

## Lesson 19

Last week we ended by reading about Queen Esther's first banquet for the king and for Haman, in which she once again failed to tell the king about the request for which she had risked her life coming before the king unsummoned. The king is 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 the book, we are told exactly how Haman is feeling. Everything seemed to be going his way, and he is very happy.

We can learn a lesson from the happiness of Haman – it depended solely on Haman's current circumstances. In this country, one of our inalienable rights is the pursuit of happiness – and we pursue it with abandon, which likely explains why the dominant emotion of our day is disappointment. Earthly happiness is a fickle friend, and, as Haman would soon discover, it comes and goes with the tides.

Haman's happiness was temporary, but Haman's defining constant characteristic was his pride. We see his vast and tender ego on display all throughout this book. Peter Kreeft has said that "nothing distinguishes Christian morality from pagan morality more sharply than their opposite attitudes toward pride." Aristotle, for example, said that pride was a virtue. Haman is a perfect example of that pagan pride. Here is how C.S. Lewis described pride in his book *Mere Christianity*:

"There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that

they are guilty themselves. ... There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. ...

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. ...

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. ... As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”

Proverbs 27:2 – “Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips.”

Proverbs 16:18 – “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”

Proverbs 18:12 – “Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour is humility.”

Proverbs 6:16-17 – “These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: 17 A proud look...”

Luke 14:11 – “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

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 refused to bow down. A single dark cloud has completely ruined Haman’s day.

What does Haman do in response? Naturally, Haman takes the only reasonable course of action – he runs home and cries to his wife! (But first, verse 10 tells us, he first “refrained himself.” You can just picture him feigning indifference at the slight while seething and plotting revenge inside. Another 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.)

In verse 10, Haman summons his wife. This book began with the king summoning his own wife, and Esther had just come before the king unsummoned. 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.” He apparently has not stopped for one moment to wonder why he was given such an unusual honor or what this all important request by Queen Esther might entail. 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 man more than that man's pride – which is why pride is so dangerous.

Haman complains to his wife that nothing – not even his riches, his power, or his honor from the Queen – gives him any satisfaction so long as he sees Mordecai sitting at the king's gate.

Proverbs 27:20 – “Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.”

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 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. He is propelled along by slights to his honor, whether real or imaginary. His 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 he 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 constantly 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 the 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. How many have run their ships aground while searching for that one more thing! The key to contentment is to give up that never ending searching for just one more thing because whatever that one thing is, there will be another “just one thing” waiting in line behind it. You will never have enough.

Haggai 1:6 – “Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.”

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 begins 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 as tall as his own pride – 75 feet! 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 he is about to get his wish! 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 as 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 6:1-3**

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.

One commentator says that 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.”

While Haman plots Mordecai’s death on a 75 foot gallows, the king plans to honor Mordecai for his faithful service. The unsuspecting Haman enters the king’s court, thinking the king must be planning to honor him – thinking to himself, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” in verse 6. “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 his 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. As one commentator stated, these coincidences are the author’s cipher for “divinely arranged.” We cannot fail to see the hand of divine providence in such a series of events.

Asking for the chronicles to be read would be similar to asking today for the Congressional Record to be read – and each could 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? Perhaps it seemed to the king that by her delay she was wanting him to come up with it on his own. Had he forgotten their anniversary?

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. Thus, the king was understandably upset to learn that Mordecai had never been honored for foiling the assassination plot against him five years earlier. Mordecai had no doubt been disappointed himself.

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. It 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 the word has never been applied to him. Will Haman at last receive the honor he is due – or perhaps something else 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?

There is some disagreement among commentators as to whether Haman came to the palace in the middle of the night or early in the morning. Given that Haman was instructed by his wife to go in the morning to see Xerxes (5:14), and that the king sent him forth immediately to carry out his instructions (6:10), it seems likely that Xerxes listened to the royal chronicles all through the night, until Haman arrived early the next day to present his request (6:4).

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 – he 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 he 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.

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. In Esther, however, it is the king who is questioning his “advisor,” not the advisor who questions the king. It is not actually the king or 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, both Xerxes and Haman are unaware that a trap is being set. It is a case of the blind leading the blind. Neither knows what the other is doing.

### **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 sounds of the words. He 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.” He 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 – and I'm sure Haman was already looking forward to the trip! In fact, this great honor has made him forget about Mordecai for a short time – a very short time! Haman wanted to be king for a day! (And likely, the text is asking us to infer, for much longer than just a day. Remember that Xerxes would soon be assassinated by his 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 his 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 would others see him. 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 all that is on his mind.

Haman sees himself only through the eyes of others, and his happiness depends solely on how they see him. In Luke 6:26, Jesus said, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." Our goal should never be to have everyone speak well of us – because many will do that only when we are wallowing in sin along with them. If we are living for Jesus, then we should expect that many (and perhaps most) will not speak well of us. "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)

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 horses with crown-like ornaments on their heads, and it would seem that Persians did the same thing. 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 go – none other than the despised Mordecai! And to make things funnier, Haman has no idea why the king would suddenly decide to honor this man that 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 never mentioned the Jews by name to the king.

But that raises another question – how did King Xerxes know that Mordecai was a Jew? We are not told, but he must have likely just heard it from another source that is not relayed to us in the text. But, also, we are not told that Mordecai, unlike Esther, was keeping his background a secret. In fact, the reason why their own relation could not be known must have been because people knew Mordecai was a Jew.

“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.”

### **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?

“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 was mourning in verse 12, but the Hebrew word can just indicate 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! She 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? Either God placed a word of prophecy on their tongue, or perhaps they knew about the ancient prophecy regarding the Agagites. Either way, they tell Haman the truth – he will soon come to ruin.

Verse 13 is a reversal – it 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 him 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. 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. (See the handout from our introductory class on Esther.)

We usually focus on Esther's role in Haman's downfall, but note that his downfall was already 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. If so, then 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.

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 the pivot point for that reversal 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 – that is the point of our great reversal!

Denominations belittle baptism because they say it is a work of man, and man is not saved by works. Baptism is not a work of man – it is a work of God! 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! Titus 3:5 – “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by

the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”

I am always amused when someone describes baptism as a work. 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 are active and one is passive. Which of the five do the denominations argue is a work of man? The one that is passive! Their blindness is truly incredible!

There are only two verses in the Bible that tell you how to get into Christ. Galatians 3:27 (“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”) and Romans 6:3 (“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?”). If your goal is to be put into Christ, what could God have said to make the path any more clear? We are baptized into Christ. Absent baptism, we are out of Christ.

And what about those outside of Christ? They are following the path of Haman, and like him they are heading for a huge reversal in fortune. And like Haman, they will discover that they were caught in a web of their own making.

Remember Naaman in 2 Kings 5? If he had returned home with his leprosy, whose fault would that have been? Whose choice would that have been? He was told to wash and be clean. Had he not done that, whose will would have sent him home unclean? C. S. Lewis: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’”

Yes, Haman is in trouble, but he has no time to worry about that because it is time to head for 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!)