out the human drama that is accessible through the words and expressions used in the original Hebrew text.

The doctrine we are learning is providence and the verse that gave rise to people concluding that Esther teaches us primarily about providence is found in Esther 4:14 which we'll cover tonight. Mordecai recognized that perhaps Esther was raised to her status as royalty for this very time. That wasn't their original intent when they plotted together to climb the ladder into the royal house. But that was God's intent and that's what we mean by providence. Man may have his plans and those plans may even be achieved, but God's plans are actually being constructed and accomplished in a behind the scenes manner usually only detected by men *after the fact* but occasionally in the midst of the facts as in Esther 4:14 and we'll review the doctrine of providence again in a moment as we see it in the early chapters.

Esther 1-2 is viewed by the author in hindsight as laying the groundwork for the coming scenes. Completely unknown to the actors God was providentially at work setting the stage so that when Haman planned to destroy the Jews His team would already be in place to foil the plan.

In Esther 1 we are introduced to the king of Persia, Ahasuerus and his queen, Vashti. The king was planning a campaign against the Greeks and the final stages of that planning took place at a great banquet lasting 180 days. After

the planning was complete he held another banquet for all of Susa lasting seven days. On the seventh day he ordered Vashti to make an appearance before all his guests in order to display her extraordinary beauty. When she refused to come Ahasuerus, drunk and embarrassed because he couldn't even command his wife, was filled with rage and sought counsel from his wise men as to what he should do. One of them, Memucan, advised him to banish Vashti from the office of queen and give her position to another more worthy than she, lest women all over the kingdom rebel against their husbands causing chaos on the eve of battle. The king accepted Memucan's advice and issued a decree banishing Vashti. We are to learn from chapter 1 that while Ahasuerus and Memucan had their own reasons for banishing Vashti God had providential reasons of His own. They wanted to send a message to all the women of Persia not to rebel against their husbands but God wanted to prepare the way for Esther to be the next queen so she could work on behalf of the Jews when the time came. Both may have achieved their purposes showing that God works in and through human choices to bring about His plan.

In Esther 2, King Ahasuerus had returned from his losing campaign against the Greeks. Being defeated he wanted to take solace in Vashti but he remembered that she had been banished and the laws of the Persians and Medes could not be repealed. His advisors saw the king downcast day after day and so suggested a kingdom-wide beauty contest to find him a new queen. All the most beautiful virgins of Persia would be selected and brought to the palace so the king could pick the one he liked best. After trying out many women he fell in love with Esther and so made her queen instead of Vashti. We are to learn that years before the beauty contest God had providentially given Esther great beauty that would win over King Ahasuerus, putting her in a position to work on behalf of the Jews when the time came. So again, both Ahasuerus and God achieved their purposes showing that God works in and through human choices to bring about His plan.

Esther 2 concludes with Mordecai being strategically located at the king's gate where he overheard a conspiracy to assassinate the king. When this conspiracy was revealed to Esther she told the king in Mordecai's name. Mordecai's loyalty was then recorded in the royal chronicles of the king but his reward was overlooked. This set the stage for the future foiling of

Haman's plan to destroy and annihilate the Jews. We are to learn from this that God is always at work "behind the scenes" to set up the fulfillment of His purposes in history.

So Esther 1-2 shows that God has providentially "set the stage" such that Esther and Mordecai are in place to foil Haman's evil plan to destroy the Jews. Esther 3 introduces Haman and his plan. The plan came about because there was a long-standing enmity between Haman the Agagite and the Jews that reached back all the way to the time of King Saul. So when Mordecai arrogantly refused to follow official Persian court etiquette and bow down and pay homage to Haman according to the king's command the king's servants asked why he rebelled against the king's command. When Mordecai revealed that it was because he was a Jew and Haman found out that he was a Jew he saw it as a little thing to press charges only against Mordecai the Jew.

