

Esther 4:1-11 'Out In The Open For Christ!'

Last time we looked at Esther Chapter 3:5-15 in a sermon I called 'Why Do The Nations Rage?' We saw Satan's attack upon God through His people, His church! Psalm 2: "Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." Clearly that is what we see taking place with this man Haman. His evil rage is so disproportionate that Mordecai's death is not enough. Only the genocide of the entire Jewish nation, "men, women and little children" will do, because as I explained, this evil enmity has ancient origins. Not only back to Solomon and Agag, 1000 years before, but to the garden of Eden itself! Genesis 3:15 "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and hers. He(Jesus) will crush your head and you will bruise his heel." And of course, God is sovereign through it all!

V7 "They cast lots." They in effect rolled the dice, and "the 11th month is chosen." So 11 months would pass between the devising of, and the implementing of this scheme. Because there was much that needed to take place in God's plan of rescuing His people from this evil enemy of the Jews! And I made the point that though history can fall on the roll of a dice, it is God who determines the outcome of that roll!

We saw Haman even as that slithering serpent like his father the devil, paint his picture of the deceit in v8-9, and then in v10-11: this fool of a king gives him his ring of authority to implement this murderous plan! He spoke to the king in vagueries, but Haman's decree was detailed and clear - Kill them all! In 15, he and the king have a celebratory drink marking the day, and yet the Persian nation is "bewildered." *Surely this must be some mistake. This cannot be happening. These are a peaceful people, they mean no- one any harm.* But yes it was happening, because it was all part of God's Sovereign plan!

And so we pick up the text in Esther 4:1-11 'Out In The Open For Christ!' V1 "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." Friends, we've looked at the "sackcloth" thing before. And if you remember, it was a very coarse black fibre made from goats hair, which would have been very uncomfortable to wear. And in Jewish culture it had very specific purposes. It was worn in the time of mourning, but also specifically in the act of repentance and the petitioning of God for forgiveness, and direction!

We saw this when looking at the book of Jonah. The whole city of Nineveh from the king down did this very thing in hope that the prophesied judgement of the God of the Israelites "might be turned aside." At the decree of the king from Jonah 3:7-9 we read: "Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh. "By the decree of the king and his nobles, do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything, do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." Yes v9 "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger. So that we will not perish."

Can you see? That unlike the world (and even sadly much of the church today) that Pagan king believed that God's judgement was coming. Yes "sackcloth" was known for the petitioning of God,

even in that Pagan nation. Because even the murderous Assyrians, recognised that their future was in God's Hands. And this is what we find before us in Mordecai's actions. His public display was his way, of actively petitioning God's intervention in this attack upon His own people.

But brothers and sisters we are presented with a problem here, because there is one thing missing in this fasting. Did you notice? The king of the Ninevites called for it. V8 "Let everyone call urgently on God, let them give up the evil ways and their violence." Yes repentance and prayer. So "sackcloth and fasting" was always that means of putting aside the physical needs, to focus more fully upon the spiritual. To focus upon one's own relationship with God. Or collectively as a people! And each time those pangs of hunger gnawed away at them, they would be reminded of their sin, and their dependence upon God.

And yet in the account before us, we see the physical side of this but we don't actually see the call to prayer. And to be honest, I have no answer for us here. Is it that, as it is with God himself only being implied throughout the book of Esther (and we know this because we also know the end of the narrative) that in their actions of "sackcloth and fasting" we are to take it that Mordecai and the people were seeking God in prayer? I believe so but I'm not sure. It may well be as we have seen before in this series, that Mordecai has taken things into his own hands, and that God is working in spite of him, as He so often does with us also.

But again I'm not sure. Think about it. Mordecai is "wailing and mourning" and rightly so, because he is largely responsible for the situation that his people are in. He has drawn a line in the sand against the evil vanity of this Haman, declaring who he is, and that's always a good thing. But was the manner in which he did this wisdom? Was it some pride and vanity on his part? Was it that as it came out at Bible study on Monday night, that he was even ashamed to call upon God? Or was it simply the sovereignty of God? Or was it all of the above? I would suggest that it is all of the above, but again I'm not really sure. And yet what we are sure of, since God leaders no thing to chance, is that this is His foreordained plan!

But surely we must admire and commend the man for his overt and bold expression of his grief, and who he was. A Jew, one of those earmarked to die, and a follower of Yahweh of the Bible. Once he'd drawn his line in the sand he was out there and there was no turning back! He hadn't just got changed no, he'd ripped his clothes off, he'd "put sackcloth on", taken ash from the fireplace carried it into the public square, (even to his post as gatekeeper) "the king's gate" no less. Then he began to "lament and wail" at the top of his lungs. Throwing ash and dust into the hair and upon his head!

