

Esther: Sleepless in Susa

Esther 6

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

This morning we come to the place where, in an ironic and comical fashion, the tide turns in the book of Esther. Let's recall the state of affairs at the end of chapter 5. Esther had hosted a banquet for the King and Haman. Our text opens late on the same night --after that banquet. Esther had requested -- dangerously -- a second banquet, for the next day, at which she promised she would tell the king her request. Haman had received the counsel of his wife and friends to execute Mordecai (Still refusing to show honor to him), on a pole which he is having constructed on this very night. His plan is to go into the king, in the morning, to seek permission to kill Mordecai. Tomorrow is a critical day, and unless something -- beyond human agency -- happens, Mordecai is likely to be dead, before Esther pleads with the King, for her people. So, we will make three points (back of bulletin). Sleeplessness, honor, and downfall.

I. Sleeplessness

First, sleeplessness. Esther 6, verse 1. Something beyond human agency does happen. Something trivial, something seemingly incidental (of no significance). That night -- not some other night -- but of all nights, that night. That night - the king could not sleep. There is a whole theology of sleep in the Bible. Sleep, as an unearned gift God gives his beloved. Sleep, as a reminder that our labors are not the decisive thing that makes the world go around. Sleep, which is a sign of God's protecting, watching mercies. That night -- the first event in a chain of coincidences - the king could not sleep.

One wonders if something about Esther's very strange approach has gotten under his skin. Why two banquets? Why Haman at both banquets? Is she interested in him? Is he interested in her? Are they seeking some leverage on me? It's not hard imagining a king -- whose already been through a thwarted assassination attempt -- getting a little paranoid in this situation.

So, what does he do? The second -- "it just so happened" link in the chain -- out of all the possibilities an Emperor could choose - He orders the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. This has got to be material about as interesting as reading the phone book. Maybe he thought

it would put him to sleep. Maybe it feeds his narcissism, since it's the record of his reign. And the third link in the chain of coincidences is in v.2: It was found – out of all the volumes of chronicles that could have been selected – the volume brought, and the place read, was the one where it was found... that it was Mordecai who had exposed the assassination plot against the king. And was thus responsible for saving Xerxes' life. This was at the end of chapter 2. And we were told there, that it was recorded in the book of the king's chronicles. It's been sitting there, like a ticking time bomb for something like 4 years.....

But God, the unmentioned agent knitting all these seemingly uninteresting choices together – doesn't forget. The detail is dug out of the archives, mere hours before Mordecai's scheduled impalement. The king – always eager to reward loyalty and punish disloyalty – asks what honor Mordecai has received for this? And his attendants tell him: nothing has been done. We could call this oversight, the fourth link in the chain events now unfolding. The king *could be* suspicious of Haman's role here. He promoted Haman in the wake of the conspiracy on his life. Why didn't Haman investigate the matter and reward Mordecai? In any event, the king, who can never seem to decide for himself what to do, asks "who is in the court?" This means we are now in the early morning hours. People are showing up to work.

So, here's your fifth coincidence: Notice the timing. Who is in the court? The king asks: "Now Haman had just entered...the outer court of the palace, to speak to the king, about impaling Mordecai on the (75') pole – which is, already set up and waiting." Haman is chipper and eager. He's at work early, expecting a rubber stamp on his plan, a happy day at work, with a delightful banquet later. The king is told: "Haman is standing in the court." And, without delay, he replies: Bring him in. Haman, must be thinking – this is going to be easy. That's sleeplessness.

II. Honor

Second, honor. Haman enters, and the king asks him: what should be done for the man the king delights to honor? Notice – and this is part of the comedy – the man in view, Mordecai, is not mentioned. The king asks it of an anonymous man. "The man the king delights to honor."

This, of course, allows Haman to assume that it must be him (he's so vain). It is hard to know, if the king is *intentionally* setting Haman up, or he just happens, innocently, to ask the question this way. Either way, however, the question does set Haman up for a fall. Call the wording of this question, the fifth link in the chain of coincidences, tightening around Haman's neck.

