

“Faithful to the Faithless”

Esther 4:1-17

Pastor Dan Erickson

September 18, 2022

Okay, folks it has been three weeks since we were in our study of Esther, so we need to quick review. Our setting is the ancient Persian empire, 500 years before the time of Christ, in a capital city of Susa, located what is now Southern Iran. By the providence of God, Esther, a young Jewish woman has become queen, married to the powerful pagan king, Ahasuerus. On the advice of her cousin Mordecai, she has kept her identity as a Jewess a secret.

Meanwhile, Mordecai has gotten in trouble. He refuses to bow down to a man named Haman, an Agagite, who the king promoted to an important political position. Having been offended by Mordecai, Haman seeks revenge by coming up with a scheme to murder all the Jews in the empire. The king, for some reason, endorses the plan. Soon the news spreads that the 11th month from the day when the edict was made, everyone is to kill their Jewish neighbors and confiscate their property. Things look very grim for a seemingly powerless minority in the mighty Persian empire.

That brings us to our text, chapter 4:1-17. Let's pause and pray that God would speak to us through these ancient words and show us what they mean for our lives today.

Esther 4:1-3 When Mordecai (Queen Esther's cousin) 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. But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Their despair is understandable. These are traditional ways of expressing grief in the ancient near east, including in Israel. For example, in 2 Samuel, David and his army tear their clothes, mourn, weep and fast, when they hear that King Saul and Jonathan have been killed. It is interesting what the God inspired author does not say. There is no reference to Mordecai and other

Jews, calling out to the Lord or praying. Some assume that is what occurred, but I suspect the writer is very intentional in this omission.

As we mentioned a few weeks ago, it doesn't seem Esther and Mordecai are devout Jews. After 120 years in exile, the Jewish people remember many of their traditions, but faithfulness to the Law, Torah, to temple worship, and to the Lord Himself seems to be forgotten. The Jews are afraid and distraught, but I don't think a true turning to God for help occurs. **Esther 4:4 When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.** The king would be embarrassed and irritated by sackcloth and expressions of grief. Esther doesn't want her cousin to be punished, so she has one of her servants find out what is troubling Mordecai.

Mordecai then tells Esther's servant, Hathak, about Haman's plan to destroy the Jews and **Esther 4:8 He 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 instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.** There was little opportunity for Mordecai and Esther to communicate with each other. I am not sure whether he had been contemplating how Esther might help the Jews, or if this comes into his mind as he speaks with Hathak, but the bottom line is Mordecai wants Esther to go to the king and beg for mercy. Hathak, reports this to Esther.

Esther 4:10 Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces 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 they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

In other words, you don't just go to the king and ask him for a favor. The king has to summon you.

It has been five years since Esther had become queen and the initial attraction the king had felt toward her has cooled. There is certainly no guarantee he will welcome her by extending that gold scepter. Esther would be risking her life by approaching the king without being summoned. **Esther 4:12-14a** **When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "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."**

Bible scholars have debated the meaning and the intention of Mordecai's words. Is he simply warning that Haman's plan puts Esther in peril as well? Or is Mordecai actually threatening Esther, telling her that if she refuses to help, and the Jews somehow survive, Esther and her family will be treated as enemies of the Jewish people. Many think Mordecai is saying, that if Esther refuses to speak up, God is the "another place," from where the Jews will receive help. Yet, I think the author's lack of a clear reference to God is intentional.

Again, Mordecai is not an atheist, but I don't know what he was really trusting in the Lord, the true God. I suspect he may believe more in fate, than divine providence, even as he says, **Esther 4:14b** **And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?** This was the verse on which we focused as we started our series on Esther. It tells us clearly that God has a purpose for each one of us. I am just not sure Mordecai realizes this. He knows Esther is in a strategic position. Among all the Jews, she is the one who may be able to do something to stop the plan to annihilate them. Yet, I don't see any indication in the text that Mordecai recognizes that the Lord, the true God, is the one who put Esther in that place.

Esther 4:15-17 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 attendants 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." So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

Okay, here is Esther, the Jewish girl who has been living in the Persian palace, part of the royal harem, married to the pagan king. Whether because of ignorance or rebellion, I don't know, but she has not been following a path of faithfulness to the Lord. But something is different now. Esther expresses a willingness to risk her safety, her life, for the sake of the Jewish people. And she asks them, the ones who lived in Susa anyway, to fast, not eat or drink for three days.

