

Lesson 20

Things are clearly out of control for Haman in verse 14. The pace of events is accelerating, and he is now just along for the ride. The eunuchs have arrived and have “hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet” that Queen Esther has prepared. Maybe that banquet would turn things around for Haman! Let’s see...

Esther 7

Reversal continues to be a major theme in Chapter 7. In Chapter 3, Haman received the honor that Mordecai deserved. In Chapter 6, Mordecai received the honor that Haman had intended for himself. In Chapter 7, Haman will receive the punishment that he had intended for Mordecai.

As before, the reversal will hinge on a misunderstanding. In Chapter 6, Haman misunderstood the reason behind the king’s request for advice on how to honor such a deserving person. In Chapter 7, the king will misunderstand Haman’s motives in falling upon the queen’s couch. As evil as Haman is, he will ultimately be condemned for two crimes he did not commit – swindling the king and attempting to rape the queen.

We have already said that Esther is a textbook about God’s providence, and we will really learn some valuable lessons about that in Chapter 7.

The reader is asked to consider whether the hidden hand of God’s providence has been behind the many reversals we have seen in this book – and the eye of faith can come to no other conclusion. Esther’s elevation to queenship, Mordecai’s overhearing the plot against the king, the king’s sleepless night and the reading of Mordecai’s loyalty in the royal chronicles – who can miss the hand of God in these events?

In this chapter, however, we see something else at work – Esther’s intellect and Esther’s skill with people. Like Joseph, Esther has been placed in a situation where she has access to a foreign king, and she will use that access to bring deliverance to her people. Like Moses, Esther is in a remarkable position to save the children of Israel from bondage and death. But unlike either Joseph or Moses, Esther has no miraculous powers or divine insights.

God creates opportunities, but Esther must act upon them. It is a pattern that God repeats throughout Scripture, and throughout history. While God initiates the work of deliverance, there is also the human response required. God will part the Red Sea, but Moses must raise the staff. God will destroy the walls of Jericho, but the Israelites must blow the horns. God sends Jesus Christ to make the way of salvation, but humanity must still respond by obeying his gospel.

Esther 7:1-2

So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen. 2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.

As we mentioned in the introduction, feasting is a central theme in Esther. The book of Esther begins and concludes with pairs of feasts, with another pair of feasts occurring in between. In Chapter 1, Xerxes gave two consecutive feasts, and Chapter 9 will show the Jews observing two consecutive feasts to celebrate their deliverance. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 we see another pair of feasts, with Haman's downfall having begun to occur in between the two.

"The second day" in verse 2 refers to the day after the first banquet. It does not mean that this banquet lasted two days.

In verse 2, the King asks Esther for the third time what she wants him to do. Esther is in a delicate position because she somehow needs to accuse Haman without also accusing the king who had permitted Haman to act with his approval and authority. Esther knew better than anyone the weak and unstable despot she was dealing with. To be successful she must never act as if she is bringing a charge directly against the king.

Esther 7:3-7

3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: 4 For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage. 5 Then the king Ahasuerus answered and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so? 6 And Esther said, The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen. 7 And the king arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king.

The king asked two questions in verse 2 – What is your wish? What is your request? – although he was likely seeking just a single answer. Esther, however, gives him two answers in verse 3. She asks for her own life as her wish, and for the life of her people as her request. By that answer she is tying her own life to the life of her people, and at last she is telling the king that "her people" are not the same as his people. She is bringing herself under an irrevocable edict of death. The king had not been concerned about the destruction of an entire people, but the destruction of his queen would be a personal matter.

Compare Esther's statement in 7:3 ("If I have found favor in your sight, O king...") with her earlier statement in 5:8 ("If I have found favor in the sight of the king..."). Do you see the subtle difference? In the statement from Chapter 5, Esther addressed the king in the third person, which would have been the normal court protocol (e.g., your majesty, your royal highness). But here in Chapter 7, she addresses the king in the second person – "If I have found favor with you, O King." Esther had a special relationship with the king that was closer even than that of Haman, the king's closest advisor.

