

Esther: Strategic Patience

Esther 5

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

We left the book of Esther, with Esther heeding Mordecai's advice to go in to the king – against the law – and plead for the life of her people. And, she says, “if I perish, I perish.” To prepare, she calls for a three day fast, for all the Jews in the capitol. The narrative, as we come to the crux of the book, slows down dramatically. Nine years have gone by, from the opening of the book, to this point. The crucial turning, over the next few chapters, takes place in a mere two days. Chapter 5, our text, occupies less than a full day. We will make two points. Esther's wisdom in verses 1-8, and Haman's folly in verses 9-14.

I. Esther's Wisdom

First, Esther's wisdom. It has already been 30 days since Esther saw the king, even before the decree to slaughter the Jews was issued. On the third day of the three day fast, the day with echoes of divine deliverance, Esther must wonder: will she be like a lamb led to the slaughter. She has summoned up her courage, and on the third day, puts on her royal robes. She comes now, not as beauty queen, but as Queen. Not merely attractive, but clothed in her royal stature. She has, literally, put her royalty on. She has, as Mordecai suggested, come into the kingdom, into her royal station, for this appointed time.

The whole ambience here – inside the palace – is one of intimidating royal majesty. Words related to king, are used six times in the first verse. Esther comes and she STANDS, she does not bow, she is the Queen of Persia, she stands in the inner court, in front of the king's hall. This is against the law, and it is done under threat of death. There are reliefs (paintings) from this period, which show the Persian king on this throne, having a soldier with an ax by his side, to prevent unwanted intrusions. The king is sitting on his royal throne, facing the entrance, and he sees Esther. Esther, who the narrator calls, for the first time, *Queen* Esther. And – to her great relief – he was pleased (favored) with her – he holds out the golden scepter, thus (for now) lifting the death sentence. Esther approaches and touches the royal scepter.

The king could tell by looking at Esther that something wasn't right. And he knows the risk she took to appear. So, he asks: What is it? Or, what's up with

you? QUEEN Esther. Now the narrator and Xerxes agree: Esther is royalty, she is rising in status and dignity as this chapter unfolds. What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you. Now, this is standard hyperbole. The king isn't giving away half his kingdom. But it does mean something like: I'm in a generous mood, what is it that you want, try me! And we will see shortly that Esther doesn't take the invitation literally.

You would think, having escaped the death penalty, and been given this kind of open door to make her request, Esther would lay her petition before the King immediately. Surprisingly, that is not what happens. Instead, she exercises strategic patience, as the tension mounts in the story. The narrator, of course, does not tell us why she refuses to be direct, or why she chooses the course of action she does. And some commentators think this means we shouldn't speculate.

I think the opposite. I think the narrator's silence is an invitation to ask: why? Why this way at this time? I think a large part of the book is meant to produce reflection on tactics, strategy, timing, prudence, human psychology, in a political world. A world where, though it is never stated, God's providential hand is assumed, but often invisible. What kind of human actions do we take in THAT world, under that kind of God? When do we resist, when do we conform, when do we block, when do we subvert, when do we delay, when do we stand and fight? The book is pushing back against a cookie cutter view of life, of political action, of what it means to be a human agent in the realm of permanent exile.

So, Esther. She knows Xerxes doesn't care much about the actual substance of the policy to kill the Jews. He barely seemed to pay attention to it. What she needs to do is damage Haman's credibility. His standing with the King. She needs another voice – hers – to be heard over against Haman's. And she knows the King is mercurial (changes a lot and quickly) and pliable in the hands of his advisors.

So, there are real drawbacks to taking up the king's generous offer to present her request. Her Jewishness – and thus her deceit – would be exposed to the king. And – do not forget this – Esther hasn't – the law CANNOT BE CHANGED ANYWAY! Even if the King were open to her, he would be in a legal bind, and he is not likely to want to lose face. And, most importantly, if Haman is not involved and confronted from the moment of Esther's request, he could (with some advisors) likely change the king's mind in a subsequent meeting – from which, Esther would be absent.

So, she has a plan, which is not obvious, not direct. She exercises strategic patience. She is no longer a tool of Mordecai. She is her own tactician. "If it pleases the king, let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him (the King)."

It's a strange request. It's certainly not the request Mordecai asked her to make, nor is it the kind of request the king invited her to make. He was in the mood for a grand gesture, and she invited him – who she hasn't seen for 30 days – to a quiet dinner – for three! This is called taking the long road home. Notice her confidence, her trust that she would be spared, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet TODAY – a banquet ALREADY prepared. Which means she was overseeing the preparation of a banquet while she was fasting! That's like watching the food channel while your fasting. But she knows this king – she wants him relaxed and drinking – and she wants Haman in the room (wedge). Besides, in this culture, preparing and serving a meal, gives the hostess a certain leverage over the proceedings.

So, the King is in. "Bring Haman at once -so that we may do what Esther asks." Don't let that sentence slide by. At the end of the last chapter – Esther was issuing the commands and Mordecai and the Jews in Susa were obeying. Here, the King and Haman will do what Esther asks. Her word is gaining authority. She is subtly changing the psychological disposition of the king, and the balance of power in the situation. Then the King and Haman, go to the banquet Esther had prepared. And, as she wanted, they are drinking. And the king asks again for a second time: Surely this banquet is not what you risked death for? What is your petition – even up to half the kingdom -- it will be granted.