Instead he set out to destroy all the Jews. To decide the most propitious day to slaughter Jews he went down to the Zoroastrian priests and cast the die according to Persian astrology where they believed that Chance gave rise to Fate. And by this procedure the most propitious day for slaughtering Jews was determined to be the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. That day ended up, however, being the most propitious day for Jews; slaughtering those who tried to slaughter them and therefore became known as the day of Purim or "lots" because every lot that is cast in the lap, its decision is the LORD's. In other words, there is no such thing as Chance events. That's a pagan doctrine. All pagan religions make room for gods but they also make room for Chance. For example Cicero said, "The gods are concerned with weighty matters and ignore what is inconsequential." Well, the casting of the lots may sound inconsequential to you and me but it's not inconsequential to the personal sovereign God. There is nothing inconsequential to Him no matter how limited our finite faculties for detecting the significance may be. And so Haman cast the die but the Lord personally decided the day. And when Haman presented his plan in a general way to the king, promising to add 10,000 talents of silver to the royal treasury, the king casually and unconcernedly accepted the proposition, gave him his signet ring and told him to do whatever he wanted. And while the decree went out for all the enemies of the Jews to make themselves ready for that day, to kill and to destroy and to annihilate all the Jews and plunder them, the people of Susa were in confusion, but the king and Haman could care less, they were getting drunk.

Tonight we come to Esther 4; Esther and Mordecai are in place, Haman's plan has been ratified and letters have been sent out to all the provinces in the first month of the year that all who hate the Jews may ready themselves for the twelfth month when they would have one day to exterminate the Jews and seize the plunder.

Now if we think through the Babylonian calendar we realize that gives eleven months for Esther and Mordecai to act, to do something about this unhappy situation. And since God's sovereign plan for history involves responsible human acts and decisions then the decisions and acts they make are significant. In other words, it's not that God is sovereign and therefore whatever will be will be, that's Fatalism, *que sera sera* and I can sit back and have the attitude that God's plan is just going to happen independent of anything I do. Wrong, that is fatalism and it is a pagan doctrine that many people confuse with sovereignty. Sovereignty is not fatalism. Fatalism is interested only in the end point that is attained, the goal, but God's sovereignty is not just interested in the end point, the goal of history, it is also interested in the means by which that end is attained and includes the responsible acts of men and angels. And I hope you see the interplay throughout the Book of Esther. The Book of Esther is a case study on God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. God is shown as sovereign, by which we mean that He has a plan that will certainly come to pass and at the same time man enters into that plan by acts of genuine choice. And if man didn't make certain choices then certain things wouldn't happen. So it's not one or the other. You don't pit God's sovereignty against man's responsible choices and begin to diminish God's sovereignty in order to make room for man's choices. That's trying to put God and man in the same box, on the same level. Nonsense, God and man are not in the same box, they are not on the same level, God is the Creator and man is the creature. So we're dealing with two levels of reality and not one, two levels of being and not one. And God's sovereignty is operating on one level and human responsibility on another level. The problem is when people try to bring those two levels together and try to get sovereignty and responsibility together. And every time anyone has done that they have ended up destroying both God's sovereignty and human responsibility. They don't go together. They are consistent with one another but they don't go together. And so because of the Creator-creature distinction the only way to understand it is to understand that God's sovereignty is His

acting *upon* the created order from *outside* of it according to His infinite assets, and man's responsibility is his acting *within* the created order from *inside* it according to his finite assets. And therefore both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are true and I think we see the interplay over and over and over in the book of Esther.

So with Esther and Mordecai in place and with Haman's plan ratified and communicated to all the provinces in the first month of the year to get ready for the twelfth month when they would have one day to exterminate the Jews there are now eleven months for Esther and Mordecai to act within history, to act with a significant response.

Esther 4:1, When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. 2He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. Now literally Mordecai had **learned all that had been done**, not only what was written in the decree but how Haman had instigated it because of his arrogant refusal to bow down and pay homage and even according to verse 7 the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay in to the royal treasury. So we perceive that Mordecai had access to intimate details of conversation that went on in the royal palace and that means he either held a high position in the Persian government or he knew people in high positions in the Persian government who liked to gossip. But having **learned all that had been done** he immediately goes into great public mourning.

