

# Esther: The Unexpected Influencer

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Esther chapter 4 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.
- But he only went 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. 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.
- Then Esther summoned Hatak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.
- So Hatak 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.
- [ 1 : 3 3 ] 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 instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. Hatak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said.
- 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 should be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives.
- But 30 days have passed since I was called to go to the king. 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.
- [ 2 : 5 0 ] But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. 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. Thank God for his word. Good morning.
- Thank you, Sam. I don't know if some of you may know that I attended Kern Hill as a child when I was in primary school, about that age. And I still get very warm, fuzzy feelings being here.

- [ 4 : 04 ] So I'm very grateful to this church and to the people who've been in it over the years for giving me such a really positive experience of church as a young person and as a child.
- And I would have quite happily gone out with the kids earlier today and enjoyed that again. But it's great to be here with you. And thank you for having me. Thank you.
- Thank you.
- So, maybe that doesn't ring any bells with you, but if it does, this story today is for us, for people like you, well, people like me, and possibly like you, who manage to somehow just kind of get through the day and get through conversations and relationships and issues that come up without necessarily consciously thinking, pray and God.
- So, just to recap the story as we have it. So, Esther, the story of, specifically of Esther that we're going to look at today.
- [ 6 : 05 ] So, Haman is an evil man in the palace, one of the king's advisors, and he really doesn't like the Jews. And so, he plots that he is going to get them all slaughtered.
- And the king's a bit clueless. And so, Haman says, I've got this great idea. And the king says, sure, do whatever you want, basically. And so, there's this edict that goes out, which we heard about in the reading that Sam gave, for the Jews to be slaughtered.
- Now, Mordecai, who is Esther's cousin, hears about this. And that's what happens at the beginning of chapter 4, as we heard. When Mordecai had learned of all of this, he put on sackcloth and ashes.
- And so, he is lamenting this terrible destruction that has been decreed for the Jews. And Esther hears about this.
- Well, she hears about Mordecai's lamenting before she hears about the destruction of the Jews, which is a slightly interesting plot twist, but that's how it comes into text. So, she goes, what's going on?
- [ 7 : 15 ] So, she tries to find out what's the issue. And Mordecai explains it. There's some messages that go back and forth. And Mordecai tries to persuade Esther to use her position to help the Jews.
- And he is successful at persuading Esther to do this. And so, she goes to the king. And then we get this kind of multi-stage process where Esther works her way through.
- So, she goes to the king, and he is indeed pleased with her and happy for her to come and give her request. But she doesn't give it right then, does she? Okay. So, if you just kind of scan forward into chapter 5, Esther goes to the king.
- And he says, what do you want? Whatever you want. And she goes, come to a banquet. Not quite what we're expecting. We're expecting her to give her peace.
- You know, this is her chance. She says, no, no, no, come to a banquet that I have prepared. So, king comes to the banquet. Now, Esther. This is still in chapter 5, beginning of chapter 5.
- [ 8 : 20 ] So, king comes to the banquet. And he says, now, Esther, tell me, tell me now. What is it that you want? And Esther goes, come to another banquet.
- Finally, so now, then moving into chapter 7. King comes to the second banquet. So, okay, Esther. What do you want? And Esther finally coughs it up.
- My people and I are going to be destroyed. And she asks for the king's help. And there's a bit more to come.
- But the king is persuaded and the Jews are saved. Hallelujah. It's all successful. So, Esther and Mordecai's planning and their conversations in chapter 4 that we had read come to a successful conclusion through the book of Esther.

Now, I mean, from a kind of Christian perspective, the interesting thing about all of this is that, I think, you know, since neither Esther nor Mordecai, they don't pray about any of this.

[ 9 : 29 ] We don't hear at any point in this story, Esther and Mordecai heard about what was going on, and they prayed to God to do something, or they prayed to God for guidance. They don't pray and ask God to tell them what to do about this situation.

And they don't pray, once they've decided what they're going to do, they don't pray that their mission will be successful. So, they don't pray, we know that they don't pray to ask God what they should do, because even the fasting that they do, Esther says, I will go to the king.

She decides what she's going to do, and then she says, now fast. So, the fasting is not to help her decide what to do, it's to follow. And they don't pray for their efforts to be successful.

