

LESSON 25

Esther 6:7-10, Continued

Verse 8 includes an interesting detail – the horse would wear a royal crown. Haman could not ask to wear the crown himself, but he apparently thought the next best thing would be for the horse to wear the crown! Archaeologists have found carved reliefs showing Assyrian and Persian horses with crown-like ornaments on their heads. (See the class handout.)

As for whether Haman might have asked to wear the crown himself, we actually have an account by Plutarch of someone who made that very request of this same king:

And when Demaratus the Spartan, being bidden to ask a gift, asked that he might ride in state through Sardis, wearing his tiara upright after the manner of the Persian kings, Mithropaustes the King's cousin said, touching the tiara of Demaratus: 'This tiara of thine hath no brains to cover; indeed thou wilt not be Zeus merely because thou graspest the thunderbolt.' The King also repulsed Demaratus in anger at his request, and was minded to be inexorable towards him, and yet Themistocles begged and obtained a reconciliation with him.

And Haman, no doubt, he would have received the same reaction had he been foolish enough to make that request. It was much safer to let the horse wear the crown!

Haman was obsessed with kingship – in fact the Hebrew root word for “rule” appears six times in his answer to the king.

To fully appreciate verse 10, you have to picture Haman's face as the king finally identifies the one to whom this special honor will be given – none other than the despised Mordecai!

And to make things even funnier, Haman has no idea why the king would suddenly decide to honor this man whom Haman was planning to kill. Talk about a reversal! And the reversal was far from over for poor Haman!

Notice that the king does not just tell Haman to honor Mordecai, he tells Haman to honor “Mordecai **the Jew**.” In addition to rubbing salt in Haman's wound, the reference by the king to Mordecai's nationality raises an interesting question. Did the king even know that he had condemned all the Jews to death? Almost certainly not. Remember that Haman had never mentioned the Jews by name to the

king when he convinced the king to sign the edict.

But that raises another question – how did King Xerxes know that Mordecai was a Jew?

We are not told, but perhaps Mordecai's ancestry was recorded in the chronicles. Or perhaps the king had heard it from Mordecai himself or from another source. But, of course, unlike Esther, we are not told that Mordecai was keeping his background a secret. In fact, the reason why Esther's relation to Mordecai was a secret was most likely because people already knew that Mordecai was a Jew. Haman certainly knew it!

We have said several times that the king never makes any decisions on his own, but the king does make one decision in verse 10.

When Haman told the king in verse 9 how to honor someone, Haman said that "one of the king's most noble officials" should be selected to lead the horse around the city. In verse 10, the king selects Haman for that great honor! The king tells Haman to "do so to Mordecai the Jew!" That is, the king says to Haman, "That's a great idea! You do it!" So Haman is not able to pick a subordinate to lead Mordecai around. He has to do it himself!

And what does Haman say in response? Not a word, as far as we are told. I suspect it took some time for the shock to wear off.

"By the king's order, Haman cannot neglect any of the honors that he imagined himself enjoying. In fact, Xerxes reminds Haman twice that these are his words, his instructions, rather than those of the king. Haman's silence is more articulate than any response he could have formulated."

"Haman unwittingly prescribes the highest honors for his enemy and brings the greatest humiliation upon himself."

And, of course, even Haman must have been a bit nervous by this point. He was at this time building a giant gallows to execute the very person that the king wanted to honor above all else.

Esther 6:11-14

11 Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and brought him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto

the man whom the king delighteth to honour. 12 And Mordecai came again to the king's gate. But Haman hasted to his house mourning, and having his head covered. 13 And Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his friends every thing that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him. 14 And while they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet that Esther had prepared.

In verse 11, Haman takes the robes and the horse, and he dresses Mordecai in them and leads him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

If I had written the book of Esther, I would have turned verse 11 into an entire chapter. Elsewhere we are told exactly what Haman was thinking – what was he thinking here? How did Mordecai react to the sudden reversal? What were the people thinking? What was the horse thinking?

"Only an author with a sure hand and confidence in his reader would allow this climax in the bitter relationship between the two protagonists to pass with so few words and leave so much to the audience. A skilled author knows when not to say too much."

And, of course, the skilled author of Esther is the Holy Spirit! You can't get any more skilled than that!

Later Jewish tradition could not help but heap more disgrace upon poor Haman. They said that as Haman led Mordecai through the streets, Haman's daughter looked out a balcony window and thought that the splendid man on the horse must be her father, and the inglorious figure leading him about must be Mordecai. To further abuse the Jew, she dumped a chamber pot on his head. When Haman looked up and reproached her, she was so shocked that she fell from the balcony and died. (This, they say, is why Haman is mourning in verse 12, but the Hebrew word used there can refer to just a feeling of great distress over any great loss or calamity.)

Can't we picture the scene as they march all through the city in grim silence with the only words being Haman's proclamation, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." Can't we picture their faces? Just another example of why the book is always better than the movie!

Mordecai returns to the King's Gate, and what does Haman do next? What else? He runs back home to his wife!

In verse 12, Haman covers his head in grief. Later, in Chapter 7, we will see Haman's head covered once again.

