

ESTHER 7:1 - 8:17

Before we have time to ponder the ominous clouds gathering over Haman, he is escorted by the King's servants to the great banquet at which he is a special guest.

1) Esther sets up the King and Haman masterfully. She builds up the King to the point where he is pleading with her to tell him her request. He is persistent and consistent in the promise that anything she asks will be granted her. Esther's petition and request are presented brilliantly. She petitions for her life and requests the rescue of her people from destruction. It's one thing to be sold into slavery, but it's quite another to be marked for annihilation. The King is totally stunned by this petition and request because he has no clue what she is talking about. His rage (typical reaction of the King as we have seen, especially after a few drinks) is activated on Esther's behalf: "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" We can imagine Haman shaking from head to toe at this point. Esther doesn't hold back: "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Haman is terrified, while the King is so angry he gets up and goes out to take a walk. In the king's absence Haman goes over to Esther and pleads for his life. Now he is kneeling and begging, as he wanted Mordecai and everyone else to do before him, and to a woman and a Jew! Unfortunately for Haman, the king comes in at that very moment and presumes Haman is making a pass at the Queen, or even trying to assault her. Haman is innocent of this charge, but at this point, there is no hope for him.

2) The story of Esther is about reversals of fortune. But it is also about irony, with a mix of comedy and tragedy. Vashti is rejected as Queen because she asserts her will as a woman. As this story progresses, Esther is asserting her will in a way far beyond Vashti, and she will succeed. The fate of the Jews and the fate of womanhood in the empire seem to be intertwined.

Also, every honour and privilege Haman has received, are transferred directly to Mordecai, while the fate Haman had imagined for Mordecai is transferred to him. Mordecai inherits Haman's house and wealth, his position, even his signet ring. Though the decree crafted by Haman and sealed by the King cannot be reversed, Mordecai is given the freedom and power to write another decree, also sealed by the king, giving full range of power to the Jews to defend themselves from all those who would attack them.

Ironically, while Susa is thrown into confusion and distress with the first decree, there is joy at this new one. The Jews seem to be popular in the empire for reasons we are not told. Moreover, given their total reversal of fortunes, it is now popular to be Jewish. In the beginning of our story Mordecai tells Esther not to reveal her nationality. Now, even those who aren't Jews want to convert or pretend they are Jewish.

The comedy in this story is that the King continues to be told what to do by others. First Haman, then Esther, then his eunuch - Harbona, who comes up with a creative way to deal with Haman. And finally, Mordecai is the mastermind behind the new decree and its communication throughout the empire. Given that Mordecai is a man who will risk his life for his principles, he can be trusted, unlike Haman whose sole motive is his own advancement and glory.

3) Divine providence works in mysterious ways in this story. A combination of random occurrences at the right time - Esther becoming Queen, Mordecai overhearing the plot to assassinate the king, Esther rising to the challenge of confronting the problem of Jewish survival, the King's bad night sleep and noticing Mordecai's deed of loyalty, and Esther's success in turning the tables on Haman and persuading the king. Was this all planned? No. But, without the right people making the right choices at the right time, things could have turned out very differently. God gave the faith, the gifts, and the courage needed for something like this to happen. This is the way "providence" works (God will provide a way).

ESTHER 9-10

1) The first thing we must establish as we read chapter 9 is that we, as Christians, cannot countenance the purported actions of the Jewish people in response to the threat on their lives. Jesus didn't say that we should get even with our enemies and get the upper hand over them. He said that we should love our enemies and try to find ways to be reconciled with them, without resorting to violence, and eschewing completely revenge as a motive.

But is revenge the motivation of the Jews against their enemies. No. It is not revenge that motivates them but security and safety. By doing away with their enemies, they will be safe and they can continue to live in the empire without fear for their lives. But was there no other way they could have acted toward their enemies than slaughtering them? About this Jesus would have much to say, as would Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, and many others. Gaining power over others by force, by instilling fear, by killing, is not a long-term solution. For what happens if things are reversed some day? Mordecai would not live forever and neither would Esther. Was there no more creative solution to "dealing" with their enemies?

2) Having said all this, though, we must acknowledge that the Jews responded to their enemies with restraint. It could have been worse. How do we know this? First of all, we are told that on the appointed day of revenge, the Jews are not to take any of the plunder of their enemies. In other words, the only thing they can take is their lives, not their possessions. Their possessions are left to their remaining families, children, wives, etc. This is important to note for as we know in most cases of massacre, people's homes and valuables are taken over, and whole families are killed. Even in the case of Haman's family, we are told only that his 10 sons are killed, not his wife Zaresh or anyone else related to him. The women survive.

Second, the killing only takes place over two days. It's not unlimited. This means that after these two days the Jews can't just have a free hand with their enemies. It stops, it ends. This is security for those who are not Jews, and even for any enemies left alive. They are now safe from harm. They don't have to go on living in fear for their lives. We know full well that Jews lived in fear in the empire. This is why Mordecai told Esther to

conceal her Jewishness. It wasn't safe to be a Jew. Now this situation has been reversed completely. But just because the Jews are now a favoured people, it doesn't mean other peoples or groups have to live in fear. The Jews are only interested to keep themselves safe and protected, not to have domination over others.

Finally, the numbers of those killed are exaggerated, just as the number of provinces in Persia are exaggerated. In different versions of the story the numbers are much lower. There are only so many people that can be killed in two days.

3) Purim is established as a holiday for the Jews. The date for Purim is established by the original decree devised by Haman. The date was chosen by casting lots or "Pur". This date, which was to be one of mourning, has been changed to one of victory and celebration. It is significant that this holiday is not intended as one where old hatreds are to be relived. Rather, gifts of food are to be exchanged and help to the poor offered. One of the special parts of the celebration is the re-telling of the story of Esther, often through dramatization. Every time Haman's name is mentioned people are to shake rattles called "graggers". One of the traditions that has evolved in this holiday is that revelers are allowed to drink until they cannot tell the difference between statements like "blessed be Mordecai" and "cursed be Haman."

4) Esther goes through a steady transformation, from a young girl deferring to Mordecai's counsel, to a strong woman who uses her intelligence and charm to engineer the salvation of her people. By the end of the story she is not second to Mordecai but his equal. She also raises herself in her relationship with the king, no longer barred from his presence unless called for. The equality of Esther with Mordecai, and even the king, connects to the beginning of the story and Vashti's fate. Where Vashti and all women of the kingdom are supposedly put in their place, Esther seems to represent a new day for women and their fate in the empire. The story of Esther definitely sides with Vashti and the greater equality of women with men. Even Haman's wife Zareh plays a significant role in advising her husband as well as predicting his doom. But to be equal with men in a society stacked against them, women have to out-smart the men which they do with great success in this story.

5) Where is God in the book of Esther? We have already referred to the role of providence and the religious commitments of Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman, and a significant factor in this is related to his faith that only to God is a Jew to bow down. Second, Esther and Mordecai fast and offer prayers in their time of trouble. In Chapter 9, the command for the Jews not to touch the enemies plunder is not only about restraint out of mercy. It is also a plea not to be contaminated by taking what is unclean (non-Jewish). In a more indirect, yet equally profound sense we can see God in the development of Esther's character. She rises to the challenge of trying to help save her people. She makes choices and acts in such a way that makes it possible for good to come out of a potentially disastrous conclusion. Such courage and confidence is also a gift of God, as is the grace of compassion and forgiveness. Maybe Esther had more of the former gifts than the latter.