

## Lesson 8: Esther 4:15 – 7:7

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### Verses 15-17

15 Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 16 “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered 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 orders him to do. Esther has now taken charge. So far she has been passive, not taking action, but 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. This great reversal in the life of Esther led to the great reversal in the life of her people – and at this point she has finally answered Mordecai’s question – the Jews rather than 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. 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. Isn’t that what we see in the life of Esther? She became a different person once she stood up and 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)

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 author is calling for us to focus on her as she progresses and matures through these events. And perhaps the author is inviting his readers to compare her development with their own. Are we progressing and maturing? Unless we are perfect, 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 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.” Others though say that the phrase simply shows her courageous determination. As usual, the text does not tell us what she is thinking or what is motivating her. Each time we think we have her figured out, the text tosses us another puzzle.

Esther’s request that the people fast on her behalf may imply prayer, but the text does not mention it. The act of fasting also generally implies an appeal to God, but the text does not mention God.

Although fasts were generally practiced only during the day, this fast lasted both day and night. 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.

What would Esther do next? So far we have seen two acts of courage – Vashti in refusing to dishonor herself, and Mordecai in refusing to honor Haman. Will we see a third? God’s providence has brought Esther to this point. How will she respond?

## Esther 5

### Verses 1-4

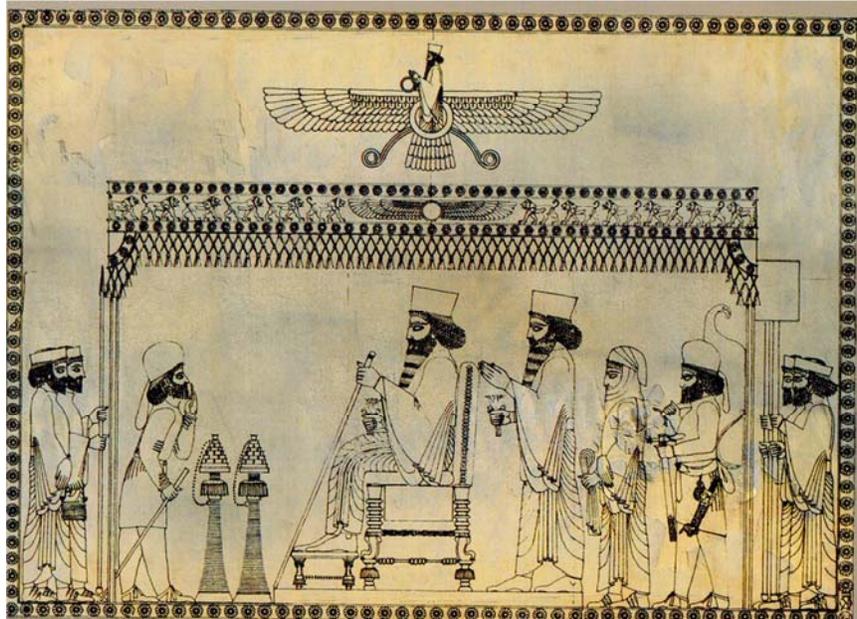
1 On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, in front of the king’s quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. 2 And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 3 And the king said to her,

“What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.” 4 And Esther said, “If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king.”

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.

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 questions 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 was real. 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 an idiom that was not meant to be taken literally. It simply meant that the king was disposed to be 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, Artaynte. 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 request and she asked for Artaynte’s mother (whom she believed was behind the affair). She had that woman brutally murdered, which led the woman’s husband, Xerxes’ brother, to instigate a revolt.

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. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7)

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. 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.

In verse 4, the initial Hebrew letters in the phrase “Let the King ... Come Today” spell out the divine name, Yahweh (YHWH).<sup>1</sup> Some ancient manuscripts wrote those letters in large script to call attention to that fact, 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: “Now the Spirit speaketh **expressly**, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith.” (1 Timothy 4:1)

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<sup>1</sup> Most English translations say “let the King and Haman come today.” The verb, however, is singular. A better translation might be, “may the King come today—and Haman.”

Verse 4 ends with Haman being invited to his own downfall—and looking forward to it!

### Verses 5-8

5 Then the king said, “Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked.” So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. 6 And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” 7 Then Esther answered, “My wish and my request is: 8 If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.”