Haman's wife and his friends seem to see the handwriting on the wall, and they begin to distance themselves from Haman – saying in verse 13 that “you” (not “we”) will surely come to ruin!

How did they know that? Most likely, God placed a word of prophecy on their tongue. Either that, or perhaps they knew about the ancient prophecy regarding the Agagites, or perhaps they knew trouble would come quickly when the king finally figured out what Haman had led him to sign. For whatever reason, his wife and his so-called wise men (at least they were wise after the fact!) tell Haman the truth – he will soon come to ruin.

Verse 13 is a reversal of the advice that his wife and his friends had given him shortly before in 5:14. There, they had told Haman that by killing Mordecai, Haman could make his life happy and fulfilling; here, they tell Haman that he cannot kill Mordecai and that he is heading for a downfall.

Once again, it is significant that the voice of insight comes from a woman, the wife of Haman, Zeresh. Xerxes has repeatedly shown himself to be clueless. Haman, too, is frequently oblivious to the significance of the acts transpiring around him. Even Mordecai failed to foresee that his disrespect of Haman would have dire repercussions. But here Zeresh, like Esther herself, proves to be a person of insight.

The book of Esther has an elaborate structure in which a sudden turn of events reverses the intended and expected action, and in which events have corresponding parallels that occur in reverse order. (Recall the handout from our introductory classes on Esther.)

We usually focus on Esther's role in Haman's downfall, but note that Haman's downfall already seems inevitable by the end of this chapter – **before** the confrontation with Esther.

That is why most commentators point to the king's sleepless night as the pivot about which this book turns.

Why is that important? Because choosing such a seemingly insignificant pivot highlights God's providential role in the events and takes the focus away from human actions. These reversals are not occurring by accident, but they are also not occurring due to the work of man. Someone else is involved here!

And this key theme of reversal is not a theme that is limited just to this book of Esther. As Christians, we have experienced the ultimate reversal of fortune – none could be greater!

Although once formerly in exile, apart from God and expecting nothing but death, we experienced a complete reversal.

And what was the pivot point for that great reversal? It was a seemingly insignificant event – the birth of a baby in Bethlehem and his later execution on a cross. To the world it seems foolishness – but to us it is the power of God!

And what is the pivot point for our own personal reversal? Isn't it our baptism?

Romans 6:4 – Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Baptism is the point where we pass from death to life – baptism is the pivot point of our great reversal! Baptism is the precise point where everything about us changes. Before baptism we are dead; after baptism we are alive. Could we ever experience a greater reversal than that?

Denominations belittle baptism because they say it is a work of man, and man is not saved by works. But baptism is not a work of man – the Bible tells us that baptism is a work of God (Colossians 2:12, Titus 3:5)!

Just as with the sleepless night of Xerxes, baptism is the seemingly insignificant pivot point about which everything turns. It is the point at which God does his great work of transferring us from the power of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son (Colossians 1:13). That is not our work; it is God's work!

I am always amazed when someone describes baptism as a meritorious work of man. Think about the steps of salvation: hear, believe, repent, confess, **be** baptized. Let's put our English teacher hats on and look at those five verbs – four of them are active and one of them is passive. Which of the five do the denominations argue is a work of man? The only one that is passive! Their blindness is truly incredible!

And what about those today who reject the gospel? They are following the path of Haman, and like Haman they will discover that they have been caught in a trap of their own making.

Things are clearly out of control for Haman in verse 14. The pace of events is accelerating, and Haman is now just along for the ride.

The eunuchs have arrived and have “hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet” that Queen Esther has prepared. The haste points to Haman’s importance, not to any tardiness or reluctance on his part.

Yes, Haman is in trouble, but he has no time to worry about that because it is time to head off to the feast with the Queen. Maybe that will take his mind off his troubles! Maybe that will lift his spirits! (Well, it will lift something!)

Esther 7

Reversal continues to be a major theme in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 3, Haman received the honor that Mordecai deserved. In Chapter 6, Mordecai received the honor that Haman had intended for himself. In Chapter 7, Haman will receive the punishment that he had intended for Mordecai.

As before, the reversal in Chapter 7 will hinge on a misunderstanding.

In Chapter 6, Haman misunderstood the reason behind the king’s request for advice on how best to honor someone. In Chapter 7, the king will misunderstand Haman’s motives in falling upon the queen’s couch.

As evil as Haman is, he will ultimately be condemned for two crimes he did **not** commit – swindling the king and attempting to rape the queen.

We have already said that Esther is a textbook about God’s providence, and we will really learn some valuable lessons on that subject in Chapter 7.

The reader is asked to consider whether the hidden hand of God’s providence has been behind the many reversals we have seen in this book – and the eye of faith can come to no other conclusion.

Esther’s elevation to queenship, Mordecai’s overhearing the plot against the king, the king’s sleepless night and the reading of Mordecai’s loyalty in the royal chronicles – who can miss the hand of God in

these events?

But in Chapter 7 we will see something else at work – Esther’s intellect and Esther’s skill with people.

