

CHAPTER 4

We left God's Isaac bound upon the altar and ready to be sacrificed, and the enemies triumphing in the prospect of it; but things here begin to work towards a deliverance, and they begin at the right end.

I. The Jews' friends lay to heart the danger and lament it (v. 1-4).

II. Matters are concerted between Mordecai and Esther for the preventing of it.

1. Esther enquires into this case, and receives a particular account of it (v. 5-7).

2. Mordecai urges her to intercede with the king for a revocation of the edict (v. 8, 9).

III. Esther objects the danger of addressing the king uncalled (v. 10-12).

IV. Mordecai presses her to venture (v. 13, 14).

V. Esther, after a religious fast of three days, promises to do so (v. 15-17), and we shall find that she sped well.

ESTHER 4:1-4

GREAT MOURNING AMONG THE JEWS

Here we have an account of the general sorrow that there was among the Jews upon the publishing of Haman's bloody edict against them. It was a sad time with the church.

1. Mordecai cried bitterly, *rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth*, v. 1, 2. He not only thus vented his grief, but proclaimed it, that all might take notice of it that he was not ashamed to own himself a friend to the Jews, and a fellow-sufferer with them, their brother and companion in tribulation, how despicable and how odious soever they were now represented by Haman's faction. It was nobly done thus publicly to espouse what he knew to be a righteous cause, and the cause of God, even when it seemed a desperate and a sinking cause. Mordecai laid the danger to heart more than

any because he knew that Haman's spite was against him primarily, and that it was for his sake that the rest of the Jews were struck at; and therefore, though he did not repent of what some would call his obstinacy, for he persisted in it (^{<178D>}Esther 5:9), yet it troubled him greatly that his people should suffer for his scruples, which perhaps occasioned some of them to reflect upon him as too precise. But, being able to appeal to God that what he did he did from a principle of conscience, he could with comfort commit his own cause and that of his people to him that judgeth righteously. God will keep those that are exposed by the tenderness of their consciences. Notice is here taken of a law that *none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth*; though the arbitrary power of their kings often, as now, set many a mourning, yet none must come near the king in a mourning dress, because he was not willing to hear the complaints of such. Nothing but what was gay and pleasant must appear at court, and every thing that was melancholy must be banished thence; all in king's palaces *wear soft clothing* (^{<411B>}Matthew 11:8), not sackcloth. But thus to keep out the badges of sorrow, unless they could withal have kept out the causes of sorrow — to forbid sackcloth to enter, unless they could have forbidden sickness, and trouble, and death to enter — was jest. However this obliged Mordecai to keep his distance, and only to come before the gate, not to take his place in the gate.

2. All the Jews in every province laid it much to heart, v. 3. They denied themselves the comfort of their tables (for they fasted and mingled tears with their meat and drink), and the comfort of their beds at night, for *they lay in sackcloth and ashes*. Those who for want of confidence in God, and affection to their own land, has staid in the land of their captivity, when Cyrus gave them liberty to be gone, now perhaps repented of their folly, and wished, when it was too late, that they had complied with the call of God.

3. Esther the queen, upon a general intimation of the trouble Mordecai was in, *was exceedingly grieved*, v. 4. Mordecai's grief was hers, such a respect did she still retain for him; and the Jews' danger was her distress; for, though a queen, she forgot not her relation to them. Let not the greatest think it below them to *grieve for the affliction of Joseph*, though they themselves be *anointed with the chief ointments*, (^{<300B>}Amos 6:6. Esther sent change of raiment to Mordecai, the *oil of joy for mourning and the garments of praise for the spirit of heaviness*; but because he would make

her sensible of the greatness of his grief, and consequently of the cause of it, *he received it not*, but was as one that refused to be comforted.

~~<7045>~~ ESTHER 4:5-17

ESTHER URGED TO PETITION THE KING

So strictly did the laws of Persia confine the wives, especially the king's wives, that it was not possible for Mordecai to have a conference with Esther about this important affair, but divers messages are here carried between them by Hatach, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and it seems he was one she could confide in.

I. She sent to Mordecai to know more particularly and fully what the trouble was which he was now lamenting (v. 5) and why it was that he would not put off his sackcloth. To enquire thus after news, that we may know the better how to direct our griefs and joys, our prayers and praises, well becomes all that love Sion. If we must weep with those that weep, we must know why they weep.

