

## Esther 1 - 4

### Living on a Cliffhanger

Back in the 1800s, it was common for authors of novels to release their new book in weekly or monthly installments, one chapter at a time; they'd write a chapter and release it for sale, before the book was complete, so that they could make a living off it week to week. One such author was Thomas Hardy and he once ended a chapter by literally leaving a character hanging from the side of a cliff. This was a clever way to force his readers to be left on the edge of their seats, dying to find out what would happen next, so that they would be sure to rush out and buy the next chapter as soon as it came out. And so the term "cliffhanger" was born. This strategy continues today, and for good reason, because it's highly effective. I'm sure we've all watched a show where an episode ends on a massive cliffhanger, leaving us confused or frustrated or anxious to see what will happen to our beloved character so that we just can't wait until the next episode drops. It makes a story exciting and keeps us coming back for more.

Cliffhangers make for exciting stories, but we don't want to live in one. It's a form of entertainment to read about characters in these dire circumstances, eager to see how they may get out of it, but none of us want to *live* there ourselves or be in those situations. Yet that's often exactly where we find ourselves: living on a cliffhanger, waiting in eager anticipation for what's going to happen next. Sometimes in life, we find ourselves living in a cliffhanger, waiting for God to act, to answer our prayers, to show us the way, to resolve our problems, and work out everything for good. But God doesn't solve all our problems and answer all of our prayers right away; often, He calls us to wait upon Him. And that's hard.

Sometimes this looks like waiting for God to answer our prayers; maybe we're in need of a job or financial provision, and it feels like every door we knock on keeps getting slammed in our face, and we're waiting for God to provide; having a medical issue and waiting desperately to hear back about medical test results, or desperately hoping that maybe this time there will be a different answer, a new medication to try, relief from the pain, or the good news that the disease is in remission; maybe it comes from real life enemies threatening you, coming after you, or trying to find some way to persecute you, drag your name through the mud, or ruin your life.

I have a vivid memory of a cliffhanger in my own life that I'll never forget: when I was living in China, sitting in Mandarin class, and got a call telling me that my sister had been in a

really bad car wreck and I needed to call my parents immediately. The news had been passed through multiple hands by that point, so the missionary telling me this didn't even know if she was alive or dead. And it wasn't so simple as me just picking up the phone and calling my parents. I had to communicate what was going on to my Chinese teacher through the language barrier, leave class, hop on my bicycle and pedal as fast as I could several miles through congested Chinese traffic, in order to get home, climb 5 flights of stairs to my apartment, fire up my laptop and VPN, and Skype home to my parents (for you younger folks, Skype was what we used before Zoom was cool). That whole time, I was frantically praying to God that my sister was still alive, terrified of what news I would hear when I finally got there. Every rotation of the pedal on my bike, every flight of stairs I climbed, my stomach sank lower and lower, my heart racing. I might as well have been dangling off a literal cliff, not knowing what would happen.

Thankfully, by the grace and mercy of God, my sister miraculously survived a terrible car crash, to the praise of God's glory. The Lord pulled me right up that cliff, and all was well. My sister is alive and well years later, with only a scar on her throat as a visible reminder of what happened, and a reminder of God's great mercy.

But as we all know all too well, that's not always the answer we get. And so we're tempted to drown in anxiety, fear, doubt, and unbelief when we find ourselves living on a cliffhanger, overwhelmed by and drowning in all the troubles of our lives, because it feels like it's about to all come crashing down on us. And not all of the cliffhangers in our lives are resolved after rushing home and making a phone call. Sometimes we find ourselves there for days, weeks, months, maybe even years. So how are we supposed to respond when we find ourselves in that situation, as Christians? How do we respond in faith, hold on to hope, and press on without being overwhelmed, crushed, and giving up or giving in?

The book of Esther has much to teach us about this. The book of Esther takes place in the middle of a cliffhanger in the storyline of Israel. The book of Esther takes place later on in Israel's history, after the Exile has ended. Let's quickly remind ourselves of the storyline of the Old Testament: In Genesis, God creates the world, and forms a covenant people for Himself, the nation of Israel, from the descendants of Abraham. After that, they become a large people, led out of Egypt by Moses and into the promised land by Joshua, and become a full-fledged nation. They had kings, like David and Solomon, but due to sin and idolatry, the nation was broken in two; eventually, after many bad kings, both kingdoms went into Exile. The Jews of Judea, in the

