

The Man Who the King Delights to Honor

Esther 6:1-11

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Now if you would please, turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Esther, chapter 6; Esther chapter 6. You'll find that on page 413 if you're using one of the church Bibles. Hear now the Word of Almighty God. Actually, before we hear God's Word, would you pray with me?

Father, Your Word is spread before us but we confess how inclined we are to mishear it, to misunderstand it, to distort it, overlook its rebukes, to distort its message to serve our own ends. Would You help us, please, to see Christ in His perfect suitability to be our all sufficient Redeemer? Show us our own bankruptcy. Show us the ugliness and bankruptcy of idolatry. And help us, all of us, to flee again to Christ as He is offered to us in the Gospel, in the pages of the book of Esther. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Esther chapter 6 from verse 1. This is God's inerrant Word:

On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And the king said, 'What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?' The king's young men who attended him said, 'Nothing has been done for him.' And the king said, 'Who is in the court?' Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. And the king's young men told him, 'Haman is there, standing in the court.' And the king said, 'Let him come in.' So Haman came in, and the king said to him, 'What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?' And Haman said to himself, 'Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?'

And Haman said to the king, 'For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let

them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.' Then the king said to Haman, 'Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.' So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'

Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, 'If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.'

While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

This is the holy and inerrant and sufficient Word of Almighty God Himself. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Reading through the narrative of Esther chapter 6 a phrase — I know I come from Glasgow but a phrase from, believe it or not, from *Hamlet* came to mind. Haman is about to be "hoist on his own petard!" It's actually an archaic phrase that we sometimes still hear used to describe a plan that backfires completely. Now I like words, so I did a little digging — this is actually a complete tangent to the point but I thought you would be interested! I did a little digging to find out the etymology of the phrase, "hoist on your own petard." It turns out the word hoist, as Shakespeare used it, is an archaic past tense. One is not hoisted; one is hoist. And a petard was a word of French origin designating a kind of explosive device used in the medieval era to blow open the doors of a castle to which siege has been laid. If they set the fuse wrongly the device would explode prematurely and the engineer would be hoist on their own petard!

In Esther chapter 5 Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews, has set, as it turns out, his rather short fuse on an explosion aimed at taking out Mordecai. Remember he has been promoted beyond all the others in the kingdom. He has had his ego stroked by his inclusion in the private party held by Queen Esther. He has, nevertheless discovered, all of that notwithstanding, that the fragile bubble of success and significance that he has been so carefully cultivating for himself was extremely easily burst. One his way back from the party, it shattered in an instant when he his eyes fell on Mordecai — Esther's uncle her adoptive father, bold as brass, unbowed and unafraid, sitting in the king's gate. Whatever pleasure he had taken from his personal triumphs evaporated in the cruel heat of bitterness and prejudice and jealousy

and rage. And so if you recall at the end of the chapter last time, at the suggestion of his charming wife, Zeresh, Haman has resolved to deal with Mordecai once and for all. That very night, he was up all night building an enormous gallows, 75 feet tall. The next morning his plan was to go into the King and seek permission to have pesky Mordecai hung on it. The fuse was lit, but Haman, as we'll see, will be hoist on his own petard.

The story, if you'll look at it please, chapter 6, is structured around three speeches of King Ahasuerus. In verses 1 to 3, we see the king's insomnia that leads him to ask, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai...?" So that as we take all of that in, we are being shown the wise providence of God, the wise providence of God. Then in verses 4 to 9 the king asks Haman, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" The focus this time is on the irony of arrogance as we watch the blood drain from Haman's face. And then in 10 to 13 the king commands Haman to honor Mordecai, so that Haman now feels the sting of vengeance, the vengeance of the Lord — the wisdom of providence, the irony of arrogance, and the sting of vengeance.

THE WISDOM OF PROVIDENCE

Let's look at verses 1 to 3 first of all. Here is the wisdom of providence. Now understand how high the stakes are as chapter 6 opens. Esther knows only that Haman has secured the king's authorization for the annihilation of the Jews about one year later. She knows nothing of Haman's new resolution to execute Mordecai that very morning. In chapters 4 and 5 we have watched Esther wrestle with her own responsibility and calling before God. She was called upon, remember, to take action, and to risk everything on behalf of her people. It was a challenging reminder to us that to follow the Lord, to follow Jesus Christ, entails for all of us the costliness of faithfulness to His claims in the midst of an increasingly hostile world. That was chapters 4 and 5, but now that chapter 6 opens, the focus rests, not on the responsibility of the child of God — Esther is oblivious to what is taking place — now the focus rests on the wise providence of the sovereign God. Esther does not even know of the fuse that has been lit and is moving rapidly towards Mordecai's destruction. It is out of her hands entirely. She can do nothing.

