

A Righteous Man Honoured?

Esther 5

Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 1 October 2023, AM Service.

I hope you've all recognized as we work through this book that Esther is a literary masterpiece.

Each chapter brings yet another significant realization... another twist... another cautionary note for Israel.

This chapter here is the middle ground. We've had the characters introduced... some of their strengths... some of their weaknesses. And from the end of chapter 4, we are viewing the situation ultimately through the eyes of Esther.

She began in our story as an orphan girl, from a defeated and exiled people, the epitome of weakness...

And yet God had brought her up to the highest position she could have imagined... at least here on earth... queen to the king of the world.

Now if old Disney could have found a way to eliminate the more problematic scenes in this book, they would have stopped there... a classic tale of rags to romantic riches.

But the story continues didn't it. And though she was queen... the end of chapter 4 brings us all the way back down... the queen, once again, has no hope, going into the house of the king... she is certain that she will perish, as will her people.

What's going to happen?

Well, we've read the chapter, so it'll come as no surprise to you, though it is actually a massive surprise! that Esther doesn't end up on the gallows.

Remember that she's a better Vashi... younger, more beautiful... more *submissive*.

Unlike Vashti, Esther knows full well not to say no to the king. There was absolutely no reason to suggest that, if she did say no, that she would get any different treatment than Vashti did.

But what happens? She goes into the inner court anyway... against the Law... now facing the death penalty...

And when the king saw Esther in his inner court, the king was furious, and his anger burned within him...

No... that's chapter 1:12... that's Vashti.

Chapter 5:2 says— "So it was, when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she found favour in his sight."

He held out his sceptre, and Esther received his favour. This was the only way she would receive grace... we learnt that last week... a grace that was so infrequently given, that even given her

position, Esther entered the inner court with no hope: if I perish, I perish... a Hebrew phrase which indicates an almost certain inevitability.

The king had, up until this point, maintained law in his kingdom to the letter... and up until this point, he had poured his wrath out upon those who acted against his law...

Given all reasonable expectations, the grace he gives his queen is miraculous.

Especially given that he not only refrains from the death penalty, but he interrupts his critically important business he had been sequestered away to manage... and he speaks to the woman he's already married to: "Here... how about you have up to half my kingdom!"

And in fact, my business isn't that important after all... how about I just take a break to let you throw a banquet... and tomorrow as well? Sure, why not.

How easily does God turn the hearts of kings...

Now... some have suggested that Esther was very clever here... like a fisherman with a difficult fish on the line... she slowly and patiently reels in her prey.

The suggestion is that she was an expert manipulator, pulling the strings.

I don't think there's anything in the book thus far to suggest that that's the case. Quite the contrary... although she and Mordecai both make various efforts, as do Achashverosh and Haman, the point is constant that God is the one who has to do the work.

I would suggest, as an alternative, that Esther is trying to buy some time to think. It appears that she either doesn't have the words, because she didn't expect to gain an audience... or she's too scared to say them.

Why do I lean in that direction?

Well, apart from the feast... and getting Haman to attend it, she does absolutely nothing between this point and chapter 7:3, when she asks the king to save her people.

If she was trying to manipulate the king, the only thing she does is try to put him in a good mood through feeding him. And yet, in including Haman, she's actually strengthening the bond between him and the king... rather than driving a wedge between them.

The events that follow all fall into place at the divine hand of God... not at the manipulation of Esther or Mordecai. And we'll see that very clearly next week.

In fact, Esther's plan only amounts to pouring honour on the very one who is the enemy of her people. Yes, she went into the inner court, but now she's there, she's actually making it politically worse for the Jews... not better.

So, verse 9, Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart...

Haman, in contrast to Esther, is in the highest position of confidence. He's second in the kingdom, he has been wined and dined by the king and his queen...

He was able to go home and, vs 10, tell his family and friends and his wife '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.'

And note, that this is the king lifting him up. And up until now, he hasn't actually done anything. Yes, he's navigated justice with the king against the potential division in the empire, but even that hasn't been followed through yet.

For Mordecai, vs 9, is still standing in the king's gate. Wearing sackcloth yes... but justice still hadn't been done.

And so he takes the advice of his friends and his wife and he has a gallows (literally a 'tree') made, fifty cubits high... about 25 meters... able to be seen by the entire city.

The vehicle of judgement for a sinner. Setting an example for all the people.

You see the literary genius?

Esther received unexpected and undeserved favour from the king... Haman receives unexpected and undeserved favour from the king and Esther... Mordecai gets no favour... no grace... no lifting up.

