

So an unchangeable law has been passed that all the Jews in the Persian empire are to be put to death. The date for the slaughter is set for about a year's time. The text does not tell us who is to do the killing, but the documents with the instructions are addressed "to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples." Presumably the empire had enough people with weapons at its disposal to take care of this gruesome task. Such a large task takes some organization and so there is almost a year between the day the law was written and the day in which the killing was to take place. What happens in chapter 4 takes place in this interim.

The text describes Mordecai grieving. He grieved in the way of the ancients. He tore his clothes. He put on sack-cloth and ashes. And he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. So did the rest of the Jews when they heard of the law that had been made to kill them all. Verse 3, "And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes."

Now none of us have faced anything quite like this. But we do face threats and dangers and concerns that are far, far, less dramatic but which are nevertheless real for us and how we deal with them is spiritually significant. There is, of course, a whole range of things that can happen to us that can make us feel vulnerable, or in danger or anxious. There are the big things like a cancer diagnosis or the loss of a loved one or a large financial setback or a broken relationship. None of these is the same as the kind of thing that Mordecai was dealing with, but we all do face things that cause us pain or anxiety – where we feel vulnerable or threatened. And how we deal with such things is always spiritually significant.

In Mordecai's case, first notice his mourning. That is understandable. It would be not right if Mordecai did not react in this way given the news that he had heard. And the same is the case for us when we are facing bad news, threatening news, painful news. There is a place for mourning. There is a place for weeping. There is a place for concern. We are not meant to be people who do not feel anything. We are called to rejoice in the Lord and be content with our lives but that does not mean there is never a place for weeping and mourning and concern for the future. What Mordecai and the other Jews did when they heard about the threat against their people was an appropriate response.

This passage does not say it directly, but it does remind us of another time in Israel's history when she was mourning and groaning. In Exodus 2, the people of Israel are described as groaning because of their slavery in Egypt, and we are told in Exodus 2:24 "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel – and God knew." This is a very common theme in the Scriptures – that God hears the groaning and the mourning of his people. Psalm 56:8 says, "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. And they are not in your book?"

If we look at Mordecai and the Jewish people weeping and lamenting, nothing is said at this point about where God is in all this, but we have many assurances in the Word of God that when God's people weep and are

anxious, God is aware – God hears our groaning – he is aware of our tears – whether we are aware of that or not.

Now one thing about Mordecai's morning in the story before us is that it was very public. "Verse 2 says, "He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth." And it is that visibility that gets the news to Esther. Esther was queen, but as is so often the case with being a royal, her palace was also a prison. Not literally in this case, but her high position made it impossible for her meet easily with Mordecai. Mordecai is not able to run up to the palace and ask to see Esther. And so he mourns at "the entrance of the king's gate."

Some of Queen Esther's servants notice and bring word to the queen that Mordecai is in mourning. Esther does not yet know why. She sends a change of clothes to Mordecai so that he might take off his sackcloth. Mordecai does not accept Esther's clothes. It's clear that she does not know what is going on. But she is going to find out. She sends a servant to Mordecai to find out why he is in mourning. Mordecai tells the servant. He gives him a copy of the decree commanding the destruction of the Jews and he tells the servant to tell Esther to go to the king and "plead with him on behalf of her people."

It appears that Esther is quite ignorant about what is going on outside of the palace. She seems to be living in her own little world, isolated from the lives of regular people. That's easy for us to do as well. We don't have to live in a palace to isolate ourselves from the world around us. It's easy, isn't it, to focus on our own things and pay little attention to what is going on in society and the suffering of so many people in this world? Love for others and a concern for God's kingdom requires that have some interest in the world beyond our individual interests and concerns. In order to pray and to care and to help we need to have some knowledge about things beyond our own little lives.

So Mordecai tells Esther about the plan to annihilate the Jews and asks her to take up that matter with the King. That is a risky thing to do as Esther informs her cousin. She explains, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law, - to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

That seems rather extreme. It is understandable that the king's time had to be protected. You can't have people approaching the king whenever they want. But this seems a bit excessive. Capital punishment for approaching the king without being invited unless he holds out his golden scepter. We can assume that that do not happen very often.

Queen Esther's hesitation is understandable. The king did not know that she was a Jew. He might be angry that she had held that information from him. She had not been called to come into the king for thirty days. We can be pretty certain that the king had called other women to come to him during that time. The king might be

tiring of Esther. She might be on her way out anyway. For her to approach the king in that situation was a pretty dangerous proposition.