I do indeed believe that this was a declaration of his faith in action. He was not one of those people who was just going to let go and let God, as the saying goes. And while I appreciate the sentiment behind this statement, it's the kind of thing which many people say and use as their excuse to do nothing, and leave everything to someone else. We might even put it this way: Mordecai saw an opportunity for ministry, and he knew that he was best placed to do it. And this should be within the heart of us all! We each of us have abilities and gifts, and God calls us to use them.

Think about the stand Mordecai has made. He is basically gone over to parliament house in the middle of the day, with all of the media watching. And he has declared the end of the world for God's people. He really has led the procession for the call to repentance and revival by his actions. I take it that he was the first, and then this "sackcloth and wailing" had been spread throughout the whole empire! V3 "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." What will become of us? Who will rescue us?

Now again Mordecai was not one to sit on his hands. I do believe that in this display he has committed the situation to God, but he also has a plan. He knows someone at the highest level: his adopted daughter the Queen! But he needed to get her attention. Yet it wasn't so easy for him to see her anymore. She was cloistered away with all of her royal entourage. The closest that he could get to her was at "the kings gate." That's where all the action took place. If he went there, someone would get word to the Queen. No there is no doubt that that is why we find him "at the kings gate" Yes he had a plan and why? Because God had a plan to rescue His people!

David writes in Psalm 37:23-25a "If the Lord delights in a man's ways he makes his step firm, though he stumbled he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand. I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken." Yes God has a plan for each of us. It might include sickness, difficulty, trial, hardship and heartache. Taking up the Cross of Jesus is never easy. The implications of the cross are a one - way street to hardship and ultimately death. But "He will not abandon us. Though we stumble he will not let us fall." Yes "he upholds us with his own hand." When we are in the throes of hardship we need to remember Mordecai. Seemingly alone, and yet cradled by God's Own Hand! He has a plan for me, and he has a plan for you Beloved!

In one of my recent daily readings, the commentator pointed out that when we make our plans for the future etc, we should always pray in our hearts "If God permits." We have been seeing in Esther that God orchestrates all things for His plans and purposes. But have you ever considered that whatever it may be that happens in your life, can only happen "if God permits?" Yes things only happen with the permission of God. In Job ch1-2, we find all the angels gathered together before God and we see that great fallen angel Satan is there also. God declares to Satan the integrity and uprightness of Job before all of those who are gathered there. Ch 1:8 "Have you considered my servant job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright. A man who fears God and shuns evil." And let's remember that Job was a contemporary of Abraham.

And then as he does with all of God's people, looking to smash Job and accuse him, Satan says to God v9-11 "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has and he will surely curse you to your face." Yes, take it all away, "and he will surely curse you to your face."

So then God replies in v12 "Very well then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." What do these words translate into? I give you my permission! So Satan takes everything from him: livestock, servants, children. But not a finger is laid upon him personally. Then in ch 2, he is given permission to smite Job physically, but "cannot take his life." The simple point is that everything that happened to Job came only by God's permission! So the way that I understand this then is that difficulty and illness, yes, is in Satan's hand, but he can inflict them only when "God permits." He can only go so far, as he is given permission by God. Because as we saw last time, what Satan intends for evil, God predetermines for good.

It happens in our lives, and it's happening in the passage before us in Esther, because not only has God been orchestrating all of these things with His unseen Hand, they have also been taking place only by his permission! The edict has been proclaimed, Mordecai responds with "wailing, sackcloth fasting and ashes at the king's gate," but all in accordance with the permission and plan of God!

V4 "When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress." By now there would have been a public commotion. But this was not the kind of place

where you would glue yourself to the road, and disrupt everybody's lives without consequence. No, this sort of thing did not happen in Susa, let alone "at the king's gate." And yet it has had Mordecai's desired effect. The news had gotten to the Queen and she "was in great distress." But interestingly, her first response is to send him clothes to put on. Now why do you think she did this? Did she think that Mordecai had no clothes of his own? Well I don't think so. He was a public servant come city official. I'm sure he had more than enough clothes of his own. May I suggest that what distressed her so much (was yes to learn of Mordecai in such a state was indeed distressing) but perhaps equally so, her connection to him, and news of this reaching the king, was disturbing and distressing! So her first inclination (and we can sympathise with her position here) was just as fast as she can to cover this thing up. *Quick, take him some clothes before this thing goes too far!*

Now brothers and sisters, I'm not suggesting in any way that she sinned here; if she did that is between her and God. And yet isn't that our first inclination also when our sin has been exposed? Cover it up, so no one finds out. Adam went running for the bushes when he realised he was naked. God is now bringing Esther into that place where Mordecai already was. Out into the open! She will soon not be able to continue to conceal who she is. Yes her first inclination is to send him some clothes to cover him up. It's only after he refuses to cover up, (and I guess refuses to cease his wailing) does she in v5, then send someone to him to find out what the real problem is. Now it's no doubt that she loved him, but this was going to bring out of her comfort zone. And into the streets and out into the open!

