

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Esther 4 and 5

Last week we were introduced to Haman, who was not a Persian, but an Amelekite. The Amelekites and Jews had been feuding for many generations. The king had elevated him to the highest position in the kingdom and demanded that all kneel and bow before Haman. But when Mordecai, Esther's cousin, saw Haman, he refused to bow. Jews only bow before God - not men or idols. Haman was filled with rage. When Haman discovered that Mordecai was Jewish, he successfully persuaded king Xerxes to enact a decree to destroy all the Jews.

Together they chose the date of this horrific day in an outrageous way. Haman rolled ancient dice, known as *Pur* in Hebrew, and the decree was set. Eleven months later, on the 13th day of the month of Adar, all the Jews, men women, and children, were to be killed in any way the executioners chose. They could steal the properties of the dead Jews as their reward. Haman and the king then threw a party to celebrate the decree.

When Mordecai learned of the edict, he tore his clothes, put on burlap and ashes. He went through the city wailing loudly. But, he could only go as far as the city gate. No one clothed in burlap was allowed to enter the city. Tearing clothes was a dramatic way to express strong feelings of grief or anger. Rolling in or rubbing ashes was a visible sign of suffering. These demonstrations of grief, were also used by Persians.

Mordecai was a man of faith who believed that God would come to their aid. He did not fear for his own life, but for his countrymen, women and children who were also people of God. His wailing, his cries, were addressed to God, not Xerxes. This public mourning had been repeated by the Jews, for centuries.

Public displays of grief were forbidden by the king and were against the law. Mordecai's sorrow and suffering could not be shown. The king was not to be exposed to such suffering as it could lead him to despair. Persians saw this as an evil omen or premonition. The king and couriers were not to see such a sad sight, lest their mirth be barred.

When Esther heard of Mordecai's display of grief, she sent him fresh clothes. She sent her eunuch Hathak, to determine the reason for his grief. Hathak served both the king and queen. Xerxes was a jealous and suspicious king. Under his watch, there was no way for Esther to meet with Mordecai. Esther trusted the eunuch's discretion. Mordecai gave Hathak the transcribed copy of the edict and asked him to read and explain it to Esther.

Hathak returned from Mordecai with the request that Esther appear before the king to ask for mercy. Mordecai and Esther were now the only hope for the Jewish people. The plan for Esther was to reveal her Jewish identity to the king and ask that he reverse the decree. Esther was

hesitant to intercede with the king.

Persian law was harsh and only the king could summon someone to the throne room. No one was allowed in the throne room uninvited, on penalty of death, and the queen was no exception. She could be killed unless the king chose to spare her life. At a crucial moment in the story, Mordecai asserts that if Esther remains silent or does not take up her cross, “deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place.” Then he wondered aloud, “Who knows, maybe you’ve become queen for this very moment!”

Many commentators, ancient and modern, have interpreted the phrase “from another place” as an oblique reference to God. How can Mordecai be so sure that the Jews will be saved? Because they, like Esther herself, seem to attract a kind of mysterious divine favour, unexplained but indisputable.

Esther’s privileged position came with great responsibility. Like her ancestors Abraham and Sarah, called out of obscurity into God’s saving work, Esther was blessed not for her own sake but in order to be a blessing. She was called to risk her own life for the sake of her people, and she answered that call by taking charge of the situation and accepting the danger that her action entails: “I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I die, I die.”

The king had not summoned Esther for thirty days. So she was hesitant to request a meeting, fearing for her life. Haman controlled the king's command of one thousand men used for the protection of the king. Esther would have had to ask Haman to be admitted to the throne room. The king would have demanded to know the reason for her uninvited visit. This was extremely dangerous for Esther.

She reminded Mordecai that the request to reverse the edict could cause her death. Persian kings were kept away from their subjects to protect the king's safety. This was to emphasize the imperial standing which applied to the wife or queen as well. This was not a new law, it had existed for many years. Mordecai kept pressuring Esther. She and her Jewish family would die if she did nothing. Mordecai trusted God, believing that God would rescue God's people.

Esther had a difficult choice. The queen was not protected from the fate faced by the Jews. She agreed to do as Mordecai asked, but she needed God's help. She was willing to risk everything for the welfare of her people. So she had a plan. First she would seek God's help to find favour with the king. Secondly, the Jewish people throughout Susa, including the queen and her attendants, would fast; no food or drink for three days. Thirdly, the queen would then come before the king, willing to risk her life to save her people.

