

Lesson 18

Last week we had just started discussing Esther 4:12-14, which ends with perhaps the best known verse in Esther: “For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

We noticed that Mordecai’s statement to Esther sidesteps his own role in what had happened. The “time such as this” had come upon them because of Mordecai’s disobedience to King Xerxes. And remember that Esther’s current position came about because of Vashti’s disobedience to King Xerxes. Esther herself is about to appear before the king unbidden. For such a powerful king, Xerxes seems to have trouble getting people to do what he wants them to do!

Mordecai tells Esther that she is in danger no matter what she does. She is in danger if she acts, and she is in danger if she fails to act. Why was Mordecai so certain that Esther would perish if she failed to act? After all, her identify remained a secret among the Persians.

Mordecai’s statement to Esther is a little unsettling when you examine it closely. He understands that her life may be in peril if she acts, but he is certain she will perish if she fails to act. Was he invoking a divine judgment upon her if she failed to act for her people? Or was he, as some suggest, threatening to reveal her identity as Jew, thus bringing her under Haman’s decree. How did Esther understand it? Did she see a veiled threat? We are not told.

Another, perhaps more likely, explanation is that Mordecai may just have felt certain her secret would not be kept for very long. Verse 16 suggests that other Jews know who Esther is, and her servants may also have known, with at least one of them (the courier she sent to Mordecai) almost certainly knowing. Once the killing started, the other Jews who knew would likely also turn to Esther for help. She could not avoid danger by remaining silent. (Yet another lesson for us!)

As for the identify of this other deliverer, commentators have long seen in that verse an allusion to God’s intervention should human efforts fail. But is that really the choice they were facing – that either man would save the Jews or God would save the Jews? Don’t we see God already acting to save his people? Don’t we see God already working through Esther? Mordecai was not saying either you do it or God will do it. A better view is that Mordecai was saying either God will do it through you, Esther, or God will do it through someone else.

At last we come to perhaps the key question in the book: “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this” Mordecai suggests that there is a purpose behind all that has happened in Esther’s life – a purpose that goes beyond her own self interests (and beyond Mordecai’s own self interests, although that part is not as clear in his famous speech). If Esther had ever wondered how she had come to this unlikely position, perhaps that question had now been answered. Why had she found herself in Persia? Why had she found herself in Susa? Why had she found herself in the bedroom of King Xerxes?

We, too, may look around at times and wonder how we have reached our current state. Why am I living where I am? Why am I working where I am? I once heard a preacher at another congregation

say, and I am quoting now, “God does not care where you live or what you do for a living.” Is this the same God who knows when a sparrow falls? Is this the same God who counts the hairs on our heads? God cares. And one reason he cares is found in the question in verse 14. We are not living here just for ourselves. We do not work just for ourselves. Everything we do should have the bigger picture in mind. We should view everything we do with the eye of eternity. And when we do that, we will find that what we do is suddenly filled with much more meaning and significance. If you are ever tempted to feel that your life lacks meaning or significance, the cure for that is to lift up your eyes. Esther is being asked to do that here.

Mordecai’s question seems to reveal a deep conviction of God’s providence, and an understanding that God’s providence works through the actions of individuals. Yes, God would save his people – but he would do so through the courage and faithfulness of Esther, or he would find someone else. Could God have sent an army of angels to kill the Persians? Yes, but that is not how he worked then, and that is not how he works now. We are his army – and if we lay our weapons down and fail to act, then who will fight for him? If the soldiers of Christ fail to arise, who will arise in their place? If we remain silent, who will speak up? God is working today through his people, and we are his people. And if we don’t work, what then? God will do what he had always done – he will find a faithful remnant and work through them. That is what he is doing today – and we are that remnant.

Why did I say earlier that Mordecai’s statements **seem** to reveal a conviction of God’s providence? Because we don’t know for sure what Mordecai is thinking, and because there is another way to understand his statement. The original Hebrew would support this reading: “Will relief and deliverance come to the Jews from another place?” That reading would change Mordecai’s statement from an expression of trust to one of despair. If Esther fails to act, then there will be no one left to act. Esther is their final hope.

Which view is correct? We can’t say for sure, but I favor the traditional view. No matter how secularized Mordecai may have become, I think we see at least a glimmer of faith in his statement here to Esther – and perhaps much more than just a glimmer.

Finally, some point to these verses as evidence that Mordecai believed the Jewish race to be indestructible. That the Jewish race could never and would never perish. There was certainly some truth to that belief at this point in history. Why? Because God had promised to bless the entire world through a son of David, and that worldwide blessing had not yet come.