Esther next quotes the words used in Haman's edict – “For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated” – but she uses the passive voice to delay mentioning Haman's name or mentioning that the king had been a party to the sale of her people.

The ingenuity of Esther's tactics becomes evident here. Esther announcing that she had been sold must have mortified the king. And, by using the passive form of the verb, Esther cleverly avoids casting any blame on the king in this matter. Indeed, it would be possible for the king to imagine that Esther's distress has nothing to do with him at all. She also uses the personal pronoun “I,” striking home the fact that this queen, who (by the king's own admission) has pleased him and found favor in his sight, is now slated for execution. The decree is, in fact, an indirect attack on the king.

Esther had delayed this confrontation with the king three times – there was a delay in approaching the king the first time, there was a delay after she approached him the first time, and there was a delay after the first banquet. What is the result of these delays? Esther is prepared! She has had time to prepare her answer and come up with the best way to respond. If she has been praying, and we don't know if she has, then she has had time to do that as well. There are lessons here for us – a warning against hasty answers, and a lesson about the importance of being a prepared people.

1 Peter 3:15 – “and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” What is the key phrase in that command? “Be ready!” That is, be prepared! Failing to plan is planning to fail! Esther prepared herself.

And what will we find when we get back to Ezra? Ezra 7:10 – “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

We are the people of God! Let's not just wing it!

Once again, the book of Esther puts an ironic twist on what a Bible reader might have expected to happen here. In Genesis 38, Judah is confronted with his pregnant daughter-in-law, and when he demands to know who the father is, she announces that it is he himself. In 2 Samuel 12:1-10, David is confronted with the story of a man who killed his neighbor's pet lamb; when he demands to know who has done such a thing, he is told, “You are the man.” In 2 Samuel 14:1-22, a woman presents David with a grievance. When he rules that her case is just, she reveals that the story is really about David and his son Absalom. The result here in verse 5 starts out the same way – the king asks, “Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?” (Apparently the edict had made so little an impression on the king that Esther's quotation from the edict does not even ring a bell! But I bet it was ringing a bell with Haman!)

Here, the king was, in fact, responsible for selling the Jews into destruction. When the king expresses his outrage over the act, the stage is set for Esther to reveal that it is, in fact, Xerxes himself who is guilty. But that is not what happens. Instead, Esther points her finger at Haman, but she builds the suspense by not revealing Haman's name until the end of the clause: “A man, the oppressor and enemy – this wicked Haman!”

This language of God's people being sold reminds us of the language used in Deuteronomy 32:30 – “How should one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, except their Rock had sold them, and the LORD had shut them up?” That verse was telling Israel that they could not be

put to flight by a single individual unless their “Rock” had sold them.

Esther is implicating Haman in the conspiracy against the Jews, but the text may be taking an opportunity to remind us of the real reason why Israel found itself in this predicament. It is not only Haman who has “sold” them, but they had sold themselves.

Isaiah 50:1 – “Thus saith the LORD, Where is the bill of your mother’s divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away.”

We might ask whether the king even knows yet that Esther is Jewish. Haman never mentioned the Jews by name when he convinced the king to issue the edict, and Esther does not mention the Jews by name here. The King knows that Mordecai is a Jew (6:10), but he does not yet know that Esther and Mordecai are related. That fact is not revealed to him until 8:1. Just how clueless was this king? Did he even now know that Queen Esther is Jewish? He did if he had bothered to read his own edict against her people, which mentioned the Jews by name (3:13), but had he read the edict?

But the real genius of Esther’s appeal is that she will couch the affair in terms of the king’s self-interest—just as Haman had done in 3:8-9 when proposing the massacre. There, Haman appealed to the king’s greed: “it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them.” Esther does the same here.

In verse 4, she says: “But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue.” Why? Because, presumably, such a sale would have brought revenue to the king. This destruction, however, will not prove profitable to the king.

