

How the Tables Turn

Esther 6

Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 8 October 2023, AM Service.

There are a few laugh out loud moments in the Scriptures... Not many... but a few...

This is one of them.

It has all the hallmarks of a well-written comedy.

God certainly has a sense of humour.

He does, after all, sit in the heaven and laugh at the foolishness of men... Psalm 2.

And yet, we know by now, don't we, that Esther isn't recorded for God's people in the Scriptures just so that we can have a laugh.

I was sitting in my office this past week wondering what it would have been like to be Haman.

We're not at the end of his story of course... things get worse the next chapter.

But at the end of chapter 5, everything was stitched up. He had favour from all the right people... riches, children, power, influence... even the queen held feasts in his honour.

And our passage find him arriving early to the king's court the morning after the first banquet, expecting to have Achashverosh affirm Mordecai's execution.

And yet everything began to crumble beneath him.

Almost as if the universe conspired against him somehow. A classic case of Murphy's Law... whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.

In Haman's situation, though, everything he touched turned to gold between chapter 2 and the end of chapter 5... apart from Mordecai not showing him honour.

And now, in chapter 6, and heading into chapter 7, nothing goes right.

Let's make just a couple of brief observations about these events. Notice that none of the things that happen have been orchestrated by Esther.

The king couldn't sleep...

Of all the things he wanted to do, he chose to read the records of the chronicles of the empire.

And of all the chronicles, he read of Mordecai overturning a plot against his life...

Despite his tension with Haman, it appears that Mordecai isn't known by name to the king. And so the king is motivated to right this wrong he was just made aware of... and reward Mordecai.

It just so happens, that Haman is around in the court... and it just so happens that Haman misunderstands Achashverosh's intention... and it just so happens, then, that he tells the king what he thinks **he** will receive... and so, it just so happens, that Haman has to be the one who has to parade Mordecai around the city, showering the king's honour upon him.

Mordecai didn't orchestrate this.

Esther didn't orchestrate this.

Who did? God did.

And in the weight of the overwhelming shift in the course of the story, what's there left to say? Well Zeresh, Haman's wife, says it all... in verse 13: *"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."*

One main point for this morning's sermon:

1. If God is for you, who can be against you?

This is also true in its inverse... if God is against you, who can stand before him?

This is painfully apparent with Haman, isn't it. Being loved by the world for conformity to their laws... or being celebrated as being a champion of a society that is inherently pagan... will not save you when you stand before the true king.

Haman is presented as the most righteous man in all of the kingdom. He had been showered with wealth and recognition... and so he assumed that when the king asked him about how to honour a man, his natural assumption was: it must be me!

The issue for Haman, then, is that he, as the one most deserving of honour, from an earthly standard, must humble himself and become a servant to Mordecai, who is ultimately a criminal deserving of death.

And this drives him to mourning, in verse 12, and he covers his head.

Why? Because the ones he considered worthy of judgement, were lifted up above him by a power greater than him.

Interestingly, Habakkuk wrestled with the same problem but from the opposite side of the equation. He opens his account with crying out to God against the wickedness done in Israel...

God says: yes, I will attend to it... I'll judge my people... how? With the Assyrians...

And Habakkuk asks what? How can you judge Israel with a nation more wicked than she is? How can you show such favour to Assyria to bring her to a position of power and supremacy? They're worse!

And how does God respond? Assyria will be the instrument of judgement against Israel, but they in turn will face his judgement.

Here in Esther, God has raised up Persia in judgement over Israel. But even Haman is recognizing this tension... he's not as in control over this situation as he thinks he is.

Just like Pharaoh in Egypt, in fear of the growth of the Jews, seeking to crush them under his heel, and yet in just 10 short plagues and a couple of conversations later, his empire is crippled, his eldest son in the grave, and his army at the bottom of the Red Sea.

Why? Because Israel is stronger than Egypt? No. Because Israel is more deserving than Egypt? No. Because they're faithful and righteous and loving? Absolutely not...