But there was also great danger in the notion of Jewish indestructibility. Why? It leads to false confidence. During the days of Jeremiah, the Judeans believed that Jerusalem could not be destroyed because of the presence of the temple in the city (Jeremiah 7:1-15). As the people soon learned, God was willing to destroy the city and reduce the nation to a small remnant to correct their sinful ways. Jesus warned the Jewish people that they should take no comfort in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham, for “God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Matthew 3:9) God does, indeed, have a covenant relationship with his people, but that relationship is spiritual rather than genetic.

Romans 2:28-29 – “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the

heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

There has never been a time in human history when those opposed to God and in rebellion against God did, at the same time, enjoy a right relationship with God. God’s covenant people have always been God’s faithful people. That was certainly the case under the Old Covenant. Deuteronomy 7:9 – “Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations.” God’s covenant people have always been God’s faithful people. That is true today, that was true in Esther’s day, and it has always been true.

Esther 4:15-17

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. 17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

We see another reversal in verses 15-17. In verse 8, Mordecai issued his final command to Esther through the king’s eunuch, but here the roles are reversed—Mordecai does what Esther commands him to do.

The word “commanded” in verse 17 does not just mean “instructed” as the NIV translates it or “told” as other versions translate it. The verb used in verse 17 is the same word used in Esther 2:10 for Mordecai’s commands to Esther, in 3:2 for the king’s commandment regarding Haman, and in 3:12 for Haman’s commandment. Esther is “commanding” Mordecai. No softer word should be used instead.

Esther has now taken charge. So far she has been passive, not taking action, but rather just following the path of least resistance. But now she has come to a defining moment, and *passive* Esther becomes *active* Esther.

It is Esther, not Mordecai, who courageously goes before the king. It is Esther, not Mordecai, who plans the strategy to unmask Haman. It is Esther, not Mordecai, who prevents the genocide of her people. Mordecai created the problem. Esther solves the problem. This great reversal in the life of Esther will lead to a great reversal in the life of her people – and at this point she has perhaps finally answered Mordecai’s unstated question – who are your people? The Jews – not the Persians – are “her” people.

What caused this great transformation in the life of Esther? When did it occur? We talked earlier about “Esther moments” – those moments of decision in which we are given an opportunity to stand up with the people of God and let our identity be known. Again, we should pray for those moments and welcome them when they come. And one thing about those moments is that, when we respond correctly to them, they have the effect of strengthening us and emboldening us for other such moments. Standing up for God the second time is easier than standing up for God the first time.

Isn't that what we see in the life of Esther? She became a different person once she stood up and (eventually) identified herself with the people of God. That was when the great reversal in her own life began. That decision was the pivot point in her life. It is often an imagined parade of horrors that prevents us from standing up when we should – and when that parade does not appear after we take a stand, subsequent stands become easier. And once we are identified with the people of God, we will become bolder and more confident about later stands. “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31) “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28)

Esther is the central character in this book. How do we know that? (And it is not only because the book is named for her!) We also know it because she alone changes in this book. Mordecai, Xerxes, and Haman walk through the book unchanged and unchanging, but not Esther. The text is calling for us to focus on her as she progresses and matures through these events.

And perhaps the text is inviting readers to compare her development with their own. Are we progressing and maturing? We need to be in a constant state of change! It is Jesus – not us – who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We should be changing every day as we become more and more like him. (Or do we perhaps instead expect Jesus to become more and more like us?)

Do we see Esther acting by faith in these verses or do we see Esther following the fatalism of the Persians? We are not told, although the end of verse 16 perhaps shows us some fatalism – “if I perish, I perish.” Is that fatalism, or does it simply show us Esther's courageous determination? As usual, the text does not tell us what she is thinking or what is motivating her. Each time we think we finally have Esther all figured out, the text tosses us another puzzle.

We have noticed quite a few comparisons between what happened to Esther and what happened to Joseph, and Esther's statement in verse 16 (“if I perish, I perish”) shows us yet another similarity. In Genesis 43:14, when Jacob was forced by circumstances to send Benjamin back to Egypt, he said, “If I am bereaved, I am bereaved.”

Esther's request that the people fast on her behalf may imply prayer, but the text does not mention it. Although fasts were generally practiced only during the day, this fast lasted both day and night. And, although we see fasting throughout the Bible, the Jews were commanded to fast on only one day each year, the Day of Atonement. But they frequently fasted at other times for special occasions or times of special need.

The act of fasting generally implies an appeal to God in the Bible, but the text does not mention God. Fasting can also simply imply a time of mourning, and perhaps that is all it means here.