But look at the text. Just as Haman has been up all night long building a gallows for Mordecai, so too, it seems, has the king, who does what we've all done when insomnia strikes, right? He reads. Actually, being the king, he has a talking head read to him — and we all know about the soporific effects of talking heads! In this case he calls for something called "the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles." It was presumably a record of legal decisions of the king's court, of royal edicts, of battles won, of tribute paid. No doubt it would have been as riveting a bedtime read as studying the tax code! One imagines Ahasuerus with

drooping eyelids and nodding head, just about to fall asleep, as the civil servants are droning on in the background when suddenly there is a jolt of electricity that suddenly pushes him into alertness. All thought of sleep now is gone because the chronicle has come to that place where Mordecai has saved the king's life from the murder plot of Bigthana and Teresh. And verse 3 — "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" Something has begun to wake up in the king's mind. You see, the Persian emperors were renowned for their swift and extravagant generosity upon all who have done them any service. But Mordecai has not been rewarded. It was an embarrassment to the king and it needed to be rectified immediately. All thought of sleep is gone now. Something must be done and it must be done immediately. "Who is in the king's court?" verse 4. "Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows" — he'd been up all night — "that he had prepared for him."

Now notice carefully the timing. Isn't it beautiful? Ahasuerus could not sleep. Why? In God's design, he stays up all night in order that he might be reminded of Mordecai's heroism in saving his life. When he sent to the palace for an advisor to put the situation to right, who should be walking in the door but Haman, who's at the palace unusually early, presumably because he could not wait any longer to tell the king of his plan for Mordecai. God has set up Ahasuerus and Haman, do you see, timing everything perfectly, that the bloodlust of the latter might be undone by the guilt of the former, for the salvation of his own beloved child!

Here is the wisdom of providence on display. It is a beautiful reminder to us that "In the heart the man plans his way but the Lord establishes his steps" — Proverbs 16:9. It is a reminder to us that God does indeed work "all things according to the counsel of his own will" — Ephesians 1:11. It is a reminder that "God works all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose" — Romans 8:28. Esther 6 helps us to fight anxiety with faith in the wise providence and ordering of our sovereign God. Queen Esther was ignorant of the situation and utterly impotent to help. Mordecai was in danger; his life was threatened. If Haman could so easily persuade Ahasuerus to obliterate the entire Jewish people, how easy would it have been for him to secure Mordecai's execution? Mordecai's life hangs by the slenderest of threads. Humanly speaking it was a terrifying and precarious turn of events. But, Esther 6:1, "On that night, that very night, the king could not sleep," God was at work for the good of Mordecai in ways beyond understanding. The malice of Haman and the vacuous, amoral, hedonism of Ahasuerus presented no barrier to the Lordship of the God of heaven, indeed are made servants of the larger design of His eternal purpose.

Have you perhaps forgotten that word of Christ which says, "Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ... Do not be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself;" he said, "sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Do you live in the grip of worry about forces beyond your

control? Let me suggest that our fear is an excellent barometer of how far we continue to misunderstand the true dynamics that govern all things. Our worry derives from the belief that we ought to be competent for every circumstance while discovering that in fact we are not. Maybe you have been living out this equation over and over again. See if this little equation works for you: Unforeseeable circumstances plus misguided faith in your own competence, has equaled anxiety and fear. Unforeseeable circumstances plus misguided faith in your own competence, has equaled anxiety and fear. But the Word of the Lord in Esther 6 calls us to direct our confidence to a far more reliable object than ourselves. It invites us, with the psalmist, to lift our eyes to the hills and to remember where our help comes from. Our safety comes from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth. It aims to help us rejoin the psalmist in singing with renewed confidence in the only solid foundation for faith — “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.”

