

Lesson 7: Esther 2:19 – 4:14

Verses 19-20

19 Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.

What does verse 19 mean when it says that the virgins were gathered together “the second time”? Some think it is a flashback to a time before Esther was chosen as queen, but the better view is that it refers to a second gathering of the virgins after Esther became queen. Most likely it was a second procession of the unsuccessful contestants, perhaps intended to highlight Esther's beauty in comparison to theirs.

That Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate tells us that he was an official of some sort. One commentator suggests that after Esther became queen she had Mordecai appointed a magistrate or a judge.

The king's gate was a building with a gate within it and in which legal, civil, and commercial business was conducted. The foundations of this gate have been located at Susa (in present day Iran), and it measures 131 by 92 feet. (See the handout from Lesson 6.) It consisted of a central hall that led into the royal compound and two rectangular side rooms. The evidence from the excavation of the gate and the palace corresponds well with the details given in Esther.

In verse 20 we are again reminded of Mordecai's command to Esther that she not reveal her identity. Later we will see Esther commanding Mordecai, which will be yet another example of our theme of reversal.

Verses 21-23

21 In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. 22 And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. 23 When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

The details in Esther such as the names of the eunuchs in verse 21 further confirm that what we are reading is history. These names were likely recorded in the court records of the period.

Why did these two eunuchs become angry? We are not told, but remember that between these events and the events in Chapter 1, the king had been humiliated in a battle against the Greeks. Some surmise that humiliation may have caused this anger. We know that the king was eventually killed under similar circumstances.

Mordecai hears of the plot, and he tells Esther, who then tells the king. The conspirators are hanged, and the events are recorded in the book of chronicles of the king. Herodotus tells us about such a book in which the king had his secretaries record each time he saw one of his officers acting with distinction during a battle against the Greeks.

Verse 22 tells us something very important about Esther – she gave credit where credit was due. And if she had not done so, these events would have turned out very differently. And there are some lessons for us here. First, the obvious lesson is that we should also give credit where credit is due and not take unearned honors upon ourselves. But there is also a second lesson – our seemingly small acts of integrity (which may seem like nothing to us at the time) can have huge unforeseen impacts on our lives and the lives of others.

Esther 3

Verse 1

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| 1 After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. |
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The villain takes the stage in Chapter 3. When Jews today celebrate the feast of Purim, the children are given noisemakers to use while the book of Esther is read, and they try to drown out the reader with noise every time Haman's name is mentioned.

We are not told why Haman is honored in this way, but it is interesting that the author places the promotion of Haman just where a reader would expect to see Mordecai's promotion for foiling the plot against the king's life. Haman is promoted to be second only to the king, while Mordecai appears to go unrewarded.

When Haman is introduced, he is identified as an Agagite (which is one of the most important words in the entire book). This reference

to Haman's nationality hints at a conflict that by this time was already centuries old. Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time that Saul was the first king of Israel. (You will recall that Mordecai and Saul were both of the tribe of Benjamin and were both descended from someone named Kish, although that could not have been the same Kish with each.)

The Amalekites had the dubious distinction of being the first nation to attack and try to destroy God's newly formed covenant nation. In response, God promised Moses that he would completely destroy the Amalekites and be at war with them from generation to generation. (Exodus 17:8-16) Balaam's oracle in Numbers 24:7 predicted that the Israelite king would be greater than Agag (the Amalekite royal title).

Later, God instructed King Saul to attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. (1 Samuel 15:1-3) Saul did attack them, but he spared the life of King Agag and kept the best of the sheep and the cattle, in disobedience to God's command. When Samuel showed up, he cursed Saul and he cut Agag into pieces.

God's promise to be at war with the Amalekites in every generation was given to Moses within the context of the Sinai covenant. Would that promise still stand for the Jews living in exile for having violated that same covenant? Could they expect God to remain faithful to his promises when they had not remained faithful to theirs? These are the questions posed by the simple identification of Haman as an Agagite.

Verses 2-4

2 And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. 3 Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" 4 And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew.

In the first chapter, we saw an example of respect commanded and respect refused, and here we see a second such example.