I don't think we should be too hard on Queen Esther at this point. She is being asked to risk her life. In the end she will see that it is the right thing to do and she will do it. But it is understandable that she needs some time to process her situation.

But Mordecai knows that it is Queen Esther's responsibility to do this. His reply to Esther is profound and reveals that Mordecai had been growing in spiritual maturity since he had told Esther to hide her Jewish identity earlier on in the story. He had grown to the point where he was willing to reveal his Jewish identity by now bowing down to Haman. He knew that that was a dangerous thing to do and yet he had done it. Mordecai is beginning to understand that there are times for God's people to take a stand regardless of the consequences. He had taken his stand. And now it was time for Esther to take her stand.

This is what he says to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

He tells Esther that the edict to kill the Jews applies to her as well as the rest of the Jews. Then he reveals his own faith that God will not allow his people to be exterminated. "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place...." How can he say that? How does he know that "relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place...."? Mordecai here is expressing his trust in the promises of God. He is trusting that God will keep his promise made to Abraham that in his offspring all the families of the earth will be blessed. Perhaps he is remembering the promise God made to King David that he would establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 2 Samuel 7:16, God says to David, "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." This promise was the basis of much of Israel's hope for the future.

The promises that God had made to Israel make it clear that God had a plan for his people beyond the days of Mordecai and Esther. And so Mordecai knew that God was going to deliver his people either through Esther or some other way. Given what God had promised concerning his people and their role in the history of God's saving purposes it was impossible that he would allow the whole of the Jewish people to be annihilated.

Things looked very dark at that moment. An unchangeable law had been made that on such and such a day the entire Jewish people were to be wiped out. Haman held the power. King Ahasuerus had no interest in the Jewish people. The situation for the Jews seemed hopeless. But Mordecai knew that in one way or another God would not allow his people to be wiped out because of promises that God had made.

And that is also true for us in our day. We also live in the light of promises from God. We have the same promises that Mordecai had. But we have many more – including promises made by Jesus and in Jesus' name. Jesus has promised us in the great commission, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20). We have God's promises that nothing will "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39).

Jesus does not promise that things will be easy for his people. Matthew 24:9-14, ⁹"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹²And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Jesus is certainly not promising an easy time for the people of God. And so we might have to experience very difficult times like the Jews were facing in this story. But Jesus promises that those "who endure to the end will be saved." And the gospel must continue to be proclaimed right to the end. And we have promises that go beyond the end of this world. We have promises that the people of God will enter into glory after their time on earth and that the people of God as a whole will experience the fullness of the blessings of salvation beyond this present age. And that gives us the hope we need to face the difficulties we may have to experience.

So Mordecai trusts that the Lord will deliver his people. If not through Esther's influence then some other way. But it seems clear to Mordecai that God had placed Esther in her position as queen for the purpose of using her to deliver his people. Verse 14. Mordecai says to Esther. "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" He is suggesting that this is why Esther had become queen. He is suggesting that all of the various factors that had brought Esther to this place had been directed by God so that she might now be in a place to be the means that God will use to save his people from extermination.

This principle also applies to us although probably in a less dramatic way than Esther. Nevertheless it is true of every one of God's people that God has directed our lives for such a time as this. We are who we are. We are where we are by God's providence to accomplish what he has ordained to accomplish through our lives in his kingdom. God's providence does not only apply to people like Esther whom God had chosen to be the means of saving an entire people from extermination. It also applies to each one of God's people so that God has gifted us and placed us where we are in his providence to contribute in small but significant ways to his master plan for the coming of his kingdom. Ephesians 2:10 says "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

God has brought us to where we are in our lives for a variety of purposes. "[W]e are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." There are ways

for us to serve God that God has prepared for us and prepared us for. The works that God has prepared for us to do are probably not as dramatic as the work that God had prepared Esther to do, but they are significant none-the-less. These are the works that God places before us. The opportunities in our lives to serve God and other people. Serving him at our jobs and in our families and in our church and in all the providentially arranged situations that we face day by day. And each day and in each situation we can ask ourselves what task or tasks has God prepared for me to do.

Mordecai got through to Esther. Verses 15-16, “Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ‘Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.’”