Mordecai is confident, in verse 14, that the Jews will be delivered. So, the issue here is not, God, please make it successful.

Mordecai is like, God is going to do his thing. You know, something is, Jews will be delivered. So, they don't pray about that either. In fact, God isn't even mentioned in the book of Esther, and this is one of the things that this book is famous for in the Bible, is that God is not mentioned in the entire book.

[ 10 : 53 ] And that doesn't feel, sometimes we feel awkward about that as Christians. What do we do with this book of the Bible where God is not mentioned?

Isn't that kind of missing the point? Isn't the point of the book that we all talk about God? And I should emphasize, yes, the big point of our faith is that we do talk about God.

But in Esther, we don't get that explicitly. So, perhaps, you know, we're a bit uncomfortable about this. But, I mean, what's interesting, isn't it, isn't that that's kind of our lives, isn't it?

We go from day to day. And, I mean, we do, we might have a quiet time, we might pray. You know, we do various things where we think very consciously about God and we pray.

But, frankly, I would imagine for most of our days, you know, we go through our day, and we aren't thinking God, God, God all the time. And I think in this way, Esther offers some guidance of how do we live as faithful people, as faithful Christians or faithful believers.

[ 11 : 59 ] Esther was obviously a Jew, not yet a Christian. How do we live as faithful people when sometimes we go our whole day without maybe thinking about God?

Now, so in this context of Esther, so I think sometimes there's perhaps three different ways, three different ways that we might engage with going about our day and making our decisions and dealing with situations.

I mean, one is that we ask God for help. We ask God for guidance. We ask him to sort things out for us. So, you know, we make prayer, you know, really explicit prayer a big thing.

If something comes up and we pray about it, and we've all had those situations where something happens and we go, oh, my goodness, and we know that we just need, we really need to pray about this, and that is the answer.

There's another kind of possibility where something happens and you think, oh, common sense suggests that I should do this, perhaps.

[ 13 : 03 ] You know, we don't think, we don't over-spiritualize it. We just think, you know what, you know, there's just been a car crash. I should call the police. I should call the ambulance. You know, we don't, it's just common sense.

Or perhaps we have values that drive our decisions. So you see someone suffering and you know that the right, you know, you're going to help them because that's what your values say that you should. You don't overthink it.

You don't question that. You go with what you know to be the values that you hold. And that's also a good, there are also situations where that's enormously valuable.

And interestingly, in Esther, we don't really get either of these things. They're not really into prayer. They're not really doing what makes common sense here.

I mean, geez, what is common sense? I mean, probably to run and hide somewhere at this point. And it's interesting as well that this is not about doing good. Mordecai doesn't say to Esther, you need to go and, you know, talk to the king because that is the good thing to do.

[ 14 : 11 ] You know, you should be a righteous person and, you know, the righteous person speaks up for the oppressed and you should go and be a good person. He doesn't actually appeal to that in this situation.

He appeals to her specific situation, to who she is and the context in which she is. So I'm going to offer this third possibility where we have sort of prayer perhaps here.

We've got sort of where we work with common sense and values that we hold. And another option, which I think is what we see in Esther, where we are extremely attentive to our place, to our situation, to the context we find ourselves in, to what we know about that situation.

What are we deeply knowledgeable about? Where are we connected? What's specific about our context? And that that then drives our decisions, drives our actions, drives the way that we handle something.

Now, all of these are good options. So this is not a normative sermon where we say, this is what you should do. But in Esther, we have an interesting opportunity to reflect on relatively an unusual situation in the Bible and to think about what we might take from that to help us in our lives as we live as faithful people.

[ 15 : 41 ] So if we go looking at the story. So Esther is initially reluctant to help. She doesn't want to get involved. She says in verse 11, you know, listen, if people go to the king uninvited, they get killed.

They just get killed off the top unless the king, you know, extends the scepter. And I don't think that's going to happen. So, you know, count me out. This is pointless. But Mordecai persuades her.

And he does, he looks at two different things. One is he looks at who she is. So she was thinking, this is about helping other people. You know, I, the Jews are in trouble and I, maybe, you know, I'm going to help the Jews.

And Mordecai says in verse 13, do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape.

