

Gallows Humor

Esther 5:1-14

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Now if you would please take your Bibles and turn with me to the book of Esther chapter 5. You'll find that on page 413 if you're using one of the church Bibles - Esther chapter 5. Before we read God's Word will you bow your heads with me as we pray together?

Our Father, we need the help of the Holy Spirit by whose agency the words before us were penned to illumine our sins and to illumine understandings that we might behold the light of the glory of God in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. So come now we pray, in the power and presence and ministry of the Spirit of Your Son, and open Your Word to us that all the glory might be Yours. In Jesus' name, amen.

Esther chapter 5 reading from verse 1:

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. And the king said to her, 'What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.' And Esther said, 'If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king.' Then the king said, 'Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked.' So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, 'What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.' Then Esther answered, 'My wish and my request is: If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.'

And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman

saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. Then Haman said, 'Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.' Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, 'Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast.' This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

Amen, and we praise God for this reading from His holy and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

It is often said that God has a sense of humor. Usually when we say that we're referring to some ironic twist of providence, some unexpected consequence that taught us the very lesson we needed to learn at precisely the time we needed to learn it. We mean some missed opportunity that led to the very thing we hoped for in the end anyway, only better. God has a sense of humor we say. God delights to shower his grace upon us, sometimes directly, but often obliquely. He loves to surprise his children and make them even laugh in delight at the discovery that the folly of God that is wiser than man's wisdom. One place where the wit of God can be seen quite clearly is Esther chapter 5.

You will remember the story so far. Haman the Agagite has contrived to have his murderous intention towards the Jews become an empire-wide policy, signing it into law with the royal signet ring of Ahasuerus himself. In chapter 4, Mordecai has prevailed upon Esther to face up to her responsibility, even her divine calling, to go in to the king uninvited and to plead for her people, risking her life in the process. Esther, who had gone incognito for so long, now resolves at last to identify herself fully with God's covenant people. And as chapter 4 ended she called for a fast, if you will recall, in which she herself and her servants will participate, as the church of God in Susa intercedes on Esther's behalf and for their own deliverance. After three days of fasting Esther has decided to go into the king, declaring in words that ring down through the ages in the truest tones of heroism, "If I perish, I perish."

Now when I was a boy they showed black and white reruns of "The Lone Ranger" on TV every Saturday mornings. Each week would end with a cliffhanger, and you'd have to wait a whole week for the next episode to find out what would happen. When Saturday morning came around I was desperate for the next installment to know what was going to happen. Chapter 4 rather leaves

us with a cliffhanger. And so as we come to chapter 5 tonight eager to find out how things are going to go as Esther takes the great step of going in before this wicked tyrant, King Ahasueras. But I want us to make sure, in our eagerness to find out what happens next, that we don't miss one of the wonderful features of our text. Part of the author's intention here is not simply to recount the facts, but to make us laugh at the glorious ironies that adorn those facts. Notice how, instead of cutting to the chase at the beginning of the chapter and immediately telling us how it's all going to turn out for Esther and her people, the author slows everything down. Do you see that? Every detail of the events in the throne room is recorded in painstaking precision, as though to invite us not to rush things, but, as if savoring a fine wine, to enjoy the tale; to roll the delicious wit of God over our palettes just to be sure we get the full flavor. The general title for our studies in the book of Esther is "Sudden Reversals," remember, and there are several wonderful reversals here in this chapter, all unexpected and glorious, displaying for us God's goodness, the folly of human pride, in a way that is intended to make us relish every minute of the story, and leave us, frankly, chuckling in wonder at the perfect wisdom of our Sovereign God. To help us begin to see some of that, I want you to notice three contrasts in Esther chapter 5. First in verses 1 to 3 we find life, not death; life, not death. Then in 4 to 8, a queen, not a criminal. And in 9 to 14 - 4 to 8 a queen, not a criminal - 9 to 14, folly not wisdom. Life, not death; a queen, not a criminal, folly, not wisdom.