God had brought Esther to a place of decision. And she made the right choice. He used Mordecai’s urging and the crisis itself to bring Esther to this decision. We know that she made that decision by God’s grace, but also that it was her decision freely made. It was a big leap forward in her spiritual growth. Before she had been content to keep her Jewishness hidden and enjoy the life of luxury in the royal court. But now she came to see that God was calling her to risk her life for the purpose of seeking to save her people from extermination. She came to see that God was calling her to surrender her life in his service.

And that is what God requires of all of his people. We will probably never be in a position where standing up for Jesus will require us to put our life at risk although who knows what the future will bring. There are plenty of believers living today whose public confession of Christ and service to Christ does put their lives at risk. And without in any way minimizing the significance of literally risking your life in the service of Christ, the challenge of the many less dramatic ways that we are called to give our lives for Christ and his kingdom is not to be underestimated because we are confronted with that challenge multiple times every day. Multiple times a day we are faced with the decision to give our lives for Christ or hold back from making that sacrifice. Will we do what we know Christ is calling us to do, or will we refuse and go our own way? Will we speak up or will we keep silent? Will we give or will we fail to give? Will we serve or will we fail to serve? Will we serve Christ or will we serve self?

That is not to say that there is no place for rest, relaxation, enjoying God’s gifts and seeking our own welfare. Giving our lives for Christ does not mean rejecting all the enjoyment of the life that God gives us to live. We are called to do all things to the glory of God. We are called to give our lives for Christ. We are called to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. And that means enjoying God’s gifts with thankfulness to God and resisting self-indulgence and being willing to serve and sacrifice and love. To give our lives for Christ means seeking to live a life that is pleasing to him. Sometimes that will mean enjoying a hobby. Sometimes that will mean giving time and talent for Christ and others in service to Christ. Esther was being called to offer her life in service to God and his people. In her case the call was to actually risk her life. That is not likely what God is

calling us to do, but he is calling us to give our lives for Jesus in multiple smaller ways each day. We are “created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Esther’s acceptance of her calling reminds us of Jesus’ acceptance of his calling. Esther was willing to risk her life for her people. She asked Mordecai to encourage the Jews in Susa to fast for her. She asked her closer companions to fast with her. And she put her life on the line for the sake of her people. That reminds us of Jesus in Gethsemane. There, the horror of what lay before him almost overwhelmed Jesus. He asked his disciples to pray for him. He prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me....” But he continued, “[N]evertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

We can be thankful that by God’s grace Esther was willing to risk her life for her people because our salvation was tied to the continuation of that people until Christ could be born of them. But Jesus did more than risk his life. He gave his life. And that meant more than just physical death. Jesus gave himself as the “propitiation for our sins.” That means that he gave himself to suffer the wrath of God for our sins. He shrunk back momentarily in the garden when the horror of what lay before him overwhelmed him, but he did not turn back. He embraced his mission. He did not say, “If I perish, I perish.” He knew that he would perish. He knew he would die. But he embraced that calling out of love for his people. He “delivers us from the wrath to come.” (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

Esther risked her life that her people might live. Jesus in a more profound way gave his life that we might live in a more profound way. Jesus gave his life that we might not have to experience the wrath of God – that we might be made spiritually alive – and that we might have eternal life.

And just as Esther reminds us of Jesus giving his life for us, she also reminds us of our calling to give our lives for Jesus and for other people. In Ephesians 5:2 Paul tells us, “[W]alk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Why did Esther give her life as an offering? It was because she came to see the implications of belonging to God’s chosen people. She came to see that her Jewishness was a calling for her to offer up her life for the salvation of her people. And our calling is something like that. We too belong to God’s chosen people. If we are believers, God has chosen us in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” That choice is the most wonderful possible blessing, but it comes with obligations as well. That is what Esther came to see. She belonged to the chosen people of God. And that meant that she had obligations to the people of God.

We have been chosen to belong to God’s people. But like Esther we have obligations to the people of God. We are to love one another. We are to care for one another as Jesus has loved us. (John 15:12) John writes in 1 John 3:16, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the

brothers.” Esther is a picture of Jesus giving his life for us. She is also a picture of our calling to “lay down our lives for the brothers.”

Let us consider that Jesus has laid down his life for us to save us from death – to save us from destruction. And let us consider how he calls us to “lay down our lives for the brothers” as Jesus has “laid down his love for us.”