So he says, hey, hey, hey, wait. This is not about you helping other people. It's a little bit like that. This is about you. You are a Jew. You are deeply identified into this situation.

[ 16 : 47 ] And so she has to recognize her own identity and her own kind of participation in this situation. And it's also, at this point, the palace, no one in the palace knows that she is a Jew.

So no one, so she would have to fess up, basically, to her own identity in order to carry this out. So she's not, initially, she's not sure this is what she wants to do.

But Mordecai says, no, listen, you have no choice. You are a Jew. You are deeply identified with this situation and with the threat and also with the opportunity because you are in the palace.

You can go and talk to the king. And no one else has that opportunity. So as he says, you will not escape because you are indeed a Jew. And in verse 14, and who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.

So he's appealing to her identity, who she is in this situation, and to the context, the opportunity that she has which no one else has. Now, what this looks like for you and I is, who knows, it could look all sorts of different ways.

[ 18 : 02 ] And one of the things about when you preach is that you get to find the one opportunity, the one time in your life when you actually did something useful. And you can use that as an example, and it makes it look like you could screw it up all the time, but I've been able to think of one opportunity when I think I've gotten this perhaps right.

So I had a job a number of years ago where I had absolutely no authority. I had no official power in this situation. That's a bit like Esther.

I had no organizational power. But after I'd been at the job for about a year, and I thought, what is going on here? This place is so weird.

Anyway, because what I had was I had two different groups of people that I worked with, and they were basically at each other's throats. So it was intensely, it was very, the whole setup was kind of adversarial, you know.

May, may, may, lots of name calling and pointing, and it was always the other people's fault. And I had an opportunity, not because I had power, but because by sort of listening and getting to know people a bit, I did have some influence.

[ 19 : 09 ] And I had an opportunity to basically change the tone of this conversation and to bring it into, instead of it being this very adversarial situation, but to introduce a way of working that was much more collaborative.

So that was something that I had in my situation I was able to do. You know, we think about our jobs. Where are you in your job?

What context are you in? What might you with your opportunities, you with your identity in your job, who are you identifying with? In your family situations, what might be your context?

In your community, in your church, you know, what is the influence that you, whoever you are specifically, might be able to exercise because of where you're at?

And Esther offers us this challenge. Where are we, and what might we do with that situation? So once Esther's persuaded that she should get involved, she has a strategy.

[ 20 : 24 ] She's going to go to the king. And we then get this series of three events. She goes, we get the first banquet, she organizes the first banquet, she organizes the second banquet, and it's only at that point that she finally fesses up to what it is that she wants.

And when I first read this, I thought, ah, this is a very shrewd woman. She's developed this elaborate strategy. She knows exactly how to play the puppet, pull the strings, you know.

How many banquets is it going to take to soften up the king? You know, she knows all of this. She's got it sorted. And this was her plan from the beginning. And that might well be true.

But then I wondered, maybe that isn't the case. We don't know that. She doesn't outline at the beginning, and this is my plan. Well, maybe she's just playing it by ear.

Maybe when she goes to the king the first time, she isn't quite sure what she's going to do. She goes along and she thinks, well, I'll go there, see what kind of mood he's in, how I'm feeling this might work. Like, so she goes and she's like, no, not yet, not yet.

[ 21 : 35 ] He needs a bit more, a bit more alcohol maybe, a bit more softening up, you know. Haven't seen him for a while, need to rebuild the relationship. We'll have the first banquet. We'll do it over food.

Anything, everything is always better over food, right? So she invites him to a banquet. Yeah, maybe she goes to that and she thinks, just not quite where this needs to be yet.

Second banquet. Right. We're all good here. This is the right time for me to bring my request to the king for optimum results. We can't tell from the text, which we don't know which way it's going.

But I think either way, whichever way you read that, and I think you can read it either way, what is clear is that she is intensely sensitive to her situation.

She's not just kind of devised a strategy, you know, kind of thought, well, I don't know. I don't know what to do. I'm just going to go to the king, I'm going to say my piece, and, you know, that will be fine. She's really scratching her head here and thinking, how do I use what I know of the king, the way he works, the way he thinks, the relationship that I have, how do I really, and the personal dynamics she's aware of between the king and Haman and herself, you know, how do I make this work?