Three days after the fast, on the 15th day of the month of Nisan, Esther

went bravely to see the king. Xerxes had not called her in a month. Approaching him uninvited, could mean possible death. The king was in the throne room on a raised chair. Esther, in her royal robes, stood just outside the throne room, hoping Xerxes would notice her. The door to the throne room was kept open so that the king could see into the inner court. Esther waited. Xerxes was pleased to see her. He extended the golden sceptre to her. She could now enter to speak to him. Esther touched the tip of the sceptre, showing respect and admiration for the king. God heard the prayers offered by Esther and touched the heart of the king.

Xerxes was glad to see Esther and requested to know her petition. He offered her anything she wanted, up to half of his kingdom. Sometimes kings even gave their wives entire cities. But, at this meeting, Esther did not beg for the lives of her people. She invited the king and Haman to a banquet, so she could accuse Haman face-to-face, in front of the king at the appropriate time. The timing was most important for her plan.

She knew that accepting the king's original offer was unwise. So, following Persian etiquette, her one small favour was an invitation to her banquet. Then when the time was right, she would present her real petition. The goal was to earn the king's favour. At the banquet he would be more receptive to her request. A banquet meant the consumption of a great deal of alcohol. Drinking excessively was expected. The banquet was a very unusual request. The king always ate alone. Guests ate in a

nearby room. At the queen's banquet, they drank and ate together. Haman considered this to be a great honour.

At the banquet, the king again asked Esther for her petition or request. Instead of asking him to reverse the decree and save her people as well as herself, she invited Xerxes and Haman to yet another banquet, where she would reveal her actual petition and the fact that she was Jewish. Esther showed herself to be very wise and was willing to wait for God's perfect timing. Haman was absolutely delighted. He bragged to his friends and wife of the great honour of dining with the king and queen. He held a very high opinion of himself.

Haman again saw Mordecai at the gate. Of course, Mordecai again refused to kneel or bow down to Haman. Haman hated Mordecai and was filled with rage. Haman's greatest sins were greed and pride. He was not satisfied with wealth, prestige, and power. After all, Mordecai had humiliated him. He wanted to degrade and punish him. This execution would disgrace Mordecai. So, Haman had a seventy-five foot pole installed in his courtyard, to be used to impale Mordecai. But, he needed authorization from Xerxes to carry out his plan. He decided he would ask the king to execute Mordecai in the morning.

The sovereignty of God is a central theme in these two chapters of Esther, underscoring God's control over historical events and human affairs. Not many of us encounter angels coming to dinner or a burning

bush, but eyes of faith can see God's hand at work in the seemingly happenstance circumstances of life. Esther, out of all the woman in the empire, just happens to become queen at a time when her people need her. This demonstrates a belief in divine providence, where God's purposes prevail even amidst human choices.

Human responsibility is another significant theme, as Esther's decision to risk her life illustrates the necessity of courage and obedience in fulfilling God's plans. Her willingness to sacrifice her safety for the sake of her people mirrors the principle of selfless service, a key aspect of biblical discipleship.

These chapters also highlight the communal nature of faith, as Mordecai and the Jewish people join in fasting and prayer, seeking divine intervention. This collective act of faith reflects the importance of spiritual unity in times of crisis. The theme of divine providence is central here. Although God is not explicitly or directly involved in the book of Esther, God's hand is evident in the favour shown to Esther by King Xerxes and the unfolding events that align to protect God's people. We are reminded that God works behind the scenes, orchestrating circumstances to fulfill His purposes.

In this part of the story, contrasts between humility and reliance on God stand in stark opposition to Haman's pride and self-centeredness. This dichotomy underscores a broader biblical principle: James writes: "God

opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.” Haman’s downfall, foreshadowed here, serves as a warning against arrogance and hostility toward God’s people.

Through Esther’s example, we believers are encouraged to trust in God’s timing and provision, to act courageously when called, and to recognize that God’s purposes will ultimately prevail. This narrative foreshadows the ultimate deliverance found in Jesus Christ, who would later fulfill God’s redemptive plan through His sacrificial death and resurrection. Esther’s intercession for her people points to the greater intercession of Christ for humanity.

What does all this mean for us? Jesus said that "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." Your 'cross', that Jesus asked you to take up, is the place in your life where the will of God will cross with your will. That is, where the two wills are in opposition to each other! This was how it was for Esther, as her will was initially opposed to Mordecai’s instruction. As shown by Esther, we too must deny our will and obey God's call. Can we learn from Esther, who initially dug her toes in but died to her own will so that the plans and purpose of God could be activated through her? I believe we all can.

Next week we'll see how things finally turned out. We'll see whether God

would respond to Esther's faith and bring about deliverance or whether things will go downhill very quickly!

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of justice, you sent your servant Esther into a life of privilege so that those without would be taken care of. In our privilege, show us how to advocate for those who have less, so that your world might be peaceful and just. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**