At the banquet, and after some drinks, the king again asks Esther what had caused her to come before him unannounced – and once again he is understandably curious why she had risked death. 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 has been 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 – we know he was moody and erratic, and Haman could be tipped off at any moment to the danger he was in. Esther’s answer suggest she was treating the king’s promise as sort of a blank check that she could take with her – “tomorrow I will do as the king has said.” Why did she make him wait? 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 prove very important. Thus, the real answer for Esther’s delay is likely the providence of God working to see his plans accomplished.

### Verses 9-14

9 And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his

wife Zeresh. 11 And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. 12 Then Haman said, "Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. 13 Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." 14 Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

Verse 9 tells us that Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. Again, unlike others in the book, we are told exactly how Haman was feeling. Everything seemed to be going his way, and he was very happy. We can learn a lesson from the happiness of Haman – it depended solely on Haman's current circumstances. In this country, one of our unalienable rights is the pursuit of happiness – and we pursue it with abandon, which likely explains why the dominant emotion in our day is disappointment. Earthly happiness is a fickle friend, and, as Haman would soon discover, it comes and goes with the tides.

Haman's defining characteristic was his pride. We see his vast and tender ego on display all throughout this book. Peter Kreeft has said that "nothing distinguishes Christian morality from pagan morality more sharply than their opposite attitudes toward pride." Aristotle, for example, said that pride was a virtue. Haman is a perfect example of that pagan pride. Here is how C.S. Lewis described pride in his book *Mere Christianity*

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. ... There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. ...

[Pride] is the complete anti-God state of mind. ...

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-

looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. ...

[P]ower is what Pride really enjoys: there is nothing that makes a man feel so superior to others as being able to move them about like toy soldiers. ... If I am a proud man, then, as long as there is one man in the whole world more powerful, or richer, or cleverer than I, he is my rival and my enemy. ...

Pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God. ...

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. ... As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. ...

Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.

Pride violates the first and greatest commandment because pride loves self rather than God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. Pride is behind every other sin because every sin says to God, “*my* will be done.” Hell’s theme song is “I did it my way!”

And once again Haman’s pride meets Mordecai, and as usual, Mordecai does not disappoint. Apparently Haman had to pass by Mordecai on his way home, and Mordecai neither rose nor showed any fear when the great Haman passed by. This was even more of an affront than when Mordecai refused to bow down. So naturally, Haman takes the only reasonable course of action – he runs home and cries to his wife! (But first, verse 10 tells us, he “restrained himself.” You can just picture him feigning indifference at the slight while seething and plotting revenge inside.) He complains to his wife that nothing – not even his riches, his power, or his honor from the Queen – gives him any satisfaction so long as he sees Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate. It has been rightly said that a person of good character overlooks slights against himself, but one of inferior character magnifies them. Here is how Pascal described such a person:

[T]he same man who spends so many days and nights in fury and despair at losing some office or at some imaginary affront to his honor is the very one who knows that he is going to lose everything through death but feels neither anxiety nor emotion. It is a monstrous thing to see one and the same heart at once so sensitive to minor things and so strangely insensitive to the greatest. It is an incomprehensible spell, a supernatural torpor.

We see such a person in Haman. He is obsessed with Mordecai's opinion of him, while giving hardly a thought to his own attempted genocide of an entire people. He is propelled along by slights to his honor, whether real or imaginary. His focus is on how others saw him, and we see him giving no thought at all to what sort of person he really was. Haman's focus was totally external – which makes it doubly interesting that he is the only person in Esther whose inner thoughts are laid open for our examination.

There is a very subtle irony in the picture of Haman constantly running home to ask his wife how to solve his problem. Remember how this book started out? The king and his advisors were concerned that the Vashti incident would somehow undermine the male leadership in their society! Who do we see taking charge in this book? Esther and Zeresh – Xerxes' wife and Haman's wife!

With Haman and his wife Zeresh, we see a parallel with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Like Haman, Ahab was rebuffed by Naboth and then ran home sulking to his wife – and like Jezebel, Zeresh has a simple yet evil solution to the problem. Like Haman, Ahab also seemingly had everything – and yet he wanted just one more thing to be happy. How many have run their ships aground while searching for that one more thing! The key to contentment is to give up that never ending searching for just one more thing because whatever that one thing is, there will be another “just one thing” waiting in line behind it. You will never have enough.

