

INTRO: This morning, it is my prayer that you will see this main point: **In the midst of a world filled with sin and tragedy, we must seek the Lord.** Last week, **Esther 3** set up the major tension of this book: Mordecai, Esther's relative, refused to bow down to Haman, a powerful leader. As can be expected, Haman did not respond well. He set out to destroy all of the Jewish people, and the King told him to pick a day and this would be carried out. So he did. See **3:13**: **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.** Tragedy was coming. We come to **Esther 4** this morning with that tension hanging over the story, and we must ask a question: **How did the Israelites respond to the coming tragedy in Esther?** Today we answer that question. Our text will show us four ways that they responded beginning with this first:

They mourned. In our text, we see "A Mourning People" as the Jews find out about Haman's plan. **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.** Notice the sorrow: in **v1**, Mordecai tears his clothes and replaces them with sackcloth and ashes. This may seem like an odd reaction to us, but this happens several times in the Old Testament. When King Saul and his son, Jonathan, died, David's tore his clothes and mourned their loss in **2 Sam 1:11-12**. Later, when Jonah preaches in Nineveh that God is going to destroy them, they repent and mourn in sackcloth; the king even commanded that animals put on sackcloth in **Jonah 3**! Nineveh grieved that God was going to kill them! And, here, in Esther, both Mordecai and all of the Jews (in **v3**) grieved their coming death. But there is a difference: the Jews weren't being killed by God's righteous hand but by the evil hand of Haman. Mordecai "**cried out with a loud and bitter cry**". The word "**loud**" in the Hebrew is the word "**great**". He let out a great cry. Mordecai goes to the king's gate but wasn't allowed in because he was in his mourning attire of sackcloth and ashes. But Mordecai was not alone. The Jews were alongside him. They were **fasting, weeping, and lamenting**. These are all pictures of a mourning people. This is their first response to the coming tragedy. Mourning is a proper reaction to tragedy in Scripture. We could highlight other examples in Job and the prophets. And we can even see the example in our Savior, Jesus Christ, at various times in his ministry. When sin and tragedy strike, the people of God can and should mourn. Grief allows us to be honest with both God and each other. I am not advocating hopelessness (we aren't Eeyore), but we also can't live in this world without acknowledging that this isn't our home. And one way we do that is through our confession of grief to God. Church, we must gather with our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering; we must gather alongside our fellow Christians, here, who have lost loved ones to sickness and death. I read an article recently which said it like this: "*there is no Biblical foundation for the conception of an emotionless God worshipped by emotionless people.*" Yet the church often takes the stance of the Buckingham Palace guard, showing no emotion. We have much to learn, in Esther, about a proper response to sin and tragedy. This mourning is not paralyzing (as we will see in this text), but we must take the time to mourn and to remember that we are longing for another world. But the people in this text didn't simply mourn as individuals. See the second thing they did in response to the coming tragedy:

They challenged each other. We continue in our text to see “A Distressed Queen” in **4:4-12**. Esther, you may remember, has been made the queen of Persia. She wasn’t mentioned at all in **ch 3**, and we can assume that she had not yet heard of Haman’s plan. But Mordecai’s fasting gets her attention. Read with me: **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.** She doesn’t know why Mordecai is wearing sackcloth (maybe he is making a fashion statement) so she sends him clothes. **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.** Remember, Mordecai commanded Esther not to make it known that she was a Jew. So, instead of going herself, she sends a messenger so that she wouldn’t be seen talking with a Jew. She must really trust this servant! **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 believes the only way to change this coming tragedy is for Esther to go before the King. But see what Esther says in response: **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.” 12 And they told Mordecai what Esther had said.** Esther has a good reason not to follow Mordecai’s advice: she could be killed! So she gives Mordecai her excuse. And I want us to understand what is going on: Esther became aware of her people’s mourning and was “**deeply distressed**”. That term describes a deep pain. In fact, it can be used in Hebrew to describe childbirth. I don’t know how that feels but it’s a deeper pain than stubbing a toe. The NASB translates it best: she “**writhed in great anguish**”. She grieves with her people. So she sends a messenger to find out, and she and Mordecai have a discussion. And I want you to see a quick point of application here: God’s people are a community, even during tragedy. Esther sees her people suffering and doesn’t ignore it. She sends someone. Although she is queen, Esther can’t overlook the suffering of her people. They are united in grief. Continue to read and we see this further:

Although Esther presents a strong case for not confronting the king, we continue to see “A Convincing Argument” made by Mordecai in **4:13-14** **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?”** Esther has a good reason not to go to the king, but our boy Mordecai has a better reason to go to him. He appeals to two things. First, Esther is a Jew. If all the Jews are exterminated, she will be part of this. **V13 Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. “Esther, you may be the Queen, but don’t forget where you came from!”** It’s that phrase my dad always said, blood is thicker than water. And Esther’s blood is Jewish blood. But note his second reasoning.