Oh, let's note a deep irony here. Haman, in his viscous, little propaganda speech to Xerxes, about the people who must be annihilated, purposely left the name of the people out. The Jews are named in the written decree, but they are not

named in Haman's speech to Xerxes. So now, mysteriously, on the brink of the story's pivoting, Xerxes leaves out the name of the man he wants to honor.

Predictably, Haman thinks: who is there that the king would rather honor than me? (he's so vain) Remember: He brags about his money, his son, his success. He jumps to conclusions too quickly. He's hyper-reactive. An awful quality for someone with this much power. He's self-indulgent, and he has a proclivity to excess. And, for him, public honor is his lifeblood. His idol. He mentions "the man the king delights to honor" four times here. He begins and ends his reply to the king, with the phrase. The phrase itself captivates his juvenile, frantic thoughts.

So, he answers the king's question, and thinking he's the unnamed man, he probably inflates the honor. Clearly, it's something he's already thought a lot about. "For the man the king delights to honor, he says... Have them bring a royal robe the king has worn, and a horse the king has ridden, with a royal crest placed on its head. The king's own robe and his own horse, make this request close to treason. These are the kinds of things that would be given to you, if you were ascending to the throne itself. Haman thinks equality with the king, IS something to be grasped.

But there's more. For greater honor, the robe and the horse should be entrusted to "one of the king's most noble princes." They can robe the honored man, and lead him through the city – as a herald – saying – this is what is done for the man the king delights to honor. He's dreamed of this moment for a long time. Go at once – immediately – the king commands – and do JUST as you have suggested... for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. "Mordecai the Jew" is the term of contempt, that an enraged Haman used in the last chapter when Mordecai refused to show honor.

Here we can see that Xerxes himself does not appear to be anti-Semitic. He actually forgot the decree of annihilation anyway. And does not seem to be aware that Mordecai the Jew would be under the death sentence. And he certainly doesn't know about Haman and Mordecai's feud. It's a standard comedic device, when the audience knows more than the parties to the conversation. It's like the Abbot and Costello "who's on first" routine. We know what both parties are saying, but they are unaware of the comedic irony. He finishes instructing Haman: Do not neglect anything YOU have recommended. Talk about pouring salt in the wound. Twice the king says to Haman: Hey, this is *your* deal. You fulfill your word. Do exactly as you have suggested, don't neglect anything, do it at once.

Haman, obviously, is in shock. He finds this a bitter pill to swallow. He's blindsided, by a reversal he could never have imagined. One commentator says humorously: here, the early bird is gotten by the worm. Haman gets the robe and the horse. Robes Mordecai. Previously, his actions clothed Mordecai in sackcloth and ashes. Now he invests him with honor. The fortunes of the Jews, and the

fortunes of their enemies, turn right here. And surely, with suppressed rage, Haman leads Mordecai through the streets, proclaiming the good news, in words that would have stuck in his throat: This is what is done, for the man the king delights to honor. His pride, his love of honor, is going before his fall.

III. Downfall

Our final point is the downfall. After this little ride Mordecai returns to the king gates. He goes back to work. He doesn't think it's time to celebrate. The decree of annihilation is still in effect. There's a beautiful – non-reactive – humility and contentment in Mordecai. He doesn't even seem to entertain vengeance on Haman. It's like he got on the horse and said: drop me back off where we started.

On the other hand, Haman is all drama and hysterics. He rushed home with his head covered in grief. This is the end of three days of fasting in sackcloth and ashes for the Jews. Now, their enemies begin to mourn. Again, this is the point of reversal. Haman runs home in grief, and tells his wife and friends everything that happened.

For this sort of person, it is never: you know, I learned a valuable lesson today. They are never broken by providence. It's always somebody else's fault. And his advisors – who gave him monstrous advice the day before about executing Mordecai – surprisingly, speak as Gentile prophets here: Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started. Now, this is not literally true yet, politically, but they can see it. Since Mordecai is of Jewish origin (Jewish seed), you cannot stand before him, you will surely come to ruin.