Like Joseph, Esther has been placed in a situation where she has access to a foreign king, and she will use that access to bring deliverance to her people. Like Moses, Esther is in a remarkable position to save the children of Israel from bondage and death. But unlike either Joseph or Moses, Esther has no miraculous powers or (as far as we are told) divine insights.

God creates opportunities, but Esther must act upon them. It is a pattern that God repeats throughout Scripture, and throughout history.

While God initiates the work of deliverance, human response is also required. God will part the Red Sea, but the people must cross over. God will destroy the walls of Jericho, but the Israelites must blow the horns. God sends Jesus Christ to make the way of salvation, but we must obey the gospel.

Esther 7:1-2

So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen. 2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.

Let’s pause for a moment here to look at two words that we have seen throughout these events - petition and request.

Here in verse 2, the king asks Esther, “what is thy petition? What is thy request?” Is the king asking the same question twice - basically, “Esther, what do you want?” Or is there a difference between the two questions?

In verse 3, we will see that Esther understands there to be a difference between the two questions because she will shortly give a different answer to each question - but is that what the king intended, or are we again seeing the cleverness of Esther?

As for the words themselves, the Hebrew word translated “petition” (KJV) or “wish” (ESV) in verse 2 is used in the Bible to denote something that a person or a group asks of another person or asks of

God. The same word is used in Judges 8:24 when Gideon asks for gold earrings from the Ishmaelites, and it is used in 1 Samuel 1:17 to describe Hannah's prayer to God for a son.

The Hebrew word translated "request" (KJV, ESV) in verse 2 is very close to being a synonym of the first word, also meaning simply a request, a desire, or something sought. We will see this same word when we return to Ezra in Ezra 7:6 where it will be used to describe what Ezra requested of the king. And if this second word is not a synonym of the first, then that verse from Ezra 7 may point us to the difference in meaning – this second word most often refers to requests made to royalty.

As for why the king asks both questions, the answer may be that the king understands that more is going on here than meets the eye. The queen did not risk her life to invite the king to lunch. Yes, that is her request, but there must be something deeper on her mind. What does she really want?

Another possibility is that this is just how things were done in the presence of royalty. As one commentator described it, "the balancing of conventional words and cadences captures the slow rhythm of the east." Perhaps the second word is used to remind Esther that she is asking the king himself for this favor.

And again, whatever the king meant by using both words, Esther will use the king's two questions to her advantage in the next verse by giving a different answer to each.

Another thing we should remember as we start Chapter 7 is that, as we saw in the introduction, feasting is a central theme in the book of Esther.

The book of Esther begins and concludes with pairs of feasts, with another pair of feasts occurring in between. In Chapter 1, Xerxes gave two consecutive feasts, and Chapter 9 will show the Jews observing two consecutive feasts to celebrate their deliverance. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 7, we see another pair of feasts, with Haman's downfall starting to occur in between the two.

As we said in the introduction, the focus on feasting may be a reminder that man has a role to play in God's providence. We certainly see it working that way in this book.

"The second day" in verse 2 refers to the day after the first banquet. It does not mean that this banquet lasted two days.

In verse 2, the King asks Esther for the third time what she wants him to do.

Esther is in a delicate position because she somehow needs to accuse Haman without also accusing the king who had permitted Haman to act with his approval and authority.

Esther knows better than anyone the weak and unstable despot she is dealing with here. To be successful, Esther must never act as if she is bringing a charge directly against the king himself.

Esther 7:3-7

3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: 4 For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage. 5 Then the king Ahasuerus answered and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so? 6 And Esther said, The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen. 7 And the king arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king.

The king asked two questions in verse 2 – What is your petition? What is your request? – although as we suggested he may have been seeking just a single answer.

But Esther gives the king two answers in verse 3. She asks for her own life as her petition, and for the life of her people as her request.

We earlier talked about Daniel Moments or Esther Moments. Those are moments in our life when we have an opportunity to stand up and announce to the world whose side we are on. Such moments are coming with increasing frequency today as our own society continues to plunge into the abyss. Esther's own Esther Moment happens right here in verses 3-4.

By her answer, Esther is tying her own life to the life of her people, and at last Esther is telling the king that "her people" are not the same as his people.

And with these words, Esther is bringing down upon herself an irrevocable decree of death. Getting rid of Haman will not get rid of that decree. Esther will remain under sentence of death.

And the king? The king had not been concerned about the destruction of an entire people. Will the destruction of his queen be a different matter?

We should note that Esther is pulling out the big guns now that she is alone with the king and Haman. Yes, Haman was a very close advisor of the king. But was Haman as close to the king as Esther?

Compare Esther's statement in 7:3 ("If I have found favor in your sight, O king...") with her earlier statement in 5:8 ("If I have found favor in the sight of the king..."). Do you see the subtle difference?

In the statement from Chapter 5, Esther addressed the king in the third person, which would have been the normal court protocol (*e.g.*, your majesty, your royal highness). But here in Chapter 7, Esther addresses the king in the second person – "If I have found favor with you, O King."

Why the difference? Because Esther has a special relationship with the king that is closer even than that of Haman, the king's closest advisor, and Esther wants to remind the king of that fact.

#ezra-esther