

Esther Agrees to Help the Jews

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – Esther responds to Mordecai's rebuke by fasting and going before the king
2. aim – to cause us to choose the proper path of identifying fully with the church as it is opposed
3. passage – Esther 4:1-5:14

b. outline

1. Mordecai's Response to the Edict (Esther 4:1-14)
2. Esther's Response to Mordecai (Esther 4:15-5:8)
3. Haman's Response to Mordecai (Esther 5:9-14)

c. opening

1. the *direction* of our exposition of the book
 - a. **chapters 1-2** lay out *in detail* how it is that Esther (a Jewess) was able to rise to Queen of Persia
 - b. **chapter 3** is the "center" of the book – the plot by Haman to destroy the Jews
 1. the elevation of Esther is *in anticipation* of this particular threat
 2. the remaining chapters outline *how* this threat is thwarted
 - c. **chapters 4-7** outline the *response* to the edict by Haman (**chapters 8-10** = its resolution)
 1. (**in a sense**) how each main character responds to this edict – Mordecai, Esther, Haman himself, and (even) the king (as the events unfold)
 2. this sermon will revolve around Esther's response, both *initially* and *as it evolves*

I. Mordecai's Response to the Edict (Esther 4:1-14)

Content

a. his response in general (vv. 1-3)

1. Mordecai responds by embracing the ways of his people: he enters a state of *mourning*
 - a. rending garments, wearing sackcloth and ashes was a clear sign that a person was in *great grief*
 1. it was common to the Jewish people (e.g. Jacob mourning for Joseph in **Genesis 37**; Hezekiah in the face of attack in **2 Kings 19**; the remnant upon the reading of the law in **Nehemiah 9**)
 - a. however, it was also prominent in other cultures (**note v. 2b**)
 2. it was typically accompanied by a time of fasting, prayer, weeping, and lamenting (**see v. 3**)
 3. it was used:
 - a. for grieving after a death (in seeking comfort from God and others)
 - b. in the face of great evil or tribulation to come (in seeking God's help before an enemy)
 - c. as a form of confession and repentance of sin (in humility and shame before God)
 4. it was an *outward* manifestation of the grief that one felt internally – the outward look of being **unkempt** was designed to show others the depth of pain that one felt internally
 - b. the Jews (as a whole) embrace the ways of their culture: they (too) enter a state of *national grief*
 - a. this is an *empire-wide* response of the Jewish people – the entire *diaspora* of Jews rises up in grief over the edict set against them (i.e. which makes sense, given the genocide to come)
 - b. **question:** who were these people at this point in history? **answer:** they were a people who had (up to this point) purposed to *remain* scattered among the Persians (and other foreigners) rather than returning to their homeland and embracing their specific *religious* and *ethnic* heritage
 - c. (**for later**) they choose to *step out* in this way rather than "hide" amongst those around them

b. his response to Esther (vv. 4-9)

1. Esther attempts to get Mordecai to stop manifesting his grief in this way (**why?**)
 - a. because she is unaware of the edict and the reason for his grief (**note vv. 5, 7-8**)
 - b. because she is concerned that his acting this way may disrupt her own comfort
2. Mordecai responds to Esther's ignorance (through Hathach) by:
 - a. telling her of how he had refused to bow down to Haman (which was the right thing to *not* do)
 - b. telling her of the great bribe that Haman had used to persuade her husband to kill the Jews
 - c. telling her of the edict that had been established by her husband against the Jews
 - d. (**and**) commanding her to go to the king and beg for mercy over *her own people* (**see v. 8b**)

c. his rebuke of Esther (vv. 10-14)

1. Esther's *initial* response to the revelation is to **make an excuse** about why she cannot help
 - a. she hasn't had any contact with the king for the past month ("*thirty days*"; v. 11b)
 - b. she cannot just go to the king without being invited by him (or being granted an *exception*; risky)
2. **(in essence)** Esther *refuses* to use her position as the queen to appeal for **her own people**
 - a. **remember:** no one in the palace knows her true ethnicity, even after more than 5 years
 1. initially, Mordecai had commanded her *not* to reveal her ethnicity (**see 2:20**)
 2. now, Mordecai *needs* for her to reveal her ethnicity, for her Jewishness to be a *means* of help
 - b. it is *likely* that Esther has become very comfortable in the palace, melding into the peoples there
3. Mordecai rebukes her for **her unwillingness to identify with her own people**
 - a. **note:** many people focus on the last statement (question) of the rebuke as most important:
 1. **i.e.** that *maybe* Esther "*has come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*"
 2. **(agreed)** this is a serious question pointing to his belief that God has (probably) raised her up to be queen of Persia for this exact purpose – in his sovereignty, God has made her a queen so that she can be the means that he will use to overthrow the destruction of his people
 - a. we see that in *hindsight* – he is *surmising* that only in foresight (**it's secondary to him**)
 3. **(thus)** the first part of the rebuke is *much more important in this context*
 - b. he says to her: do not think that you will escape this edict simply because you are in the palace
 1. meaning: the edict is *universal* – once your ethnicity comes to light, you will die too!
 - c. he says to her: if you keep silent, deliverance will come from another source, but you will perish
 1. meaning: the Jews will be saved in another way – but you will lose your *connection* to them
 2. **i.e.** she will be *discarded* by her own people, and will (forevermore) be treated as a foreigner
 3. **LOW:** her failure to step up and **identify with** her people will make her an **orphan** forever
 - d. **(for later)** like all the Jews, will Esther *step out* rather than "hide" amongst those around her?

