



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for February 15, 2009  
Released on Wednesday, February 11, 2009**

**“Risky Commitments”**

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Philippians 1:20–30

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Esther 3 - 5

**PRINTED TEXT:** Esther 4:1–3, 9–17

**Esther 4:1–3, 9–17**

1 When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;

2 And came even before the king’s gate: for none might enter into the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth.

3 And in every province, whithersoever the king’s commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

.....  
9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;

11 All the king’s servants, and the people of the king’s provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

12 And they told to Mordecai Esther’s words.

13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king’s house, more than all the Jews.

14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

**LESSON AIMS:**

**Facts:** to see how God used His strategically-placed individuals to keep His chosen people alive.

**Principle:** to realize that divine protection operates among true believers to bring God glory.

**Application:** to encourage God’s people to trust in Him while in the midst of threatening problems.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The fabric of American society came under severe strain in the 1960s and early 1970s. Unrest presented itself on several fronts. The Civil Rights movement swept the land. Protests against the Vietnam War grew ever stronger. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., rocked the sensibilities of the nation. President Richard Nixon's paranoia concerning his political "enemies" led him into the debacle of Watergate. This led in turn to Nixon's resignation as president lest he be impeached. Gerald Ford found himself in the highest office of the land without having solicited a single vote.

Former President Ford died on December 26, 2006. During his funeral he was eulogized by both Democrats and Republicans for his humility and skill in bringing healing to the nation. Part of that process was accomplished when President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon so that the country would not have to endure years of judicial procedures.

That move turned out to be political suicide. Yet President Ford was determined to do the right thing for the country at a time when the country so badly needed it. Many who eulogized him mentioned that he was the right man at the right time in the right place. Could it have been by divine intervention?

There are people who make commitments that place their careers or even their lives at great risk. But if the cause is noble and right, the risks are worth it. Our study of Queen Esther examines her reaction to a crisis. Her predecessor, Queen Vashti, had committed career suicide by taking a stand on a certain issue (Esther 1). For Esther, the stakes were much higher.

## **LESSON BACKGROUND:**

Time: 474 B.C.

Place: Shushan

Read Chuck Swindoll's words as he began a study on Esther 4: "In an overpopulated world, it's easy to underestimate the significance of one. There are so many people who have so many gifts and skills who are already doing so many things that are so important, who needs me? What can I as one individual contribute to the overwhelming needs of our world? Sure is easy to let the vastness of our surroundings do a number on us, isn't it? But the truth is, you are you-the only you in the world" (Esther; Word).

We all know how Esther ended up being the queen of Persia. When Haman received the promotion to prime minister of the land, he expected everyone to bow before him when he passed by. Mordecai (Esther's cousin) refused to do this; he reserved such reverence for God alone. Haman's hatred led him to devise a plan for destroying not just Mordecai but all the Jewish people. After the king signed and sealed the order, the Jews' situation looked completely hopeless.

## **PENDING DOOM (Esther 4:1-3)**

### **1. Why was a decree issued by the king to destroy all the Jewish people?**

The king's second-in-command, Haman, hated the Jewish people. He especially despised one Jew, Mordecai, who refused to bow down to him. Rather than plotting to destroy Mordecai, Haman decided to trick the king into decreeing that all Jews in the land should be killed. Haman said to the king, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries" (3:8-9).

Soon the king signed a decree and sent it to the leaders of all the provinces of Persia. It instructed them to kill all the Jews in their area and plunder all their possessions on the

thirteenth day of the twelfth month (Esther 3:12-13). As soon as the royal couriers had been sent on their way, the king and Haman sat down together for a drink (vs. 15). The chapter ends by saying, "But the city Shushan was perplexed." The action that had been decreed by the king made no sense to the people. It left them confused and wondering.

## **2. How did Mordecai display his grief over the decree of the king (Esther 4:1)?**

Mordecai soon heard about the decree and went into deep mourning. He used regular Hebrew rituals to display his grief. Tearing his clothes was a sign of mourning. Wearing sackcloth, which was a very coarse and loose type of cloth, was also evidence of mourning. The sprinkling of ashes, usually on the head, was an additional sign of deep grief. He then went out into the city and began to cry bitterly. It was a loud, bitter wail that came from Mordecai's lips, because his grief was great and unimaginably deep.

In our culture, mourning takes various forms. Some weep softly and hide their faces behind veils; some cry out loudly when their despair is too painful to contain. Middle Eastern culture is quite different from ours, however. Most of us have probably seen caskets being carried by mobs of people wailing and reaching out toward them as if to grab them and hold them back. Mordecai mourned according to those customs. His lamenting was public. All Jews were going to suffer greatly because of the king's decree.

