

Series Esther

This Message #6

Scripture Esther chapters 7 & 8

Today we finally arrive at the climax of the story. In this message, the truth about circumstances will be revealed. The king will finally recognize what has been happening around him, the villain will be exposed and receive judgment, new responsibilities will be given to Queen Esther and Mordecai, and there will be a “turn-around” in the fortunes of the Jewish people.

Chapter 7 opens with the king and his grand vizier, Haman, joining Esther the queen at the second of the two banquets prepared by Esther. As they gathered in the queen’s quarters for the meal, only Esther understood how important and pivotal the evening would be for herself and her people. She did not know how the king would accept her plea for mercy on behalf of the Jewish people or what his reaction might be to her condemnation of Haman as the adversary of the Jews.

Haman did not know about Esther’s Jewishness, nor about her close association with Mordecai, the man Haman hated so intensely. Haman had deceived himself into thinking that he was on the good side of both the king and queen, and didn’t realize that Esther was his arch enemy. The king didn’t know that his wife was a Jewess, and he had no clue about Haman’s personal vendetta against Mordecai and the Jewish people. But before the end of the evening, the truths about each person would be revealed.

Read Esther 7

After the meal, during the time they were drinking wine, the king once again sought to discover the nature of Esther’s petition. This was the third time that the king assured Esther that he would grant her request. This was the opportunity for which she had been waiting.

Esther began her appeal in a very courteous way. Even as queen, she could not presume on the good will of Xerxes because she knew about his impetuous and volatile nature, so, diplomatically, she began her request with soft, gentle flattering words, “If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty...” This is the way a person must speak to a king. Then Esther presented her request — that her life and the life of her people be spared.

Esther continued on to explain that she and her people had been “sold for destruction, slaughter, and annihilation.” This was undoubtedly a reference to the bribe offered by Haman to the king to obtain permission to take action against the Jews. The sum of money was apparently common knowledge among the people. You will recall that back in chapter 4 Mordecai had reported the “exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury” (*Esther 4:7*).

The meaning of the Hebrews words in the last part of verse 4 are obscure and uncertain. Some translations mention “distress” and “disturbing the king.” Esther stated that she would not have disturbed the king, or brought this matter to his attention, if she and her people were only to be sold into slavery. The fact was, they had been sold unto death.

There is another, and perhaps better, way to translate the phrase, so that the meaning is “the compensation our adversary offers cannot be compared with the loss the king would suffer.” Translated this way, it would mean that the destruction, slaughter, and annihilation of the Jews would represent an economic loss to the king. I prefer this alternate interpretation because I think Esther knew how to get her point across in a way that had practical meaning to the king — that the annihilation of the people would affect his “bottom line” financial situation.

We don’t actually know if the king remembered granting permission to Haman for the destruction of a people group or not, or whether he knew that the people group was the Jews or not, because Haman had not mentioned the name of the people group in his conversation with the king (*see Esther 3:8-11*). The text itself implies that Xerxes was surprised by Esther’s words, and that he was learning for the first time about the plan to annihilate an entire people group within his empire and that his royal consort was a member of that group.

The king must have required some time to process that information. On the other hand, Esther's words must have had an instantaneous and stunning impact on Haman. He would have been shocked to learn that Esther was a Jew, and he would suddenly realize that the queen was among those condemned by his edict, and that the death of the queen would directly affect the king in a deeply personal way. He would realize that the king would undoubtedly take action against him for initiating such a law and, at the least, remove him from his position of power. These would be the kind of thoughts racing through Haman's mind.

Esther had explained to the king circumstances that he should have already known, but apparently did not because he had placed so much trust and confidence in Haman and delegated many responsibilities to him. He reacted to the statements of Esther by asking "who had dared to do such a thing."