Now, I am puzzled why the God inspired author doesn't say "Esther asked the people to fast and pray." The ESV study notes and other Bible commentaries assume that is what she asked them to do, but I am not so sure. Oh, I think, like Mordecai, she believes in God, but she really doesn't know much about who this God is, what He is like, and what it means to please Him. Yet, that is something that she and all who read this book will be learning.

Okay, next week the story continues. Let's turn our focus to some of the lessons the Lord has for us in this passage.

First, there is an implicit warning about nominalism." Mordecai the Jew, in his grief and fear he and many other Jews put on sackcloth and ashes. It is part of the Jewish religious customs, yet there is really no indication they truly turned to the Lord. They go through the motions of religion, but don't seem to have the real things.

Esther is willing to risk her life for the Jews and wants them to fast for her. Yet did she really even understand what the purpose of what fasting was? After 120 years of living in exile, it is easy to see how that would happen. There was no temple, there were no prophets, no priests, no one really teaching the people the Torah. Yes, parents kept telling their children the things they remembered; however, I think the things they remembered about their religion tended to be symbols and rituals. Much of what those symbols and rituals meant was gradually lost. By the time of Mordecai and Esther, many people were nominal Jews, Jews in name, but not really Jews in practice.

That is nominalism, having the name, but no real substance. It continues to be a challenge to various religions. For example, some Jews today observe holidays like Passover and Purim, but

don't even believe in God. Someone said, a reformed Jew believes that the Ten Commandments still apply, but you only need to keep one of them a day to be a good Jew. Folks that is nominalism. And there are plenty of nominal Christians as well. Some folks celebrate Christmas and Easter, but don't really know what the holidays mean. Others call themselves Christians, use that name, but their beliefs and practices don't seem very Christian at all. Currently somewhere between 65-70% of American adults identify as Christians. However, only 20% of Americans believe the Bible is literally the Word of God. That is a big gap and represents a lot of people.

Now, don't get confused, a person is a Christian, is truly saved because he/she trusts in Jesus Christ, not in the Bible. However, I think the reality is clear, a lot of people use the label Christian, but their beliefs and practices don't match how the Bible describes a Christian.

Now, I am not in a position to judge who is a true believer in Christ, who is really saved, and who is not. And neither are you. God alone knows and judges the heart. He is the one who discerns whether someone's profession of faith is real or not.

As **2 Timothy 2:19** says, **"the Lord knows those who are his."** So, when I say someone seems like a nominal Christian, I am not making a judgement about his/her eternal destiny. I am simply saying that this individual's beliefs and practices are not consistent with what a Christ should believe and practice. For example, my friend Joe calls himself a Christian and goes to church regularly but says he doesn't believe that Jesus is truly God, nor that He rose from the dead. That is nominal Christianity.

On the other hand, my friend Sue says she is a Christian, claims to believe everything the Bible teaches, but she doesn't ever go to church and even though she is not married, she has slept with a number of different men over the past year. Folks, to me that sure looks like nominal Christianity. Joe and Sue call themselves Christians, but I don't see it in their lives.

Pastor Randy Alcorn says another way nominalism is revealed is when people abandon their faith when face tragic or troubling times.

That, he says, shows their faith has maybe been in a church or family tradition, but not in Jesus Christ. He adds, "If you lose your faith because of hard times, it probably was not much of a faith to start with." Now, that maybe sounds a bit harsh, but it is consistent with what the Bible teaches. In the story of the four different soils, Jesus says, **Matthew 13:20, 21 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.** In 1 Peter 1, the Lord says that our perseverance, trusting the Lord when things are tough, is what shows that our faith in Christ is genuine.

Friends, I think the book of Esther is a story of mostly nominal Jews in the Persian empire about 500 years before Christ. A separation from the temple and Torah had often made their religion an empty shell. In 21st Century America, there are millions of nominal Christians, people who use that label, but whose faith is little more than an empty shell. This is not because of a lack of churches or Bibles. There are about 380,000 churches in the United States, and 92% of Americans own at least one Bible. The average Christian has nine. Yet, for a variety of reasons many folks who call themselves Christians don't really believe and act like Christians.