This brings us to last clause in verse 4, translated in the KJV as “although the enemy could not countervail the king’s damage.” That short clause has been called the most difficult and controversial phrase in the entire book of Esther. The difficulty arises from several factors:

- (1) The conjunction (“although” in the KJV) is typically rendered “because,” and can have several different meanings, including “that” or “but.”
- (2) The noun can mean “the enemy,” or it can mean “the trouble” or “the distress.”
- (3) The verbal phrase (“could not countervail” in the KJV) generally has the sense of comparison, but it can be rendered “equal to,” “worth,” “fitting” or “sufficient for,” depending on context.
- (4) The noun (“king’s damage” in the KJV), though common in post-biblical Hebrew, occurs only here in the Old Testament, and its meaning is disputed.

These problems have led to the line being translated and interpreted in a variety of ways.

“For the adversary who has done this is not worthy of the king’s court.”

“For the man who did evil against us has changed his behavior.”

“Because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”

“But no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.”

One commentary makes a good case for the following translation: “but the money of the oppressor is not equal to the financial loss of the king.”

First, it seems best to take the opening noun to refer to an enemy rather than just to distress. The same word is used two verses later to refer to an enemy. (“The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman.”) This also makes sense when viewed in context with the king’s question in 7:5. He asks who the person is who has done this thing. That would be the natural response if Esther had just stated that an enemy was attempting to swindle the king. If Esther had instead merely mentioned “distress,” then the natural response from the king would have been to ask, “How have you been sold?” rather than, “Who has done this?”

Second, the second noun in the phrase, as we said, occurs only here in the Old Testament. In non-Biblical writings, however, the same noun typically means financial damage. In light of the fact that Esther is portraying the edict against the Jews as a financial transaction, a similar meaning would make sense here. What financial loss would the king suffer? Lost income from taxation, as well as lost services that the Jews might otherwise provide. Haman had argued that the king should not put up with the Jews because they were not “profitable.” Esther argues here that the loss of the Jews will represent a financial blow to the king that Haman has not adequately compensated.

Third, the verb phrase “could not countervail” in the KJV is also uncommon. Outside the book of Esther, it occurs only in poetic contexts. It is used, however, two other times in Esther. It is used in 3:8, where Haman advises the king that it would not be “worth it” for him to put up with the Jews, and it is used in 5:13, where Haman states that all his riches and honors are “worth nothing” to him so long as Mordecai sits in the king’s gate. With the preposition found here, the verb typically means “equal to,” “comparable to,” or “worth,” as in Proverbs 3:15 – “She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.”

Literally, then, this clause could be translated, “The oppressor is not worth the financial loss of the king.” Given how much the book of Esther loves reversals, that reading seems appropriate. In 3:8-9, Haman told Xerxes that it was not profitable for the king to tolerate the Jews; now, Esther tells the king it is not profitable for him to endure Haman.

Most likely, when Esther mentions the oppressor, she is really referring to the oppressor’s bribe. But it would have been indelicate for Esther to explicitly mention the money that Haman had promised the king because that detail would have drawn attention to the king’s own responsibility in the affair.

In short, Esther’s appeal here is a request for her people to be spared, but it is couched in terms of the king’s financial interests. The Jews have been sold, but not as slaves. Presumably they would have brought market value in the slave trade, and the king would have received a large sum. But they have been sold simply to be destroyed, and the compensation the king received (as large as it was) was not sufficient to offset the loss of revenue from tribute, gifts, and labor that the king would receive from allowing the Jews to live.

There is certainly merit to Esther’s argument. While we do not know how many Jews lived in the Persian Empire, it could have numbered more than a million. According to the census taken by

Emperor Claudius in A.D. 48, there were about seven million Jews in the Roman Empire in the first century. If there were a million Jews in the Persian Empire, their value on the slave market would have far exceeded Haman's bribe. Haman offered the king 36 million shekels of silver for the destruction of the Jews. Slaves in the Persian era sold for about sixty to ninety shekels, so the Jews' "market value" would have far exceeded the value of the bribe. As Esther presented the issue, Haman appeared to be swindling King Xerxes out of a huge sum of money.

