

LESSON 24

Esther 5:5-8

5 Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. 6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed. 7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is; 8 If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.

At the banquet, and after some drinks, the king again asks Esther what caused her to come before him unannounced – and once again he is understandably curious why she had risked death in doing so. But once again, Esther sidesteps the question, instead inviting them both to another banquet on the next day.

The king is so curious that, as we will see in a moment, he cannot sleep (which turns out to be very important). Haman, on the other hand, doesn't seem curious at all – he is just glad to be there! He seems to have been completely blinded by his pride.

Why did Esther make the king wait for an answer? We don't know. It was certainly a risk because the king's agreeable mood could have changed quickly – Esther knew he was very moody and erratic, and Haman could be tipped off at any moment to the danger that he was in.

Esther's answer suggests she was treating the king's promise as sort of a blank check that she could take with her – “I will do to morrow as the king hath said.” Why did Esther make the king wait?

Esther is clever in how she words the request: “if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet.” She conditions the king's arrival at the second banquet on his willingness to grant her, as yet unrevealed, petition. If the king shows up, he has essentially agreed in advance to grant her petition.

Esther is also clever in how she again loops Haman into the second banquet. For the first banquet, Esther said (verse 4) “let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for **him**” but for the second banquet she said (verse 8) “let the king and Haman come to the banquet that

I shall prepare for **them**.” I think Esther has thought of a plan, and Haman’s presence is required for the plan to work!

For whatever reason, the time was not right at the first banquet, and so Esther wisely showed patience along with courage – two qualities that do not always go hand in hand.

We do know that the king had a sleepless night, likely because of this first encounter, and we know that sleepless night would later prove very important. We see God working here through Esther’s unexplained delay to see his plans accomplished.

There is a difficult translation issue in verse 7. That verse ends with the phrase “my petition and my request is,” but the next verse does not contain her petition. Her petition in response to the offer of half a kingdom is not that they come to another banquet, but rather is the request that Xerxes spare her people – a petition that is not made in verse 8. So why does verse 7 say “my petition is?”

The answer is that verse 7 does not say that, at least not in the original language. The verb “is” has been supplied by the translators. Esther’s words in 5:7 are an incomplete thought. Esther begins to respond to the king, but she breaks off her answer. At the moment when the reader thinks Esther is about to save her people, she pauses and stops mid-sentence. A more accurate translation reads: “Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request... (LONG DRAMATIC PAUSE) If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.”

Why does Esther begin this way, then suddenly break off? That is precisely the question the book wants us to ask ourselves. Is Esther afraid? Is she having second thoughts? Is the old Esther, the timid wallflower, reasserting herself? It might seem that Esther has tricked us, building up our expectations, then disappointing us.

Most likely, for whatever reason, Esther just knew that this was not yet the right time to make her request known to the king. The perfect time to do that would come soon, but this was not it.

Who is Esther and who are her people? Although it looked like those questions were about to be finally answered in the throne room and then again at this first banquet, those questions still remain unanswered in verse 8.

The king, no doubt, is very curious. How is Haman feeling? Verse 9 will tell us.

Esther 5:9-14

9 Then went Haman forth that day joyful and with a glad heart: but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not up, nor moved for him, he was full of indignation against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless Haman refrained himself: and when he came home, he sent and called for his friends, and Zeresh his wife. 11 And Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king. 12 Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to morrow am I invited unto her also with the king. 13 Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. 14 Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and to morrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.

Verse 9 tells us that Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. Again, unlike others in this book, we are told exactly how Haman is feeling. Everything seemed to be going Haman's way, and he is very happy.

Haman's defining characteristic in this book is his pride. We see his vast and tender ego on display all throughout this book. And once again Haman's pride meets Mordecai, and as usual, Mordecai does not disappoint.

Apparently, Haman had to pass by Mordecai on his way home, and Mordecai neither rose nor showed any fear when the great Haman passed by. Haman had been honored by the Queen – but this Jew refused to show him any honor! This was even more of an affront than when Mordecai earlier refused to bow down. A single dark cloud has completely ruined Haman's wonderful day.