Now you may interpret his mourning as some great spirituality of Mordecai but that would be a misunderstanding of the text. Pagans often mourned in such public ways drawing attention to themselves so it's not even a sign that Mordecai is a believer. In NT times unbelievers wept loudly and wailed (Mk 5:38). On occasion we find believers like Job mourning intensely. But probably what bothered Mordecai more than anything else is that he felt guilty for revealing his nationality as a Jew and bringing all this danger to his fellow Jews. The irony of the situation is that he hadn't followed his own advice to Esther to hide her identity as a Jew. So now the cat is out of the bag and so **he tore his clothes**, his normal everyday garments, and he **put on sackcloth and ashes**. The **sackcloth** was a bag; something like our burlap sack, usually made of long, black goat's hair and if you put this on it meant

you were in extreme mourning. Then you would go and sit in the **midst of the city** which was the large, open public square and you would toss **ashes** up in the air so that they fell mostly on your head and as you did this you would **wail loudly and bitterly**. And all this was to show that you were extremely upset about something, you were in distress and you were contrite. The question is what was Mordecai contrite about? What did he regret? As far as I can tell he regrets the fact that he blew his cover by unveiling that he was a Jew and now this has brought danger to all the Jews. And I take it that this is probably why Mordecai originally told Esther to conceal her identity as a Jew. He knew there was an anti-Semitic strain in Persia and he was afraid it would erupt and have nasty repercussions. Now that he's revealed that he was a Jew and offended a top Persian official he's the one responsible for the decree to kill and destroy and annihilate all the Jews. And he's in mourning.

So verse 2, **He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth**. They didn't allow people in sackcloth to enter the royal courts because that would be sad and gloomy and these courts had to keep up the appearance of joy and pleasure. It was, of course, appearance only because these courts were shallow spiritually and emotionally just as they are in modern times. But they couldn't have that kind of sadness and gloom in the royal courts. So he **went as far as the king's gate** clothed in sackcloth but he did not **enter the king's gate**.

Verse 3, **In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes**. Now this is the commentary on what was happening out in each province as the decree was received. And again you may think these Jews are godly, they're **mourning**, they're **fasting**, their **weeping and wailing** and laying **on sackcloth and ashes**. But there is one thing that is disturbingly absent. What is it? Prayer. You don't see prayer anywhere in there and typically when **fasting** is mentioned prayer is also mentioned (cf 2 Kgs 19:1-4; Joel 1:14; Neh 1:4; Acts 13:3; 14:23). But the author deliberately leaves prayer out to reveal the spiritual poverty of these Jews. These Jews were living outside of God's covenant program for them. They were still living in the Diaspora *after the right of return* issued by Cyrus and confirmed by Darius. They had the opportunity to go back to the land and align themselves with God's covenant program for Israel but they decided to rather live out among the

pagans. So these Jews are living in disobedience to God's theocratic program. They don't pray. They fasted without praying and so what is described is religious ritual. They were going through a lot of religious motion like a lot of Christians but that's all it was, motion, their hearts were not in it, they're just a bunch of crybabies.

Verse 4, **Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish.** Now what was told her? Not verse 3. She didn't know what was going on out in every province of Persia, she didn't even know what was going on outside the palace walls. So why is she writhing **in great anguish**? Because these maidens and eunuchs saw Mordecai's in sackcloth and ashes come right up to the king's gate, weeping and wailing and they **told her** because they knew her relationship to Mordecai and that she would want to know. But the reason he was in sackcloth they didn't know, all they know and all they told was the fact of his mourning.

So middle of verse 4, **And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept them.** She's trying to cheer him up, trying to console him, trying to bring his mourning to an end, whatever the cause may be. **But he did not accept them** and when this word reached Esther she would know that his distress was far greater than some simple, personal distress, it must be something pretty bad but she still doesn't know what it is.

So verse 5 she intends to find out. **Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king's eunuchs, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.** Now **what this was**, that is, what this was that he was mourning out in the public square and **why it was**, that is, why it was he was mourning, why he was in great distress, what was the cause of his actions. And **Hathach** is the man of the hour, he is sent and he must have been a very trusted eunuch because he's been appointed to attend to the king's wife and he must have been very close to Esther because she's going to trust him to go back and forth to Mordecai with very sensitive information. And further, the very fact of his being mentioned by name shows you that whoever authored this book had access to intimate details of who was assigned to whom in the king's royal palace.

