

Series Esther

This Message #5

Scripture Esther 5:1— 6:14

At the end of chapter 4, we learned that Esther had accepted her responsibility to do what she could to save her people from annihilation. She directed Mordecai to assemble all the Jews in Susa in order that they might fast for her and with her for three days and nights, after which she would go before King Xerxes to plead for her people. Esther understood the risk she would take in going to the king uninvited. Unless he would extend his scepter, she would be killed. Another element which contributed to her fear was that she had not been summoned to be in the king's presence for a month. Yet her thought was, "I must go, and 'If I perish, I perish.'"

In her effort to intercede for her people, Esther was confronted with several complications. She would be breaking the law of the land by approaching the king. Secondly, she would have to convince the king to reverse an edict which had already been publicized throughout the empire even though such an edict was, according to the practices of the Medes and Persians, considered to be irreversible. Thirdly, Esther would have to position herself against Haman, who had won the king's confidence and become the second most powerful person in the empire. And lastly, Esther was pursuing a plan which could have a negative impact on the king's pride and ego. If the king was to deal with Haman as the situation required, the king would have to own up to his foolishness in elevating Haman to a position of such influence and power. No king would want to admit that he had been so thoroughly deceived.

Today we are going to read and think about the action steps of Esther, and then we will spend some time considering the destinies of Haman and Mordecai. At this point in this story, the wrong man, Haman, has control over the lives of the Jewish people, and he must be removed before there can be a change in their circumstances. In the Scripture passages today we will learn about how the changes begin, and about how the providence of God will be affecting the lives of the main characters.

Read Esther 5:1-8

After she had prepared herself emotionally with three days of fasting, Esther prepared herself physically for her appearance before the king. She dressed herself in her royal splendor and went to the inner court of the palace in front of the king's hall and stood there until the king noticed her. The inner hall was a kind of reception or waiting area, from where guests would be waved in when the king was ready for them to approach the throne.

Verse 2 informs us that the king was pleased when he saw Esther and held out his scepter, thus granting her permission to approach. The typical scepter of the Persian kings was a slender golden rod about five feet in length with a small orb on one end. All the ancient bas-reliefs of seated kings show them holding the scepter in their right hands.

Esther's breach of royal protocol must have raised concerns in Xerxes' mind. After all, no one would dare approach the king uninvited unless there was a serious reason. Perhaps he remembered that on a previous occasion Esther had passed on to him information about a plot against his life. He probably was even more puzzled when Esther simply invited him to a banquet. It wasn't logical for her to risk her life just to set up a dinner date.

And why did Esther put off making her request on behalf of the Jewish people? After all, the king had promised to grant, even before she asked, any request she had. Did she lose her nerve at the last minute? I have a theory about why Esther did not immediately make known her concern. In modern Persian culture, an offer must be extended three times before the offer is deemed sincere. This is one of the cultural forms of courtesy (*tae'aerof*) in the Persian culture which is very deep and goes back many centuries. Esther needed to understand how genuinely open and sincere the king was to granting her request. In the Persian culture, a guest would not presume to make a request, or accept an offer, unless invited three times to do so.

The first invitation was in verse 3: "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request?" Xerxes' second invitation was in verse 6: "Now what is your petition? It will be given to you."

It will not be until the occasion of the second banquet hosted by Esther, which is described in chapter 7, (the section we will think about in the next message), that the king repeated for the third time his offer to grant Esther whatever she wanted. It will be then, and only then, that Esther will have the freedom to articulate the concern which is heavy on her heart. It would have been grossly unacceptable for Esther to have blurted out her request before the correct time.

Thus the stage is set, or, at least, the date has been arranged, for Esther to make her plea for mercy. The next episode in the story describes the behavior and attitude of Haman.

Read Esther 5:9-14

Haman departed from banquet number one in “high spirits.” He had had the privilege to spend the evening with both the king and queen. And, even though it was unusual for any man to be in the presence of the queen in the women’s quarters, he had been invited back the next evening for another banquet.

Unfortunately, his elation and delight was spoiled by his encounter with Mordecai at the king’s gate. His rage at what he considered the insolent behavior of Mordecai took all the satisfaction out of his life. Outwardly, Haman had a lot going for him. He had riches and power and privilege, but inside he was filled with anger, resentment, and hatred. He bragged about the way the king and queen had honored him, but, as he said in verse 13, none of those things gave him satisfaction as long as that Jew Mordecai remained sitting at the king’s gate.

His wife and friends suggested that he could clear away his rage by hanging Mordecai from a gallows and that he could then attend the banquet with undiminished happiness. This suggestion delighted Haman and he had the gallows built.