And what about Mordecai? After placing the entire Jewish nation under a decree of death following his first insult of Haman, one might have thought that Mordecai might take some steps to avoid insulting Haman again - perhaps just be avoiding him if nothing else. But Mordecai has taken a stand - for something, we don't know for sure what - and so once again Mordecai insults the great Haman.

What does Haman do in response? Haman does the only reasonable thing open to him – he runs home and cries to his wife, Zeresh!

But verse 10 tells us that Haman first “refrained himself.” You can just picture Haman feigning indifference at the slight while seething and plotting revenge inside. But another likely reason for Haman’s restraint here is that, as Chapter 6 will suggest, Haman needs the king’s permission to take any action against Mordecai, who himself was an official of some sort.

In verse 10, Haman summons his wife. As Yogi Berra said, it’s déjà vu all over again!

This book began with the great king Xerxes summoning his own wife, and Queen Esther has just come before the king unsummoned. And now what is Haman doing? He is summoning his wife! This time, the summoned wife apparently comes quickly.

Notice Haman’s boast in verse 12 that “Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to morrow am I invited unto her also with the king.”

Haman apparently has not paused for one moment to wonder why he was given such an unusual honor of being invited by the Queen to two banquets or what this all important (but still unknown) request by Queen Esther might entail. Esther had risked her life to tell the king about something that apparently involves Haman in some way. That fact would cause many to be a bit apprehensive - but not Haman!

Haman’s focus is entirely on Haman! If Haman is being honored, then the only possible reason is that those honoring Haman have just suddenly discovered how wonderful Haman truly is! What other reason could there be? Nothing blinds a person more than pride – which is why pride is so dangerous.

But there is one person who does not think Haman is wonderful. And Haman complains to his wife that nothing – not even his riches, his power, or his honor from the Queen – gives him any satisfaction as long as he sees Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.

It has been rightly said that a person of good character overlooks slights against himself, but one of inferior character magnifies them. Here is how the philosopher Blaise Pascal described such a person:

“The same man who spends so many days and nights in fury and despair at losing some office or at some imaginary affront to his honor is the very one who knows that he is going to lose everything through death but feels neither anxiety nor emotion. It is a monstrous thing to see one and the same heart at once so sensitive to minor things and so strangely insensitive to the

greatest. It is an incomprehensible spell, a supernatural torpor.”

We see such a person in Haman. He is obsessed with Mordecai’s opinion of him, while giving hardly a thought to his own attempted genocide of an entire people.

Haman is propelled along by slights to his honor, whether real or imaginary. Haman’s focus is on how others see him, and we see him giving no thought at all to what sort of person he really is.

Haman’s focus is totally external – which makes it doubly interesting that Haman is the only person in Esther whose inner thoughts are laid open for our examination.

There is a very subtle irony in the picture of Haman running home to ask his wife how to solve his problem. Remember how this book started out? The king and his advisors were concerned that the Vashti incident would somehow undermine male leadership in their society! Who do we see taking charge in this book? Esther and Zeresh – Xerxes’ wife and Haman’s wife!

With Haman and his wife Zeresh, we see a parallel with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Like Haman, Ahab was rebuffed by Naboth and then ran home sulking to his wife – and like Jezebel, Zeresh has a simple yet evil solution to the problem. Like Haman, Ahab also seemingly had everything – and yet he wanted just one more thing to be happy.

Zeresh, like Jezebel, takes the lead in pushing Haman to do his evil deed. Notice that while Zeresh is listed last in verse 10, she is listed first in verse 14. Zeresh’s advice is very bad advice – and yet Haman follows it eagerly. In a book that begin with the goal of keeping all women in their place, Haman’s downfall is caused by two women – Queen Esther and his own wife, Zeresh.

Haman’s wife proposes a public humiliation for Mordecai, so Haman builds a gallows that is 75 feet tall.