Now his job is to go and find out from **Mordecai** what this was that he was mourning out in public and why it was he was mourning. And the very fact he has to go do this shows that the people in the palace were very disconnected from the daily affairs of the Persian kingdom. They didn't have a clue what was going on out there in the real world beyond the walls of the palace and I know we feel that the people in Washington have no clue what we are going through, they are disconnected leadership which really isn't leadership. There's a disconnect.

So, verse 6, Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate and 7Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai told all and it all related to what **had happened to him** back in chapter 3 and how he daily refused to bow down and pay homage to Haman at the king's gate and how the king's servants inquired of him why he refused and after they did this day after day after day he finally revealed it was because he was a Jew and so now he was personally responsible for the decree to kill and destroy and annihilate all the Jews. He even told **Hathach the exact amount of money Haman promised to pay into the king's treasuries** to carry out the operation which was 10,000 talents of silver and this would communicate to Esther that the campaign against the Jews was to be an extremely large one, a kingdom-wide program of genocide which would destroy all the Jews in the whole world. That's why he was mourning.

Verse 8, **He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her.** Again you see that the people in the palace didn't have a clue what was going on out in the Persian kingdom, they lived a very isolated and separate life from the Persian subjects. They didn't even get the edict that had been sent throughout the kingdom. But now Hathach is going to take a **copy of the text of the edict...**and show it to her so she can read it for herself. And in light of all these facts Mordecai **orders her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people.** Three things, first, **to go in to the king**, the verb is a *piel* stem which means it's an intensive command, very authoritative command, go in to the king. Second, **to implore his favor**, the verb is a *hithpael* stem which is a

reflexive middle voice and the middle voice implies for your own benefit, as well as his, since Esther was implicated in the decree then it was in the best interests of the king to do something about it. Third, **to plead with him**, again the verb is the *piel* stem which is an intensive pleading **with him** since she is the only one who can do anything about it. And all three of these involve the last phrase of verse 8, **her people**. And this little expression is important because when Mordecai **gave a copy of the edict** to Hathach and told him to inform her that it related to **her people** her cover was now blown; at least Hathach now knew that Esther was a Jew. So at this point her cover is blown in the royal palace and yet we know Hathach kept his mouth shut because it never comes to the ears of the king or Haman until the proper time.

Verse 9, Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther. She must have picked up that **Hathach** knew she was a Jew. Verse 10, **Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him to reply to Mordecai: "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days."** Now she's obviously frightened to follow Mordecai's command to go into the king. She had never done that, she never entered the **inner court** without being **summoned** and by this law the Persian kings were kept safe from unwanted intruders. Anyone who risked their life by entering, regardless of their status, was instantly **put to death, unless the king held out...the golden scepter** indicating that the king welcomed the guest. Now she obviously took this law quite seriously and I imagine there were reports of people coming into the inner court who were not summoned and were summarily executed. And for that reason she does not want to just prance into the king's **inner court**. Further, she says, **I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days**. In other words, I'm not sure I'm in good favor with the king right now and so maybe I should wait until he summons me, maybe my life could be spared if I waited. And yet she may not be summoned again, maybe the polygamous king had fallen out of love with her and in love with another. The king was always revitalizing his harem. But at the same time, maybe if she goes in to the king it will show the king that there is something of such importance on her mind that she was willing

to risk her life and therefore give her favor with the king. So there are all these questions and dilemma's running through her mind and we are to get the impression that she does not want to go into the king because she fears for her life.

So verse 12, **They related Esther's words to Mordecai. 13 Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews."** In other words, you're going to die later if you don't go into the king. So it's die now or die later but you're going to die no matter what so you might as well try to do something about it, try to act responsibly in history. She might flirt with the idea that because she was quarantined **in the king's palace** she could **escape**. But the problem was that the laws of the Persians and the Medes could not be repealed and so the king himself was subject to the law and could do nothing to save her on that day. His hands would be tied.

