

Esther 4: For Such a Time as This

A Bible Study on the Providence of God

Study Bible Studies Not stated

Esther 4:1-8 (quoted)

Esther 4:9-17 (quoted)

A. Preamble

A casual reading of the Book of Esther presents a wonderful story: a beautiful young Jewish orphan who, through a remarkable turn of events, became a powerful queen of Persia. All the ingredients of a gripping story are here — drama, power, romance, intrigue. Yet, as we were reminded when this book was first introduced to us, we find no mention of God anywhere in its narration! Nevertheless, a closer study of the players, the sequence of events, and the climax shows us that this unique book, rather than being a reading for entertainment, presents the profound interplay of God's dominion and human will. God prepared the place and the opportunity, and His people, Esther and Mordecai, chose to act. The Book amply brings out God's love and care for His people.

We also know that Esther and Ruth are the only two books in the entire Bible named after women.

B. An Approach to the Study of Esther

The book is all about providence, the divine intervention of God in the time, history, and lives of His people. It would be interesting to understand how God works in the world. We know that it is unlikely that He will suddenly split open the sky and say, "Will you please do this for me?" On the other hand, the Bible gives us ample evidence of the various ways in which He works. What God wants done, He works through three methods: Natural Order, Miracles, and Providence. Let us look at these methods in brief.

Natural Order. God set into action, through creation, a normal working of His universe. He also revealed His expectations of people through His Word.

God gave Esther natural beauty, above-average intelligence, the ability to deal with the ruthless politicians of her time, and, above all, the willingness to sacrifice even her life for the benefit of others.

Miracles. God breaks into the natural order to respond to the expressed needs of His people.

God allowed Esther to speak to the king unharmed — we will see this as

the events unfold in the next two chapters. There is no mention that she prayed to God, but we know that she, along with her maids, fasted for three days. Yet God's intervention is evident in the fact that the whimsical king was not provoked to order her death for visiting him uninvited.

Providence. God overrules the natural order to accomplish an act that people may or may not have requested.

God allowed Mordecai to overhear the plot being hatched to assassinate the king. This otherwise everyday incident eventually brought about a complete turnaround in events and resulted in the Jews being saved — a reverse-order planning by God.

Providence also means that God's divine will is fulfilled even in people who are not believers in God (like Esther's husband, King Xerxes), even in situations where God is not overtly acknowledged, and even at times when people do not act religiously.

Each event narrated in this book, and the actions and conduct of each of the players, needs to be seen and understood from the perspective of God's Providence. When we do that, we will see God filling up every page of this Book.

C. Events Thus Far

A recap of the events thus far will give us the perspective and continuity needed to understand the events narrated in Chapter 4 and thereafter.

Xerxes reigned as king of Persia between 486 and 465 BC. We see him as an impulsive man, much given to drunkenness, and, as most alcoholics do, he also loved giving or attending lavish parties. An easy way to get anything done by a person like him would be to invite him to a party — and we will see in the next chapter that this was exactly what Esther did. We also see that while he initially acted on the advice of his ministers, at a later stage, when he was far gone in his alcoholic indulgence, he was even willing to stoop so low as to take counsel of his servants.

Xerxes, in a state of drunken stupor, puts away his queen Vashti for the trivial reason that she refused to attend one of his parties and be a display of beauty and riches to his nobles and people. Most kings, as we know, did not have any intense personal relationship with their wives, and therefore had no scruples in dealing with them harshly.

Xerxes did miss his wife, though not until three years afterward. He took counsel of his servants and sent out a decree throughout his kingdom to gather beautiful virgins and bring them to his royal harem. Though he could have remained happy with his harem of thousands of women, this turn of events, once again, shows how God has intervened

through a natural order.

No self-respecting woman would want to be part of a harem, even that of a great king, let alone an alcoholic one. It entailed a lonely and unloved life. Esther, still very young — perhaps no more than a teenager — agreed to be led to the king's harem, to be groomed for a year for perhaps a single night with the king, on the advice of her cousin, guardian, and mentor, Mordecai. God did His positioning well, in time.

Esther's beauty and character won the king's heart, and he made her his queen — though, even in her favoured position, she would risk her life by attempting to see the king uninvited.

Mordecai became an official in the king's court, and this paved the way for his overhearing, and foiling, the plot to assassinate the king. Soon after this incident, the king, Mordecai, and everyone else promptly forgot about it, to be recalled only when God willed them to do so.

The ambitious and self-serving Haman became second-in-command in the empire, with extensive powers.

Mordecai would not kneel before Haman, as everyone else did. Probably, as a God-fearing Jew, he knew that he should kneel before God alone. This enraged Haman, who, using his position, deceived the king and persuaded him to issue an edict condemning all the Jews to death — offering, in the process, a huge financial incentive for it.

The edict was issued as a law which even the king was not authorised to change. The Jews, and the entire kingdom, were in turmoil, confusion, and distress. No one knew what way there might be around it, and most of the Jews must have resigned themselves to the fact that they would soon be dead.

D. Chapter 4, Verses 1 to 8

1 When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry; 2 And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. 3 And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. 4 So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him: but he received it not. 5 Then called Esther for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and gave him a commandment to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was. 6 So Hatach went

forth to Mordecai unto the street of the city, which was before the king's gate. 7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them. 8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to shew it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.

(Esther 4:1-8, KJV)

In verses 1 to 8, we see Mordecai's response to Haman's evil designs to eradicate the Jews from the entire empire.