Critics have complained that no gallows would have been this tall – about the height of a 7-story building. But it is certainly not impossible, and it is also possible that it was built on top of a hill or a building. Haman wanted everyone to see Mordecai – and Haman is about to get his wish, but not in the way he intended! Haman’s plans are about to run headfirst into the providence of God.

It is often said that Jesus can be found on every page of the Old Testament. Is that true of Esther?

Notice how Chapter 5 begins – “On the third day.” Can we not think of another, infinitely greater,

champion of God's people who arose to save them from certain death on the third day?

Whether the reference to the third day here has a greater significance, we don't know, but many commentaries speculate that it does. In fact, commentaries have seen Esther herself as an anti-type of the church and Xerxes' golden scepter as an anti-type of the gospel. Some have even compared the threatened impalement of Mordecai with the cross.

I think most of that speculation has gone much too far, and I agree with one commentator who cautioned that "the interpreter who resorts to typologies not explicitly spelled out in the New Testament is on treacherous ground."

Esther 6

One commentator says that Esther Chapter 6 is "arguably the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible" (although Chapter 7 seems funnier to me). But we should note what another commentator said: "The book of Esther may be wickedly funny at times, but it is also deadly serious."

Esther 6:1-3

On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king. 2 And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, the keepers of the door, who sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. 3 And the king said, What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him.

While Haman plots Mordecai's death on a 75 foot gallows, the king plans to honor Mordecai for his faithful service.

Asking for the records of the chronicles to be read would be similar to asking today for the Congressional Record to be read – and each would likely provide a quick cure for insomnia.

Another possibility is that the king may have had a nagging feeling that he had forgotten to do something important – and perhaps he was hoping these records might refresh his recollection. Perhaps Esther's impending request had even created this nagging feeling in the king – what did she

want? What had he forgotten? Had he forgotten their anniversary? Perhaps it seemed to the king that by her delay Esther was wanting him to come up with the answer on his own.

It was important for a Persian king to reward those who were loyal as a way of promoting his own safety and security on the throne. And so the king was understandably upset to learn that Mordecai had never been honored for foiling the assassination plot against him five years earlier. And, as we have said, Mordecai had likely been disappointed himself, possibly explaining his refusal to honor Haman.

And why did the king fail to honor Mordecai? Once again I think we see the hand of God at work. It was important for God's plan that Mordecai be honored at the right time. Perhaps we need to look for God's providence in our own lives when things do not operate according to our own carefully arranged time schedule.

The word "honor" in verse 3 occurs throughout the text. That word first appeared in 1:4 in reference to the honor of the king. In 1:20, the word was used to describe the honor that wives should give their husbands. It is the one thing that Haman craves, but so far that word has never been applied to him. Will Haman at last receive the honor he is due – or will he perhaps receive something else that he is due?

Esther 6:4-6

4 And the king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman was come into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him. 5 And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court. And the king said, Let him come in. 6 So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour? Now Haman thought in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?

The unsuspecting Haman enters the king's court, thinking the king must be planning to honor him – thinking to himself in verse 6, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" "If ever there was a picture of pride going before a fall, Haman is it." As one commentator noted, "Here the early bird is gotten by the worm!"

We begin to see here the series of seeming coincidences that we discussed in the introduction as Haman's plan spirals out of control.

The king just happens to have a sleepless night (although, as we have suggested, it might have been because of Esther's delay in answering his question). The king just happens to have the chronicles read to him, and the service of Mordecai just happens to come to his attention at the moment Haman is plotting Mordecai's death. Haman just happens to show up early and be there when the king asks for an advisor, and the king just happens to ask Haman for advice without initially mentioning Mordecai by name.

Those who read the book with the eye of faith cannot miss seeing God in its pages, even though he is never named. We cannot fail to see the hand of divine providence in such a series of events.

Haman is so eager to have his problem with Mordecai resolved that he arrives outside the king's bedroom the first thing in the morning. But the king also has a problem with Mordecai – he has failed to honor him as he should, and that failure could bring dishonor on the king himself! How will these two problems be resolved?