[ 23 : 01 ] And she uses that, her sensitivity to this situation and her kind of knowledge of it to ultimately to bring success. So I think that's something, you know, as we are Esthers in our own context, and we want to be, to have some influence, you know, that we can be, we can see in Esther this example of a faithful woman who is very sensitive and aware of her situation and using that to best effect.

And it's interesting that we don't, we don't have evidence here that they pray. We don't talk about them praying. But we are told that they fast.

And I think this is an interesting point, and I want to just explore this a little bit. Because we normally, I think, we normally associate fasting with prayer.

You know, we think of prayer and fasting. They kind of almost come together. You know, maybe you, maybe something you've done, or maybe you know other people that do. And in here, in this passage, it doesn't come across that way.

The fasting that they talk about in verse, in chapter 5, sorry, chapter 4, in verse 16, they decide, you know, Esther says, you go and fast with the Jews, I will fast with my attendants.

[ 24 : 39 ] So why? What is this, how is this helping the situation, or what's the point? And, frankly, I don't know. But, I think we can reflect a little bit here.

I mean, one option is that this is intended to placate God. You know, oh, well, you know, if we fast and we wear our sackcloth, you know, God will, God will have mercy. And maybe that's the case.

But it's interesting that Mordecai is already confident that the Jews are going to be delivered. So, he's not in any doubt about the ultimate outcome of this situation. He doesn't know how it's going to happen.

It might be that it's through Esther. It might be that it's through something else. But he is confident that God is going to, you know, well, he doesn't mention God. But he's confident that the Jews are going to be delivered.

That, you know, the outcome will be positive. So, I'm not sure that the fasting is really about that. But I want to offer this as an option.

[ 25 : 39 ] And it's about the value of ritual when we're preparing for a big moment. Because Esther is about to embark on this huge, you know, this is arguably the moment of her life.

This is the biggest moment of her life up until this point. And I don't know about you. But I'm often, even when I have even lesser moments than that, my mind is a jumble.

I'm inarticulate. I don't know what's going on. And I think sometimes I'd like to pray about something. And I'm like, oh, I don't even know God.

I have the thing that's happening. And I'm not even sure what I should be praying about because I'm not sure what's going on. And I don't really know what should be happening. And I don't know. This is kind of my usual state of affairs.

And actually, no, I have to say, I'm not, I don't, I don't have a habit of, personally, of fasting in particular. But what I do find is that some kind of ritual, whether it's fasting, it might be fasting for people.

[ 26 : 45 ] I like to, if I have a big situation to engage with, I actually like to walk or cycle there. Because that time and that space helps me root myself in the new situation.

Because I think that's what we're often needing when we're, when we're about to face a big moment. Is we need, we need time and space to get our, get our minds in the right groove. To focus and say, no, right.

The point of the next three days, the point that's coming up is this. And I'm going to focus. Focus my mind. Focus my heart. Prepare myself, in a sense.

Prepare for what, for what is to come. And you might do that in all sorts of different ways. I find I sometimes do it by cooking as well.

Now, I mean, it might be ironic to suggest cooking is a sort of substitute for fasting. I mean, I'll leave that to a better theologian than me. But sometimes I have people coming over and I think, I don't know, they're coming over this evening.

[ 27 : 49 ] I don't know what we should talk about. I don't know. I want to kind of have a good evening, but I don't really know. And by cooking, I say, okay, right. I'm going to prepare, prepare myself, prepare the moment, prepare the place for what will happen.

And it's our way, in some ways, it's also our way, and I think this is where real fasting is helpful, of reminding ourselves that situations are not successful because we have planned everything down to the nines.

You know, Esther does not, we don't hear about, and so she scripted her speech. And she thought very carefully about what she would wear and how she would walk.

And maybe she did those things. We don't know. But fasting is, fasting is a powerless thing to do, isn't it? We don't gain power.

We don't, it's not a human expression of our intelligence or of our skills. It's a kind of way of saying, oh, I recognize that there is more going on here than what I can prepare for, than what I can achieve.

[ 29 : 00 ] And fasting or something equivalent that helps us do that prepares us for the big moments. And I think also Esther was stuck in this place.

She's already in the palace, so she knows this place. We're often going somewhere that we don't know, or we're perhaps going to a job interview on the other side of town, or I'm going for some interviews tomorrow in a different part of the country.