That, folks, is a warning to all of us, make sure you are not falling into nominalism. Never be content with just calling yourself a Christian. Make sure your beliefs and behaviors are consistent with what the Bible says should be true of a Christian. And Friends, the good news is, it is not too late. If you have been just going through the motions of Christianity, not taking it seriously in how you have been thinking or how you have been living, it is time for you to change. By God's grace you need to turn to the Lord Jesus.

Maybe you have not really been trusting in Him before. As God's spirit enables you can do that today, right now, as you acknowledge your sin and receive Jesus Christ as your savior. Maybe you are really a Christian, you are truly born again, but for whatever reason you have put your faith on the shelf, and it seems like it has grown cold and dead. You need the Lord to breath new life into your soul, and He will certainly do that if you turn to Him. Friends, maybe you are thinking, Pastor Dan

you are right. I need to get on track or back on track spiritually, but I am just not sure what to do. If so. Please talk to me, Pastor Mark, Pastor Ron, one of our Deacon or Deaconesses. We would be delighted to help you go from being a nominal Christian, a Christian in name only, to becoming someone who trusts and follows Jesus Christ each and every day.

Second, even in the midst of religious nominalism, God still choose to work in great ways. In the book of Esther, the Jewish people are in a pretty dark place spiritually. Very few were really seeking after the Lord. But that did not prevent God from doing a great work among His people, protecting them from a powerful enemy and enabling them to not only survive but thrive as exiles in a pagan land.

The New Testament verse that comes to mind when I think of Esther is **2 Timothy 2:13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful-for he cannot deny himself.** Esther, Mordecai and the other Jews of that day were often not faithful to God, but He was faithful to them. They had forgotten the covenant, but the Lord had not forgotten them. They were ignorant of His promises, but God was committed to keeping every one of them. **2 Timothy 2:13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful-for he cannot deny himself.**

Friends, I sometimes hear people say, “If we want God to work in our midst, these are things we need to do.” Then they talk about praying for revival, repenting of sin, reconciling with other people. Those are all wonderful things to do. We should do them. In fact, if you want an assignment, go and do those things. Yet, a lesson from Esther is that the Lord works when and how He wants. He doesn’t need out petitions or even permission to do so. And when He is working, He almost always uses people human beings to accomplish His purposes.

The book of Esther, and yes, we have a few chapters to go, is the story of how God used a young woman in a remarkable and magnificent way. She was just a Jewish orphan girl, who was not very religious, but was just living life in the Persian capital of Susa 2500 years ago. Then through what seemed like a series of remarkable coincidences, the Lord providently works, and Esther finds herself as the queen of Persia. The

Jewish people face a great threat, and Esther is the only person who can act to save them. God has a purpose for her life, a very specific purpose. And even though she is not a very religious person, even though it seems there are significant risks involved, she chooses to sacrifice her own safety for the sake of her people. In doing so, God is honored, and Esther is honored by both Jews and Christian throughout the centuries.

Friends, maybe this seems like kind of a dark time. Both our nation and the world as a whole, face significant political and economic challenges. The American church is struggling because of opposition from outside and scandal from within. Maybe it is a very tough tie for your family, or for you personally. Yet, this is the time God has chosen for you to live.

I mentioned to a friend a couple of weeks ago I would have loved to live in the 19th century, as long as I could have had 21st century medical care, sanitation and central heat and air conditioning. Yes, that is a joke, but I know some folks look back fondly to the 1950’s, for example, as a time when most people had better values and were more interested in the things of God.

Folks, I don’t know if that is true or not, but I know it doesn’t matter, because we don’t live in the 1950’s. We live in 2022, and most of us live on the Minnesota Iron Range. And it is for such a time as this, and such a place as this, that God has called us to be faithful to Him. And by His grace, you have an opportunity to do that today. And you will have an opportunity to do that tomorrow, and in all the tomorrows, the Lord grants you.

Friends, it doesn’t matter who you are or what your circumstances are, or how religious you have been, or how many mistakes you have made in the past, if you choose to do what God is calling you to do today, that is a significant choice because God will use it, He will use it for His glory, and He will use it for your ultimate good.

Friends, for such a time as this, the Lord want you, like Esther to trust and follow Him. May He give you the grace to do just that.