Esther then identified Haman as the adversary and enemy. Haman's life completely unraveled at that moment. His deceptions, desires, and abuse of power were now revealed. Twenty-four hours earlier he had been ecstatic about his privilege to be with the king and queen, even bragging to his family and friends about how they were honoring him. Now he was "terrified." Haman knew about the hot temper of the king and what would happen to him. His only hope was to beg for mercy. How ironic that he, a man so supercilious and proud, was, within a few short hours, forced to honor the Jew Mordecai in front of all the people of Susa and then to beg for his life before another Jew, Esther. He, who showed no mercy to others was suddenly desperate for mercy.

The king was so enraged by the information that had been revealed that he left his wine and went for a walk in the garden. We don't know the reasons why the king did this. He was not thinking about the fate of Haman. Haman already understood what the king would do to him. Was the king trying to sort out the surprising details he had just learned? Was he thinking about the precarious situation he was in? After all, the edict of Haman, even though it had been granted through deception and trickery, had gone out with the king's seal, and thereby his authorization. Did the revelation that his queen was a Jewish immigrant bother him? All we know is that Xerxes found himself in a complicated situation and he took a few minutes to process everything.

When the king returned to the banquet hall he discovered that Haman “was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.” Haman was appealing to her for mercy. A person pleading for leniency would typically bow to the ground and seize the feet of the person who had the power of forgiveness. The king saw Haman do this and interpreted his action as molestation because, in the harem, only the king had the right to touch the females. Violation of this taboo was death. The point here is that Haman became deserving of death for more than one reason. [There is a Jewish tradition that the angel Gabriel pushed Haman onto Esther’s couch!]

Immediately afterward, Haman’s face was “covered.” This was a symbolic action meaning that the person would never again be allowed to look upon the king, and hence, there would be no more opportunity for mercy or pardon. The covering represented the sentence of death.

One of the king’s eunuchs knew that there was a gallows near Haman’s house, the one which had been made for Mordecai, and he so informed the king. This was the first that the king had heard about such a gallows. The fact that Haman had been plotting the death of the man who had saved the king’s life was another reason for Haman to be executed. The king’s immediate response to the information was “Hang Haman on the gallows.”

We need to take some time here to talk theology. I said previously that there was a lot of theological teaching in this story. Last week we thought about the doctrine of God’s providence. Today is a good time to talk about the Scriptural principle of retribution. Retribution means that people “get what they deserve.”

Scripture indicates that God pours out His wrath in retribution on those who oppose His plans and attempt to thwart His purposes, and He also rewards those who do His will. The Apostle Paul explained the principle of retribution in these words from the letter written to the believers in Rome: “Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (*Romans 2:5-8*).

Proverbs 5:21-23 gives another description of what happens to people who, like Haman, plan evil. “For a man’s ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths. The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly.”

There are numerous verses in Psalm 37 which also call attention to this principle of retribution.

Another way used to describe this principle is the illustration of “sowing and reaping.” The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the believers in Galatia, wrote, “Do not be deceived; God will not be mocked, for whatever a man sows, that is what he reaps” (*Galatians 6:7*). Haman was one of many people described in Scripture who reaped what he had sown. Other examples include the Egyptian Pharaoh who, before the Exodus, demanded that all the male Hebrew children be killed immediately after birth. God later sent His angel to kill the firstborn males in Egypt, including Pharaoh’s own son. Jacob deceived his father in regard to the family birthright and his sons later deceived him. King David committed adultery and murder, after which his adult sons committed evil against their father. Haman died on the gallows that he had built for another person.

At the end of chapter 7, the powerful adversary who promoted the annihilation of the Jews, was eliminated, but the threat to the Jews still remained. Haman was dead, but his evil influence, represented by the royal decree which had been issued and published throughout the empire, remained in place. We already know that the royal decrees of the Medo-Persian empire could not be revoked. The crucial issue in chapter 8 is how the Jewish people might be saved from destruction.

Read Esther chapter 8

The first two verses of chapter 8 are a transition from the events of chapter 7. King Xerxes made a present of Haman’s entire estate to Esther. Mordecai’s relationship to Esther was revealed, whereupon the king elevated Mordecai to the position previously held by Haman. Esther appointed Mordecai as the executor of Haman’s estate. Thus all of Haman’s wealth, as well as his title and power, were put into the hands of, and under the control of, Haman’s former enemy, Mordecai.