Now, does Esther falter, does she hesitate or stammer, does she change her mind and decide she's not willing to take the risk? Does she lose her nerve? Because shockingly, her best idea at this point seems to be: let's have a second banquet tomorrow. Now this is extremely dangerous. She risks spoiling the king's magnanimous mood. She gives occasion for even Haman to figure out what might be happening. She puts the request forward with great flourish and meekness. She panders. And the king likes to be flattered. She mentions that the king is king, four times. If the King regards me with favor, and if it pleases the king, to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the King and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. And, lest the king thinks she's playing with him: Then, she concludes, I will answer the king's question.

What she has craftily done here – by restraining his impulsiveness with some suspense – is essentially prep the King to answer yes in advance. These banquets are semi-public. The king has already offered TWICE to grant Esther's request (witnesses). By tomorrow's banquet it will be three times. Psychologically, it would be very hard for the King to show up, repeat his offer, and then say no. That's Esther's wisdom. To Mordecai's public pressure, she adds quiet diplomacy.

II. Haman's Folly

Our second point is Haman's folly. He goes out (v.9) happy and high spirits. The effect of social prestige and alcohol. In his joy, Haman is a fool. And Mordecai – still at the gate – ups the ante. He not only refuses to bow, he shows no lesser signs of respect for Haman. The decree of annihilation has not lessened Mordecai's public contempt. Mordecai is an uncontrolled menace, and he's giving Haman post-banquet indigestion. And public respect is an idol for Haman, so he is enraged. Disproportionate anger is always a sign that an idol is threatened. But he restrains himself, goes home, calls together some friends, and his wife, Zeresh. And, with a textbook example of the pride that goes before destruction, in v.11, we're told: Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king honored and elevated him. Talk about a narcissistic, self-absorbed foolish politician. You know what this guy never says when he gets home? How was YOUR day? He has an evening gathering just to boast. How many times do you think they had to listen to how rich he was? Like they wouldn't know. *Does this guy think that his wife doesn't know how many sons he has? Or about his promotions at work?*

This is an epic level of juvenile self-absorption. This a hollow man. And as such he's blind. "And that's not all," he continues: I'm the only person, Queen Esther... (even Haman is calling her Queen now) I'm the only one invited to the banquet for the king, and she's invited me to another one tomorrow. But none of this gives me satisfaction, while I see THAT JEW – there's the Amalekite Anti-Semitism again – that Jew, sitting at the king's gate. So, his wife and friends convince him to construct a ludicrously high, 75-foot pole to impale Mordecai on. It would be much higher than the palace itself. It's an image of Haman's absurdly inflated ego. (proportion)

This is – of course - horrific counsel. It is not about mortifying your idolatry, but feeding it. It would broadcast that resistance to Haman is futile. Apparently, this is urgent. The pole is to be set up tonight – NOW – so the king can sentence Mordecai to death on it tomorrow. "Then you can go to the banquet and enjoy yourself." Like Adam and Eve, who could eat from every tree but one, Haman can't live with adulation from all subjects but one. Like all power mongers, he obsesses over the lone dissenter.

So, the suggestion – surprise, surprise – delights Haman, and he has the pole set up. *The irony is that the original decree against Vashti, was so that every man could rule in his house, but here the Prime Minister is being ruled by the foolish counsel of his wife and friends.*

Now Esther's plan looks exposed. By tomorrow night's banquet, Mordecai may be dead. Maybe asking for the second banquet wasn't a great idea. Mordecai's public protests and Esther's quiet diplomacy don't seem like such a good match now. Either the night will do its work – and what a night this will be – next week in chapter 6 we'll look at it – either the night will do its work, or Esther will have to

confront Haman, with the backing of the King, and the full power of the Empire in his hand.

Let me conclude with three takeaways. Prayer, Providence, Patience.

Prayer

First, when we face crises, we should imitate Esther here. We should slow down and wait on the Lord. We should fast and pray and repent. We must not forget the three days before this scene. It doesn't say they prayed, but they likely did, and we certainly should. This is a key part of trusting in the Lord with all our hearts, leaning not on our own understanding, but in all our ways acknowledging him, so that he might direct our paths. We are to be anxious for nothing, but with prayer and supplication, make our request known to God.

Providence

Second, providence. When we face unpredictable, proud, volatile, difficult people. We must remember Proverbs 21:1: The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. And if it's true of kings, it's true of the people in our lives who need their hearts opened, or softened, or enlightened, or comforted. Trust the God who does have an open-door policy, and who is doing his own subtle nudging and directing – unbeknownst to anyone – in this very hour of darkness and threat.

Patience

Finally, strategic patience is a virtue. It can never replace courage. But, remember, in going into the King, Esther showed a kind of "Dare to be a Daniel" courage. But we need another hymn called: "Dare to be an Esther." Or maybe, to keep the alliteration: Engage to be an Esther. A key part in her becoming a sage is learning the arts of indirection, of subtlety, and meekness with people, of strategic patience. Of playing the long game. Of mastering the art of political tactics.

In Esther and Mordecai one can argue about almost every choice they make. For to live in this world, is to live with this kind of ambiguity as to exactly what to do. But we see all three things here, perfectly integrated in our Lord. He prayed, fervently and frequently. And fasted. Especially at crucial points in his life. He trusted the hidden providence of his father, to turn the hearts of the kings over him, to fulfill the divine purpose for which he was sent. And he showed repeatedly strategic patience. My hour has not come. I have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them now. Sometimes confronting, sometimes eluding, the authorities. His whole life was an exercise in courageous, strategic patience. And through his public gallows, he brings about the reversal, of which, the reversal about to take place in the Book of Esther, is but a foretaste. For he died,

the just for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty, the wise for the fools, that he might bring us, unmolested and welcomed into the Father's kingly throne room. Glory be to Christ, the Savior and the sage. Amen.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).