At this point, how do matters stand? The outcome of the story will be contingent on actions that will occur in the following twenty-four hours. Mordecai may have only a few more hours to live. Esther will have her one opportunity to make her appeal. Everything in Haman’s life seems to be moving along in his favor. He had in place an edict that could not be changed, and a gallows ready for its victim. The king was so naïve and uninformed that it almost seemed like matters were out of his control. Each of the characters is unaware of the motives and plans of the others.

It is interesting in Scripture how often God allows stressful, heart-stopping, “pressures” like these to build up before He takes action. Of course, we need to remember that the eternal God isn’t bound by our limitations of physical space and time. We need to remember that He is committed to the fulfillment of His promises and the accomplishment of His purposes, and that He remains firmly in control of all human activities.

There is a lesson here for us. If we believe that God has sovereign control over the affairs of mankind and that He exercises providence in order to bring about His purposes, then we don’t need to bite our fingernails in nervousness and anxiety over the negative circumstances and tensions in our lives. As I have stated previously, just because God is invisible does not mean that He has lost control or is inactive.

In an earlier message, we imagined how this story might be presented as a movie. On this night we would have scenes in which Esther would be in her quarters unable to sleep. Mordecai would be a lonely figure in the moonlight keeping his vigil by the king’s gate. Haman would be supervising the construction of the gallows; and as the camera cuts away to the king’s bedchamber, we observe that even he cannot sleep. In the next portion of Scripture we will recognize how God fits the intense fears, concerns, hatred, and ambitions of the main characters into His program. I’m sure you are eager to know what will happen next, so let’s continue into chapter 6.

Read Esther 6:1-11

There are two ways to look at these verses. They are either a series of unusual coincidences or a blending of apparent coincidences and God’s providence. Our interpretation of events in chapter 6 depends on whether we see events from a human perspective or try to see them from God’s perspective. It just so happened that the king had insomnia. Apparently in the early morning hours he got up and ordered that the book of the chronicles be read to him. This was the book in which were written the historical facts and events that were important to the empire.

And the choice of reading materials. It just so happened that the king's attendants read to him the description about the assassination plot on the king's life (*see Esther 2:21-23*). This was an event that had occurred five years previously. Mordecai, the man who had learned about this plot and reported it, had not been recognized or rewarded for his part in saving the king's life. This was an oversight that Xerxes wanted to rectify immediately.

He demanded to know which royal official was in the court. It just so happened that Haman was there, eager to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected during the night. The text suggests that the king dispensed with the usual greeting formalities which were normally an important part of Persian culture and abruptly asked Haman what should be done for a person the king wanted to honor.

Haman assumed that the king meant to honor him, and proceeded to describe what he would fantasize for himself. (*See appendix.*) Haman's suggestions delighted the king, who ordered him to carry out the plan at once. It was only then that Xerxes named the man who was to be honored, Mordecai, the Jew, the man who sat at the king's gate.

The king warned Haman to not neglect any of the honors he had proposed. Haman had no choice but to carry out the king's orders. Just imagine the chagrin and mortification felt by him as he led Mordecai through the streets of the city. How ironic that he was the one to announce to everyone in the city that his adversary was honored by the king. The man he was prepared to hang had become the one he had to lift up with honor.

These events were not just coincidentally linked together. God had been invisibly and providentially influencing the flow of events. Mordecai wasn't just lucky to have overheard the assassination plot; it wasn't just chance that the king had failed to reward Mordecai five years previously; it wasn't just chance that the king could not sleep during the night, or that he chose an attendant to read from the book of the chronicles, or that the attendant chose that particular passage to read; it wasn't just chance that Haman entered the royal court when he did. It wasn't just coincidence — it was the sovereign God working out His rescue plan.

Read Esther 6:12-14

At the end of the day Mordecai returned to his place at the king's gate, and Haman rushed home with his head covered in grief. His wife and advisors interpreted the events of the day as a bad omen. Culturally, the Persian people were extremely superstitious. Sudden dramatic, unanticipated, adverse changes in the circumstances of life were, to them, indications of doom. Hence, the people closest to Haman predicted his "downfall," that he would "not be able to stand against Mordecai," and that he would "surely come to ruin."

If I was Haman, I think I would have tried to flee away quickly and hoped to hide myself in a distant land. Unfortunately, Haman did not have the opportunity. No sooner had the words of doom been spoken by his wife and advisors than there was a knock at the door. The king's servants had come to escort Haman to the banquet. It was common practice for a guest to be escorted to special royal occasions. Haman was trapped. Before he had time to collect his thoughts, he was ushered away to the banquet prepared by Esther.

Conclude with Psalm 33:8-19

Appendix:

Haman wanted the king's honor in the same way that Satan wanted God's glory. What Haman proposed was an experience that only kings were entitled to have. Haman wanted to wear the king's clothing and ride the king's horse. He wanted to wear the king's crown. He wanted to be paraded through the city with everyone bowing to him as they would the king. According to Isaiah 15:12-14, Satan was vain enough to want to be like God.