What would Esther do next? So far we have seen two acts of either courage or foolhardiness – Vashti in refusing to appear before the king (perhaps because she did not want to dishonor herself), and Mordecai in refusing to honor Haman. Will we see a third? And will it be courage we see or foolhardiness? I think we can say with confidence that with Esther it will be courage. God's providence has brought Esther to this point. How will she respond?

Esther 5:1-4

Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal

apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house. 2 And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre. 3 Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom. 4 And Esther answered, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

In Chapter 1, Vashti risked her life by refusing to appear before the king when summoned. Here, Esther risks her life by doing the opposite – appearing before the king unsummoned.

There is a sharp contrast between Esther's first encounter with Xerxes and her encounter here with Xerxes.

(1) The first time, Esther had spent a whole year in beautification; every possible action was taken to make her as attractive as she could be. This time, she comes in exhausted from a fast of three days.

(2) Previously, she was brought passively before the king, accepting the role into which she had been cast. This time, she initiates the encounter, hoping to change her fate and that of her people.

(3) In the first case, she was segregated from her people and hiding her identification with them. This time she goes – secretly, at first – as their representative.

(4) Before, she was the passive recipient of that which she wore before the king. This time, she clothes herself in her royal office before making her appearance. She puts on her royal apparel. She appears now as the queen.

There is also a strong contrast between this event and what happened with Vashti in Chapter 1. Both queens have violated the law, but the circumstances are oddly inverted.

(1) Vashti had risked her life by refusing to come before the king when she was summoned. Esther now risks her life by coming before the king without being summoned.

(2) Vashti's failure to appear incited the king's wrath; Esther's unexpected appearance elicits his favor.

(3) Vashti's insubordination will result in an attempt to put all women in their place; Esther's insubordination, if successful, will result in the deliverance of all the Jews.

Remember that Vashti was publicly deposed so that no other woman would ever refuse to obey their husbands but rather that they would know their place. Esther is now stepping out of her place to go before the king in disobedience to the rule about who could approach him.

You should put a circle around two very important words in verse 1 – “and stood.” Esther took a stand. We mentioned Martin Luther in a previous class when we discussed his anti-Semitism, but Luther also had positive qualities.

In April 1521, Luther appeared before Emperor Charles V to defend what he had taught and written. At the end of his speech, he reportedly spoke the famous words, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.” Everyone knew where Luther stood. Where do we stand? We need to ask ourselves that question every day, and we need to make sure that we never cause the world to doubt where we stand.

The threat to Esther’s life in approaching the king unrequested has been confirmed outside the Bible. Archaeologists have uncovered an image of a Persian king (either Xerxes or Darius) seated upon his throne and holding a long scepter in his right hand. Behind him is shown a soldier holding a large ax. Either the scepter would rise or the ax would fall.

Xerxes’ offer to Esther of half his kingdom was likely a figure of speech that was not intended to be taken literally. It simply meant that the king was disposed to be very generous to the person in question, in this case Esther. Herodotus tells us about two other occasions when Xerxes made such an offer – and each time he ended up regretting it. He made that same “half kingdom” offer to one of his intended mistresses. She requested the beautiful robe he was wearing that had been handwoven by his wife, Amestris, who then discovered the affair and sought revenge. She gained it when, on her birthday she was also granted such a “half kingdom” request and she asked for the mother of the intended mistress (whom she believed was behind the affair). She then had that woman brutally mutilated, which led the woman’s husband, Xerxes’ brother, to start a revolt against the king. Xerxes does not seem to have learned very much from those lessons!

Two more things to note about the “half kingdom” offer in verse 3: First, it is yet another example of the historical accuracy of the book. Herodotus confirms that Xerxes made such offers on more than one occasion, and here we see him making the same offer to Esther.

Second, we have said that there are no references to Esther elsewhere in the Bible, but we might pause here to consider whether Mark 6:23 is such a reference. That is where Herod promised the daughter of Herodias, “Whatever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom,” which led to the death of John the Baptist. Why did Herod say that? After all, Herod was only a governor and had no kingdom to give. Some commentators suggest that Herod was quoting Xerxes from the book of Esther, which, if true, would mean that the only reference to Esther in the Bible outside of the book of Esther itself came from the lips of Herod!

In verse 2, the king raises his scepter, and Esther’s life is spared. All of the worry and all of the fear had been for nothing – the king was pleased with her, and he granted her an audience. I am reminded of one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes: “I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.” If even a tenth of the things we worry about came to pass, I doubt that any of us would still be here to talk about it. Yes, we have anxiety. But the Bible tells us what we should do with that anxiety: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7) The problem is not that we have anxiety; the problem is that we hang onto it!