II. Mordecai sent her an authentic account of the whole matter, with a charge to her to intercede with the king in this matter: *Mordecai told him all that had happened unto him* (v. 7), what a pique Haman had against him for now bowing to him, and by what arts he had procured this edict; he sent her also a true copy of the edict, that she might see what imminent danger she and her people were in, and charged her, if she had any respect for him or any kindness for the Jewish nation, that she should appear now on their behalf, rectify the misinformations with which the king was imposed upon, and set the matter in a true light, not doubting but that then he would vacate the decree.

III. She sent her case to Mordecai, that she could not, without peril of her life, address the king, and that therefore he put a great hardship upon her in urging her to it. Gladly would she wait, gladly would she stoop, to do the Jews a kindness; but, if she must run the hazard of being put to death as a malefactor, she might well say, *I pray thee have me excused*, and find out some other intercessor.

1. The law was express, and all knew it, that whosoever came to the king uncalled should be put to death, unless he was pleased to *hold out the golden sceptre to them*, and it was extremely doubtful whether she should find him in so good a humour, v. 11. This law was made, not so much in prudence, for the greater safety of the king's person, as in pride, that being seldom seen, and not without great difficulty, he might be adored as a little god. A foolish law it was; for,

(1.) It made the kings themselves unhappy, confining them to their retirements for fear they should be seen. This made the royal palace little better than a royal prison, and the kings themselves could not but become morose, and perhaps melancholy, and so a terror to others and a burden to themselves. Many have their lives made miserable by their own haughtiness and ill nature.

(2.) It was bad for the subjects; for what good had they of a king that they might never have liberty to apply to for the redress of grievances and appeal to from the inferior judges? It is not thus in the court of the King of kings; to the footstool of his throne of grace we may at any time *come boldly*, and may be sure of an answer of peace to the prayer of faith. We are welcome, not only into the inner court, but even into the holiest, through the blood of Jesus.

(3.) It was particularly very uncomfortable for their wives (for there was not a proviso in the law to except them), who were *bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh*. But perhaps it was wickedly intended as much against them as any other, that the kings might the more freely enjoy their concubines, and Esther knew it. Miserable was the kingdom when the princes framed their laws to serve their lusts.

2. Her case was at present very discouraging. Providence so ordered it that, just at this juncture, she was under a cloud, and the king's affections cooled towards her, for she had been *kept from his presence thirty days*, that her faith and courage might be the more tried, and that God's goodness in the favour she now found with the king notwithstanding might shine the brighter. It is probable that Haman endeavoured by women, as well as wine, to divert the king from thinking of what he had done, and then Esther was neglected, from whom no doubt he did what he could to alienate the king, knowing her to be averse to him.

IV. Mordecai still insisted upon it that, whatever hazard she might run, she must apply to the king in this great affair, v. 13, 14. No excuse will serve, but she must appear an advocate in this cause; he suggested to her,

1. That it was her own cause, for that the decree to *destroy all the Jews* did not except here: “*Think not therefore that thou shalt escape in the king's house, that the palace will be thy protection, and the crown save thy head: no, thou art a Jewess, and, if the rest be cut off, thou wilt be cut off too.*” It was certainly her wisdom rather to expose herself to a conditional death from her husband than to a certain death from her enemy.

2. That it was a cause which, one way or other, would certainly be carried, and which therefore she might safely venture in. “*If thou shouldst decline the service, enlargement and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place.*” This was the language of a strong faith, which *staggered not at the promise* when the danger was most threatening, but *against hope believed in hope*. Instruments may fail, but God's covenant will not.

3. That if she deserted her friends now, through cowardice and unbelief, she would have reason to fear that some judgment from heaven would be the ruin of her and her family: “*Thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed, when the rest of the families of the Jews shall be preserved.*” He that by sinful shifts will save his life, and cannot find in his heart to trust God with it in the way of duty, shall lose it in the way of sin.

4. That divine Providence had an eye to this in bringing her to be queen: “*Who knows whether thou hast come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*” and therefore,

(1.) “Thou art bound in gratitude to do this service for God and his church, else thou dost not answer the end of thy elevation.”