But because God, in his love and tender mercy, had chosen to make much of his great name by redeeming them from slavery.

Ahhh... but now Israel seems weak in the desert... so the Amalekites go to attack the stragglers, killing the women and the children who can't keep up with the rest of Israel.

And again, God works to protect and avenge his people.

I would put it to you that this equation constantly takes the enemies of Israel by surprise in the Old Testament. They feared Israel explicitly because it seemed as if time and time again, the battles worked contrary to all common sense.

The other nations would have all the trappings of earthly power... and then they would face 300 men who shouted at them, and their entire army would be defeated. Or they would have huge walls, like at Jericho, and the Israelites would walk in a circle for a while, and those walls would crumble to dust.

Every time they thought of Israel as weak and easy to crush, something inconceivable would happen.

Zeresh's observation is significant... Haman won't fail because Mordecai is clever... and they don't even know that Esther is a Jew yet...

But Haman's star will fall because, if God is for Israel, nobody can stand against her.

Brothers and sisters, this is an important truth for us to get our heads around. One of the recurring lessons in the Scriptures is for the people of Israel to not trust in the strength of the world, but in the power of their God.

Israel has been dismissive of this again, which is why they're in Persia currently.

But God is still teaching them this lesson.

He doesn't need their orchestrations or manipulations or wealth and influential position to bring about his good ends.

Instead he wakes up a king... and provides reading material for him... and lo and behold, one who was in mourning is lifted up to a position of honour, and the one standing in judgement of him, is brought low.

This principle is true not just of Israel, but of God's people throughout all time and space, is it not?

We're characterized by weakness. And at the moment, although Christianity is spreading in some parts of the world, like China... it seems to be consistently losing ground in other parts of the world, namely the West.

Churches are closing doors left right and centre... selling their buildings to cafes and craft shops and Peter Jackson (I was reading about the other day).

So what do we need to do? Get in a position of authority? No... Esther's power didn't bear the results we see here. Earn enough money to be able to control our situation? Get enough influence? Well, that didn't provide safety for Haman, now did it.

So what then?

The answer to that is found in Achashverosh's question: "What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?"

On what basis was Israel going to be lifted up? Certainly not because they were righteous.

But simply because their true king delighted to honour them. I love you because I love you.

The kingdom of God does not come through wealth or politics or even a sword, as the Crusaders learnt to our eternal shame.

The kingdom of God is spread by the grace of God extended to repentant sinners. And because we are kept by God's strong arm, not one of us can be lost.

No condemnation, no tribulation, no distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. No angels or principalities nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come... even death, sin and the Devil, will not separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hallelujah!

It's striking, isn't it?

If you're a Christian, God doesn't love you on the basis of what you can do for him. He won't love you *more* if you're more intelligent or more capable, or even more righteous.

And his power is made perfect in your weakness.

But there's a challenge here too. Those who seek to build their own kingdoms, will have nothing to say when God lifts up the man of his choosing.

Haman is the second in the kingdom... and as far as the story goes, he holds that position appropriately and righteously. And yet, the main issue that Haman faces is not that he is in competition with Mordecai... but that God Almighty, king of the universe, prophesied to Israel as he led them out of Egypt, that he would utterly destroy the Amalekites...

Haman, as a descendent of Agag the Amalekite, faced the wrath of God in heaven. And no amount of earthly success and pomp and honour and favour would save him from that judgement. He had thrown his lot in with the wrong ruler.

No amount of righteousness to a false God, no amount of fruit of a submissive heart to an earthly king, could give him security when standing before the throne of God's anointed king of king and lord of lords.

Our Lord came to earth in weakness, he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant... can anything good come from Nazareth? Who is this carpenter's son?

And yet God lifted him up and gave him all authority in heaven and on earth, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

This is God's will, and no man can stand against it.

There will be a reckoning. And the lesson is as true for Persia as it was to Israel as it is for you and me here today.

Repent and believe in the one that God has delighted to lift up above you.

Submit yourself to him, serve him...

For he is the true king in this life and the life to come.

May we honour him well.

Amen