Why did Mordecai refuse to honor Haman? Some have suggested that Mordecai resented Haman's promotion and his own lack of reward. In the Greek version of Esther, Mordecai explains that he refused to bow to Haman because he would not give the glory due to

God to any man. But, it is known from other sources that many Jews did bow to pagan officials of the Persian court because it was not seen as a religious act but rather one of court protocol. (Our own president, for example, has bowed down before a Saudi Arabian king, a Japanese emperor, and the Mayor of Tampa, Florida.) Also, if (as it seems) Mordecai was an official in the Persian court, then he must have honored the king.

I think the correct answer is most likely the same one supported by Jewish tradition, which says that no self-respecting Benjaminite would show reverence to a descendant of the Amalekites. Although it could have been due to religious scruples instead, particularly if the act of bowing down had more than just a political meaning. But not even the Persian king himself demanded worship from his subjects, and so the more likely cause is the ancient animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites (which also explains why the text specifically points out Haman's ancestry).

Whatever caused Mordecai to refuse, the text does not tell us and it was not obvious to his colleagues, who repeatedly asked him to explain his actions. The final phrase in verse 4, "he had told them that he was a Jew," supports the idea that his refusal was based either on the animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites or on his fidelity to the Jewish law.

Identification with God's people can cause hardships, and Mordecai made that identification in verse 4. Esther had not yet done so, but her opportunity was coming.

Verses 5-6

5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. 6 But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Haman's pride and hunger for power causes him to become filled with fury at Mordecai's refusal to honor him. Notice the difference here in how Mordecai, Esther, and Haman are presented by the author. We are left to wonder at Mordecai's reasons for refusing to bow down, and we are left to wonder about Esther's feelings in Chapter 2. But we have no doubt about how Haman feels – he is filled with fury. Haman is allowed no mysteries!

Rather than attack Mordecai alone (which further supports the notion that Mordecai was an official), he decides to wipe out Mordecai's entire race. Whatever we say about Esther and Mordecai, Mordecai's Jewishness was known, whereas hers was not. That also explains why they spoke using intermediaries. Mordecai's relation to Esther must have still been a secret because otherwise Haman would have known that Queen Esther herself was a Jew.

That Esther's Jewish ancestry was not known may tell us something about how the two had been living. As one commentator noted, "For the masquerade to last that long, Esther must have done more than eat, dress, and live like a Persian. She must have worshipped like one!" And before we become too judgmental, perhaps we should examine our own lives. Are we hiding our true identity from the world while we eat, dress, live, and worship like the Persians who surround us?

Incredibly, some commentators argue that Haman's attempted genocide is so improbable that the story must be fictitious. It is because of arguments such as that that professors get the reputation of living in isolated ivory towers unaware of what is going on around them! How anyone living in today's world could argue that attempted genocide is too improbable to be true is beyond me! Even in Haman's day it was not that incredible. When Smerdis the Magus was killed, every Persian in the capital took up weapons and killed every Magus they could find.

We should pause for just a moment to say a few words about anti-Semitism, of which this attempted genocide is but one of many examples extending up until the present time. The sad fact is that anti-Semitism has often been linked with Christianity, and that is something we must never condone. Here is a quote about the Jews by a famous German – who said it?

First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn ... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. ... Third, I advise that all their prayer books ... be taken from them. ... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. ... Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews.

Who said that? Hitler? Are those statements from the Nuremberg Laws? No. That quote is from Martin Luther. Samuel Sandmel has written that “the pogroms [organized massacres] in Eastern Europe from which my parents fled began with the ringing of church bells. I remember as an American boy how my mother used to shiver whenever the bells rang in the church near our home.” Very sad!

Certainly, we know what our attitude should be toward the Jewish race or any other race. As far as the church is concerned, there are only two groups of people in the world – those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ, and that division crosses all racial boundaries. “Here [in the church] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:11)

Verses 7-11

7 In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 8 Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not to the king’s profit to tolerate them. 9 If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king’s business, that they may put it into the king’s treasuries.” 10 So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. 11 And the king said to Haman, “The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.”

That we are now in the 12th year of the king’s reign means that Esther had been queen for five years when Haman convinced the king to go along with his evil plan. This was more than a century after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, more than 60 years after the first return to Jerusalem, and less than 20 years until Ezra’s return to Jerusalem.

To determine the time for the attack, Haman consulted the “pur” (plural “purim”), the Hebrew form of a Babylonian word meaning “lot.” Archaeologists have unearthed purim and found them to be clay cubes inscribed with either cuneiform characters or dots just like our modern dice. The difference is that they were not used for

gambling but rather for divination. Both Herodotus and Xenophon wrote about the Persian custom of casting lots.