South, went to Exile in Babylon; then, the Babylonian Empire was taken over by the Persian Empire, who maintained control over Israel as an outlying province. We see that happen in Daniel. But then, after 70 years of Exile, the Exile ends: the Jews were able to return home and rebuild, as we see in the beginning of the book of Ezra. But then the building was stalled, the people there opposed and hindered by the enemies of God's people still living in the land; the temple foundation built, but then abandoned; Jerusalem lying in ruins with no walls; the sacrificial system non-existent; a large number of Jews still scattered around the Gentile nations, living under pagan rule and customs. And that's the time period that Esther takes place in, spanning roughly from 483BC to 473 BC. The Exile was supposed to be over, and yet it functionally *feels like* it's still going on. You have Jews, like Esther and Mordecai, who are still living in Persia and Babylon and all these other nations.

It feels like a time of silence from God: where is He? Is the exile over or not? Is God going to fulfill His promises or not? Will he hear the prayers of His people and deliver them or not? We're supposed to feel that tension. It's why don't have any direct reference to "God" by name anywhere in the whole book of Esther. Some people doubt the legitimacy of the book of Esther for that reason, but that's absurd; Esther is very much part of the canon of Scripture, recognized by Christ and the Apostles; it's Holy, Inspired, Inerrant, and Authoritative. So then why does it never say "God" or the "Lord" or another name of God? It's because it's meant to show us that God is not silent, even when it feels like He is; God has not forgotten us, even when we're left waiting; He is actively at work behind the scenes, sovereign over everything in our lives, even when it feels to us like everything is spiraling out of control.

Things are bleak for God's people, and by the time we get to the end of chapter 4, things have gotten even bleaker - for the Jews and general, and also for our two main characters, Mordecai and Esther. The troubles and threats keep piling up all around, threaten to overcome and overwhelm God's people. And yet, we see the main characters, Esther and Mordecai, exercise faith in the Lord in the face of overwhelming odds and seemingly hopeless situations. And that's the point of these chapters for us today: that no matter how overwhelming and hopeless our situation may seem at the time, even when it feels like we're left dangling on a cliff waiting for God to act, we must trust that God is sovereignly in control and be faithful where He has placed us. So let's walk through the story of chapters 1 - 4 together, and then look at four sermon points of application from these chapters to our lives today.

## *Outline of chapters 1 - 4*

- I. Setting the stage: Life in Persia is dangerous and Xerxes is a volatile tyrant (ch.1)
  - A. Xerxes throws a banquet for his officials, military officers, and nobles (1:1-9)
  - B. Vashti refuses to come when summoned, so Xerxes banishes her (1:10-22)
- II. Introduction of main characters and plot: Esther, Mordecai, and Haman (chs.2 - 3)
  - A. Esther is chosen as the Queen of Persia (2:1-18)
  - B. Mordecai saves the King's life and foils an assassination plot (2:19-23)
  - C. Haman convinces the King to issue a decree to exterminate all Jews (3:1-15)
- III. The Defining moment: For such a time as this (ch.4)

In chapter 1, we're introduced to the context of our story, which takes place in Susa the capital of the Persian Empire, and the stage is set for the plot of the rest of the book to take place. We're introduced to one of the main characters, King Ahasuerus. This is the Hebrew version of his name; if you've studied history, you're probably more familiar with the Greek version of his name: King Xerxes; Xerxes is the name used for the same king in the book of Ezra. Are you familiar with the story of the 300 Spartans fending off the massive hordes of hundreds of thousands of Persians? That was a real historical battle, at the Pass of Thermopylae, in 480 B.C., led by this same Persian King, Xerxes, about 3 years after the events of chapter 1. Here we see the Persian emperor throwing a massive, opulent banquet in the third year of his reign (v.3), inviting all of his political officials, military leaders, and nobles, showing off his opulent wealth, power and glory. It's essentially a war council, generating support for his campaign into Greece.<sup>1</sup>

Queen Vashti was throwing her own party for the women; but then the King summons her to come and show off her beauty and splendor for his male officials. It's not entirely clear whether or not what he had in mind was inappropriate, lewd, or shameful, but either way, she refuses to come. And that's something you just don't do: you don't disobey the King of Persia, especially not in front of all of his most important people, when he's trying to show how powerful he is. He holds the power of life and death over his people. And so, in his wrath, he gathers his advisors together, and they decide that Queen Vashti must be banished, no longer queen, not only to show the King's power, but also so that none of the other nobles' wives start disobeying their own husbands. The biblical author of Esther doesn't stop to comment on the behaviors of the King or Vashti here; the point is not to show us negative behaviors to avoid or positive examples to emulate; it's simply setting the stage for what happens next, showing us that even in the political dramas and squabbles of the pagan Persian Court, God was sovereignly at

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary, pp.59-60.

work behind the scenes, orchestrating events that seem irrelevant at the time, but set the stage for God to save His people years later. This chapter also shows us that the Persian Court was a very dangerous place to be. Not even the Queen is safe from the capricious tyranny of the volatile and powerful emperor.

