

ESTHER

5:1-6:14

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Taught at our Sunday evening service, 13th November 2022 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Luke 14:7-11

Good evening. Let's pray.

Introduction

This is week 4 of 6 in our Bible study of the book of Esther, the events of which took place around 2500 years ago in what today we know as Iran, which was then part of the Medo-Persian empire.

I've mentioned a few times, that while God isn't directly mentioned in this book, we see His providence at work throughout it - and we'll definitely see that tonight as we study chapters 5 & 6.

Overview of Esther

Before we get stuck in, here's our weekly reminder of how the book is laid out, to help remind us of the context of these 2 chapters that we're going to look at this evening:

- Chapter 1 (22 verses) - The King removes Vashti as Queen
- Chapter 2 (23 verses) - Esther is made Queen, while Mordecai uncovers a plot
- Chapter 3 (15 verses) - Haman plots against the Jews
- Chapter 4 (17 verses) - Esther agrees to help the Jews
- Chapter 5 (14 verses) - Esther sets a banquet while Haman plots against Mordecai
- Chapter 6 (14 verses) - The King can't sleep and Mordecai is honoured
- Chapter 7 (10 verses) - Haman's plot is unveiled but he is killed instead
- Chapter 8 (17 verses) - Haman's plot against the Jews is reversed
- Chapter 9 (32 verses) - The Jews overcome their enemies
- Chapter 10 (3 verses) - Mordecai's position remembered

Overview of chapter five

Breaking these chapters down, we see in chapter five:

- v1-8 - Esther's boldness
- v9-13 - Haman's bitterness
- v14 - Zeresh's encouragement

Overview of chapter six

Then in chapter 6 we'll see:

- v1-5 - The king can't sleep
- v6-9 - Haman's pride
- v10-11 - Mordecai's recognition
- v12-14 - Zeresh's perception

Recap of chapter four

Now, back in chapter 4 we saw Mordecai, Queen Esther's older cousin, encourage her to speak to the king in an attempt to save the life of every single Jew in the kingdom, as each one had been sentenced to death by law. For the queen to speak to the king seems a simple request, yet in the culture of the time the default was for anyone who entered the king's presence unannounced to be put to death - the *only* exception being those to whom the king held out his sceptre - and Esther had not been called before him in a month. Understandably then she was hesitant at making a move that could cost her life - yet at the end of chapter 4 we saw it noted how she committed to doing so, preceded by 3 days of fasting, saying "if I perish, I perish!". It was a huge commitment, the timing of which was also significant as we'll see.

Chapter five

So, picking up in chapter 5 verse 1 we read...

Esther 5:1

Now it happened on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, across from the king's house, while the king sat on his royal throne in the royal house, facing the entrance of the house.

Esther did exactly as she said she would, exactly when she said she would. That's quite refreshing isn't it - because we're all let down in small ways by others, right? But of course, we should reflect how good we are at keeping our commitments - so that our yes means yes, and no means no, as Jesus instructed us to in Matthew chapter 5.

And we see that Esther also made herself as presentable as possible. She put effort into what she did. Perhaps testament to her character, but perhaps it also speaks of the king's character - indeed, he hadn't rejected the suggestion for what was essentially a beauty contest to find a new queen!

We continue...

Esther 5:2

So it was, when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, that she found favour in his sight, and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. Then Esther went near and touched the top of the sceptre.

The king is pleased to see Esther, and her life is spared - for now. However, her work isn't yet done as she still needs to deliver the plea for help. So how will she do it? How will the king react?

We'll see the most favourable outcome of this - but we'd be mistaken for thinking it was simply down to Esther's charm, or the king's mood on the day. For God is working things together for His purposes here - and as we read in Proverbs:

Proverbs 21:1

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.

And this moment we see...

Esther 5:3

And the king said to her, "What do you wish, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given to you—up to half the kingdom!"

Given the culture, the king would surely have appreciated that Esther would only have come before him if there was a need - she wouldn't have risked her life to simply ask if he wanted a cuppa. And so the king asks her what she wants.

But he also makes this huge gesture of saying he'd give anything she wanted, up to half the kingdom! I think that's a clear indication of how he felt toward Esther, but also reflective of how many men are, and not necessarily in a good way. We see the same phrase uttered by King Herod to Herodias' daughter after she had danced in front of him. And sadly far too many men have given up family or careers because of their wandering eye leading to compromise - costing them even more than half their kingdom. We'd do well to keep in mind that sin will take you further than you wanted to go, keep you longer than you wanted to stay, and cost you more than you wanted to pay.

In this case, was it the king's shallowness that led him to offer this? We don't know. Maybe it was his love for Esther (though to be fair, he hadn't asked for her in 30 days!). But either way, the door is open for Esther to make her request.

However, evidently, she wants Haman to be present as she informs the king of what Haman has plotted against the Jews, for we read:

Esther 5:4

So Esther answered, "If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him."

This banquet was already prepared, so clearly part of her plan, and she now moves from appealing from his eyes to his belly - I think Esther understood men very well indeed!