Of course, this pattern that we see here in Esther chapter 6 of God’s wise and gracious provision for the deliverance of His people before even they understood how much they needed it, that path is never more clearly seen than at the cross. “For while we were still weak, at just the right time Christ died for the ungodly...While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...While we were enemies,” Paul says, “we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.” Still sinners, still ungodly, still weak, still enemies... ignorant of grace, self-reliant, proud, rebels — that is what we were. And while we were helpless and headed for destruction, like Mordecai in face of Haman’s plot, God nevertheless in infinite love, has acted for us in mercy and grace, and by the Cross of His Son, He has obtained our deliverance. We may believe in the Gospel and trust in Christ crucified, but we often give the lie to our profession when we give in to fear about our future. The God who acted by his Son to save us while we were still sinners, acts still in countless ways beyond our ken, to guard us and keep us and bring us home to glory, finally remade in the image and likeness of Christ. That is His promise. And the Cross and the empty tomb are its unshakeable guarantee. The wisdom of providence.

THE IRONY OF ARROGANCE

Then secondly, look with me at verses 4 to 9. Here is the irony of arrogance. Haman is found standing in the outer court and is immediately ushered into the king’s presence. And very quickly now things move from the sublime almost to the slapstick, don’t they? It is difficult not to laugh out loud as Ahasuerus asks his question — we know what’s going on — “What shall happen to the man whom the king delights to honor?” And Haman said to himself, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me? I mean, what’s not to love, right?” It’s the first time actually in the book of Esther that we are told what someone is thinking. Literally Esther 6 reads, “Haman said in his heart, ‘Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?’” We are being shown the heart of Haman.

To no one's surprise, we find that it is actually Haman that has first place in Haman's heart. He can think of no one better suited for reward than himself. In his reply, notice there are none of the customary courtly niceties, that are so much in evidence in chapter 5 in Esther's interactions with the king. There is no, "If it pleases the king" — chapter 5 and verse 4. There is no, "If I have found favor in your eyes" — chapter 5 and verse 8. Haman is so eager for the plaudits of the king that he rushes right in, all the pleasantries forgotten, like a kid at Christmas who tears the wrapping paper off and ceases the presents with nary a thank you.

Look at verses 8 and 9. Haman wants the king's own robes — he doesn't want much. The king's own robes, the king's own horse, and a ticker-tape parade through the city streets proclaiming what a standup guy Haman really is. Some commentators suggest that Haman was in effect asking to be proclaimed the king's equal, or at least his surrogate, or his heir. So here is a window into Haman's heart. We get to see the nature of the man as clearly as ever we have, and we are being invited to laugh out loud at the sheer folly of what we find. He has made an idol of himself, and his ego, as it always will, has made a fool of him. All the while Haman is telling the king what he wants for himself. What is the king hearing? He only hears awfully good advice on how best to honor the one man that Haman wants to destroy! The exquisite comedy of the narrative is crowned by the punch-line in verse 10. "Hurry, take the robes" — listen to the way the name of the man whom the king delights to honor is delayed almost to the very end. "Hurry, take the robes and the horse" — you can see Haman salivating and rubbing his hands and his excitement mounts as the king seems to acquiesce in his suggestion. "Take the robes, take the horse as you have said and do so to...Mordecai, who sits at the king's gate, and be sure to leave out nothing you have mentioned." The blood drains from Haman's face and his mouth hangs open in astonishment. He has been caught in his own trap. He has been hoist on his own petard, hasn't he?

It's a Psalm 2 moment. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision." Haman's arrogance has made him a joke at whom even the Lord himself laughs, and holds him in derision. So preposterous is his self-love and the idolatry of self that has captured his heart. There is a solemn warning there for us there, isn't there, about the futility and the emptiness of pursuing earthly glory. Psalm 115:8 says of those who run after idols — "Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them." The folly of idolatry, the thing that makes it so ludicrous and ultimately laughable, preposterous, is that instead of our idols of money and power and influence and ease beautifying us as we intend them to, they leave us as empty as they are. Those who make them become like them- as dumb as a block of wood, as shiny as gold and just as lifeless. Be warned by Haman's folly and hear with new ears the call of Psalm 2 — "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of

the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” It is not in finding a way to be exalted above all others that we find peace and blessing; it’s counterintuitive. We live in a culture that tells us we ought to be first and do whatever it takes to get ahead and be first, but it is not, as it turns out, in finding a way to be exalted above all others that we find peace and blessing, but only in bowing before the exalted Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and fleeing and taking refuge in him alone.