We aren't told what exactly happened to Vasthi, but she's removed from being Queen and now there's an opening to fill. So, in chapter 2, after some time has passed, the King's advisors set a plan in motion to help the King find a new Queen. They go through the land and gather up a lot of beautiful, unmarried young women - virgins - and bring them to the King's Court, for the King to pick one to become Queen. But don't misunderstand what's going on here: this is not some kind of beauty pageant. These young women are being placed into the King's harem, as his concubines, as v.3 makes clear. Whether they are picked as Queen or not, they are now one of the King's concubines, kind of like a wife except without any status or privileges, and there's a lot of them; and they're stuck in this for life. Again, this shows us how dangerous the world of the Persian Empire was. And it wasn't just young women; this book repeatedly mentions Eunuchs, male servants who were sterilized in order to work with the women of the palace, such as the harem; every year, 500 boys were gathered from the Empire and forcibly castrated to become eunuchs.<sup>2</sup> Again, this is underscoring for us how powerful, dangerous, and capricious the king was. This is not sugar-coating history, but acknowledging the gritty, grimy, evil realities. And it's important for us to recognize this. We might be tempted to read the Bible's commands to us as Christians and think, "Sure, those are not ideals in principle, but I live in the real world; the Bible is just too sanitized and idealistic, and isn't applicable in my context, where so much darkness abounds." The book of Esther cuts right through that kind of thinking. The Bible takes place in the same dark, evil, real world we live in; in fact, the book of Esther takes place in a world far more dangerous and volatile than the one we live in today!

We're then introduced to our main characters, Esther and Mordecai, who find themselves wrapped up right in the middle of all of this. We meet them in vv.5-11. They are Jews. Mordecai is a Benjamite, of the same family line as King Saul was; we'll come back to that later. He has a cousin who's much younger than him, and when she was orphaned, he adopted and raised her as his own daughter. Her name is Esther. Actually, her Jewish name Hadassah; Esther is her Persian name. And just like she has two names, she had two lives: one as a Jew, a part of God's

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary, p.95

covenant people, but she kept that secret; her public life was as Esther, and she was taken into the King's harem. And God gave her great favor, both with the eunuch in charge of her, and then with the King; he was greatly pleased with her, loved her more than he rest, and placed a crown on her head, declaring her Queen in Vashti's place (v.17).

In v.19, we read that Mordecai was "sitting at the King's gate." This phrase means he had a job as some kind of official in the court of the king. While there, he discovered a conspiracy to assassinate the King; he foiled the plot by turning them in, and once proven, they were hanged. So you'd think that things are going pretty well, right? Esther's the Queen, Mordecai an official who saved the King's life - but remember, this is still a very dangerous and volatile place. In chapter 3, we meet Haman, an evil enemy of God's people. He's an Agagite, a descendant of King Agag, a giant Canaanite in 1 Sam. that King Saul was supposed to kill but didn't, so Samuel beheaded him instead. Now we see a showdown between Mordecai, a descendant of King Saul's family tree, and Haman, a descendant of Agag's family tree. It's part of the Bible's larger theme of the war between the seeds: the line of promise versus the offspring of the Serpent. Haman has great favor with the King, and all the servants were supposed at the King's Gate were supposed to bow down to him - but Mordecai, a good and faithful Jew, refused to; he would worship only God, even if it meant risking his life. So this made Haman furious. He devised a plot to wipe out *all* of the Jews. He cast lots to discern when, then persuades the King to make a decree for mass genocide of the Jews throughout the entire Empire.

In Chapter 4, we come to this decisive moment for Mordecai and Esther, and the fate of all the Jews, the entirety of God's Old Covenant people and the line of promise, lies hanging by a thread - or on the side of a cliff, if you will. In chapter 4:1-4, Mordecai and all the Jews are weeping and lamenting, wearing sackcloth and ashes, and fasting. Esther finds out and is distressed; she tells Mordecai to stop. But then Mordecai comes and gives a firm exhortation and plea to Esther in vv.5-14. He tells her about the decree for genocide, and pleads with her to go in and ask the king - her husband - to change this decree and avert the genocide of God's people. But Esther points out how dangerous this is: it's illegal for anyone to come into the King's presence without being summoned, even for the Queen; if she comes in, she'll be executed, unless the King decides to have mercy and extends the scepter to her. And she hasn't been summoned for a while. Even as the Queen, she is captive to the whims of the volatile king.