Esther 5:5

Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, that he may do as Esther has said." So the king and Haman went to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

This is yet another indication of his view of Queen Esther, for Haman had been elevated very highly in the kingdom, yet he is to do as Esther said.

Esther 5:6

At the banquet of wine the king said to Esther, "What is your petition? It shall be granted you. What is your request, up to half the kingdom? It shall be done!"

Maybe Esther knew the king's susceptibility to acting without consideration when drinking - she surely knew of what had happened to Queen Vashti - and we see here the king repeats this generous and open offer to Esther.

And so Esther has her opportunity. What happens? We read...

Esther 5:7-8

Then Esther answered and said, "My petition and request is this: If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfil my request, then let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

What is Esther thinking at this moment? Is she nervous? Is she even fearful? Is she worried about how to deliver the news and her plea? Maybe all those things. But just maybe God prompted her somehow saying "not yet", for this additional day will make all the difference. And she invites the king and Haman to another banquet the following day (obviously the king doesn't mind feasting given his 187 day stint in chapter 1).

Esther 5:9

So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with indignation against Mordecai.

So far, everything has been going well for Haman. Except for this one man who will not bow before him, and he is full of indignation against him; he's furious with him. We might be able to understand some offence was caused - but what we see in Haman is something extreme, because it consumes him. The Hebrew word behind this indicates the idea, among other things, of poison. But no matter how much he wants Mordecai to suffer, it is actually himself that is suffering as a result of his own attitude. And as we'll see in both the coming verses and next chapter, he is full of pride - and pride never takes kindly to someone refusing to massage it.

As for Mordecai, he didn't tremble before the man who had made his murder a requirement of the law. Why? Well, for one he has an Esther on the inside. But secondly, remember his confidence when talking to Esther, stating that even if she didn't help, that help would come from another source to deliver the Jews? At this stage he is not worried as some might be.

With Haman's pride bubbling away, the passage continues...

Esther 5:10

Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh.

He's clearly worked up, and he wants an audience.

Esther 5:11-12

Then Haman told them of his great riches, the multitude of his children, everything in which the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and servants of the king. Moreover Haman said, "Besides, Queen Esther invited no one but me to come in with the king to the banquet that she prepared; and tomorrow I am again invited by her, along with the king.

Haman is worked up, and puffed up. Like a peacock displaying it's feathers, Haman is telling his wife and friends how wonderful he is. How rich he is, how many children he has, how he has been promoted above everyone else. If social media had existed at this time, then maybe he'd have been splurging this all over Facebook and Instagram. Because we all know, you and I included, that we only post the good things that happen to us, right?

But Haman's life isn't quite as amazing as he wanted it to be. Why? Because pride isn't merely content with having. But having more than others. Not only through it's own gain, but through other's loss. It's pride that says, like the Pharisee; "God, I thank You that I am not like other men".

Pride not only puffs up, but looks down on others. It's the opposite of humility, which is what we are to pursue as Christians. And Haman won't be happy unless Mordecai is unhappy - we read:

Esther 5:13

Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

Obviously this is a horrible attitude toward Mordecai, but it's also an impatient one as within a year all Jews are set to be annihilated by the very law Haman set in place. But that won't do for Haman's ego - Mordecai must be dealt with far sooner than that. And that's seemingly far more important than all the good things he has.

As CS Lewis said:

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

We continue in verse 14:

Esther 5:14

Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows be made, fifty cubits high, and in the morning suggest to the king that Mordecai be hanged on it; then go merrily with the king to the banquet." And the thing pleased Haman; so he had the gallows made.

This will prove to be bad advice. And so let it be a reminder to us to beware what advice we listen to! All the while Haman prospers, he hears advice that only affirms his choices. But that's not helpful, or Biblical. One good thing I saw on Twitter this week was this:

World: "Follow your heart."

Jesus: "Follow me."

World: "Believe in yourself."

Jesus: "Believe in me."

World: "Discover yourself."

Jesus: "Deny yourself."

World: "Be true to you."

Jesus: "Be true to me."

Matt Smethurst

Sometimes, we really do need people to tell us we're being stupid. At the very least, to caution or correct us in the direction we're going. And having no-one in your life who is prepared to disagree with you is a recipe for disaster.

Here, encouraged by his wife and friends, Haman builds ridiculously tall gallows on which to hang Mordecai - at least 75 feet high. Little does he know that it will be he that hangs from those very gallows before the next day is done.

Chapter six

Continuing straight into the next chapter we read:

Esther 6:1

That night the king could not sleep. So one was commanded to bring the book of the records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.

Now first, I must apologise for in previous weeks I'd summarised this moment as the king's dream - but it's very much not a dream, for the king can't sleep. And so he asks for something that presumably will help him get there - he asks for the records of what has taken place in the kingdom, which one would assume were not typically Hollywood blockbuster material. This is perhaps the equivalent of reading meeting notes from your job. I often joke with Siân that if she can't sleep, I have several work documents she could try reading!

