

### **Heart of a Lion, Soul of a Saint**

Where were you at 8:46 am on Sept. 11, 2001? That was the time the first airplane crashed into the north tower in New York. Or, where were you and what were you doing when you heard about this tragic event? My guess is that you can picture exactly where you were and whom you were with, because that moment has been burned into your emotional memory forever.

Because of what happened in our country on Sept. 11, 2001, we are able not only to understand but to feel Esther chapter 4 verse 1, which says:

**When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. (Esther 4:1)**

Last week, we saw, with horror, the unfolding of this demonic plot and the two stooges used by Satan to hatch it. This week, God shows us His response through an over-the-hill community leader and a twenty-something queen who most of us would've said if we'd been there, "she's in way over her head." So, to put it bluntly, it's an evil genius and an incredibly powerful king versus grandpa and the beauty queen! Whom would you have put your money on?

But there's an old saying that says: It's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog! So, if you ever find yourself in similar circumstances, Esther chapter 4 has three pieces of advice for you. The first piece of advice is...

#### **I. Get the Truth.**

We're going to look at this crisis today through Esther's eyes because, in the end, she's the one who will be called upon to take the most decisive action. From the beginning, we see quite clearly that Esther is not just another pretty face. You should've gotten some sense of that a few weeks ago, when we saw that she had very little concern about her outward appearance. Esther was not a diva! But this week, we begin to see the depth of her character and Jewish chutzpah.

By verse 4, Esther has not been told about the edict that the king had sent out. Her first clue is to hear about Mordecai wandering around in sackcloth and ashes, wailing and mourning. So, she sends some good clothes out to him but he refuses them. Now she knows something's up and she needs to know what it is. She sends her servant back out to find out more.

Personally, I think Mordecai was putting on an act. Why? Because he was not allowed to just go visit the queen. Once she was married, that was cut off. But if she made contact with him through a servant, that was permitted. So, when Esther's servant asked what was wrong, Mordecai told him everything... (Esther 4:7)

**...including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.** [Isn't it interesting that Haman offered money to get this done? I don't know where he gets it, but Satan definitely has access to money and he loves to use it to get people to do what they might not otherwise do. How did the Chief Priests get the soldiers

guarding Jesus' tomb to tell everyone that the disciples had stolen the body? They gave them money. How did they get Judas to betray Jesus? They gave him money. Has Satan ever tried to use money to get you to do what you otherwise would not do? Money's not evil but the love of money is the root of many forms of evil] **He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. (Esther 4:8)**

Let's remember something here: Esther is at the very center of the most powerful empire in her world. No, the way she arrived there was not so pleasant, but there she was – at the very center of the world's greatest empire of her time. That's pretty heady stuff! And she was only twenty-something years old!! How clearly would you have been thinking if it were you? Would you have even noticed an older cousin acting strangely outside your window? Esther didn't just have outward beauty, she had a strong heart, a heart that could not be bought. She was determined to get to the truth.

Is the truth that motivating for you? Are you unwilling to compromise your dedication to the truth or for the right price will you change your story or simply stop asking questions? Esther could've easily been distracted by the luxuries of being Queen, but when she heard about Mordecai's strange behavior, she began to smell a rat and she dug for the truth until she found it. If he can, the enemy of God will try to buy you off from doing anything about his traitorous work. **Prov. 23:23: Buy the truth and do not sell it...**

That was Esther's first step in defeating Haman.

But getting the truth is seldom enough. A second step is required, which is to:

## **II. Make A Plan**

A one-person plan is sometimes successful, but **Proverbs 15:22 says: Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.**

What kind of a family did you grow up in? I grew up in a family where debate was seen as a virtue. My mother was a great debater. In her high school yearbook beneath her photo were the words, "Give her a crooked line and she'll argue it straight." So, "lively discussions" were normal and sometimes nightly fare in our house.

When I first brought Liz home to "meet the parents," she was taken aback by the level of discussion around our table. Now, we were taught to be respectful so there was never any name-calling or abusive language, but did we sometimes raise our voices? Absolutely! But from those discussions, I think we all came away with our own positions altered a bit, because we heard another viewpoint passionately defended.

Mordecai had not raised Esther to be a wallflower. In fact, it's clear to me that he raised her to be a debater. He sends back a very strongly worded message through her servant. Verse 8 says he "*...urged her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.*" (v. 8)

And Esther returns volley. She instructs the servant to go back to Mordecai and say, (By the way, how'd you like to be this servant?):

**All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces...** (v. 11)  
Okay, just stop there for a minute. How many people would this be, "all the officials" and "the people of the royal provinces"? That would be everyone in the whole empire!! I think Esther is using a little sarcasm here with her cousin! She continues:

[all the people in the empire] **...know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life.**

(Esther 4:11)

But Mordecai is no shrinking violet himself. He sends the servant back again to Esther with these words:

**Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?** (Esther 4:12-14)

Do you see what's happening? They aren't tearing each other apart, they're building each other up! Together, they're building a plan, they're creating a strategy. One's in the palace, the other's outside. From their own perspectives they're sharing their hearts about what can and what can't be done. Esther is describing her limitations and Mordecai is reminding her of her possibilities. He's also reminding her that God is not limited by her decision one way or the other. Though she is queen, Esther is not indispensable to God's plan.