LIFE NOT DEATH

Verses 1 to 3 first of all. Would you look at it please? Life, not death. Gone is the racy switching back and forth alternating between Mordecai and Esther that characterized the way our narrator has retold the story in chapter 4, bouncing back and forth also narrating between these two central characters. Here as chapter 5 opens we are introduced instead to a carefully staged scene in which every single detail is picked out for us. If we were looking for an immediate resolution to the cliff-hanger at the end of chapter 4, we're going to have to wait. What we get instead is a slow motion shot. Look at it please - Esther 5:1-3. Esther selects the royal robe for her ordeal. She stands. Then we are told where: the inner court, carefully positioned in front of the king's quarters. Then, once Esther is in place, the camera cuts to the throne room. Inside the king is sitting. Notice the contrast there with Esther. He is on the royal throne. She is the supplicant. He holds the power. He is inside the throne room, notice. Oh and the throne room is opposite the entrance to the palace. We're meant to find ourselves wanting to say to the author, "Enough already! Will you just get on with it and tell us what happens? We want to know what's going to happen!"

But the tension he's trying to build is all part of the plan. He has us right where he wants us. The tension is palpable. One imagines violin music as Esther takes her place. We're holding our breath waiting for the moment when, verse 2, Ahasuerus looks up, and there she is! She has positioned herself, in all her royal

finery, so that she would be framed perfectly in the doorway, directly opposite the throne. The king, remember, has not seen her for more than a month. But there she stands, waiting, risking everything to see him! Now, we know from the carvings found at the ancient palace at Persepolis that behind the throne of Ahasuerus there stood a Median soldier with a huge axe. So the king can see Esther, his eyes are captivated by her, striking a pose you know in the doorway, but Esther can also see the throne, all the trappings of power, with the evening sun glinting on the keen edge of the axe, poised and waiting.

This is it. All the prayers of God's people have been concentrated on this moment. "And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter." Life, not death! Mercy not condemnation! Hope replaces fear! She wins favor in his sight! God is at work, inclining the heart of the king and blessing His covenant child. Ahasuerus holds out the golden scepter and she lives! The terror she must have felt only moments before is now gone. The Lord has heard the cries of His people. They've been praying and fasting now for three days, remember, and the Lord has heard and answered.

And that, surely, is a major part of the message of this text: God loves to hear the cries of His children. They've been seeking God for three, repenting, returning to Him, interceding on Esther's behalf. And here at least in part, is the answer of heaven. Favor not condemnation! Acceptance not rejection! Life, not death! God loves to hear the cries of His children. Remember the exhortation of the Lord Jesus? "If we, then, being evil, know how to give gifts to our children, how much more will our Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?" That's the point here. Believing prayer is the necessary corollary of confidence in the sovereignty of God. Let me say that again, believing prayer is the necessary corollary of confidence in the sovereignty of God. If you really believe that God the Lord reigns, that He governs all things, which is again and again and again a major theme in the book of Esther, if you really believe that, then you will pray boldly. Believing prayer is the necessary corollary of confidence in the sovereignty of God. In the words of the great Calvinistic Baptist missionary to India, William Carey, if you embrace and rest in God's sovereignty, he said, you will "expect great things from God and attempt great things for God." That is what Esther did, isn't it? She expected great things from God. She had been crying out to Him along with her people for three days and she did great things for Him, resting upon His grace and favor.

Interestingly the Jewish Midrash, which is a kind of commentary on this passage, highlights and focuses on the Jews' three days of fasting under the threat of death, and the way God that answered. It declared, "Israel [is] never left in dire distress more than three days." And then it pointed to Hosea 6:2 - "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." That is what is happening in Esther 5, isn't it? Three days under the

shadow of death and on the third, not death, but life, which, of course, is immensely suggestive of another, upon whose shoulders the duty of acting on behalf of God's people fell. The heroism of Esther in the throne room of Ahasuerus, as dramatic as it was, pales before the heroic deliverance from death won for the whole people of God by the Lord Jesus Christ, who was, Romans 4:25, delivered for our trespasses and, on the third day, raised up for our justification. Life, not death! That is what He won for all who trust in Him.