Another cunning aspect of Esther's plea is that it invites the king to consider the question of whether the Jews really deserved to be enslaved. According to Herodotus, rebellious vassals could indeed be sold as slaves. But how could Xerxes brand the Jews as rebels on the very day when he had ordered Mordecai to be honored for saving the king's life? If the Jews could not reasonably be painted as insurrectionists and sold as slaves, then they would surely not be deserving of the much harsher penalty of genocide.

Esther finally reveals the villain in verse 6, but, as we said, even then she delays mentioning his name until the very last word – "A hateful man and an enemy! This vile Haman!" We can almost see her emphasizing each word with a stabbing finger pointed straight at Haman.

There is a key phrase at the end of verse 6 that tells us exactly how this will all turn out for Haman – "the king and the queen." The fact that the king and queen are mentioned together shows us how her status has risen, even as she must beg for the king's mercy. Haman trembles before both the king and the queen, recognizing that she is as dangerous as her husband.

Yet another reversal has occurred: Haman was enraged when Mordecai did not shake before him (5:9); now it is the king who is enraged, and Haman who is trembling in terror.

Have you ever had a bad day? I mean, a *really* bad day? It has probably never been as bad as the day Haman was now having. Remember that he had just returned from leading Mordecai horseback through the city, and now he learns that the Queen is Jewish and thus subject to his edict of death. Can things get any worse? Yes! (You should never ask that question!)

The king has good cause to be enraged. Earlier, his anger flared when Queen Vashti refused to appear before him. Now, it appears that someone is trying to deprive him of his current queen – and that someone is his trusted advisor, Haman.

Torn between loyalty to his wife and to his second in command, the king does what any good commander would do in such a situation – he flees from the room! We already know that Xerxes is not a decisive man, and we already know that he does not commit himself to a course of action without input from his advisors. But now, it is his chief advisor who stands accused. From whom can he seek counsel?

Is he finally going to be forced to make a decision all on his own? Will his brain be able to stand the strain? Can he punish Haman for a plot that he himself approved? If so, won't he have to admit his own fault? And how can he revoke an irrevocable law?

And what does Haman do? Haman has moved to Plan B. He stands to plead for his life. This is yet another ironic reversal. Haman had been outraged when Mordecai the Jew refused to rise before him (5:9), but now Haman must stand before the Jewish queen to plead for his life.

He begs Esther for his life. Court protocol dictated that no man other than the king himself or a eunuch could be alone with a woman from the king's harem. (We don't know if Harbona in verse 9 was with the king in the garden or remained behind with Esther. And Haman was not a eunuch, at least not yet!) Haman should have left the queen's presence when the king left the room. But wouldn't that make him look guilty?

Even in the presence of others, no other man (who either wasn't a eunuch or didn't want to quickly become one) was allowed to come within seven steps of a woman from the king's harem. Haman forgets this rule as he falls on the couch where Esther was reclining. This was so unthinkable that some early Jewish commentaries said that Haman fell on the couch only because the angel Gabriel had given him a firm shove!

Haman knew that the real power in this situation lay not with King Xerxes. He turned instead to Queen Esther, not realizing that the real power behind his downfall was the God of Israel. But the King had made a promise to Queen Esther, and so in Haman's mind she was the only one who could save him now.

Esther 7:8-10

8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the bed whereon Esther was. Then said the king, Will he force the queen also before me in the house? As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. 9 And Harbonah, one of the chamberlains, said before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. Then the king said, Hang him thereon. 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.

Remember when we asked whether things could get any worse for poor Haman? They do in verse 8 with yet another remarkable coincidence. The king walks back into the room at the very moment that Haman falls on the couch, causing the king to ask, "Will he force the queen also before me in the house?"

When the king returns from the garden, Haman has fallen before Esther, prostrating himself in a manner that Mordecai had refused to do before him. Mordecai would not bow (3:2), nor would he stand (5:9), nor would he tremble (5:9). Haman is forced to tremble (7:6), then to stand (7:7), then to bow (7:8). The Jew could not be forced to humiliate himself before the Amalekite, even by the order of the king; but the Amalekite humiliates himself before a Jew willingly.