God is the God of the Jews. He says this in two ways. First, even if Esther remains silent, God will still protect his people. **For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place.** I love this! Mordecai is teaching us Theology 101: God is powerful, and God loves his people enough to keep his plan. Even if Esther remains silent, God will protect them. But, second, Mordecai knows that God wants Esther to be a part of the plan. He says: **And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?** Mordecai knows that Esther is queen for a higher purpose than just to be beautiful and get the king's lovin'! Mordecai doesn't outright say that God put her there, but he sure does imply it. The King of Persia didn't make Esther the queen, but the King of the Universe had his hand all over it! And if all of that is true, that Esther is a Jew (she will be killed anyways) and that God is the God of the Jews, then why in the world should Esther be afraid? This is a classic case of having nothing to lose! If the king kills her then he was going to anyways. If he keeps her alive then God gets the glory. Mordecai presents a convincing argument. He is better than a t.v. lawyer here! God places people in position to work out his will. Mordecai makes that case. Church, God's providence works this way: he places us where we are for a reason. Yes, even in Cuba, New Mexico. God has placed you, as an individual, and us, as a church, here for a reason. Isn't it comforting to know that our God, the God of everything, has placed us here? He has placed us here for His glory to be made known. Your faith is not just about yourself. Your salvation is not just given so that you can hold it to yourself like the *Lord of the Rings*, "my precious". Your faith is personal, yes, but it is not private. I like how one commentator said, "*In the biblical perspective election is for service, not just for one's own benefit.*" Christian, God has saved you and called you to serve him and to share him. That is Mordecai's argument, and it is a good one. The community of God is challenging one-another to be God's people in the midst of tragedy. That is their second response. Let's keep going. What is another response?

They sought the Lord. Esther responds with "A Brave Plan" in **4:15-17** **Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.** Esther replies to Mordecai's convincing argument: "*I will do it, but we better seek the Lord!*" She tells them to fast for three days, night and day, before she goes to the king. We have talked about fasting before. We don't have time to highlight each of these, but fasting, the intentional denial of eating or drinking, is done for several reasons in the Bible. First, people fast as a picture of repentance over sin. Second, people fast when they are mourning; we saw this earlier with the Jews. Third, people fast when they need God's wisdom. This is exactly what Esther is doing: she doesn't know what to do, so she tells everyone to fast with her for God's wisdom. Ultimately, Esther knows that God will provide, so she will approach the king. But she needs God's wisdom in how to do this. I love her bravery when she says "**Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.**" Esther is called to a dangerous situation. In the midst of a tragic world, God calls her to act. Esther is aware of this and is willing to do whatever God tells her. She isn't doing this ignorantly. She seeks his wisdom, first. Esther's bravery is rooted in God's power. Earlier, she wasn't very enthusiastic to Mordecai, but he has reminded her of God's providence and power, and she is now willing to act. And this leads to her final response:

They acted in obedience. Esther acts on her plan to confront the king. However, this isn't a haphazard plan. We have seen some quick, unintelligent decisions in this book by King Ahasuerus (de-crowned his queen while under the influence), by Haman (to destroy the Jews over one disobedient citizen), and then by the King, again (he allowed Haman's plot). This book wants us to see the dangers of heat-of-the-moment decisions. But, here, we will see the exact opposite: Esther is smarter. We see "A Careful Approach" in **5:1-8** *On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. 2 And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. This is great! The king has possibly killed people for coming before him in the past, but Esther won favor in his sight. Tell me that God wasn't behind that! Keep reading: 3 And the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." 4 And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king." 5 Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked." So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. 6 And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." 7 Then Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: 8 If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."* This sequence of events seems odd. Esther asks the king to come to a feast with Horrible Haman. They are there having a few drinks (that theme keeps coming up) and she makes a request for another feast. What is going on? I thought Esther was going to do something, but she seems to just be partying with the king! Well, we won't get the full answer until later, but I want to point out a couple of things. First, Esther knows King Ahasuerus very well. She knows that he has a love for one thing: pleasure. She wants him to be at a feast because she knows that he is happy when feasting. *When you were a child, you know you did this to mom and dad; you waited until they were in a good mood to show them that report card or that letter from school.* Esther is playing to his weakness. But there is something bigger going on too: I believe Esther isn't making quick decisions because she is working the plan that God is telling her. How do I know? First, because she has been fasting. Second, because of the outcome we will see later. This may seem like an odd thing for her to do, but, in the end, God's hand is all over it. Although we are impatient realize that God's timing is perfect. Esther is a helpful example to us of not making those rash decisions which plagued the King. God's hand is all over this. So we have seen four responses to the coming tragedy in our text: they mourned, they challenged each other, they sought the Lord, and they acted in obedience. I want to turn to how this applies to us:

How do we respond to sin and tragedy in our world? The coming tragedy in Esther is a picture of our sinful world. Last week Trevor pointed out that we are in the midst of the very conflict that is pictured in this text: a spiritual war between Satan and God's people. We live in this same world. Modern society, with all of its advances has not progressed morally. An evil plan such as the destruction of an entire people is not beyond the moral fiber of our day. A society which can allow, and even celebrate, the annihilation of its own children through the horrors of abortion is not a morally-progressed nation. The problem of this text is not just a "B.C." problem. Church, I

look at your faces each week, and I know that many of us are weak and anxious living in this tragic world. We live for another world. But how do we carry on until we reach that world? This text gives us the answer: **We seek the Lord**. He created this world, and he will one day re-create this world. So we seek Him. How? Let me offer three ways from Esther:

First, *we seek him in prayer and fasting*. We witnessed this response throughout this text. Mordecai, the Jewish people, and Esther all sought the Lord through prayer and fasting in this text. We must follow their example in a sinful world. If you are here and are not a follower of Jesus Christ, I want to ask you, if Esther and her people, God's chosen people, could not escape coming destruction without his mighty hand, how do you expect to survive without Him? Deliverance in this passage comes from seeking the Lord in prayer and fasting; you must as well. Jesus has already shown us in his death and resurrection that he can handle this tragic world when we can't. Call out to him for salvation. Christian, this applies to us as well: we cannot survive this world without seeking him daily in prayer and fasting. Esther wasn't willing to act until she sought the Lord for three days and had others seeking Him on her behalf as well. I am often tempted to act out immediately in response to this world (usually by saying unholy things), but there is righteousness and wisdom in seeking the Lord first. Are you currently being dragged down by this world? Do you find yourself asking, what do I do? I don't have all of the answers, friends, but I know this: the Lord does. We must seek Him in prayer and fasting. And see a second application.

We seek him in community. Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews don't go about this tragedy alone. They challenged each other. Esther, yes, is the major personality in the book, but she isn't acting alone. She is acting through God's hand in the midst of a community. See how important both Mordecai, in challenging her, and the Jews, in fasting for her, are in this text. Church, we need each other to carry on as Christians in this world; we cannot do this alone. Esther and Mordecai challenged each other. Don't we need to be challenging each other in this same way? That should be the focus of our conversations. I love to talk about football and the weather and movies, but those things are tiny in comparison with the eternal concern of salvation. We live in a dying world. Church, how are we doing with holding each other accountable? That is one of the strengths of small-groups (Sunday school, women's groups, and men's groups); that should occur within our body of deacons, within ministry teams, within your homes. I would love to see more of our people spending Saturdays going to town with each other and living life. Because, as we live life together, we seek the Lord in community; we speak truth to each other, and we point each other to Christ. Yet some of us treat church as if it doesn't matter, as if coming a few times a year is enough. I have never met a growing Christian who doesn't go to church. We need each other. Maybe you are here and need to join this church as your church family. Don't neglect the need for community and accountability. Just like Esther, I believe God is calling this church to do something brave. I have felt this in my prayers over the last months. And many of you feel this as well. But understanding this: God has called us not just as individuals but as a community. If God calls this church to do something difficult and dangerous and counter-cultural, we can't do it on Pastor Steve's powers. We need to seek the Lord in community as we grow in discipleship. Finally,

We seek him in obedience of action. After seeking the Lord, and after being challenged by her community, Esther acted on what God revealed. That plan was dangerous, but she was obedient.

Christians, our call is to be obedient to whatever he tells us. That may mean danger. After all, Christ's command is to die to ourselves and to take our crosses, daily. It would be naïve of us to think that his call doesn't sometimes mean the possibility of physical pain and death. He called his own Son to it; he called his disciples to it; he has called Christians in every nation during every time period to it; and he calls us to live out our faith. Now, there is another aspect of this: Esther does this in God's way and in God's time. This has been a personal lesson for me in the last weeks: following God means being patient and waiting. Most of the time, that is the hardest thing for your pastor to do. In the past weeks, I have been afraid and sometimes irritated at what God has told me to do. How about you? I have been tired; I have been timid; I have been complacent and lazy at times. But this text reminds me that God is our only strength to live in a tragic world. We can't do this without Him. And here is the good news: when we seek Him, he is faithful. So we must seek the Lord. We seek him in prayer and fasting; we seek him in community; and we seek him in obedience. Would you pray with me?