But as these records are read, something catches the king's attention and instead keeps him awake:

Esther 6:2

And it was found written that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, the doorkeepers who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

So what is happening here is that Mordecai's discovery of and informing the king of an assassination attempt against him, are being recalled from the national archives - the same events that are recorded at the end of chapter 2 of this book. And we know from the timing given in chapter 3, that this is about 5 years before what we're reading in chapter 6 this evening.

But of all nights for the king to both struggle to sleep, and for this specific event to be recalled to him - it is this one, the night before Haman is intending to ask for Mordecai to be killed. Is that coincidence? I think not. As J Vernon McGee puts it "Little things are beginning to pile up and reveal God's hand in the glove of human circumstances. God is moving. He is overruling. It was no accident that Esther became queen. It was no accident that she presented herself to the king and found favor in his sight. It was no accident that he accepted her invitation to a banquet. Now he is unable to sleep, and it is no accident that the servant began to read at a certain place."

And I would suggest there are many things in our lives that are not coincidence either, but rather the hand of God working things together for our good and His glory. I've seen it in my life in some wonderful ways.

Esther 6:3

Then the king said, "What honour or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?"
And the king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him."

Take that in for a moment - Mordecai saved the king's life, yet received no reward. Even though 5 years have passed without recognition, there is no record of complaint from Mordecai, and we know he had continued to serve the king. That's such a good example to us.

If we'll only serve if there are thank-yous and public acknowledgement of what we've done, then our attitude stinks. The Christian should be humble and not proud. That doesn't mean we shouldn't show thanks to others, but our own service should not be found lacking because we received none ourselves.

Mordecai's example here is commendable - he may have missed out on reward in the moment, but the payoff is going to be huge now. And that should remind us of what we read in Luke 14:

Luke 14:7-11

So He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how they chose the best places, saying to them: "When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honourable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher!' Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Oh how we'll see that play out in this chapter and the next! Let's continue...

Esther 6:4-5

So the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to suggest that the king hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him. The king's servants said to him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in."

This conversation isn't going to turn out how Haman had pictured in his head!

Esther 6:6

So Haman came in, and the king asked him, "What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?" Now Haman thought in his heart, "Whom would the king delight to honour more than me?"

Here is pride at work! Haman could think of no-one better than himself.

Esther 6:7-9

And Haman answered the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honour, let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head. Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honour. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour!' "

Oh how Haman would have benefitted from having read Proverbs 18:13...

Proverbs 18:13

He who answers a matter before he hears it,
It is folly and shame to him.

But Haman is full of pride, no doubt picturing himself receiving all these things. One commentator even suggests he had one eye on the throne itself - and I can believe that. But what a difference a verse makes...

Esther 6:10

Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king's gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken."

Oh what a shock it must have been to his ego to realise that all the recognition he had been suggesting for himself, was in fact to be placed on the man he hated the most! Rather than make Mordecai a public spectacle on the gallows he had made, Haman would now have to honour him with his own hands and his own lips in front of the entire city.

Esther 6:11

So Haman took the robe and the horse, arrayed Mordecai and led him on horseback through the city square, and proclaimed before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour!"

So, sure enough he does it... why? Because of the absolute power of the king. Haman cannot refuse.

Esther 6:12

Afterward Mordecai went back to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered.

Mordecai goes back to his regular position this day, again not requesting anything more than had been given to him. We'll see in chapter 10 though, that greater position was given to him in God's timing, just as with Joseph and with Daniel.

But on the contrary, this deeply troubles Haman. He returns with his head covered. He's ashamed. Like racing drivers after they've crashed out the race don't often remove their helmets on the way back to the garage, so you can picture Haman doesn't want to talk to anyone. This public humiliation had hurt.

Esther 6:13

When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him."

Wow, thanks! Haman must have thought. His wife and friends, who had encouraged him on, now see that this has worked for his destruction! Instead of "yay, go hang Mordecai" they now seem to be saying "that was a mistake and you'll probably die soon". Again, be careful who you place around you and who you listen to!

Esther 6:14

While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs came, and hastened to bring Haman to the banquet which Esther had prepared.

There is no time for Haman to form a new plan. He is now at the mercy of all that is going on - at the mercy of the careful plan that Esther had put together. But more than that, God is orchestrating events so that Haman's plot does not succeed.

And we'll look what happens following this when we pick up our study next week in chapter 7.

Application questions

Reflecting on the vivid examples of character in this chapter, I suggest asking yourself these questions in the week ahead:

- Do you do the things you commit to, when you said you would? (like Esther did)
- Are you indignant or bitter toward anyone about anything? (like Haman was)
- In what ways are you prideful? What are you doing about it? (don't let it fester)
- Are you willing for God to exalt you in His timing, not yours? (are you humble?)

To close, I want to quote something from JC Ryle who said:

Pride is the oldest and most common of sins. Humility is the rarest and most beautiful of graces.

JC Ryle

Let us humble ourselves, and not puff ourselves up in pride.

Let's pray.