## **3. Why did Mordecai go no farther than the king's gate (v. 2)?**

It is obvious that in Mordecai's desperate crying, he is not just wandering aimlessly through the city streets. He goes to the only place where he can hope to find relief or some kind of justice: *the king's gate*.

Suplicants of all kinds went to the king's gate in order to seek justice from the only person who could make it happen. So it is with Mordecai. But before anyone can *enter into* the gate and approach the king, the person has to be properly cleaned and attired. Archaeological excavations at Shushan have identified a gatehouse about 100 yards east of the main palace. An inscription ordered by Ahasuerus identifies it as having been built by his father, Darius. So the word *gate* signifies much more than a mere "doorway"!

Mordecai went as far as the gate to the king's palace, but Persian protocol dictated that no person wearing the clothes of mourning was allowed to enter. Nehemiah 2:1-2 seems to indicate that nothing was to happen in the king's presence that might upset him. The king, along with others who spent most of their time in the palace, was not aware of all that was happening on the streets. This would have included Esther, who was protected from the common events going on among the common people. She was safely ensconced in a secure place.

## **4. How far-reaching was the decree, and how did the Jews respond (v. 3)?**

The scene described in Esther 4:3 is one of national lament. According to Esther 1:1, there were 127 provinces in Persia under King Ahasuerus (usually thought to be Xerxes I). The Persian Empire was huge, reaching all the way through Asia Minor to Greece and south to Egypt and beyond in Africa. The king's decree was carried by the couriers into every province, which resulted in great mourning throughout the empire. The mourning consisted of fasting, weeping, wailing, and wearing sackcloth and ashes.

Esther's servants told her about the public mourning of Mordecai. It greatly distressed her; so she sent proper clothing out to Mordecai, probably hoping he would come in and talk with her. But he refused to accept them. Esther then called in Hatach, one of the king's personal chamberlains (meaning eunuchs), who was assigned to serve Esther. She ordered him to find out why Mordecai was acting the way he was. He found Mordecai by the gate.

## **IMMINENT DANGER (Esther 4:9-11)**

### **5. What special information did Mordecai have? What command for Esther did he include in his explanation to Hatach (vs. 7-9)? Some text not in lesson.**

We discover that Mordecai had access to important political information. He not only

knew all about the decree to destroy the Jews, but he also knew the exact sum of money Haman had promised to contribute to the king's treasury. Furthermore, he had a copy of the decree, which he gave to Hatach to take back and show Queen Esther.

The most important part of his report, however, was a command he sent to Esther. He told her she needed to go to the king and implore him to spare the lives of her people, the Jews. Esther had never revealed to the king that she was a Jew (Esther 2:20) because Mordecai had told her not to. Esther is a model example regarding obedience to those in authority. Since her parents had died (vs. 7), she had been reared by her cousin Mordecai. He was obviously an older cousin and took the place of a parent; so she had willingly submitted to him. Hatach returned to Esther with Mordecai's information, including his command to plead with the king. Now she faced her biggest test of obedience ever.

### **6. Why was this command such a difficult one for Esther to obey, and how did she explain the danger it posed for her (vs. 10-12)?**

In Middle Eastern cultures, all kings were protected against unwanted visitors - something that remains true in our world today. One cannot, for example, simply walk into the White House and the Oval Office without permission. It is also true that if you were walking menacingly toward that place and refused to stop when ordered, you could lose your life on the spot.

Esther therefore gave Hatach a command to take a message of explanation back to Mordecai (v. 10). Everyone, servants of the king and common people alike, knew that no one, man or woman, entered the presence of the king without an invitation. Certainly Mordecai also knew this, which means he had carefully weighed his command before sending it to Esther. For the Jews this matter was desperate, and Esther was the one person in a position to do something about it. Once again in human history, one person could change the circumstances.

Esther reminded Mordecai that the law was specific: anyone who entered the king's presence without an invitation was to be put to death unless he held out the golden scepter to that person (v. 11). To complicate matters further, Esther had not been called into the king's presence for thirty days. It sounds like this was unusual, as if she was normally called for more regularly.

Since it has been a month since she has been summoned into the king's presence, why not wait a little longer? After all, the plan for genocide is 11 months away (Esther 3:7). Why not go through proper channels?