And think about this equation a step further: The favour Esther received was not based on her righteousness.. she had broken Persian law. And Mordecai... he had also broken Persian law...

He was facing in the Persian system, justice.

In no way could he argue this wasn't fair. If anything, what wasn't fair was that Esther wasn't already cast out like Vashti had been.

Both of them deserved the death penalty under law.

By contrast, Haman's favour from Esther also wasn't actually as a result of his righteousness... He hadn't actually performed anything particularly magnificent yet, but at the same time, it wasn't like he had broken the Law either.

But his attitude towards Esther's favour is one of surprise and gladness... Look at what's happening to me!

We don't have here an image of the man with the log in his eye picking out the speck in someone else's, but rather, the rich young ruler... "I've done everything right from my youth."

What's Israel being taught here? And what's the takeaway for us?

Israel had abused the patience and grace of their God. Was it any wonder that he'd sent them into exile in judgment? Removing them from before his face. That is actually what they deserved... if not worse... being wiped from the face of the earth for their rebellion.

And yet God, even more than Achashverosh, is gracious... and kind... and longsuffering... slow to anger... abounding in loving kindness and tender mercy.

And yet, arguably because he is patient, Israel kept forgetting that God is also a king... and he rules in justice and righteousness.

It was Israel's own fault that they faced the gallows... and what would they now say to an almighty God who stood in judgement over them?

Just like Mordecai and Esther, they had no more options... they had come to the end of their ability to manipulate the situation for their good.

Is there anything left for them? The book of Esther gives an answer to that question doesn't it:

They must throw themselves at the feet of their God, begging for mercy, though they don't deserve it.

Allow me to make one balanced point of application from here.

1. You cannot earn God's favour by your works

Brothers and sisters, none of us can earn our way into God's favour. And none of us can impress him enough to buy our way out of his disfavour.

Doubling down on pragmatism as Esther did... breaking the Law... that doesn't deserve accolades. Just as it didn't for Mordecai.

You break the law, you should expect to be treated as a lawbreaker.

And brothers and sisters, is it not true that we break the law all the time?

Even as the people of God we grieve the Spirit. We take lightly the true king and we twist and turn and contort ourselves to try to justify it.

No... he started it... yeah, but if you object to his behaviour, why isn't it a problem when you do the exact same thing?

No... it's just a white lie... well... it's still a lie though right?

No... it's fine because look at the good outcome...

We go on and on don't we? But congregation, we need to realise that none of those excuses convince the judge of the world that you are any less worthy of judgement.

God is perfectly just when he treats sinners according to their sin.

And that's the painful irony of Esther and Mordecai here... because they are in exile because of their sin... they show more loyalty to Achashverosh than they did to God... and now they're finding that even in Persia there's a consequence for breaking the Law.

Is this how you view your sin?

The Puritans had a much better attitude towards sin than we do these days. We tend to shrug at it... they sought to crucify it. We tend to wink at it... they spoke about mortifying it... putting it to death.

John Owen, perhaps one of the most famous Puritans, challenged his congregation this way: *"Do you mortify (kill your sin); do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you."*

Impatience... lust... apathy regarding your responsibilities... selfishness... stubbornness... gossip...
[insert your life here].

Congregation... God hates sin. And as R.C. Sproul pointed out, that's no comfort to anyone, because he doesn't send the sin to hell, but the sinner.

So where does that lead us? When there is no hope... that you come before the king knowing you deserve to perish... and all that you can do is throw yourself at his mercy. Beg for his forgiveness... ask for his grace.

And when God lifts your eyes yet again to the cross... the tree that you should have hung on in judgement... and yet on it you see the blood already shed to pay the cost for your sins... in that, you're reminded that there is a cost for your sin... but in grace, if you've repented and believed... it has been paid for by another.

And that cross is now empty... the one who suffered on it resurrected and ascended and seated now at the right hand of God the Father... king of kings, lord of lords.

And in his resurrection you also have been raised up. Your sins washed away, and your heart made new.

But congregation, as we celebrate that... Esther rings that cautionary note doesn't it. For it was the very abuse of God's grace that caused them to be calloused and careless in relation to their sin.

Do not take lightly the punishment you deserved but escaped from by grace. Do not grieve the Spirit.

Repent... believe... offer up your entire lives as living sacrifices of praise for your God... a reasonable service for your king for all he has done for you.

May we hold nothing back, for he deserves it all and more.

Amen.