But then Mordecai says this, in vv.13-14: “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?” These are powerful words, the most famous in the book of Esther. He’s telling Esther that if she refuses to do this because she fears losing her life, she’s going to end up losing it anyway; she’s still a Jew. He shows remarkable faith here, too, by saying that even if Esther refuses to intercede for her people and risk her life, God will still raise up another form of deliverance for his people. He has great certainty in God’s sovereignty and faithfulness to keep His promises! The line of promise is being threatened, yet Mordecai is certain God will not let Israel be totally wiped out, for the promised Messiah and King had yet to come. But even as he trusts in God’s sovereignty and covenant faithfulness, he also reminds Esther of our human responsibility to act in faithful obedience and trust: God will save his people somehow, someway, but if she isn’t faithful with the responsibility placed before her, it will have devastating consequences for her and her family. Instead, Mordecai exhorts her to trust that God has placed her here, in the court of this king, for a reason: for such a time as this. He loves her as a daughter, yet exhorts her to trust the Lord and go intercede on behalf of God’s people, at great risk to her own life. In vv.15-17, Esther agrees to do this, asking Mordecai and all the Jews around to fast and pray for her for three days; then, she will go before the king, even if it means she perishes.

That’s where our sermon text ends today: on this massive cliffhanger. It seems like the entire world is stacked against them - the Jews scattered abroad and functionally still in Exile; Esther is in the King’s harem and facing the possibility of death, even though she’s Queen; Mordecai is not being honored or recognized for his faithfulness in saving the King, but instead Haman is seeking to persecute Mordecai and all the Jews simply for their faithfulness in bowing down to God alone, and now an official decree has gone out sanctioning the death of all the Jews at the hands of their enemies in all the provinces of the world-wide Persian empire. Yet even amidst all this, Mordecai and Esther do not give up hope but trust in the Lord’s sovereign hand of Providence over the nations, trust that God will indeed save His people, cry out to the Lord in prayer, lament, intercession and fasting, and acknowledge their own responsibility to walk in faithfulness in the opportunities God places before them individually, no matter how risky. And that’s exactly how we must respond when we find ourselves left on a cliffhanger in our own life, waiting upon the world when it seems like everything is stacked against us. We must trust in the Lord. Here’s 4 points of application for us from this text:

## **I. Turn to the Lord in prayer and fasting and make your requests known to the church**

When you feel overwhelmed by crises in life and it feels like everything is stacked against you, threatening to crash down on your head, the first thing you must do is turn to the Lord in prayer. In chapter 4, Mordecai responds to all these crises *in faith*, with sackcloth and ashes and fasting. Fasting is a type of prayer; it accompanies prayer, a way of crying out to the Lord in utter dependence in our moments of need. At the end of the chapter, Esther asks for all the Jews in her local city to fast, and essentially *pray*, for the Lord to give her favor, protect her life, and grant deliverance as Esther intercedes for God's people before the king.

That's how we must respond, too. When we're feeling our weakness and in over our heads, we must turn to the Lord in prayer, crying out and trusting Him with our needs. Fasting is a wonderful way to do this, especially in our moments of crisis, anxiety, greatest need, or seeking the Lord's guidance, provision, or deliverance. Pray individually; fast; and also come and ask your brothers and sisters in Christ to join you in prayer, just like Esther did. Come to our prayer meeting and share what's going on so we can pray; come and join in praying for what's going on in the lives of your fellow Christians, too. Each one of us needs to work hard at cultivating both a *private* prayer life, and a *corporate* prayer life. Make prayer a part of your life. And then, if you find yourself in a moment of crisis, trust the Lord and turn to Him in prayer and fasting and ask your fellow church members to join you. Go to the one who *can* handle all of the problems that you can't, because God is sovereign and in control. Bringing us to our second point:

## **II. Trust in God's sovereignty over all things, including our life**

Mordecai assured Esther that God would faithfully deliver His people somehow, some way. This isn't wishful thinking; it's what real faith looks like in action. Haman cast lots, *purim*, an important word in the book, but Proverbs tells us God decides the outcome of every lot that is cast. God really is sovereign over *all the nations* and over every single event in your life, even the crises. Empires rise and fall at His command. When dice are rolled, God controls the outcome. He will not abandon His people or let His promises fail. So we must trust that God is still sovereignly in control of our situation, no matter how bleak, hopeless, or impossible it may feel like in the moment.