The "proper channels" may be the problem! Leaders of countries have certain assistants who act as figurative "gatekeepers" to determine who is allowed an audience with the leader and who is not. If Haman is himself this gatekeeper (what we may call a *chief of staff* today), then he undoubtedly will deny her an audience if he figures out what she is trying to do. No, Esther has to approach the king without being summoned, possibly incurring a *death* sentence in the process.

### **7. What is the most difficult thing you have ever asked someone to do? What was the outcome?**

Many of us never need to ask others to take great risks. Some, however, must do that regularly. A fire captain asks his crew to enter a burning building. A police sergeant tells his team to enter a home where gunfire was heard. A colonel sends his men into battle. An aid agency sends a doctor into a plagued village.

But secular examples aside, we recall that churches send missionaries to countries that are hostile to Christianity. Sometimes their lives are the price paid. But ultimately it is God who is asking them to go. God probably surprised Esther with her situation and with Mordecai's request. God may surprise us as well.

### **SHARP RETORT (Esther 4:12-14)**

### **8. What rationale did Mordecai present to Esther as to why she needed to follow through on his command (vs. 12, 13)?**

The faithful Hatach reports *Esther's words* back to *Mordecai*. But Esther's hesitation draws

a warning from Mordecai. If Esther thinks she will be exempt from the planned extermination of the Jews because she lives in the king's palace as a queen, she can *think* again!

The passage of four or five years has perhaps cooled the king's ardor for Queen Esther, evidenced by the passing of a month without her being summoned. The king's extermination order applies to all *Jews*, without exception. She may have been successful at concealing her cultural heritage so far, but can that go on permanently?

### **9. How did Mordecai's faith demonstrate the providence of God (v. 14)?**

The story of Esther is an amazing example of the providence of God. Perhaps you know that God is not named once in this book. Apparently, however, Mordecai did believe in God and the covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) that promised Israel's continued existence. This can be seen in his assurance that deliverance would come for the Jews from some place other than Esther if she did not speak up. The nation would not be destroyed.

But that provided no assurance for the immediate situation in which Mordecai, Esther, and the Jews found themselves. Since God was not limited to using Esther, there was no guarantee of her safety. On the other hand, Mordecai pointed out, this might be the reason she, a Jew, had been put in the position of Queen of Persia in the first place. Perhaps she was to be God's means of providing protection in this particular situation. Who could say for sure that she had not been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this?

The Nelson Study Bible says about Esther 4:14, "This verse constitutes the classic reference to the providence of God in the book. Mordecai, by his confidence that relief and deliverance would come from another place, was strongly asserting his faith in God and His promised protection of the Jewish people. God controls all that happens in His world and would intervene with or without Esther. . . Mordecai suggested a providential reason for her becoming queen at this precise time in history" (Radmacher, gen. ed., Nelson).

### **10. What truth can we apply to ourselves from Mordecai's statement to Esther?**

As we think in terms of God's sovereign rule, we need to believe that work for the Lord is something we need to do and something that He has ordained that we do. We need to believe that perhaps we are where we are and meeting those we meet because of a plan that is bigger than we are. We are here for such a time as this.

It is encouraging to know that God sees us as individuals and has special purposes for each one of us. He does not have the kinds of spectacular plans and purposes for most of us that He had for Esther and the other great saints in the Bible. But He does have purposes for each of us, even if it is simply ministry to immediate family, friends, and neighbors.

As we confront situations in life, we should remember that they come directly or indirectly from God. We should seek to accomplish His will in every situation.

### **FIRM RESOLVE (Esther 4:15-17)**

#### **11. What did Esther ask Mordecai to do as part of her preparation for going to see the king (vs. 15,16a)?**

Esther's mind is made up! She will act out of a sense of duty and destiny. She devises a plan that starts with a complete *fast*: no food or drink for *three days*. Although God's name is not mentioned in the book of Esther, fasting in the Old Testament is preparation for vigorous prayer to God (compare Ezra 8:21, 23; Nehemiah 1:4; Psalm 35:13; Daniel 9:3).

Esther was a true leader. Just as no soldier would go to battle without being prepared, she got herself ready and solicited the help and support of others. Esther asks that *all the Jews* in *Shushan* gather together for concentrated fasting.

#### **12. What did Esther say that indicated her submission and courage (v. 16b)?**

Esther concluded her message to Mordecai with the promise that she would approach the king. Her determination to approach the king is a violation of Persian custom, and her risky

commitment is the famous statement: *If I perish, I perish*. That was not so much an expression of pessimism as it was one of submission.