The king was very curious about what had caused Esther to come before him unrequested. He

knew it must be something extremely important because he knew she was risking death in coming to him that way. But Esther handles the situation as a master politician – she does not directly answer the king’s question. Instead, she invites the king, along with Haman, to come to a banquet she has prepared. That she extended the offer to include Haman only added to the mystery. It was an unusual honor for another man to be invited to a banquet with the queen because Persian kings were very protective of their wives.

One thing we know for certain about Esther was that she was clever. She knew she would not have the upper hand if she confronted Haman in front of the king in his throne room with all of his advisors in attendance. She knew the king would see it as an affront to his authority. So instead she moved the conversation to a place and time of her own choosing. Here, in the throne room, Haman, who belonged there, would have had the upper hand over Esther, who did not belong there. I am reminded of a favorite quote: “Don’t start an argument with somebody who has a microphone when you don’t; they’ll make you look like chopped liver.”

In verse 4, the initial Hebrew letters in the phrase “Let the King ... Come Today” spell out the divine name, Yahweh (YHWH). (Most English translations say “let the King and Haman come today.” The verb, however, is singular. A better translation might be, “let the King come today—and Haman.”) Some ancient manuscripts wrote those letters in large script to call attention to that fact that they spell out the divine name, with some arguing that the author had included God’s name in coded form.

I am always amused by those who seek secret codes in the Bible – they generally ignore what God is plainly saying to them in his word while they seek secret hidden messages from God. Today, there is an entire industry built around supposed secret Bible codes, and those efforts display an ignorance of scripture as well as an ignorance of statistics. The Bible does have a message for them – but they do not need a secret decoder ring to understand it!

Verse 4 ends with Haman being invited to his own downfall—and looking forward to it! If Haman weren’t so despicable we would be tempted to feel sorry for him!

Esther 5:5-8

5 Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. 6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed. 7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is; 8 If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.

At the banquet, and after some drinks, the king again asks Esther what caused her to come before him unannounced – and once again he is understandably curious why she had risked death in doing so. But once again, Esther sidesteps the question, instead inviting them both to another banquet on the next day.

The king is so curious that, as we will see in a moment, he cannot sleep (which turns out to be very important). Haman, on the other hand, doesn't seem curious at all – he is just glad to be there! He seems to have been completely blinded by his pride.

Why did Esther make the king wait for an answer? It was certainly a risk because the king's agreeable mood could change quickly – Esther knew he was very moody and erratic, and Haman could be tipped off at any moment to the danger he was in.

Esther's answer suggests she was treating the king's promise as sort of a blank check that she could take with her – “I will do to morrow as the king hath said.” Why did she make him wait?

Esther is clever in how she words the request: “if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet.” She conditions the king's arrival at the second banquet on his willingness to grant her, as yet unrevealed, petition. If the king shows up, he has essentially agreed in advance to grant her petition.

Esther is also clever in how she loops Haman into the second banquet. For the first banquet, Esther said (verse 4) “let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for **him**” but for the second banquet she said (verse 8) “let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for **them**.” I think Esther has thought of a plan, and Haman's presence is required for the plan to work!

For whatever reason, the time was not right, and Esther wisely showed patience along with her courage – two qualities that do not always go hand in hand. We do know that the king had a sleepless night, likely because of this encounter, and that sleepless night would later prove very important. We will see God working through Esther's unexplained delay to see his plans accomplished.

There is a difficult translation issue in verse 7. That verse ends with the phrase “My petition and my request is,” but the next verse does not contain her petition. Her petition in response to the offer of half a kingdom is not that they come to another banquet, but rather is the request that Xerxes spare her people – a petition that is not made in verse 8. So why does verse 7 say “my petition is?”

The answer is that verse 7 does not say that, at least not in the original language. The verb “is” has been supplied by the translators. Esther's words in 5:7 are an incomplete thought. Esther begins to respond to the king, but she breaks off her answer. At the moment when the reader thinks Esther is about to save her people, she pauses and stops mid-sentence. A more accurate translation reads: “Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request... (LONG PAUSE) If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.”

Why does Esther begin this way, then suddenly break off? That is precisely the question the book wants us to ask. Is Esther afraid? Is she having second thoughts? Is the old Esther, the timid wallflower, reasserting herself? It seems that Esther has tricked us, building up our expectations, then disappointing us. Most likely, Esther just knew that this was not yet the right time to make her request known to the king. The perfect time to do that would come soon, but this was not it.

Who is Esther and who are her people? Although it looked like those questions were about to be finally answered in the throne room and then again at this banquet, those questions still remain unanswered in verse 8.