



Esther 6:1-14
Esther: The God Behind Everything
“The Tables Are Turned”

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November 21st, 2021

This morning we wrap up our series in Esther. In a moment we'll read Esther 6:1-14. But Esther is 10 chapters long, so that means there's quite a bit more to talk about that flows out of today's passage. So, strap on your seatbelts and grab a snack, as we dive into a 90-minute sermon ☺ on the last five chapters of the book.

Last week we saw Esther summon the courage, at Mordecai's request, to go and speak to the King about the edict that has gone out from the King's right-hand man, Haman, to eradicate the Jews from the Persian kingdom. This is Haman's plan. One thing to note, that I didn't convey last week, is that: **When Haman makes the proposal to the King, he doesn't say exactly who the people are.** He calls them a “certain people” dispersed throughout the kingdom who “keep themselves separate.” We'll see this anonymity return today. So, he doesn't name who they are, and apparently Xerxes doesn't ask. But then the edict comes out and it's clear who it's targeting.

So, in chapter 5, Esther goes to the king and says she wants to speak with him. He extends the gold scepter to her, so there's no perishing of Queen Esther here. He asks what she wants, and says he will grant her anything she asks for. But she simply says to him that she'd like to have a dinner party with the King and his right-hand man, Haman, and then she will tell him what she wants. Then, at the dinner, she invites them back to another banquet the next night. So, she's delaying in making the request that she actually wants to make on behalf of the Jews.

In the meantime, Haman is full of pride about his wealth, his promotion, and accomplishments. He boasts to his family of being the only one besides the king who is invited to these two dinners...but he's still disgusted that Mordecai won't bow down to him. He has an opportunity to take matters into his own hands, but passes. Then, at the suggestion of his family, he makes a pole on which to impale Mordecai, and waits for his opportunity to do so.

That brings us to the events in chapter 6 we will now read. This is Esther **6:1-14**, God's word to us today.

Let's briefly go over this just to make sure we understand what's going on and the irony behind these events, and then I'll summarize what flows out of it the rest of the way. So, the king can't sleep. **What better way to fall asleep than to have the chronological record of his kingship and the decisions he's made, be read to him?** It's like reading the minutes of board meetings. Or reading a history book. Or a combination of both. So, out of all the things he could have asked to have read, that's what he chose. And in it he happens to come across this record of Mordecai saving the king's life when he discovered an assassination plot.

After a brief conversation where they realize Mordecai hasn't ever been properly honored, he decides to honor him. The king then hears someone in the court of the palace. It's Haman, Xerxes' right-hand man, who has been plotting against Mordecai. And first on Haman's list of things to do that day is to talk with the king about executing Mordecai (because he wants to do it ahead of the "schedule" that the edict set out). But the King beats him to the punch, with his own request first.

He ask Haman in verse 6, **"What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" (Esther 6:6)**. He wants to get Haman's thoughts on how to honor someone publicly. Well, Haman's pride, which is first revealed in the previous chapters, causes him to assume he's the one who's going to be honored, and he makes a suggestion through that lens about what ought to be done: That the man be dressed in the king's garb, ride a horse of the king, and taken on a little two-person parade through the city, with an appointed official leading him and proclaiming to everyone who he is and what a great thing he has done.

King Xerxes thinks this is a great plan, and asks Haman...not to be honored, but to be the one to dress Mordecai in the king's robe and other garb, and put him on the king's horse, and then lead Mordecai around, announcing to the world what a great guy he is!

Let's pause for just a moment. Have you ever made plans and not have them go the way you anticipated? Woody Allen once said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans." I don't know if Haman talked to God about his plans...he probably didn't...but they are *not* coming to fruition. In fact, the exact opposite is what happens.

Well, at the end of the day, he has to go home and tell his wife and friends about what happened...and then it's time to go off to this second dinner party that Esther is hosting. But before he goes, they give him what is essentially a prophetic word of caution in verse 13: **"Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!"** They have an understanding of the God whom Mordecai worships. And they realize that if Haman is really going to go toe-to-toe with Mordecai and try to exact revenge on him, he's in trouble. You can't out-smart God, or win a battle against him.

So that night at the second dinner gathering, in chapter 7, the King asks Esther for her request. And she says her request is for the King to spare "my people." Remember, Haman didn't name who the people were when he pitched his plan to Xerxes earlier, and Esther has not revealed to the King about her Jewishness, either. She goes on to tell him, "I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated." The king asks, "Who has ordered such a thing to happen?" (Remember, though Haman spoke with the king about it, Haman actually ordered it.) And Esther tells him that it's Haman, who of course is right there at the table with them.

Xerxes is stunned that his wife is one of those targeted, gets up and walks out to get some space to think. Meanwhile, Haman pleads with the queen to spare his life. At one point, he stumbles some and falls over onto Esther. At that moment, the King walks back in and it looks like Haman is molesting the queen. The king is ticked! One of the attendants lets the king know that there's a pole Haman had set up to use to kill Mordecai, and the king commands them to instead have Haman impaled on it.

So, the tables are completely turned, and everything that has been done up to now is undone. It's a complete reversal of all that Haman had planned and had set up.

But there's still the decree against the Jews, and because it was in writing, it can't be undone so easily. We've talked about Persian law a couple times before in this series, and it's well-known that once a law or decree was written, it was iron-clad and could not just be undone. So, another decree is issued that gave the Jews the right to assemble and protect themselves, and to kill anyone who might attack them as a result of the earlier decree that Haman had written and sent out with the king's seal of approval.