Haman's wife proposes a public humiliation for Mordecai, so Haman builds a gallows that is as tall as his own pride – 75 feet! Critics have complained that no gallows would have been this tall – about the height of a 7-story building. But it is certainly not impossible, and it is also possible that it was built on top of a hill or a building. Haman wanted everyone to see Mordecai – and he is about to get his wish! Haman's plans are about to run head first into the providence of God.

It is often said that Jesus can be found on every page of the Old Testament. Is that true of Esther? Notice how Chapter 5 begins – “On the third day.” Can we not think of another, infinitely greater, champion of God’s people who arose to save them from certain death on the third day?

## Esther 6

### Verses 1-3

1 On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. 2 And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. 3 And the king said, “What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?” The king’s young men who attended him said, “Nothing has been done for him.”

One commentator says that Chapter 6 is “arguably the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible” (although Chapter 7 seems funnier to me). While Haman plots Mordecai’s death on a 75 foot gallows, the king plans to honor Mordecai for his faithful service. The unsuspecting Haman enters the king’s court, thinking the king must be planning to honor him – thinking to himself, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” in verse 6. “If ever there was a picture of pride going before a fall, Haman is it.” As one commentator noted, “Here the early bird is gotten by the worm!”

We begin to see here the series of seeming coincidences that we discussed in the introduction as Haman’s plan spirals out of control. The king just happens to have a sleepless night (although, as we have suggested, it might have been because of Esther’s delay in answering his question). The king just happens to have the chronicles read to him, and the service of Mordecai just happens to come to his attention at the moment Haman is plotting his death. Haman just happens to show up early and be there when the king asks for an advisor, and the king just happens to ask Haman for advice without initially mentioning Mordecai by name. Those who read the book with the eye of faith cannot miss seeing God in its pages, even though he is never named. As one commentator stated, these coincidences are the author’s cipher for “divinely arranged.” We cannot fail to see the hand of divine providence in such a series of events.

Asking for the chronicles to be read would be similar to asking today for the Congressional Record to be read – and each could provide a quick cure for insomnia.

It was important for a Persian king to reward those who were loyal as a way of promoting his own safety and security on the throne. Thus, the king was understandably upset to learn that Mordecai had never been honored for foiling the assassination plot against him five years earlier. Mordecai had no doubt been disappointed himself, and his apparent willingness to overlook it may tell us something about his character.

And why did the king fail to honor Mordecai? Once again I think we see the providence of God at work. It was important for God's plan that Mordecai be honored at the right time. Perhaps we need to look for God's providence in our own lives when things do not operate according to our own carefully arranged time schedule.

#### Verses 4-14

4 And the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. 5 And the king's young men told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." 6 So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" 7 And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, 8 let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. 9 And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" 10 Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." 11 So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." 12 Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. 13 And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the

Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.” 14 While they were yet talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

As one commentator notes, the question in verse 6 “creates instant dismay in the reader: how unfortunate that the king should consult Haman, of all people, on the way to reward Mordecai!” Haman, no doubt, would turn the king’s opinion against Mordecai or perhaps suggest some meaningless and unobservable honor. But the king does not mention Mordecai’s name when he asks the question, which allows Haman’s pride to take center stage once again just at the right time, and he asks himself a question in verse 6 that creates one of the funniest scenes in the Bible – “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” Whom indeed!

Haman can’t ask for a promotion for himself because he is already second only to the king. Haman selects a reward (wearing the king’s own robe and riding on the king’s own horse) that would reinforce his relation to the king in the eyes of the people. Today, it would be similar to the president allowing someone to use Air Force One – and I’m sure Haman was already looking forward to the trip! In fact, this great honor has made him forget about Mordecai for a short time – a very short time!

Rather than asking for wealth or power, Haman asks for honor and recognition – and here we see the driving force in his life: what do others think about him? Do they all know how wonderful he truly is? Haman is guided throughout this book by one overriding concern – how would others see him. He wanted nothing more than that others would see him as powerful and prestigious. Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai’s motivations come from inside – and the book tells us nothing about what they are thinking. Haman’s motivations, by contrast, are external – and the book tells us all that is on his mind.