Verse 7 also gives the equivalent Hebrew word for lot, which is goral. In Psalm 16:5, David praised God because “you have assigned me my portion and my cup, you have made my lot [goral] secure.” David praised God because it was God (rather than chance or luck) who had secured David’s destiny. Proverbs 16:33 likewise uses the same word: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

We see in these verses one of the themes we discussed earlier – the clash of worldviews between those who trust in fate and those who trust in God. We know that God is at work, but like Esther and Mordecai, we cannot always see the end of things from the middle. But as Christians we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Haman casts the lots in the first month (for reasons we discussed in the introduction) and the lots fall on a day that gives the Jews almost a year to prepare. This simple event may tell us much about the providence of God – he did not override Haman’s free will in determining to act against God’s people, but he seems to have a hand in the outcome of these lots in determining the date when Haman would act.

Haman uses a mixture of truth, error, and exaggeration to convince the king to follow his plan. He tells the king that all the Jews disobey all the laws, even though only one Jew had disobeyed only one command. He also says that the Jews are scattered throughout all the provinces, which was likely also an exaggeration, although the Jews do seem have to been fairly widespread.

Haman’s charges against the Jews were based on the fact that they were different – they had different laws and different customs. Anyone who takes God’s word seriously will be different – in Esther’s day or in our own. But we must notice that Esther, it would seem, had not been very different herself because her ancestry appears to have remained hidden.

Haman knew that his promise in verse 9 would sway the king to his side – money! Xerxes desperately needed to replenish his treasury after the disastrous war with Greece. Haman presumably planned to obtain this massive amount of money by plundering the property of those whom he would kill.

By giving Haman the signet ring in verse 10, the king was giving him unlimited authority to do what he wanted regarding this issue.

Neither he nor Haman appears to have had any idea that Queen Esther herself was a member of this troublesome group. Notice that Haman never once mentioned the Jewish race by name in his argument before the king. Perhaps that was because Xerxes' two predecessors, Cyrus and Darius, had issued proclamations favorable to the Jews. In any event, you would think the king would ask – but he did not. Some surmise that he may have been looking for a scapegoat to blame for his loss in Greece, and if so it would not be the last time God's people found themselves in that position. Nero later used the church as a scapegoat for the devastating fire that many believed he himself started. And as times turn bad today, we might wonder if history might not repeat itself.

And Haman in verse 11 heard what must have been music to his ears – “the money is given to you” (although the king certainly expected his promised 10,000 talents, which was about two thirds of the entire empire's income, leading some to believe that Haman was using hyperbole.) Later in 7:4, Esther will confirm that her people had been sold. It would not be the last time that God's people would be sold. Those 30 pieces of silver have changed hands many times, and it is still happening today every time a congregation puts the contribution plate ahead of their faithfulness to God.

The king's permission in verse 11 to Haman that he “do with them as it seems good to you,” is paralleled by a similar phrase later in 9:5 that the Jews “did what they would unto those that hated them,” but by that time the tables had been turned!

Verses 12-15

12 Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring. 13 Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 14 A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. 15 The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Although Haman will have to wait eleven months for the day on which he will attack the Jews, he immediately sends out the decree announcing their fate. That edict is sent out on the 13th day of the first month, which is ironically the eve of the Passover. The day before they would celebrate their freedom from Egyptian bondage, a decree had been made calling for their destruction.

The decree is made and copies are sent to every province. Chapter 3 ends with what one commentator has called the most horrifying sight in the narrative so far – after the death document had been issued, “the king and Haman sat down to drink.”

It is interesting that verse 15 says “the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.” Everyone seems to have been bewildered by such an order, whether Jewish or not. Perhaps they wisely thought that if it happened to them, it could also happen to us.

We have noted that Esther has always been very meaningful to the Jews, particularly during times of persecution. But the same is also true with the church. In fact, the early church faced a similar situation when in the first century it felt the full force of the mighty Roman empire. The Roman emperors demanded respect with a command ordering all people to acknowledge them as Lord. When the Christians refused, they were persecuted. The early Christians, like the Jews in Susa, had their existence threatened by the government under which they lived. The book of Revelation is focused on that conflict between Rome and the early church, and it was written to encourage Christians in that time of persecution.

