

## AUTUMN BIBLE STUDY

### Esther 4:1-5:8

#### Such a Time as This



#### **THE NEWS SPREADS (4:1-5)**

Mordecai adds his voice to the outcry. The Jews across the empire are fasting, lamenting, and lying in sackcloth and ashes. Yet, the decree that has gone out across the four corners of the land has not reached Esther. She may have picked up bits and pieces, but her response to her maids and eunuchs is that Mordecai is at the gate *“woefully out of compliance with the palace dress code.”* Why she sends her cousin clothing is perplexing. Is Esther trying to fix Mordecai’s sorrow by fixing his attire? Is she summoning him inside the gate with proper dress so they can confer? Whatever the case, Mordecai refuses the garments. This refusal causes Esther to ask, “What is going on?”

#### **THE CRUCIAL INTERCHANGE (4:6-14)**

Esther sends one of the eunuchs, Hathach, to find out. With him going back and forth Esther and Mordecai have an urgent and passionate conversation. It is a delicate situation reliant on Hathach not getting the message wrong.

The dynamics of Esther and Mordecai’s relationship has reached a turning point. Up until now Mordecai has been Esther’s protector – now the roles gradually change. Esther is forced to grow from childhood to adulthood.

Mordecai is very specific in what he tells Hathach, including a copy of the decree and information on the amount Haman offered the king. He instructs Esther to plead for ‘her people’ before the king.

Esther seems poised to refuse, as she knows the danger to go before the king unbidden. In fact, she tells Mordecai, that she hasn’t been summoned by the king for over a month. Some commentators say that she is being cowardly, but we should note that she hasn’t refused. Yet, Esther pauses to think before acting. Her response shows yet another of those arbitrary laws in Esther’s Persia – one can’t go before the king unbidden. This goes along with the odd laws seen already in 2:2-4, 12; 3:2; 3:9-10 and 4:2.

Mordecai answers Esther in very direct terms - if she does not go she will die. He then continues more positively saying, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this?” (4:14)

It would seem that Mordecai raises the possibility that a force is already at work preparing the way for deliverance. He is confident that the Jewish people will survive, but uncertain how this will happen.

#### **GETTING READY AGAIN TO MEET THE KING (4:15-17)**

Esther’s answer displays both courage and leadership:

*“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.”* (4:16).

It is the first time she has given Mordecai an order, which he obeys. Any thoughts of Esther being a coward can now be put to rest. This verse seems like a battle plan, and Esther is the general. Mordecai recognises this and goes away and does everything Esther has ordered.

Up until now Esther has always sought to please others and do what is expected of her. Things have changed, as now Esther must appear before the king when he has not called her and convince him to reverse Haman’s decree. Esther takes three routes:

Firstly, she secures the support of the Jews in Susa.

Secondly, she takes time to think it through.

Thirdly, she makes preparations as she fasts for three days, preparing her heart, and dresses festively for her performance to 'please the king' in the only way he seems to understand.

### **PLEASING THE KING ONCE AGAIN (5:1-8)**

Once again Esther wins the king's favour. It is the stuff of fairy tales:

*"What is it Queen Esther? What do you want? I'll give you anything – even half the kingdom." (5:3)*

Seeing that all the Jews in Persia make up much less than half the kingdom, this may seem at first glance that she has got what she needed. But Esther knows the mercurial moods of the king and his capacity for changing his mind. Haman is also still in the picture and he has much influence over the king – Haman is dangerous and fully capable of thwarting the request and manipulating the king against her. So Esther makes a request that is clearly safe:

*"If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to a banquet that I have prepared for the king." (5:4)*

As we know, the king never turns down a banquet, so he naturally agrees. He calls Haman so that he too will do as Esther requires – literally in Hebrew, *"so we may do the word of Esther."*

Ironic twist isn't it, that only a while ago the king had been terrified that women might not obey their husbands. Vashti didn't come when the king called. Esther has got away with coming when the king did not call. The king is now obeying his wife! And, to add to the irony, Haman obeys her (a woman) as well, but delights in being hosted by a Jew – a Jew passing herself off as Persian so splendidly that she puts the lie to all he said about her people's disruptiveness.

However, even the king realises that Esther didn't put her life at risk just to have lunch with two men. So, during the banquet he asks

her what she really wants, reiterating twice as elaborately that he will give her half his kingdom. She replies:

*"This is my wish and this is what I want: If I please the king, and if the king wishes to grant my wish and my desire, I'd like the king and Haman to come to another feast that I will prepare for them. Tomorrow I will answer the king's questions." (5:7-8)*

This speech warrants closer examination. The king has reiterated his earlier promise. Esther seems to be repeating herself as well, as she issues another invitation to a banquet – but, she has actually added something else. In essence she has asked the king to sign a blank cheque, intimating that the next day he will discover what he has agreed to, even suggesting that this is a favour she is doing for him.

Is this elaborate method necessary? Well, the king is certainly fickle, and her desire is that he will repudiate his highest official. Her caution is entirely appropriate to the situation's gravity and the king's volatility.

Some have expressed discomfort at Esther's cleverness, calling it manipulation. We should recall though that Haman presented his case to the king with lies, misstatements and bribes. Esther uses none of these. Her banquet is not a bribe, but a prelude to her posing a request. Her goal is life, not death. Her goal is to save her people.

She may, in the first place, have been called there by the king, but as Mordecai hints, divine providence is the real impetus behind these events. This delay in answering the king allows other forces beyond Esther's control to play themselves out. A great deal is going to happen in the next twenty-four hours. Only in retrospect will it be clear how much providence has been at work.