It was the custom of Persian nobles to recline on couches when they dined. Haman had risen from his couch, but Esther remained recumbent, seemingly unmoved by Haman's plight. In a severe breach of protocol, Haman throws himself on the queen. According to Plutarch, touching the Persian king's wife was a capital offense. In Assyrian law, no man was allowed to draw within more than seven paces of a member of the king's harem. Haman must surely have been out of his mind to have made such an error.

Many consider this scene to be the funniest in the book of Esther. The king has returned from his walk to find Haman sprawled atop the queen. Haman is begging for his life; the king accuses him instead of trying to force the queen. But the attack is not the real issue for the king: it is the fact that it occurs in his presence, “with me in the house.” It is not the insult to the queen, but the insult to the king that really matters here.

The king must have known that Haman had not seen this time as the perfect opportunity to assault the queen. Instead, the king interprets Haman’s actions that way so that he can condemn Haman without implicating himself in Haman’s plot against the Jews. Haman’s apparent assault will allow the king’s own complicity to remain hidden and unexamined. Even though he is guilty of many crimes, Haman is about to be executed for a crime he did not actually commit!

The end of verse 8 ends with an interesting detail – “they covered Haman’s face.” While it may have been customary in ancient Greece and Rome to cover the head of condemned prisoners, we are told that there is no evidence for such a practice among the Persians. (But, of course, that statement forgets that the book of Esther is itself evidence of such a practice!) Most likely it was done simply to keep the king from having to see Haman’s sad countenance, given how sensitive the Persian kings seem to have been to people appearing before them in distress. (See Nehemiah 2:2.) This covering also reminds us of Esther 6:12, where Haman rushed home with his head covered after his humiliation before Mordecai. That verse, we now see, foreshadowed this event where the servants covered his face for him.

Is it still possible for things to get even worse for Haman? Yes!

A very helpful eunuch (likely the same Harbona mentioned in 1:10) points out that there is a ready-made pike that can be used for eliminating troublesome Haman. Clearly, this eunuch had little love for Haman. He, and many others, had likely been mistreated by pompous, self-important Haman. An 1852 article said it well: “But apart from spiritual motives, a man’s true claim to refinement of character and good sense, is better tested by scarcely any social incident, than by the way he treats his inferiors in life. To insult or to abuse those who cannot resist, or dare not resent the injury, is a sure mark of cowardice.”

The eunuch tells the king that Haman had built a giant gallows for the purpose of killing Mordecai—the very person who had saved the king’s life and who had just been honored by the king. The king no doubt saw this revelation as a threat to his own life by the villainous Haman, who must, the King likely reasoned, have secret sympathies for the attempted assassins (whom the king must have feared, and rightly so because he would soon be assassinated). Haman would murder the king’s rescuer and attack the king’s wife on the same day.

Once again, the narrator gives us an ironic twist. Haman’s death occurs on the instrument of doom that he had created for Mordecai. The pike that was going to show everyone what happens to those who oppose Haman becomes the place for demonstrating what happens to those who oppose the Jews.

With Haman executed, the king’s anger abates. The wording is reminiscent of 2:1, where the king’s wrath against Vashti abated. In Chapter 1, the flaring of the king’s anger led to the removal of the queen; when it abated, he chose a new queen. In this chapter, his wrath meant the removal of

Haman. The abating of Xerxes' wrath signals the coming of Haman's replacement, which will occur in the next chapter.

Of all of the reversals in the book, Haman's reversal may be the greatest and most sudden. One day he was on top of the world, and the next day he is standing at the top of his own gallows. Overnight the tables had turned, and he did not see it coming. That same reversal awaits all who have plans opposed to the plan of God. "There's a great day coming, A great day coming, There's a great day coming by and by; When the saints and the sinners shall be parted right and left, Are you ready for that day to come?"