Esther 4

Verses 1-3

1 When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. 2 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. 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.

Mordecai shows intense grief over the edict, and no doubt particularly because his personal conflict with Haman has brought the entire Jewish nation into jeopardy. It is one thing to bring

persecution upon yourself, but he had brought it upon his entire people by his refusal to bow down before Haman. But there is no indication that Mordecai regretted having not bowed down to Haman, which some say supports the idea that it was done for religious reasons. (But since we are not told what Mordecai was thinking, we can't say for sure whether he had any regret.) In any event, had Mordecai not bowed down to Haman, Haman would have found another excuse to move against the Jews.

We see the tearing of clothes as a display of grief by Jews throughout the Old Testament by such men as Joshua, Caleb, David, and Ezra, but it was also a custom of the Persians. Herodotus says that the Persians under Xerxes tore their clothes because of their grief at having lost the battle of Salamis.

Mordecai went up to but did not enter the King's Gate because no one in sackcloth was allowed to enter.

Mordecai's mourning was duplicated by Jews wherever the decree reached – and they, of course, had no way to know what had caused the edict. In fact, Mordecai may have been the only Jew who knew what had triggered the edict.

Given the length of time between the edict and the carrying out of the edict, had things not turned out as they did later in this book, there might have been a much larger number of Jews who decided to join those who had already returned to Jerusalem!

Verse 3 includes the phrase “with fasting and weeping and lamenting,” which is the same phrase we find in Joel 2:12 – “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning.” Many commentators see that phrase as an intertextual link between Esther and Joel. If so, the next phrase in Joel 2 is telling: “Rend your heart and not your garments.” And a verse later in Joel, we read, “Who knoweth if he will return and repent?” And in the next verse, there is a call for fasting. Each of these statements from Joel can be linked to an event in these verses from Esther.

The reference to fasting without any reference to prayer is unusual and almost certainly intentional. As we have said, the book omits direct references to God perhaps in order to highlight his providence at work behind the scenes. “The promise of God, the justice of God, and the providence of God shine brilliantly through the entire crisis, so that the mere omission of his name obscures nothing of his

identity, attributes, and purposes for his chosen people and for the entire world of mankind.”

But another possibility is that these exiled Jews had moved so far away from God that they did not even pray in this hour of crisis. If I had to point to the surest sign that someone has drifted away from God, I would point either to a failure to delight in God’s word or to a failure to pray. When either of those things occurs in someone’s life, that person has likely crossed the line and drifted away from the church.

- “Prayerlessness is an insult to God. Every prayerless day is a statement by a helpless individual, ‘I do not need God today.’”
- “The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.”
- “Apostasy begins in the closet, no man ever backslid from the life and power of Christianity who continued constant and fervent in private prayer.”

These verses are the low point in the narrative. Death seems certain – unless a deliverer can be found. But who could that be? Verse 4 answers that question.

Verses 4-5

4 When Esther’s young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. 5 Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.

The remainder of Chapter 4 presents three stages in the dialogue between Esther and Mordecai, although they never speak personally with each other. First, Esther sends clothes to Mordecai, but he does not accept them. Second, Esther sends someone to find out why Mordecai is upset, and she receives a detailed explanation. Third, there is a longer exchange in which Esther decides what she will do.

Esther was deeply distressed when she learned of Mordecai’s grief. She and Mordecai were still very close, although they seem to have

maintained the secrecy of their relationship. The eunuch who delivered the message must have been trusted to maintain that secret.

Verses 6-8

6 Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7 and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. 8 Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people.

Mordecai was well informed, knowing even the details of the money that Haman offered the king. The text emphasizes that he knew the “exact sum.” Mordecai even sent Esther a copy of the decree so she could see for herself and know that he was not exaggerating.

Mordecai also instructed the eunuch to “command” Esther to go to the king and plead with him on behalf of “her” people. Who were “her” people? Was she Jewish or was she Persian? And if she had one foot in each camp, into which camp would she jump when forced to make a decision? (We could ask ourselves those same questions!)

And if she did what Mordecai commanded, then her secret would be out! Wasn't Mordecai the one who commanded her to keep her identity a secret? If Esther now obeyed Mordecai's new command to do the opposite, she might find herself on the wrong side of that edict! Revealing her identity as a Jew would make her an easy target in the treacherous Persian court.