For starters, the king's problem comes first – Xerxes gives Haman no opportunity to present his problem before the king launches into his own problem.

As one commentator notes, the question in verse 6 “creates instant dismay in the reader: how unfortunate that the king should consult Haman, of all people, on the way to reward Mordecai!”

Haman, no doubt, would turn the king's opinion against Mordecai or perhaps suggest some meaningless and unobservable honor. But the king does not mention Mordecai's name when he asks the question, which allows Haman's pride to take center stage once again just at the right time.

And Haman asks himself a question in verse 6 that creates one of the funniest scenes in the Bible – “To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?” Whom indeed! This peek into Haman's heart shows us a proud fool who is unable to imagine anyone more deserving of honor than himself.

Back in verse 3, the king asked, “What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?” The word translated “dignity” in the KJV is better translated “advancement.” It is the same word we saw in 3:1 describing Haman: “After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.”

The question in verse 6 to Haman omits the word “advancement” from verse 3, but asks only how such a man would be honored by the king. Why is that omission important? Because had the king used the word “advancement” in his question to Haman, Haman would have immediately known the king was not speaking about him – because Haman could not be advanced any further! He was already second to the king being “above all the officials who were with him” (3:1).

The text here ironically reverses a scene that occurs several times in the Bible: someone presents a question or parable to a king or other authority, and after the answer is given, it is revealed that the parable is about the person to whom the question was placed.

The best example of this is in 2 Samuel 12:1-12, where Nathan the prophet traps King David with the parable of the ewe lamb. Jesus often used this technique as well, presenting parables to the scribes and Pharisees that obliquely condemned them. You can almost see their faces as they slowly realized that Jesus was talking about them!

In Esther, however, it is the king who is questioning his “advisor,” not the advisor who questions the king. And it is not the king or the advisor who is the subject of the inquiry, but another party entirely. Unlike those accounts where the prophet or wise man is deliberately trapping the subject, here both Xerxes and Haman are unaware that a trap is being set. It is a case of the blind leading the blind. Neither can see what the other is doing.

Xerxes is not being clever, and Haman is not being clever. And yet clever things are happening. Who is behind it all?

Esther 6:7-10

7 And Haman answered the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honour, 8 Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head: 9 And let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour. 10 Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.

English translations add the word “for” to the beginning of Haman’s answer in verse 7, but that word is not in the original Hebrew. Instead, Haman merely repeats the phrase “the man whom the king delightest to honor” as if he is simply enjoying the sound of those words. Haman will in fact repeat the phrase several times in his answer.

Haman does not even bother with the usual court formality, “If it please the king.” Haman is so caught up in the daydreams of his anticipated exaltation that he launches into his description without remembering whom he is addressing.

As we said, Haman can’t ask for a promotion for himself because he is already second only to the king. Haman selects a reward (wearing the king’s own robe and riding on the king’s own horse) that would reinforce his relation to the king in the eyes of the people. Today, it would be similar to the president allowing someone to use Air Force One.

This great honor has made Haman forget about Mordecai for a short time – a very short time! Haman wanted to be king for a day! (And most likely the text is asking us to infer that Haman wanted to be king for much longer than just a day. Remember that Xerxes would later be assassinated by his own advisors.)

Also, remember what we have said about the importance of putting on special clothing in Esther – here Haman wants to wear the king’s own robe.

Rather than asking for wealth or power, all of which Haman already had, Haman asks for honor and recognition – and here we see the driving force in Haman’s life: what do others think about him? Do they all know how wonderful he truly is?

Haman is guided throughout this book by one overriding concern – how will others see me. He wanted nothing more than that others would see him as powerful and prestigious. Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai’s motivations seem to come from inside – and the book tells us nothing about what they are thinking. Haman’s motivations, by contrast, are external – and the book tells us everything that is on his mind.

#ezra-esther