

## ESTHER 4:1 – 5:8

1) Even though the version we have of Esther in our bibles never mentions God, Faith in God is implicit through and through. When Mordecai hears what Haman has engineered in terms of the decree to exterminate all Jews, he “wails with a loud and bitter cry.” Moreover, he dresses in sackcloth and covers his body with ashes - a public expression of mourning. We are also told that all Jews throughout the empire do the same. They weep, lament and fast. Now fasting is always accompanied by prayer in the bible. Without a doubt, Mordecai and his fellow Jews are uttering heart-felt cries to God for deliverance.

2) When Esther hears of her cousin’s public display of grief, she does two things. She sends a messenger to inquire why Mordecai is doing this. But she also sends some clothes so that Mordecai may dress himself and clean himself up. Is he an embarrassment to her? Up to this point, we have no sense that Esther is but a young girl absorbed in her life. Unlike Vashti and Mordecai, she has not had to stand up for anything that could cost her.

3) Now, the relationship between Mordecai and Esther begins to change. First, Mordecai sends her a message and tells her straight up what’s going on. Up to now, he has done everything to protect her. Now he is challenging her to risk her life for the sake of their people. Here, again, we get a further glimpse into Mordecai’s character. Whereas Haman and King Ahasuerus are driven by personal ambition, luxury, emotional tantrums, and the pleasures of the moment, Mordecai has the interests of his people in mind, as well as the welfare of the king. He is not afraid to stand up to his principles, on behalf of his faith, and he will not hide his principles under the carpet. He challenges Esther to grow up and do the same.

4) Mordecai tells Esther that if she doesn’t do something about the imminent attack on her people, two things will happen. First, she herself and her family will also be part of the casualties. Second, if she doesn’t stand up and do something for her people, “relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter.” (4:14) Is this not a statement of faith? God will deliver the Jews as God has always promised. Mordecai believes this, even though he wrestles with the worst possible scenario - the suffering and slaughter of his people. Finally, Mordecai tells Esther that perhaps this very situation explains the mysterious reasons why she has been put in the position of queen. Mordecai is not some fundamentalist who believes everything happens for a reason and everything is predetermined according to some divine plan. However, the miraculous coincidence of Esther being where she is, raises the challenge for her to make the kinds of choices that would justify her being queen for reasons beyond her own security and advancement. There’s something bigger at play here and Esther has to rise to it.

5) At this point, there is a profound shift in Esther. She has to grow up and take charge. Now she is the one to tell her cousin what to do. The roles are reversed. Moreover, we

are let in to Esther's spiritual life. She tells her cousin to get the word out to all the Jews living in Susa. They must fast (pray) for 3 days and 3 nights, and she will do the same. Clearly, this is a petition for God's help in whatever she will attempt to do. And what Esther will attempt to do is very risky. She has to be willing to risk her life. The King has not sent for her for 30 days, so the likelihood that she would get an invitation without asking for one is slim. The problem with asking for one is that there is a law (another ridiculous one) that states that unless bidden, no one can come into the king's presence, and if he does not hold out his scepter, death is certain.

6) Esther plans serious strategy and reveals that she is every bit the queen that Vashti was. And more, Esther will strategize in such a way so as to change a law the king and his top official have just shaken hands on. Imagine that, a woman overturning the decisions of the two most powerful men in the empire. But things become even more ironic. As a woman, Esther's power of persuasion is her beauty and her charm. Once she has the king wrapped around her finger, she gives the orders, so to speak, telling the king and summoning Haman to a banquet she has prepared. Once they are there, she tells them they must come to another banquet the following day. She is softening up the king and committing him to grant any request Esther makes of him "even to half my kingdom." What a fool of a king, except in this case, the right strategy may pay off.

## ESTHER 5:9 – 6:14

In this section, we begin to get an ominous feeling about Haman's fate, and hope for Mordecai's vindication. We also get to ponder more deeply the way divine providence works in the midst of the choices and seemingly random occurrences of life.

1) In chapters 5-6 Haman really comes across as a pathetic human being. He is so singularly driven by his ego and his thirst for honour and glory. Yet his ego is so fragile that one man's (Mordecai's) apparent disregard for him is enough to spoil his happiness.

After the first day of banqueting with the King and Queen, Haman is very happy. Who holds a greater position in the kingdom after the king but him?

But then, he runs into Mordecai, still sitting there by the King's gate, dressed in sackcloth, and covered in ashes. Instead of getting up to bow down before Haman, Mordecai continues to sit down. At that moment, should Haman not feel gratified that Mordecai's day of reckoning is coming, and that of his people the Jews? Yet Mordecai's apparent disregard of Haman is enough to totally ruin Haman's good mood. Once he arrives home, though, he is pleased to call his wife and friends together and narrate to them all the honours, riches and good fortune that have befallen him. But even this is not enough to satisfy his ego-hungry heart. Mordecai's continued existence is a sharp thorn in his fragile ego. How will he find relief?

His wife, Zareh, and his friends offer the answer. Build gallows upon which to hang Mordecai. Build it so high that everyone in the city will see it. If Mordecai refuses to get

up in your presence, hang him so high he won't have a choice but to "get up". Secure permission from the king to hang him first thing in the morning, and then go off to your banquet.

2) While Haman is having a good night's sleep secure in his plan to deal with Mordecai sooner than later, the king is having trouble sleeping. As any sleep doctor will tell us, if sleep doesn't come, get up and read and then try sleeping again. That's what the king does. His bedtime reading, though, is the book of records and annals of things that people have done that are noteworthy. Mordecai's act of loyalty to the king is recounted. The king realizes that Mordecai has never been rewarded properly. He knows Mordecai is a Jew (6:10), but he doesn't know his relation to Esther.

In the morning, just as Haman is coming to make his request of the king, the king speaks to Haman first. He asks Haman's advice (the king is always asking others what he should do). "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honour?" Given Haman's egocentric personality he presumes the king is speaking about him. Well, replies Haman, what I would want is this: "For the man whom the king wishes to honour, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on his head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials; let him robe the man whom the king wishes to honour and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: "thus shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honour."" Poor Haman! Little does he realize this is what he will be called to do for Mordecai, of all people! He does what he is bidden to do. Instead of having Mordecai hanged, he has him honoured, publicly, in the way he would want himself honoured. He is now forced to bow down before Mordecai! Can the humiliation be any worse?!

We are not told how Mordecai reacts to this honour. He must have found it strange. But he submits to it all. He then returns to his post by the King's gate. Haman, however, is so distraught he runs home "mourning and with his head covered." Strangely, where his wife and friends were supportive before, they now appear fatalistic and gloomy. Mordecai's apparently temporary vindication over Haman may not be temporary at all. And part of this fearful prophecy is tied to the Jewish people (vs 14). Is it that the Jewish people have a strength to them and protection over them that is reputed? Is there a fear that their God will deliver them and punish their enemies? We're not told.