Mordecai's life was filled with challenges, surely by God's design, which he turned into opportunities. When his aunt and uncle died, he adopted Esther, their daughter and his cousin. Later, when she was drafted into the king's harem and chosen to be queen, Mordecai continued to advise and carefully mentor her. He refused to pay reverence to a human being, and found himself in conflict with Haman as a result.

When the edict was passed to kill all the Jews, he did not give up. He tore his ministerial attire, put on sackcloth and ashes, and sat in protest at the king's gate. Willing to be the faithful servant of God, he used this method not just to convey the dreadful news to Esther, but to impress upon her the seriousness of the matter. He refused the clothes she sent him, and urged her to use her good office with the king to save her fellow Jews from extinction.

He was quite unmindful of the danger into which Esther was being put. He had no doubt that the God who had made a simple orphan girl queen of the empire would also protect her, and would somehow save the Jews through her.

Probably, he did not recall at that moment that God had placed him in the right place years earlier, when he overheard the plot being hatched to kill the king and saved the king from death. Nor could he have imagined that this incident would eventually turn matters to his advantage.

Nevertheless, he went into action in the best possible way he could think of.

E. Chapter 4, Verses 9 to the End

9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai. 10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai; 11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's

provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days. **12** And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. **13** Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. **14** For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this? **15** Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, **16** Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. **17** So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

(Esther 4:9-17, KJV)

Let us now look at verses 9 to the end of the chapter.

Esther's initial response to Mordecai's suggestion that she should meet with the king and plead for her people was to remind him that anyone who approached the king in the inner court uninvited would face certain death. Such a person would be spared only if the king chose to extend the golden sceptre towards him or her. It is noteworthy that, although she pointed this out to Mordecai, she did not decline his request even in the first instance.

On hearing this, Mordecai responded, cautioning Esther that she herself would not be safe simply because she lived in the king's house, once it became known that she was a Jew. He also knew that deliverance would come from another place if she refused to act — hinting at deliverance through the intervention of God.

There was no further hesitation on Esther's part. She prepared to fast, and probably to pray as well, for three days, along with her maids, and asked Mordecai to do likewise, gathering all the Jews in Susa together with him.

Both Esther and Mordecai could have despaired; they could have decided to find ways to save themselves using their position and power; or they could simply have stayed put, doing nothing, waiting for God's intervention. Instead, they saw that God had placed them in their positions for a purpose, so they seized the opportunity and acted.

The lesson to be learnt here is that, when it is within our reach to save or help others, we must do so. In a life-threatening situation, we should not withdraw, behave selfishly, flounder in despair, or wait for God to fix everything. Instead, we should ask God for His direction, and act. God might have placed us where we are "for such a time as this", to quote Mordecai.

Again, we see that, though God is not specifically mentioned in the narration, it is quite obvious that Mordecai and Esther expected a divine deliverance.

When we face challenges in life, we should seek to know what God wants us to do, and then do it, confident that He will do His part. We do not know ahead of time how He will accomplish His will. We simply have to place explicit, unquestioning trust in our Lord, and be prepared to be surprised by the ways in which He demonstrates His trustworthiness. More often than not, we do just the opposite, questioning God as to why we are made to face such difficulties.

I remember that, during the worst period in my life, when I saw my whole world crumbling around me, I spent a couple of years asking Jesus, "Lord, why has this happened to me?" Then the realisation hit me that He has His own purpose, which I need not understand right away, and that I should stop being dejected. When I did that, I saw His direction clearly, and acted. My actions, though, had nothing whatsoever to do with the adverse situation I was in. A chance meeting with one of the church's ministers, on a weekday in church, over a discussion about the church website, was followed by one thing leading to another, and the direction Jesus wanted me to take became absolutely clear. The chain of events, the people who were part of them, and the timing and opportunities that came my way, could surely not have been mere coincidence.

In the midst of all this, Jesus surely did His part as far as my problems were concerned, though none of my earlier calculations and plans as to how He might pull me out of my situation ever materialised. But the way things worked out for me presented surprise upon surprise. I am now learning to leave all matters in His hands, to His will — and am I happy?

Finally, we see in this book that God was in full control, and yet Esther and Mordecai had to act. We cannot understand how both can be true at the same time, and yet they are. God chooses to work through those who are willing to act for Him. We should pray earnestly, since everything depends on God, and at the same time act as if everything depended on our own action — while avoiding the two extremes of, on the one hand, doing nothing, and, on the other, thinking that we must do everything.

Esther's attitude stands in bold contrast to our own selfish outlook on

life. She knew what she had to do, and she also knew that it could cost her her life. Her response was, "If I perish, I perish."

F. Our Learnings

We should know that Jesus is in control of every situation.

While, as mortals, we are granted the ability to plan only a little way ahead in time, He, as God, has planned everything from eternity past to eternity future — almost as if He had planned things in reverse order, from end to beginning.

Though we know this, we still have to act our part, irrespective of its perceived consequences.

We are placed where we are for a purpose — for His purpose — and every opportunity that presents itself to us to help others should be seized and acted upon selflessly.

We often try to tell Jesus how we want Him to help us. We must know that divine intervention will come from unexpected quarters, and that our Lord is full of surprises. Let us not try to dictate terms to Him.

In our lives, we will not be given the power to raise the dead or turn sticks into snakes. But we can know that, even though God does not part the skies and speak to us directly, He is with us every step of the way.

Amen.