In v6-9 we read, "So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. 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. Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said." So for Esther, the Queen of Persia, the local girl made good, everything has just gotten all too real. And you know what is really astounding is that she knew none of what was going on. The world of her people was being attacked, but she was totally oblivious, because she has just been floating along in a world of her own, perhaps with not a care in the world! During these past seven and a half years if she had been practising her Judaism, she would have been found out. Oh, she had an excuse, Mordecai had told her to keep it quiet and she had done that very well, but soon the secret would be out!

We can be like that at times I believe. Oh we believe in God, and have come to him as we are commanded to through Jesus' sacrifice. Yes we are Christian, but it's almost as though we are actually on autopilot and just going through the motions. And then one day God grabs a hold of us and wakes us up out of our daydream, through whatever difficulty, and then our walk with Him truly begins. And it all becomes all too real.

Well that's what's happened to Esther before us. Her secret heritage, her secret nationality can no longer remain secret. She is being asked by God as I mentioned earlier, to step out into the open! Jesus said in Mark 8:38 "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Beloved I made the comments some weeks ago, that there is no such thing as the secret Christian. Oh sure some of us are more out there so to speak than others about our faith, that's true and that's OK. We are all different and with different personalities. In the same way, the four Gospel writers

are reflected in their accounts of Jesus. Saying the same things but seen through their own eyes. It's the same for each of us. And God uses those differences for His Work and His Glory. But secretive, or ashamed of our faith we must not be. And now this truth has really been brought home to Esther! "You're either for me or against me" Jesus said. There is no neutral ground, like Switzerland was during the war.

Verse 7: "Mordecai sends word of everything that had happened to him." The conflict between him and Haman. The nobles trying to get him to comply "day after day," and now the outcome of that conflict and how it has affected the whole Jewish nation! *Esther, it's time to come out into the open. It's time for you to act, it's all up to you! Hathach, make it clear to the Queen what is actually on the line here.* V8 "Urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people." *Although you may have a different life now Esther these are your true people. You are a Jewess. You might be under their king's roof and sleeping in his bed, but don't forget to whom do you belong!*

Beloved again, this can be something which can happen to us very easily. We start to compromise a little bit here and a little bit there. The standard that we know we should keep ourselves to, (in light of our Saviour's example and the price that he paid for us) starts to slide a little bit. We are more and more accepting of this behaviour and that behaviour in others, because it is loving and inclusive, we are told. And then soon, we have embraced those same things within our own lives. It's the old boiling of the frog thing isn't it. When we finally realise what is happening to us, it is all too late. Well now Esther has been woken up from her sleep, with a call to arms. But it's scary stuff! V10-11a we read: "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 he be put to death." *Father do you know what you are asking of me? The whole world knows that to do such a thing means certain death. Do you really want me to risk my life?*

Friends, throughout the millennia that's exactly what missionaries have been asked by God to do. But as Jim Eliot the martyr put it, "Who would not be willing to lose that which he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose."

V11b-c: "The only exception to do this is for the king to extend the golden sceptre to him and spare his life. But 30 days have passed since I was called to go to the king." Friends, can you see what she is saying? There is one exception. I take my life in my hands and approach the king in hope that he point the golden sceptre at me! But there is a problem you see. It's been a month since the king called for me. Or in other words, I think I might have fallen out of favour. I have been queen for four and a half years he might be getting tired of me!

Brothers and sisters, we can all be reluctant servants at times. We all have things that we find difficult to do. Some are good at talking with people, others are not. To be honest I find it difficult. I'm more comfortable when I'm washing the dishes. Some are quiet doers, others are overt sharers of their faith. Some are quite intellectual and theological in their Christianity, while others are quietly faithful. Some are leaders, others are happy to be led. And in the eyes of God, all are as equally precious, because Jesus shed His blood for each one of us personally!

Friends, throughout the millennia there have been those that have been asked by God to lay their very lives on the line. And that is what He's asking of Esther here. And in effect, that is what He asks of us all. To come out of the shadows and be out in the open in our faith for Christ! Yes, "you're either for me or against me." With Jesus there is no middle ground! Let's pray.