Courage was called for – how would she respond? Esther was faced with a decision. She had to decide who she was – was she Esther or Hadassah? Who were “her” people?

We need to pray that we will be given such Esther moments! Every Christian has had at least one Esther moment because that is the choice demanded by the gospel. Either we will continue to live as the pagans or we will step out and become part of and identify ourselves with the people of God. That choice defines who we are. That choice answers the question: who are your people?

And those Esther moments will come again and again throughout our lives. Often they come unexpectedly and they pass quickly – but we should pray that they will come and that we will recognize them when they come and that we will respond correctly when they come. It is

those Esther moments in our lives that define who we are. And Esther moments don't just come to individual Christians, they come to congregations as well. And, as with individuals, it is the Esther moments that define us as a congregation. Are we on the side of Christ, or are we on the side of Persia? Congregations that have abandoned the word of God to appeal to the world on issues such as instrumental music and church organization have announced to the world that they are on the side of Persia.

Verses 9-11

9 And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. 10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 11 "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."

Esther reminds Mordecai of the Persian law forbidding anyone to approach the king without first being called. Under that law, such a person was to be killed unless the king held out his golden scepter. Esther had not been called for 30 days.

Herodotus confirms that the Persians had such a law, but he also says that one could send a message to the king requesting an audience. If so, why didn't Esther do that? Perhaps because it would take too long, or perhaps the risk was too great that he would say no – and then what?

Under ordinary circumstances, Esther might have had less fear in approaching the king unannounced, but this decree changed things. Clearly, something had caused the king to issue the decree – and perhaps her secret was already out. (Verse 7 may suggest that Mordecai told Esther what had caused the decree to be issued, but we are not certain that he did.)

Remember that these events were taking place five years after Esther's initial encounter with the king. That he had not called for her in 30 days may suggest that his affection for her had cooled. Perhaps the king was ready for another queen, and, if so, perhaps he would welcome an opportunity to have Esther banished or killed. Is this what Esther was thinking? We are not told.

Verses 12-14

12 And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. 13 Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 14 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?"

Mordecai's only recorded words appear in these verses, and they leave us with a number of intriguing questions. From where or from whom would this other deliverance come if Esther failed to act? And why was Mordecai so certain that Esther would perish if she failed to act? (After all, her identify remained a secret among the Persians.)

Mordecai tells Esther that she is in danger no matter what she does. She is in danger if she acts, and she is in danger if she fails to act. Apparently, Mordecai felt certain her secret would not be maintained for very long. Other Jews knew who Esther was (see verse 16), and once the killing started they would likely also turn to her for help. She could not avoid danger by remaining silent.

Mordecai's statement to Esther is a little unsettling when you examine it closely. He understands that her life may be in peril if she acts, but he is certain she will perish if she fails to act. Was he invoking a divine judgment upon her if she failed to act for her people? Or was he, as some suggest, threatening to reveal her identity as Jew, thus bringing her under Haman's decree. How did Esther understand it? Did she see a veiled threat? We are not told.

As for the identify of this other deliverer, commentators have long seen in that verse an allusion to God's intervention should human efforts fail. But is that really the choice they were facing – that either man would save the Jews or God would save the Jews? Don't we see God acting through Esther already? God was working to save his people already. Mordecai was not saying either you do it or God will do it. Instead, he was saying either God will do it through you or God will do it through someone else.

And there is a lesson for us. We, too, cannot avoid danger by remaining silent. We cannot avoid danger by remaining inactive. We cannot remain with one foot in Persia and one foot in the kingdom.

At last we come to perhaps the key question in the book: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as

this?” Mordecai suggests that there is a purpose behind all that has happened in Esther’s life that goes beyond her own self interests. If Esther had ever wondered how she had come to this unlikely position, perhaps that question had now been answered. Why had she found herself in Persia? Why had she found herself in Susa? Why had she found herself in the bedroom of Xerxes?

Mordecai’s question reveals a deep conviction of God’s providence, and an understanding that God’s providence works through the actions of individuals. Yes, God would save his people – but he would do so through the courage and faithfulness of Esther, or he would find someone else. Could God have sent an army of angels to kill the Persians? Yes, but that is now he worked then, and that is not how works now. We are his army – and if we lay our weapons down and fail to act, then who will fight for him?