What Esther was about to do could cost her her life. It would seem that Mordecai's attention to the reason she was on the throne had given her the confidence she needed. She understood this was no guarantee that her life would be spared, but she was willing to take the risk.

She courageously submitted to God's plan. The statement "If I perish, I perish" was not a fatalistic view of giving up. Rather, it was a view of understanding that God was in control. Esther submitted to her destiny and left the outcome in the hands of God.

### **13. How did Mordecai react to Esther's plan? What was the fitting conclusion to the story (v. 17)?**

Mordecai did exactly as Esther requested because everything about this situation pointed to disaster. Esther knew she was about to break the law. Her only hope was in the raised scepter and kindness from the king. Her belief in God appears to have been strong enough that she was willing to take this risk.

As Esther had instructed, the Jews gathered in Shushan to fast (and, undoubtedly, to pray). Esther's plan sets in motion the following: She approaches the king and is accepted (Esther 5:1, 2). She offers a banquet with Haman present, effectively neutralizing him (5:3-5). Haman continues to be enraged because Mordecai refuses to bow down to him (5:9, 10). Haman's wife suggests a gallows be made 75 feet high (50 cubits) upon which all will be able to see Mordecai's dead body. The gallows is built (5:11-14).

The king had insomnia, thus he requests the history books of his reign be read to him. (Do history books put you to sleep?) He ends up hearing about the conspiracy that Mordecai uncovered to save the king's life and that Mordecai was never rewarded (6:1-3). Mordecai is ironically honored in the very manner that Haman anticipated being honored himself (6:4-13).

Esther requests a second banquet with the king and Haman present (6:14-7:2). She exposes Haman as the man who seeks to slaughter the Jews, being careful not to implicate the king himself, although he is privy to the plan (7:3-6). Haman pleads with Esther for his life (7:7b, 8a). From a distance, the king interprets Haman's actions as molesting the queen (7:8b). Haman is quickly hanged on the very gallows that he had erected for Mordecai (7:9, 10).

The rest of the story comes to a fitting conclusion in Esther 8-10. Mordecai replaces Haman in position, power, and property (8:1, 2). The Jews are allowed to defend themselves, and they do it successfully, even for an extra day (8:13-9:17). Thus begins the celebration of Purim (9:18-32). A final tribute is given to Mordecai (chapter 10).

### **PRACTICAL POINTS:**

1. Mourning is appropriate at times, but for believers it must never be without hope (Es. 4:1-2).
2. Troublesome times should be met by prayer and fasting (v. 3).
3. God may call us to do difficult and even risky things for the sake of others (vs. 9-11).
4. The easy way is seldom the safest or the best way (vs. 12-13).
5. God has put us in the place and time where we can best serve Him (v. 14).
6. Difficult tasks call for the prayer and support of others (vs. 15-17).

### **CONCLUSION:**

Even though God's name is not mentioned in the book of Esther, one comes away from reading the book with the thought of how great God is. "Is any thing too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14). He reverses the irreversible!

Mankind may propose, but God disposes. Esther was willing to risk her life for the worthy cause of saving her fellow Jews. By God's providence, Esther became queen at just the right time to intercede. God today may arrange circumstances for faithful people to be in

special positions at just the right time to effect important change.

Commitment to personal integrity for great causes often carries with it great risk - perhaps to one's career or even to one's life. Maybe God has placed you in a unique position "for such a time as this." Are you willing to make a commitment that risks all?

**PRAYER:**

O Lord our God, we pray that You will raise up leaders in our homes, our churches, and our country who will make commitments to accomplish Your will on this earth, although it will require great risks. Give us the courage of Esther to carry through with our own commitment to Your plans. May we, like Mordecai, encourage those who need to make such commitments. In the name of Jesus, the one who gave all for us. Amen.

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:**

The greatest risk is in not following God's plan.

**ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:**

Next week's lesson is "A Commitment to Change". The Old Testament has many theophanies, or visible manifestations, of God. Through one of these divine visions, Isaiah, the prince of prophets, received and accepted his call to the prophetic ministry. Study Isaiah 6:1-13.

**LESSON SUMMARIZED BY:**

Renee Little  
Jesus Is All Ministries  
[www.jesusisall.com](http://www.jesusisall.com)

**WORKS CITED**

Summary and commentary derived from Standard Lesson Commentary Copyright© 2009 by permission of Standard Publishing.

Reprinted by permission of The Incorporated Trustees of the Gospel Worker Society, Union Gospel Press, P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101. (Web site: <http://www.uniongospelpress.com/>)

The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books.