Haman sees himself only through the eyes of others, and his happiness depends solely on how they see him. In Luke 6:26, Jesus said, “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” Our goal should never be to have everyone speak well of us – because many will do that only when we are wallowing in sin with them. If we are living for Jesus, then we should expect that many (and perhaps most) will not speak well of us. “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10)

To fully appreciate verse 10, you have to picture Haman's face as the king finally identifies the one to whom this special honor will go – none other than the despised Mordecai! And to make things funnier, Haman has no idea why the king would suddenly decide to honor this man that Haman was planning to kill. Talk about a reversal! And the reversal was far from over for poor Haman!

Notice that the king does not just tell Haman to honor Mordecai, he tells Haman to honor “Mordecai *the Jew*.” In addition to rubbing salt in Haman's wound, the reference by the king to Mordecai's nationality raises an interesting question. Did the king even know that he had condemned all the Jews to death? Remember that Haman never mentioned the Jews by name to the king.

In verse 11, Haman takes the robes and the horse, and he dresses Mordecai in them and leads him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” If I had written the book of Esther, I would have turned verse 11 into an entire chapter. Elsewhere we are told exactly what Haman was thinking – what was he thinking here? How did Mordecai react to the sudden reversal?

“Only an author with a sure hand and confidence in his reader would allow this climax in the bitter relationship between the two protagonists to pass with so few words and leave so much to the audience. A skilled author knows when not to say too much.”

And can't we picture the scene as they march all through the city in grim silence with the only words being Haman's proclamation, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” Can't we picture their faces? Just another example of why the book is always better than the movie!

Mordecai returns to the King's Gate, and what does Haman do next? What else? He runs back home to his wife! She and his friends seem to see the handwriting on the wall, and they begin to distance themselves from Haman – saying “you” (not “we”) will surely come to ruin! How did they know? Either God placed a word of prophecy on their tongue, or perhaps they knew about the ancient prophecy regarding the Agagites. Either way, they tell Haman the truth – he will soon come to ruin.

We usually focus on Esther's role in Haman's downfall, but note that his downfall was already inevitable by the end of this chapter—*before*

the confrontation with Esther. That is why most commentators point to the king's sleepless night as the pivot about which this book turns.

Yes, Haman is in trouble, but he has no time to worry about that because it is time to head for the feast with the Queen. Maybe that will take his mind off his troubles! Maybe that will lift his spirits! (Well, it will lift something!)

## Esther 7

### Verses 1-2

<p>1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."</p>
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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 other pairs 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 author of Esther is recounting these events using two literary devices – peripety and chiasm. (Or perhaps we should say that God used these devices in causing the events to occur as they did.) The first refers to a sudden turn of events that reverses the intended and expected action, and the second is a device in which elements in the story have corresponding parallels that occur in reverse order. (See the handout from our introductory class on Esther.) Many see the pivot point in this structure as being the king's sleepless night. If so, then choosing such a seemingly insignificant pivot highlights God's providential role in the events and takes the focus away from human actions. These reversals are not occurring by accident, but they are also not occurring due to the work of man.

As Christians, we have experienced the ultimate reversal of fortune – none could be greater! Although once formerly in exile, apart from God and expecting nothing but death, we experienced a reversal. And the pivot for that reversal was a seemingly insignificant event – the birth of a baby in Bethlehem and his later execution on a cross. To the world it seems foolishness – but to us it is the power of God!

And what about those outside of Christ? They are following the path of Haman, and like him they are heading for a huge reversal in fortune. And like Haman, they will discover that they were caught in a web of their own making. “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” (C. S. Lewis)

In Chapter 7, the King asks Esther for the third time what she wanted him to do. Esther was in a delicate position because she somehow needed 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.

### Verses 3-7

3 Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” 6 And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. 7 And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was 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.

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. This tactic reminds us of Nathan’s confrontation of David in 2 Samuel 12. The result in verse 5 is the same – the king asks, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” (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!)

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 (3:13), but had he?

Esther finally reveals the villain in verse 6, but 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.

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 can any worse? Yes! (You should never ask that question!)

The king is clearly suffering from information overload, and so he heads out to the garden to think. 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 approved? If so, won’t he have to admit his own fault? And how can he revoke an irrevocable law?

Meanwhile Haman has moved to Plan B. He begs Esther for his life. Court protocol dictated that no one but the king 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.) But

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 due to 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.