THE STING OF VENGEANCE

The wisdom of providence, the irony or arrogance, and then finally look at verses 10 to 13 please. The sting of vengeance. The king ordered Haman to do for Mordecai what he longed for himself — the robe, the horse, the procession, all of it. One wonders what Mordecai must have been thinking that morning when around the corner comes Haman stomping towards him with a face like a thundercloud. Perhaps there was an army of civil servants in tow sitting at the king’s gate thinking, “Is this it? This is it; I’m done for!” And then the bewilderment when instead of violence, the violence Haman’s dirty looks seemed to have promised, Haman takes off his sackcloth and puts the king’s own robe on Mordecai. And then Haman saddles him in the king’s horse and Haman takes him through the streets, shouting at the top of his voice about how great a guy Mordecai is and how much the king delights to honor him.

By the end of the day Mordecai, faithful Mordecai, reliable Mordecai, he’s back where he has always been — in the king’s gate, while Haman is home sulking. Notice the stunning reversal. Mordecai is dressed like the king, serving at the palace; Haman heads for home mourning. The word there is the same as the word used for the mourning the Jews and the mourning of Mordecai himself when Haman’s edict for their destruction was first proclaimed in 4 verse 1 and chapter 4 verse 3. Haman and Mordecai, you see, have traded places. And just when things could not get any darker for Haman, cue Zeresh, as delightful as ever, with words cold comfort. When she heard from Haman all that had occurred she said, “If Mordecai before whom you have begun to fall is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.”

How are Zeresh and her cronies able to make that determination? It is not at all clear, although it does seem likely that even they are beginning to discern something of the providential care of God for his chosen people. The language they use actually calls Mordecai not, “of the Jewish people,” but “the seed of the Jews,” which of course to Zeresh meant nothing. But to us as readers of the whole Bible, that is a title that rings with promise. Remember that what we are seeing here actually is simply another iteration of the age old conflict being played out between the Benjamites and the Agagites, between Israel and her enemies, between the church and the world, between the seed of the woman

and the seed of the serpent. Mordecai is the seed of Abraham to whom belongs the covenant promises of God. And though Zeresh may not have been able to account for all her reasoning, she says more than she knows when she tells Haman that against the covenant seed there can be no victory. It had been four years that Mordecai had gone forgotten and unrewarded. And during that time the fate of the people of God in the empire had gone from bad to worse. But God has not forgotten His covenant, and in His own perfect timing has worked to keep His promises.

Earlier we quoted Psalm 115 and verse 8. It was a good description of the fate of Haman — “those who make idols become like them, so do all who trust in them.” In that same psalm, Psalm 115, the idolatrous nations are quoted as asking of Israel, “Where now is their God?” If we are not believers, there is a temptation to think that we are safe because we cannot see God at work or discern His ways. “Where is their God?” We may scoff perhaps mock the people of God for their convictions and their ethics. And even for the church the temptation to begin to wonder if God has in fact forgotten His promises to His people can be just as real. We find ourselves asking, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation” — 2 Peter 3 and verse 4. Or saying with the psalmist, “How long oh Lord? Have You forgotten Your promises?”

If we are not Christians this evening, actually Esther 6 is a chilling warning. And if we are Christians it is a glorious promise of hope. It tells us, whatever we think and however we may perceive things, that God “is not slow in keeping his promises as some account slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” — 2 Peter 3:9 and following. An echo of that great final day reached Haman in the words of Zeresh his wife. God will and He does keep His covenant with His people, however long He might delay. If you are not a Christian, be warned. Repent and believe the Gospel, lest a sudden reversal come upon you like a thief in the night and you, like Haman, feel the sting of divine vengeance. But if you are a Christian, endure, press on, persevere, learn from Mordecai, what the man whom the Lord delights to honor looks like. And like him, do not grow weary in well doing, knowing that we shall reap a harvest in due time if we do not give up. Therefore brothers and sisters, press on. May the Lord bless to us the ministry of his Word. Will you pray with me?

Our Father we bless You that though there are times when it seems to us as though You are far from fulfilling Your promises, we bless You that You are not slow in keeping Your promises as some account slowness but You are patient towards us, not willing that any should perish. O Lord, grant that all who have heard the Gospel this Lord's Day in this place may not perish, but believing on

the Lord Jesus, having kissed the Son and fled for refuge in Him, grant that they may have everlasting life. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Let's stand and receive God's benediction.

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore. And all God's people said, amen.

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