You'll recall that when Haman did that, he had the King's signet ring, which made the decree official as it got sent throughout the kingdom. Well, the king now has his signet ring back, and he gives it to Esther and asks her and Mordecai to write this new decree and seal it with his ring because, as 8:8 says, "...no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked." Once again, we encounter the power of the written law in Persia, and he's giving that power to Esther and Mordecai.

The result is that the Jews are able to defend themselves and stave off elimination. It's a triumph, for sure, but it's also a disturbing part of Esther. Much like earlier in chapter two, with the process to find a new queen that makes us cringe some, parts of chapter 9 are cringeworthy, but for different reasons: it's a battle, played out in different communities throughout Persia, between the people of Persia (not the military, by the way...it was a grassroots militia-style effort to eradicate the Jews who Haman had riled up), and the Jews who defend themselves. And the Jews win the day. **To mark their successful self-defense, they established a two-day holiday called "Purim".** "Pur" is the Hebrew word for "lot" as in "casting lots" which had been done earlier when Haman plotted on which month and day to annihilate the Jews – it was determined by casting lots, or casting the "pur." When the lot was cast, the date that came up was 11 months out. That gave time for the rest of the events to be carried out. And "im" is just Hebrew the plural ending for a noun (like our "s"). Put it together and you get "Purim", a festival that

the Jews established to mark when they were saved by God through Esther's courage and wisdom.

Additionally, Esther is given Haman's property, and Mordecai is elevated in the King's government to second-in-command, replacing Haman.

Interestingly, archaeologists working in present-day Iran in the 1930's uncovered government records from this time period in Persia. The tablets, which were discovered at one of the ancient governmental palaces, are now housed at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. They list a government official named Marduku or Marduka who served under King Xerxes. It's not difficult to see the connection between that name and the name of Mordecai, especially when allowing for language pronunciation differences between Persian and Hebrew. The documents also state that he served in the city of Susa where the events of Esther take place.¹

So, when it's all said and done: what do we take from all of this, and even from the book of Esther as a whole? We've already talked some about how God is not mentioned anywhere in the book of Esther, and yet the ordering of events and the way things unfold – even as people make their own free will decisions – makes it clear that God is involved. **Esther shows us that God is behind the seen.** There's more than meets the eye. We see one thing, but underneath, God is at work. The evidence of God's active presence is evident in the daily things that are seen, even if God himself is not.

Here's a list of some of the things that happen in the book of Esther that at first glance we might say, "God had nothing to do with that"...but when you put them all together it's hard not to see the hand of God in them:

- God arranged for Queen Vashti to lose her place.
- God arranged for a competition to replace Queen Vashti.
- God arranged for Esther to enter the competition.
- God arranged for special favor for Esther by the Eunuch and among the other women.
- God arranged for Mordecai to have access to both Esther and the affairs of the kingdom.
- God arranged for the lot that was cast to give 11 months warning before the evil event.

- God arranged that the decree would command that the Jews be killed by private hands, instead of by the army of Persia - which would have been much more difficult to stop.
- God arranged that Haman restrain his anger and not kill Mordecai immediately (Esther 5:10) when he had an opportunity earlier on.
- God arranged for Xerxes to have a sleepless night.
- God arranged for Xerxes to pick up a certain book in his sleepless night.
- God arranged for Xerxes to read the passage about Mordecai in that particular book.

And that reading, as we saw in today's passage, is the turning point. The simple choice to pick up a book of history...a record of the significant events and decisions in the Kingdom...and read through it completely reversed the course of events. That's where everything begins to turn around. The same thing can happen in your life when you pick up the Bible and read it. It's a record of the King of kings' activity in history. It points us to Jesus and can completely turn your life around. It's an unseen work that God does in us, that bears fruit in our lives that *is* seen. So, in the book of Esther we see that God is at work behind the seen.

Second of all, we'd be remiss not to learn something from Esther herself, given that the book is named after her. And one thing we learn is that **God works through people of good character who honor and follow him**. This is the fruit of a life that has God at work in it. Mordecai and Esther both stood up for their faith, in the face of challenges to their faith. And notice, they weren't real vocal about their faith. Esther didn't tell anyone about her Jewish faith until near the end. In fact, the book never explicitly tells us that she did at all, though we can certainly conclude that she did share her faith background once she told the king at that second dinner, that Haman's plan was to eradicate her own people.

But Esther (and Mordecai) lived out their faith in tangible ways, even in the face of risk to their livelihoods and their very lives. Mordecai wouldn't bow down to Haman, and Esther risked her life in going to the King. But even before that, back in chapter two, we saw how Esther gained the respect of the Eunuch who took care of her during the pageant preparations, and we're told

that she “won the favor of everyone who saw her.” This isn’t about her physical appearance, and it’s long before she got the crown, so it’s not about positions and titles. It’s about her character...how she carried herself, and how she related to other people. **Esther is the kind of person God works through: people with humility, grace, and courage – everything that Haman was not.**

About 480 years later, Jesus comes along and exudes those same qualities, all the way to the cross. And much like Esther’s actions saved her people, so Jesus saves us, but for eternity as his resurrection proves: Death is overcome. May we live similarly to Jesus and to Esther: living with humility, grace and courage. We do so trusting in Jesus so that by His Holy Spirit God might work through us to change people’s lives. That’s a work of God that isn’t seen: It’s in people’s hearts, minds, and our souls. And when God goes to work in those unseen places, the tables of our lives, and the lives of others as God works through us, can be turned around, all for his glory. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ <https://biblereadingarcheology.com/2016/03/31/mordecai-in-ancient-records/>.