II. Esther's Response to Mordecai (Esther 4:15-5:8)

Content

a. she calls for a fast in preparation (vv. 4:15-17)

1. the value of this book is found in the whitespace between **vv. 14-15**
 - a. or, how will Esther *respond* when confronted with a great evil coming not only against *her*, but against a people that she *ought to* identify with? her response becomes the real value of the book
2. Esther instructs Mordecai to call for a city-wide fast amongst the Jews – the implication of this three-day fast is to pray, to seek wisdom from God, and to seek for God to grant her the mercy of the king
 - a. true, there is no mention of prayer in the text, but the implication is undeniable (**why else fast?**)
 1. **here's a spiritual discipline that has gone the way of the dodo!**
 - b. she also agrees to fast for these three days – again, the implication is to pray for the same
 - c. she admits the *possibility* that the king will fatally reject her, but she is willing to accept that cost
3. **(so)** Esther chooses to stand up and be counted amongst the people of God
 - a. an observation from "*The Esther Option*" (Mike Cospers, The Gospel Coalition, June 19, 2018)
 1. how do we "fit in" or respond to a culture that despises us – do we "withdraw" into our own enclaves (Benedict) or "withdraw" from what identifies us in order to find comfort and safety?
"Esther is an orphan, and Mordecai is essentially warning her that if she refuses to stand with the Jews now, she forfeits her place in her father's family. Her family line ends, and she will live and die as a Persian, cut off from the promises of God's people. This is Esther's crossroads, and it's the moment that motivates her to act. She too awakens [like the diaspora Jews and Mordecai when faced with an existential threat]. We have to ask similar questions. As the world around us applies pressure, trying to move us away from religion entirely, or to abandon certain historic and traditional principles and doctrines, we have to ask whether we want to be part of the family of God. Do we want to identify with his people, no matter the cost? Are we willing to endure persecution and ridicule for the sake of our inheritance?"
 - b. **principle: to be an authentic follower of Jesus, we must be willing to identify ourselves with him and with his eternal principles, set down in Scripture – those who refuse to confess Christ before the world will be left as orphans in the world by him (Matthew 10:32-33)**

b. she goes to the king for a hearing (vv. 5:1-2)

1. **(maybe)** the Sunday School version of this story portrays the response of the king to her entrance in a *romantic* way – **i.e.** he found her loveliness too much to resist, so he held out the scepter
2. **(however)** although she "*puts on her royal robes,*" this cannot conceal the fact that she has been fasting for the past three days – **i.e.** his response to her is out of *pity* more than out of love
 - a. after all, she hasn't been in his favor enough to even be called by him in more than a month
 - b. **LOW:** it's likely that Esther *purposely* made herself look pitiful through fasting – she suspected that she couldn't rely on her *beauty* to appeal to the king; she needed a different approach
 - c. an **approach in humility ...**

c. she seeks a way to appeal to the king (vv. 5:3-8)

1. instead of immediately requesting the king to withdraw the edict, Esther uses a different approach:
 - a. she invites *both* the king *and* Haman to a feast – probably to flatter these men
 1. **remember:** this is a king who seems to enjoy feasts and is easily swayed at them
 2. **remember:** neither of these men know who she really is and what she really wants
 - b. she invites both the king and Haman *to a second meal* – probably to show favor over them
 1. it makes Haman feel *important* before the queen (**note v. 12**)
2. Esther approaches the issue of deliverance not with *power*, but with *vulnerability*

"This, too, is a crucial piece of the Esther Option. Rather than fight power with power, we walk the way of the cross, stand by our convictions, and make ourselves vulnerable. That might mean vulnerability to persecution and ridicule, but it might also mean many other kinds of vulnerabilities ... [including] moving toward the places in our culture where there is the greatest need."

 - a. **principle: true followers of Jesus Christ take the path he took – a path of obedience, speaking the truth, showing compassion, and being willing to suffer at the hands of those who hated them – in the world, helpful to the world, but not of the world (Matthew 10:38)**

III. Haman's Response to Mordecai (Esther 5:9-14)

Content

a. his hatred for Mordecai

1. although he is a man with "everything" (including the favor of the queen; so he thinks) he cannot help but seethe with anger just by *looking at* Mordecai
 - a. all of his position and prosperity are "*worth nothing*" (v. 13) to him as long as Mordecai refuses to bow down and "worship him" – his wife's advice: get rid of him!
 - b. (**again**) those who desire the world to "worship" their lusts and identities seethe in rage at those who will only worship the Living God – Christians represent an *existential* threat to them
2. **application: we cannot escape being hated by the world if we have a true love for the God revealed in Scripture – so, we must respond to that hatred biblically, willing to identify with the people of Christ and willing to give of ourselves to those in the greatest need**