Are you waiting upon the Lord right now, brothers and sisters? Maybe you've felt like life is spinning out of control. Maybe you've been earnestly praying for God to change your situation, to guide you or provide or bring relief, but you just keep waiting and waiting. Maybe

it's for God to change your spouse's or kid's heart. Maybe you're desperately waiting for medical tests to come back. Maybe you're living in fear of what your enemies may do. Maybe you've been praying for financial provision but you can't seem to get a job, or find the right one.

There's a brother here that's been looking for a job for a while, and we've been praying. I was thinking about that situation and how I hoped this text would bring encouragement; and then, as I was in the middle of preparing this sermon, I got a text from him this week that God has answered those prayers and given him a job. Isn't God so good and faithful?

Brothers and sisters, whatever you're going through, trust that the Lord sees you and is with you, every step of the way. He is sovereign over this and He will not let these circumstances sweep you away. Trust that He has a plan for you, and it's perfect; for He has promised to work out all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). Friend, if you are a Christian, if you love Jesus and have repented of your sins and are believing in Him alone, then you have been called according to His purposes. He is sovereignly orchestrating every single detail of your life; no matter how impossible it may seem right now, or in a crisis that may spring up in your life later down the road, trust that God has a plan and knows what He's doing, even if you don't. Trust that He has put you right where He wants you. Bringing us to point three...

### **III. Trust that God has put you where he wants you and be faithful in what the Lord has put in front of you**

Mordecai famously told Esther: "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" She needed to trust the Lord's sovereign plan and be faithful where God had put her, even though it was scary and costly and humanly seemed impossible. And the same is true for each of us today. Trusting in God's sovereignty doesn't lead us to throw up our hands and passively sit back and let God do everything while we go hide in a corner or sit on our hands. It means we trust God and get to work with what He has put before us. The Bible teaches us that God is sovereign and that we are responsible for what we do. Both of these things are true at the same time. So trust that God has put you where you are for a reason, and then press on in faithfulness; trust and obey the Lord, even if it may be costly.

Maybe you're pretty sure you know what God would want you to do at work, but you're worried it may cost you your job to speak the truth in that way. Trust God has put you there for such a time as this. Maybe you've been putting off obeying the Lord because you're afraid of the

consequences; trust that God has put you where you are for a reason. Maybe you've been resisting fully being part of God's people and joining a church because you don't want to put yourself under authority again and you're scared of what might happen; trust the Lord's sovereignty, trust where He has brought you and put you, and then take responsibility and do what He has told you to do and put before you. Wherever else you may find yourself, trust that the Lord has put you here for a reason, for such a time as this; so let us be faithful. Finally...

#### **IV. Trust that Christ courageously fulfilled the hour appointed for Him to save us**

We can trust the Lord no matter what is going on in our lives because of what Christ has already done for us. Esther must go before the king and intercede for her people and risk her life, and as she does, it points us to Jesus. Just as Esther is ordained for such a time as this, to face the possibility of death as she intercedes for the salvation of her people, Jesus met the hour appointed Him by the Father. He came down to intercede on our behalf in order to save us. He interceded for us to save us from the Hell we deserve. He took our place and stood before the King, bearing our sin. He courageously fulfilled the hour appointed for Him, willingly laying down His life for us on the cross, so that we may live! He defeated Sin, Satan, and Death against impossible odds by rising from the grave! So we aren't actually living on a cliffhanger, not really; no matter what's going on in your life, if you're trusting in Christ, you know how the story ends: He has saved your soul from sin and death, and He shall raise you up to eternal life and glory! We are already more than conquerors in Christ Jesus; He shall surely bring us safely home. And that means we can trust that He is actively at work in our lives, interceding for us and ruling over all things; no matter how out of control things may feel, trust that Christ is in control and has a plan for you, because of what He has done, is doing, and will do.

So let us draw near in faith by coming to the Lord's Table. If you are one of God's people as a true believer - if you are repenting and believing in Jesus Christ, have professed faith in baptism, and belong to a gospel preaching church in good standing - then we invite you to join us for the Lord's Supper in just a moment. If those three things *don't* describe you, then we invite you instead to turn to Christ, trusting that He interceded to save you from your greatest danger: the wrath of God in hell you deserve for your sins; trust He died on the cross to save you; cry out to Him in faith, and He will. If you have questions, we'd love to speak with you, but until then, let's have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the Table.