They may very well remember that the Gentile prophet Balaam, said that the God of Israel would triumph over the Amalekites (remember: Haman is an Amalekite). Or perhaps they know the promise to Abraham, that those who bless his seed will be blessed, and those who curse his seed will be cursed. Their own words confirm Mordecai's words to Esther in chapter 4: If you refuse, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter.

Again, God is not mentioned. But there is this deep-seated fear/belief that you cannot oppose the covenant people, without coming to ruin. One can imagine Haman saying: What? You knew this, and you said nothing to me when I issued a decree against ALL the Jews? Or, it would have been nice if you told me this yesterday – when you knew Mordecai was a Jew- and suggested that I execute him! That's why his advisors are virtually prophesying here (not normal mode of counsel). It's an extraordinary scene, with these Persians agreeing with Mordecai, that some mysterious, unknown, unnamed, hidden, but potent, force will come to the aid of the Jews.

While they are talking, the King's eunuchs arrive, they whisk a now passive Haman, to the banquet Esther – who is now in charge – has prepared. Haman may not know what's in store, but he knows that the gallows he built, will not be occupied by Mordecai. And he knows his downfall has begun. Never has the old song “what a difference a day makes,” been truer than in the last 24 hours of our story.

I will make three points in closing. Honor, Action, and Coincidences. First, honor.

Honor

Mordecai is moving, being transfigured, from a righteous man, suffering and unrecognized. To one vindicated, exalted, and publicly recognized. He doesn't grasp after the kingship, yet honor comes to him. And we should see the humiliation and exaltation of our Lord Jesus in this pattern. For he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, and is now exalted, as the man that God the king delights to honor. The Son in whom he is well pleased. He is the one who rode a donkey in lowliness, and was mockingly dressed in purple robes of royalty, and a crown of twisted thorns. And scheduled for execution by the Empire. A “gallows” he was NOT delivered from.

Now he rides on in triumph, clothed in royal majesty, the seed of Abraham, Jesus the Jew, the Son, whom God is pleased to honor with universal, public proclamation. And we are called into union with that Jesus, and with that way of being in the world. Losing our lives to save them, not grasping for honor, but emptying ourselves in service, waiting in dishonor, for honor to be given.

Action

Second, action. Please get this – one crucial lesson of this text – is that our action – important as it is, because God deigns to use us – is not operating on the same level as God, and is something God can work above, without, or against, with ease. We are not needed. We are honored to be called into cooperation with the divine design.

The story turns here, where Esther & Mordecai are both absent or passive. Nothing about their boldness enters into the scene. Mordecai triumphs this night while he is sleeping. Esther's plan has not really even gotten off the ground. God saves the Jews by disturbing the sleep of a king, and having the exact right boring text brought to him. Effortlessly, without our aid, he is able to save. He doesn't need Mordecai & Esther to be heroes (in any event they deeply flawed heroes). This chapter reminds us, that God's action and our actions are NOT correlated – we are not God's equal partners. His action is decisive.

Coincidences

Finally, coincidences. Someone once said a coincidence is just God's way of remaining anonymous. He is, if you will, masked and subtle. But this text indicates that the most mundane – most unspiritual if you will – the most boring, this-worldly regularities – these things- the anonymous, silent God is ordering for our sakes.

There is a mysterious depth, a strange design in the ordinary stuff, and we need to be alert to it. The details are divine appointments. Here the history of the world turns on a sleepless night. It could be a commonplace encounter, an interruption, an emergency, a phone call, and email, a chance event, a quiet moment. God's providence is mostly little stuff. Your life is 95% little stuff, a word, a look, a tone of voice, some body language, daily errands, daily disciplines, maintenance, upkeep, work, eat, sleep, repeat.

Fredrick Faber, the hymnwriter said:

“Thrice bless’ d is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when he
Is most invisible.”

Let us cultivate this instinct, this sense that God's fatherly hand is measuring out our daily portion, ordering our steps, and is present, in sovereign invisible wisdom and goodness, in all that befalls us. Amen.

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