Esther's story is a shadow of the One to come, who does far more than she. Esther wins favor and is spared unjust condemnation. But Jesus, who was not guilty, was nevertheless made the object of divine wrath and He was condemned. Esther lived, but Jesus died that we might live. Esther merely risked all, and won through, but Jesus actually gave all, and He did so not simply for us on behalf of His people as did Esther, Jesus gave all instead of His people. He died, the just for the unjust to bring us to God. That is the good news that we have for you this evening. Apart from faith in Jesus we are guilty before God and under a just sentence of death. But Jesus died that sinners like you and me, that we might live. The golden scepter was held out to Esther as she acted on behalf of her people. Esther was spared; Jesus was not spared. He died for us at Calvary. This evening the good news is that the sentence our sin has concurred has been fulfilled, the penalty satisfied, for any and all who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. "Why will you die?" the Scriptures say. He died that you might live! And for those who do trust in Christ, Hebrews 4:16, we need never fear coming before the One seated on heaven's throne in condemnation. No, now we can go, Hebrews says, to the throne of grace with confidence, boldly, "to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Life, not death.

A QUEEN NOT A CRIMINAL

And secondly look at verses 4 to 8 with me. Not only does Esther receive life not death, she is acclaimed Queen and not treated as a criminal. Having held out the royal scepter, and preserved her life, the King is now full of curiosity. Verse 3 - "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even up to half of my kingdom." What in the world could move you to risk your neck to come to the throne room without an invitation Esther? And in her answer, she displays a calculating side to her character we have not yet encountered. I think it's hard not to admire her courage. The king demands an answer. He is the most powerful man in the world. And instead of a replay, she bats her eyelashes and obfuscates. She says, "Come to my party." Now she's talking Ahasuerus' language. Remember the opulent soirees in chapters 1 and 2? You can almost hear the vacant headed monarch, like a character from a Wodehouse novel, "A party! What fun! Run and fetch Haman immediately!"

Then, later, full of wine and feeling magnanimous, and still no doubt burning with

curiosity about Esther's request, he repeats the offer, verse 6 - "What do you want? You can have anything up to half my kingdom! Just tell me what you want!" Now watch Esther. Like a hunter, skillfully luring her prey into the trap, she almost tells all, but not quite. "My wish and my request is..." and King Ahasuerus sits forward on the edge of his seat... "Come to my party tomorrow and then we'll talk about it." It's a dangerous game, to be sure, but now there is absolutely no way Ahasuerus can refuse, is there? He's just got to know. The suspense must have been killing him, freshly beguiled as he was by Esther's charm.

You see what's happening of course. Ahasuerus and Haman are being mocked aren't they? Who is it that holds the power in Esther chapter 5? It's not actually the Emperor nor is it his bloodthirsty right-hand man, Haman. It's Esther, the Jewish peasant girl. She has the mightiest ruler in the world and his lackey eating out of the palm of her hand! What a delightful reversal that is. The peasant girl really has become queen. Actually, Esther is only called Queen once before now in the whole book. But after this moment, she is Queen Esther sixteen times more, almost in every chapter, over and over again. In fact, since 2:22, in obedience to the instructions of Mordecai, she has done everything she could to assimilate to the life of a royal consort living in the harem of Ahasuerus. She has submerged her identity as Hadassah, the Jewish member of the covenant people of God. She has submerged her identity beneath her Persian alter-ego, Esther. And yet, as she tells us in chapter 4 and verse 11, her best efforts notwithstanding, the king has not wanted to see her in over a month. He seems to have grown bored with her, so that the more she sought to live like the Persian she was not, the more precarious her position in the court seems to have become.