Perhaps Xerxes, after taking care of these matters, assumed that everything had been adequately dealt with. The implication in verse three is that the king would not have dealt with the threat against the Jewish people if Esther had not once again approached the king to plead for her people. We don't know when Esther went before the king to beg for an end to the evil plan of Haman. It was probably several weeks after the execution of Haman and the appointment of Mordecai. [Compare 8:9 with 3:12.]

Esther made an impassioned plea with weeping. Notice how she once again used deferential words in speaking to the king: "If it pleases the king, and if he regards me with favor, and (if he) thinks it is the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me..." Her request was for an order to be written which would overrule the dispatches that Haman had devised and sent to all the provinces of the empire.

What was Xerxes to do? The fixed and unalterable character of Persian decrees put him in an awkward dilemma. He didn't know what to do. It was not unusual for Persian kings to make decisions that they later regretted. They sometimes made decisions in moments of impulsiveness and thoughtlessness which could not be changed later. Even the kings had no way to avoid the consequences of foolish decisions. One example in Scripture was the obligation of Xerxes' father, Darius, to put Daniel in the lion's den, even though he regretted having to do so.

King Xerxes responded to Esther's plea by pointing out what he had already done, as if that was enough. Then, because he had no idea what else might be done, he delegated the responsibility for dealing with the Jewish issue to Mordecai and Esther. Notice what he said to them, "Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you." It's as if the king were saying, "I don't know what to do. I give you permission and authority to come up with a plan." Then the king reminded them that "no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked." This was his way of saying that they could not take away the decree of Haman.

Given the legal restrictions and limited options available to them, the plan that Mordecai and Esther came up with was quite remarkable. Their plan gave the Jews in every city the right to protect themselves: to destroy, kill, and annihilate every armed force that might attack them. The Jews were to be ready to avenge themselves on any enemies who would follow the edict of Haman and come against them.

The new decree did not take away the first decree, but neutralized it by taking away its one-sidedness. The assumption was that people would not be eager to attack the Jews if they knew that the Jews would not be a pushover, and that they would counter attack . The Jews were not permitted to aggressively and preemptively attack suspected aggressors; they were only permitted to take action against those who first attacked them. The royal couriers raced out to announce the new edict in all the 127 provinces stretching from India to Africa.

The first decree, to destroy the Jews, had gone out on the 13th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar which, in our calendars, was April 17, 474 B.C. (*see Esther 3:12*). The Mordecai decree, which allowed the Jews to defend themselves, was written the 23rd day of the third month, or June 25, 474 B.C. This meant that the Jews had more than eight months to prepare for the day their enemies might attack them. That day, which had been determined by casting lots, was March 7, 473 B.C.

When the Jews throughout the empire learned of the new edict, it was, for them, a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor, with feasting and celebrating. Their time of fasting and mourning was ended.

end

Notes:

Several verses in chapter 8 (verses 9-13) are closely parallel to several verses in chapter 3, which described the edict written by Haman.

Some things to think about:

Believers might think of Haman as a type of their enemy, Satan. He was defeated by Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. Believers can rejoice about this fact.

However, believers must still deal with the righteous decree of God that demands death because of sins. The statement, "the soul who sins shall die" (*Ezekiel 18:4*) is like the decree of Haman (Satan) which remains in effect even though the perpetrator has been vanquished. In our condition of sinfulness, we not only have the continuing influence of our enemy (Satan), but we also have a legal decree from a righteous God against us.

God has solved our problem. He did it, not by compromising His decree for eternal justice, but by fulfilling justice in taking the punishment we deserve. God's counter-decree saves us. He is therefore not only just but the justifier of all those who put their faith in Jesus (*Romans 3:26*).

The chosen people of God rejoiced before the actual day appointed when there would be conflict with their enemies. They rejoiced because the decree of the king assured them, ahead of the time, of their preservation.

In the same way, the day of ultimate salvation of believers has not yet arrived, yet believers can rejoice because of their confidence in the decree of our king. We can be confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ (*Philippians 1:6*)