And verse 14, **For** and the conjunction can mean certainly, **Certainly if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish.** In other words, **if you** don't do anything about it while there is still time to do something about it, God **will** certainly provide some other way of deliverance for us but because you failed to do it **you and your father's house will perish** under divine judgment. Now this is one of Mordecai's finest moments. He evidently is cognizant of and believes in the provisions of the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant; namely, that a kingdom-wide campaign of genocide of the Jews will be ultimately unsuccessful. He recognized that God had made promises to the Jewish people that must be fulfilled in history.¹ And yet this is not necessarily a monument to Mordecai's great faith or even that he was a believer. The Pharisees at the time of Christ believed in the Abrahamic Covenant and that God would not allow His covenant people to be destroyed and they were clearly unbelievers. And yet while they were not necessarily godly and Mordecai was not necessarily godly, God is still God and He will not violate His promises even while the Jews are in disobedience. God is the hero of history "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:28). And so if Esther **remains silent at this time** then even though Mordecai does not mention God's name here, this is the verse that gets the closest to naming God. The Jewish rabbi's held that this expression was a veiled allusion to God and the fact that God will

provide some other means of deliverance. But the consequences of Esther not being the means of deliverance are that her and her **father's house** would **perish**. In other words, she should read the signs of history around her and interpret them to mean that she was put in that place in that time providentially by God for this purpose. And to not capitalize on it would be an act of disobedience to the Lord with disciplinary consequences.

And Mordecai says as much at the end of verse 14, **And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?** In other words, Mordecai not only recognizes the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant but he also recognizes that God providentially rules history. He and Esther had their own plans to work up the rungs of the ladder into positions of authority in the Persian Kingdom, purposes they had achieved to a large degree, but Mordecai recognizes that God's purpose may have been something different, **who knows**, maybe God moved **you** into the position of **royalty for** the very purpose that you might save your people. And if so, what a great story that would make. What a great testimony to the fact that even in disobedience God is looking out for His people. So Mordecai in another fine moment recognizes not only the Abrahamic Covenant but also God's providential rule of history. The nation Israel has eternal security and God will maneuver the pieces of history in order to protect that security. It is impossible to destroy the Jews.

Verse 15, **Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 16Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.** There is one of Esther's finest moments. It's not necessarily a super spiritual moment, there's no mention of prayer, it's just fasting, but her courage and bravery to **go in to the king** unannounced, which was a capital offense, is an act of extraordinary bravery. This does not mean that she is not afraid for bravery is not the absence of fear but it is acting in spite of it. And so Esther reveals the very essence of bravery in the words **and if I perish, I perish**. Certainly heroic words that are based on an acknowledgment of God's providential rule of history and that the things that happen in our lives are not by chance but by purpose and God is aligning us to fulfill certain purposes and we are

responsible to acknowledge Him and detect what He is doing in our lives and to act accordingly in a way that will please Him.

And so verse 17, **Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.** The Jews of Susa were informed concerning the fast; there was no more communication between Esther in the palace and Mordecai in the city. For three days those inside the palace and those outside in the city proclaimed a full fast and that will bring us to the third day of the fast in Esther 5.

But this time, what conclusions can we draw from Esther 4? I'm going to draw out one very important thing; God's sovereign rule over history does not exclude human responsibility to act. Mordecai and Esther both perceived that the way God ruled history was by means of responsible human choices. Given eleven months to make decisions and act they formed a plan to act decisively in history from within history. They recognized that God is sovereign and His people could not be destroyed but that at the same time human actions are the means by which God carries out the deliverance. And if it was not them who acted then God (by other means) would act. So then we are invited as humans to enter into history responsibly and fulfill God's purposes for our lives. So then you see that God's sovereign rule and man's human responsibility are not contrary to one another but rather God uses responsible human choices to fulfill His sovereign plans.

In light of this each one of us should recognize that we are here in this time and in this place for a specific purpose. We need to be cognizant of the times in which we live and the place in which we live because there are things for us to do, significant things. We do not just sit here and say I am insignificant and I don't know what God wants me to do. Look around you, there are many providential shapings of God occurring in our world right now that are there for us to detect and to act on, doing so on the basis of sound doctrine. This is what Mordecai and Esther perceived and this is what we are to do. Perceive the times and places in which we live and base our actions on a sound doctrine of providence in light of them.

ⁱ Certainly this utterance in 473BC shows that the Abrahamic Covenant had not yet been fulfilled. This is contrary to Amillennialism which says the covenant had been fulfilled in Joshua's day (cf Josh 21:43ff).

[Back To The Top](#)

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