But now that she decides to be the child of God she always was, now that she has resolved to stand for her people and let the consequences fall where they may - "If I perish, then I perish!" - now having at last determined to risk everything for her people's sake - the crown, her life, everything - now, as she comes to plead with the king. Who is it the king sees? What does the text say? Verse 2 - "the King saw Queen Esther." And when he speaks to her, who is she? Verse 3 - "What is your wish Queen Esther?" She has, at last, been willing to risk everything. She has laid it all down. She has determined to stand in solidarity with the people of God and the cause of God and the covenant of God and risk her life in doing so. But instead of losing, she wins. Instead of condemnation as a criminal she is recognized as Queen. Do you remember Vashti, back in chapter 1? She had been queen; why was she rejected? The king had called for her to attend him and she would not come. Here is Esther, who is ready to lose everything by coming to the king without a call, and she is not rejected, is she? Esther is recognized and received and promised reward.

We've seen in the story so far how Esther has had to make a choice. Would she be the believer or the pagan? The royal consort or the covenant child? Would she risk all or would she duck and cover? But now the choice has been made.

Instead of disaster she meets reward. And as it turns out, that pattern is not a one-off in Scripture. In fact, the same delightful irony laces the promises of the Lord Jesus towards all who trust him. You may remember the occasion in Matthew's gospel, when Peter reminded Jesus of how much he had sacrificed for Jesus' sake. And Jesus replied, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" - Matthew 19:28 and following. Esther is a queen not a criminal. She is rewarded not condemned. She risks all only to discover that God is no one's debtor. And anyone who ventures to trust in Christ and seek first His kingdom and His righteousness has the promise of the Savior that all of these things added to them also - Matthew 6:33. No one who has ever given their all in the cause of Jesus Christ and in the service of His kingdom will confess to being the loser, howsoever severe the consequences of their faithfulness to Him may have been in this life. No one who gives their all in the service of King Jesus ever confesses to have been the loser. With Paul, we who have come to know the unsearchable riches of Christ can confess that actually that to us to live is Christ and to die is gain, and as we live and trust in Him, our God supplies all our needs according to His riches in glory.

FOLLY NOT WISDOM

Life not death; a queen not a criminal, then verses 9 to 14 lastly - folly not wisdom. Haman is heading home, "joyful and glad of heart," which being interpreted means he's had a good time at the party. Perhaps he sang a few incoherent songs as he staggered back that evening, but as he turns the corner there is Mordecai sitting in the king's gate, unafraid, un-trembling, filled with that same serenity that seems so often to infuriate unbelievers whenever they encounter it in the heart and life of a child of God. And in an instant, his tipsy good-humors evaporate, don't they? He is so mad, we are told, he has to restrain himself, and in an effort to self soothe, he gathers his family and his friends for a boasting session. Verse 11 - he boasted "of the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him," advancing him to the top to the civil service, even including him in the private parties of the royal family. And one thing, nevertheless, all of that aside, one thing drives him nuts, robs him of pleasure in it all. Verse 13 - "All this is worth nothing to me so long as I see Mordecai the Jew" - you can hear the venom and the malice in his voice - "Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

Enter the most charming character in the book of Esther: Zeresh, Haman's lovely wife. She is concerned about the stress headache that her husband has developed and suggests that a nice neat hanging ought to relieve the pressure. Just notice the size of the gallows. It is roughly 75 feet tall. Haman, you see,

needs a gallows to match his ego, which is exactly the point. If Esther is the model of wisdom, Haman is the paradigm of a fool. His words reveal his folly - Proverbs 13:16. And his pride, as towering as the gallows, can only lead him one way. Proverbs 16:18 - "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." The gallows is a monument to Haman's ego. And though he can't see it, we can; the hint is not hard to catch. For whom is this gallows really intended, in this irony-laden narrative of sudden reversals? What is the fate of a fool whose biggest idol is himself? The joke is really on Haman, isn't it? And the gallows he has built to satisfy his bloodlust stands as a warning to us all. While there is a Savior who has died that we might live, there is a death that any must face, who, in their foolishness and pride, rejects that Savior's offers of mercy. Either we die or Christ dies for us. Which will you choose?

Will you pray with me?

Our Father, we bless You for the glorious Gospel of our blessed God and for the grace of our Savior the Lord Jesus who gave Himself, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God. Would you, in the power of Your Spirit, draw us to Him and deliver us from the consequences of our native folly. For we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Will you stand with me and receive God's blessing?

And now may grace, mercy, and peace from Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

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