So I need that opportunity to step into the situation. We talked about, you know, Esther's in this context that she's in. And I think fasting, that pause, that walking somewhere, the taking the time.

Maybe you go ahead of time somewhere and you sit in the cafe and you reflect, where is this place that I am in? Where is this position that I have been placed in? And that we focus on that.

I think another value of the fasting, which is a little bit also contextual, is that it's a shared activity, isn't it?

[ 30 : 05 ] She doesn't just fast. She says, Mordecai, take the Jews and fast. And we're reminded that in Esther's role as an influencer, she's not a standalone person.

She is not the only, you know, the savior of the world. She's just a representative of a group. She happens to be the person with the opportunity.

But really, she is just the face of a community and a representative of them. And by them all fasting together, she's reminded that that is what she is.

She is just the voice of a community. And we all know that it's much easier in life, isn't it, when you shared your concern with someone else. And we like to pray together, partly because we know that God hears us, and partly because it's nice to know that this is not just about us.

Whatever you're going through in life, whatever you're facing, whatever situation you've been placed in to do what you were doing, as Christians, as the body of Christ, we're all in this together and we support each other and we fast or whatever it is that we do, because we all are in this, are all in this together.

[ 31 : 14 ] I think the final challenge of Esther in this particular context is she gets her attendance to fast too.

Now, can you imagine if you went to work and you said, right, to all the people you worked for, I have a big moment coming up. You're all going to fast with me. I don't think that would go over terribly well.

But I think it's a challenge to remember, again, that we are not alone. And we are not just part of our Christian community and they are with us.

But that we are also in our own communities. You're in your community at work or at school or wherever it is that you find yourself. And you may not think that these people are interested in the fate of the Jews.

You may not think that these people are interested or have a stake in what it is that you are trying to achieve. But I think Esther challenges us to engage the people around us and to go with them, to bring them with us in an appropriate way.

[ 32 : 19 ] But to believe that we can be open with people about what we're trying to achieve and that we can generate support for ourselves and for what we're doing wherever we are.

And how you do that is a challenge. But actually, you know, I think we actually like it sometimes when people share. You know when somebody's got something on and you think, I wish they told me six months ago that this is what they were doing.

Maybe it worked. Maybe it worked. So I'd urge us to share with the people around us in an appropriate way. And engage them.

Partly because then when something awesome happens, they knew. They knew what was going on. They knew what we were trying to do. And if we're like Esther and she coughed up that she was a Jew, we cough up that we're Christians, they start to put the pieces together.

So none of us are Persian Jewish queens that I'm aware of. But we are all, we've all been placed into a context, into a situation that we have come into.

[ 33 : 36 ] And I think we can believe, as Esther and Mordecai suggest, although they don't make explicit, that we are where we are because God has placed us there.

To make use of who we are as individuals, our identity. To make use of the situation and the opportunities that we have because of where we are at.

And to use that to influence, to see where the issues are and to step up where we feel that we can be of help.



And where we can feel that we should get involved, as Esther does. She's going, oh, right, I need to get involved because I'm concerned. And as we go to do all of these, to meet this challenge that Esther sets us, that we take the time, take the opportunity to fast, to prepare ourselves, to prepare the place, to prepare our minds and our hearts for what we are about to do.

And that we remember not to go it alone, but to bring others with us. And to join with them as we take advantage of the opportunities that God gives to us.

[ 34 : 57 ] Because who knows, but that you and I have come to our position for such a time as this. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the example that Esther sets of someone who became aware of just how significant her situation was.

And Father, we thank you for the purpose of us. And Father, we thank you that you are at work in each one of us to make, wherever we are, a significant place for us.

To give us a unique role and a unique opportunity to influence perhaps just another person, perhaps the whole world.

But to be an influence for us to be an influence for you and for your ultimate purposes. And I pray that you would help us to have Esther's sensitivity to the situation and her ability to work through it.

[ 36 : 11 ] And to work for your ultimate glory and deliverance. A soul and approximately one of us. Amen. That is a Fazaling of America. Amen.

Thank you. That is aoo raise earth guide for you.

And thank you for forgiveness. Amen. Thank you. Thank you. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.