**For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place...** (Esther 4:14)

How important do you think you are to God's plans? I have a poem pinned above my desk. It's a poem my dad used to recite quite frequently to me and my brother. It goes like this:

*Sometime when you're feeling important,  
Sometime when your ego's in bloom,  
Sometimes when you take it for granted  
You're the best qualified in the room.*

*Sometime when you feel that your going would leave an unfillable hole,  
Just follow these simple instructions  
And see how they humble your soul.*

*Take a bucket and fill it with water, put your hand in it up to the wrist,  
Pull it out and the hole that's remaining  
Is a measure of how you'll be missed.  
You can splash all you wish when you enter,  
You can stir up the water galore,  
But stop, and you'll find that in no time  
It looks quite the same as before.*

*The moral in this quaint example is do just the best that you can,  
Be proud of yourself, but remember – There's no indispensable man.*<sup>i</sup>

By the end of verse 14, Esther and Mordecai agree on a plan. Now what? Having a plan and executing a plan are two very different things. This brings us to perhaps the three most critical verses in this book, verses 15-17, where we see Esther live out the third piece of advice. She shows us how to...

### **III. Make Your Move.**

The first step as they move is to pray. Why do I say “pray”? That word doesn’t even appear in this story. No, the word “pray” doesn’t appear but the word “fast” does and fasting and prayer are constantly linked throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. When the Israelites wanted to know the Lord’s will in the Book of Judges, some 400 years before the exile, it says: (Judges 20:26, 27a)

**Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel... They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the LORD. And the Israelites inquired of the LORD.**

Fasting and prayer, “*inquiring of the Lord,*” are linked. But what about in their captivity in Babylon and Persia? Besides Esther, three other books of the Old Testament are written by men who spent time in The Exile: Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel. Is there any evidence that they “fasted and prayed” in exile? Yes, all three of them did. While Ezra was in exile but preparing to return to Jerusalem, he wrote:

**...I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey... so we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.** (Ezra 8:21, 23)

When Nehemiah was in Susa and heard of the conditions in Jerusalem, he wrote:

**When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.** (Neh. 1:4)

And the prophet Daniel was in Persia after Esther and Mordecai and he was also concerned for Jerusalem. So, he says in Daniel 9:3:

**So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.**

These are three other Jews in the same circumstances, in roughly the same period of history as Mordecai and Esther. Whenever they fasted, they prayed. Fasting and prayer were almost synonymous for these Jews in exile. So, I’m convinced that when Esther and Mordecai fasted, they also earnestly prayed. This is the first step in their plan. Then, the second step was to have others pray as well:

**Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”** (Esther 4:15-16)

Henry Blackaby calls what Esther is experiencing, “a crisis of belief.” He writes:

“When God invites you to join Him in His work ... you will quickly realize you cannot do what He is asking on your own... This sends you into a crisis of belief: God wants you to do something you don’t think you can do... The way you respond at this turning point will determine whether you become involved with God in something God-sized or whether you will continue to go your own way and miss His purpose for your life.”<sup>ii</sup>

Is Esther's position so different from ours as a church? I don't think so. Esther openly questioned Mordecai about the need for her to risk her life before the king. Some of you may be thinking, "Why are we doing this Bristol thing? Isn't it kind of risky financially, emotionally, relationally? Why don't we just stay here? Let them come here if they want to be part of our church!"

But like Esther, it comes down to our making a choice – Jesus said, "Go." That's our mission, that's a definition of who we really are. If we stay, it might be safe, but we won't be the same. We won't be who Jesus said we're supposed to be.

So, we're going to follow Esther's example. She said she would fast and pray and she asked Mordecai to have all the Jews in Susa do the same. The leadership here at Valley Avon is making the same request. We're asking you to pick a specific time each week when you will pray for our launch preparations in Bristol. We're asking you to commit to pray weekly from now until launch on Sunday, Oct. 5<sup>th</sup>. Please fill out the card in front of you here in the sanctuary, or in your bulletin in The Venue, and please include an email address. Then we will email you each week with two or three specific prayer topics for that week. **It's time for us to ask God to prepare the way for His Grace and Mercy to flow in Bristol.**

Esther chose to spend time preparing herself by fasting and praying for three days and three nights. Does that remind you of any other Biblical stories of preparation? Joshua had the people prepare themselves for three days before crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land (Josh. 3:5). God prepared Jonah for his evangelistic outreach in Nineveh by having him spend three nights in the belly of a fish! Abraham journeyed for three days before coming to the place that would severely test his faith but would ultimately prove the faithfulness of God. And on the third day, Jesus Christ won the victory that brought grace and mercy within reach of every human soul, including you and me. Three days and nights is a recurring symbol of a spiritual preparation before being used by God.

And what was the result? Esther chose to identify fully with God and His people, even if it meant her death. She predicted the outcome when she said:

**When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.** (Esther 4:16)

Major Thomas describes the scene this way:

Lips quivering, every limb trembling, and with a heart thumping fit to burst, it was a pale-faced slip of a girl who stepped out on that third morning as she crossed the threshold of the royal court into the presence of the king, uninvited. She had nothing to lose, for she was already dead – self-sentenced; but she had everything to gain! <sup>iii</sup>

Are you at that "defining moment" in your life? Have you been hiding your relationship with Christ? You can't waiver now, you must decide; will you identify with God and His people or with the King of this world? Yes, it feels like you will lose everything, but in reality, there's more to be gained than you could ever lose. You must choose. Col. 3:2-4 says:

**Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**

Choose Christ – He is your real life! Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Author unknown, *The Indispensable Man*

<sup>ii</sup> Henry & Richard Blackaby, Claude King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2009), p. 134

<sup>iii</sup> Major W. Ian Thomas, *If I Perish, I Perish* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 59