

## Committee Work

*Luke 22:16,24-30; Esther 8:7-14*

We are rounding into the home stretch of the Book of Esther, which is really the story of a young Jewish orphan named Hadassah, who was raised by her devout elder cousin, Mordecai. So young Hadassah was also devout, a young woman who would have led a quiet, pious, ordinary sort of life if it were not for a wild turn of circumstances which put her on a path where she became Esther, Queen of the Persians, the bride and best love of Xerxes, the Persian Emperor. Her wedding to a man who ruled all of west Asia should have been beyond the wildest dreams of an orphan girl from a subject people. But we've already seen that Esther's is a story where every happy ending leads to a new set of difficult and complicated trials.

In this book, I think that Xerxes appears as a savior king, one of a number of Old Testament forerunners of Christ, but we've already seen Xerxes drift away from the bride he loves and get involved in something evil. Xerxes allowed an antichrist, Haman the Amalekite, to rise to a position of such power that he had the means to plot a holocaust against God's people. Haman used his office as prime minister and the signet ring Xerxes gave him to set the whole Persian government into motion against the Jews, so as to exterminate all God's people throughout west Asia by the end of that calendar year.

The plan was so desperately evil that it forced Esther to test the love that existed between her and Xerxes by boldly demanding that the king side with her and God's people against his own hand chosen prime minister. And to everyone's great relief, Xerxes proved to be the upright and compassionate king and savior that God's people needed in that moment. Forced to choose, the Savior King loved his bride and judged Haman as a devil, and put Haman to death on the very gallows that Haman had built so that Mordecai could hang as the very first victim of Haman's holocaust, the holocaust that never happened because Xerxes put a stop to it. And if the Book of Esther were a fairy tale, it might have ended there with everybody living happily ever after.

But there are no fairy tales in the Bible. The fact that the good guy turned out good and the bad guy turned up dead, the fact that Xerxes really did love his bride after all, didn't alter the fact that the whole Persian government was still churning toward the holocaust that Haman had set into motion. So the very next day, Esther had to barge into Xerxes inner throne room a second time, putting her life on the line yet again. A second time, the Queen of the Persians was reduced to begging the emperor from her knees to do something to reverse what Haman had set in motion throughout the Persian government.

The point being that sin can be institutional as well as personal. The triumph of a good guy over a bad guy, even the proof of a Savior's love for a bride who needed and trusted him, does not mean that all the problems occasioned by sin and evil are going to simply go away. It was true for Xerxes and Esther then and it's true for you and me and Christ today. The fact that we're forgiven by what Christ did at the cross and saved by his triumph at the resurrection doesn't relieve us from the necessity of responding to and wrestling with the evil that still comes our way even after we've thrown in with Christ.

How wonderful for Esther to know that Xerxes' inner throne room was a place where she would be loved and listened to and cared for by the most powerful man in the realm. How tempting for her to imagine that every time she went there the king would wave his scepter and solve her problems through some sort of royal fiat. But note carefully that this time the king left the destiny of God's people in the hands of God's people! Xerxes says to Esther and Mordecai in so many words, that he had already done everything necessary to avert the holocaust, but now it was time for Esther and Mordecai to get in the game.

Listen to the king! He says to Esther and Mordecai, *"Behold, I've given to Esther the house of Haman and they have hanged Haman on the gallows...But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with my signet ring. For an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."* If you listen carefully, Xerxes both provides the solution and describes the problem in the same sentence. The holocaust was declared in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet. Under Persian jurisprudence it could not be simply revoked.

That's the problem. But if you have eyes to see, and a mind to grasp and a heart that believes in possibilities, the very same principle, the absolute, irreversible power of the monarch was the solution to their problems as well. Xerxes was saying to Esther and especially to Mordecai in so many words, "That's a pretty potent ring I just placed on your hand." So you go now and write some countermeasure that will make Haman's holocaust impossible to execute. And that's what Mordecai did!

He completed what was essentially a creative writing assignment that said, in so many words, "Haman's holocaust is on, we can't reverse it, but the imperial government will also arm and authorize the Jews to preemptively attack anyone they believe wants to do them harm. So, if you plan to exterminate the Jews, understand that the full weight of the Persian government will be against you in this.

What Xerxes did for Esther and especially Mordecai in the inner throne room that day is very similar to what Jesus did for the disciples at the Last Supper. *"You are the ones"* Jesus told

them, “ *who have stood by me in all my trials, and I confer on you, as my Father has conferred on me a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table and sit on thrones, ruling the twelve tribes of Israel.* ” Understand what grim, ominous circumstances prompted Jesus to speak to his disciples like this.

The very next words out of his mouth were “*Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift you all like wheat!*” And the point was that they were already saved, Jesus had already promised to see them through whatever came their way and get them home to heaven. But it was not going to happen by any sort of instant, painless fiat from the king. As apostles, they were going to have to use the keys Jesus had promised them. They were going to have to legislate a gospel and build institutions that would change the direction fallen humanity wants to continue to churn even after Christ has made a new way possible for anyone who wants to be forgiven and changed and saved.

The point being that, if sin can work its way into the patterns of our lives and the policies of our institutions, then grace will have to be habitual and institutional in its own turn. That’s why the very first public words out of Jesus’ mouth were this: “*The kingdom of God is at hand, repent therefore, and believe the good news!* ” In other words, the gospel call is not just for you and me to change our own personal thoughts and feelings and habits. It’s about joining and belonging to a kingdom, participating in and persevering at relationships even when they’re hard.

It follows that loving Christ is more than a bunch of friends finding a cozy place to have a mystical experience and then moving on without addressing the interpersonal and institutional habits and patterns that keep us bound in sin. That’s why giving our hearts to Christ also involves living our lives in a kingdom where personal loyalty and love are expressed and bounded by formal obligations.

And the place where that happens in God’s kingdom is church. Read the New Testament letters and take note how much and how often the apostles have to teach about how worship services get organized, and widows get taken care of, and money gets handled. To be sure, Xerxes loving Esther and vanquishing Haman, Christ forgiving sins and conquering death, the goodness and power of the Savior is the foundation on which the kingdom is built and our own lives get changed. But it’s also true that we only know and love and follow Christ to the extent we live as part of a kingdom and we face life in common as brothers and sisters in church.