(2.) “Thou needest not fear miscarrying in the enterprise; if God designed thee for it, he will bear thee out and give thee success.” Now,

[1.] It appeared, by the event, that she did come to the kingdom that she might be an instrument of the Jews' deliverance, so that Mordecai was right in the conjecture. *Because the Lord loved his people*, therefore he made Esther queen. There is a wise counsel and design in all the providences of God, which is unknown to us till it is accomplished, but it will prove, in the issue, that they are all intended for, and centre in, the good of the church.

[2.] The probability of this was a good reason why she should now bestir herself, and do her utmost for her people. We should every one of us consider for what end God has put us in the place where we are, and study to answer that end; and, when any particular opportunity of serving God and our generation offers itself, we must take care that we do not let it slip; for we were entrusted with it that we might improve it. These things Mordecai urges to Esther; and some of the Jewish writers, who are fruitful in invention, add another thing which had *happened to him* (v. 7) which he desired she might be told, “that going home, the night before, in great heaviness, upon the notice of Haman's plot, he met three Jewish children coming from school, of whom he enquired what they had learned that day; one of them told him his lesson was, ^{<1025>}Proverbs 3:25, 26, *Be not afraid of sudden fear*; the second told him his was, ^{<2180>}Isaiah 8:10, *Take counsel together, and it shall come to nought*; the third told him his was ^{<2304>}Isaiah 46:4, *I have made, and I will bear, even I will carry and will deliver you*. ‘O the goodness of God,’ says Mordecai, ‘who out of the mouth of babes and sucklings ordains strength!’”

V. Esther hereupon resolved, whatever it might cost her, to apply to the king, but not till she and her friends had first applied to God. Let them first by fasting and prayer obtain God's favour, and then she should hope to find favour with the king, v. 15, 16. She speaks here,

1. With the piety and devotion that became an Israelite. She had here eye up unto God, in whose hands the hearts of kings are, and on whom she depended to incline this king's heart towards her. She went in peril of her life, but would think herself safe, and would be easy, when she had committed the keeping of her soul to God and had put herself under his protection. She believed that God's favour was to be obtained by prayer, that his people are a praying people, and he a prayer-hearing God. She knew it was the practice of good people, in extraordinary cases, to join fasting with prayer, and many of them to join together in both. She therefore,

(1.) Desired that Mordecai would direct the Jews that were in Shushan to *sanctify a fast* and *call a solemn assembly*, to meet in the respective synagogues to which they belonged, and to pray for her, and to keep a solemn fast, abstaining from all set meals and all pleasant food for three days, and as much as possible from all food, in token of their humiliation for sin and in a sense of their unworthiness of God's mercy. Those know

not how to value the divine favours who grudge thus much labour and self-denial in the pursuit of it.

(2.) She promised that she and her family would sanctify this fast in her apartment of the palace, for she might not come to their assemblies; her maids were either Jewesses or so far proselytes that they joined with her in her fasting and praying. Here is a good example of a mistress praying with her maids, and it is worthy to be imitated. Observe also, Those who are confined to privacy may join their prayers with those of the solemn assemblies of God's people; those that are absent in body may be present in spirit. Those who desire, and have, the prayers of others for them, must not think that this will excuse them from praying for themselves.

2. With the courage and resolution that became a queen. "When we have sought God in this matter, *I will go unto the king* to intercede for my people. *I know it is not according to the king's law*, but it is according to God's law; and therefore, whatever comes of it, I will venture, and not count my life dear to me, so that I may serve God and his church, and, *if I perish, I perish*. I cannot lose my life in a better cause. Better do my duty and die for my people than shrink from my duty and die with them." She reasons as the lepers (~~1170~~ 2 Kings 7:4): "*If I sit still, I die*; if I venture, I may live, and be the life of my people: if the worst come to the worst," as we say, "*I shall but die*." Nothing venture, nothing win. She said not this in despair or passion, but in a holy resolution to do her duty and trust God with the issue; welcome his holy will. In the apocryphal part of this book (Esther 13 and 14) we have Mordecai's prayer and Esther's upon this occasion, and both of them very particular and pertinent. In the sequel of the story we shall find that God said not to this seed of Jacob, *Seek you me in vain*.