

## **The Invisible Hand Turns the Table**

*1 Peter 5:6-11; Esther 5:5a-6:11*

We rejoin the story of Esther this morning at a point where the prayers and fasting of God's people have led Esther to a point where she's in entirely over her head. Faced with Haman, an Amalekite prime minister who has scheduled a holocaust against God's people, Esther the Persian queen, has already taken her life in her hands and approached her husband, the Persian emperor, uninvited, which in Persia in those days should have gotten her executed. But instead last week we saw Xerxes remember how much he loved his wife and so he extended mercy to her, but the question remained "What should Esther do next?"

There she was, in the inner court, in front of the king's cabinet with Haman, the enemy of the Jews, standing right there...and her own husband doesn't even know she's a Jew. Nothing's clear to Esther and she can't bring herself to take her life in her hands twice in the same day, so she stalls! She asks for a luncheon, just her and the king and the wicked prime minister, hoping to find some sort of lever she can pull to save her people. And at the luncheon, her bridegroom the king wants to help her but she doesn't know what to ask and so she stalls again, asking for another luncheon the next day and hoping God will give her a clue in the meantime.

So Haman leaves the inner court that day imagining that he's just gained another ally in his campaign to dominate everything Persian. Xerxes' mysterious queen has suddenly shown an interest in Haman, the new prime minister, and Haman can only imagine that the queen sees him as a winner and wants to be on his side in the deadly game he's about to play. So Haman is ecstatic as he leaves court that day, that is till he has to pass Mordecai the Jew on his way out the palace. Mordecai knows that the Amalekites are enemies of God, cursed by Moses himself, so Mordecai never bows even though everyone else at the palace gate trembles and cowers for the king's new strong man.

So life is bittersweet for Haman as he pulls into his own mansion. And he assembles his team to take stock of his circumstances, his friends and allies in the capital city, his wife Zeresh and those of his sons who can be reached on short notice and Haman launches into a discourse on the state of his party after the day's events. And, strangely, sadly, from our point of view, life has been good to Haman, evil though he was. He had gained the trust and admiration of Persia's great emperor. Haman was rich beyond his wildest dreams. He had a number of sons to build his legacy and watch his back. Haman was the most powerful man in Persia, after the emperor himself.

And the irony here is that no one among God's people in the exile, not Mordecai, not Nehemiah, not even Daniel had fared as well in the eastern palaces as Haman, this Amalekite hit man whom Xerxes had made the most powerful man in Persia. Haman had everything! Which provokes the age old question, "Why does God allow bad men and bad women to do so well, to gain such wealth and power while good, humble, faithful people have to struggle, one step away from heartbreak and destitution and failure?" It's a question we'll pay attention to in the weeks ahead, but for now I'd like to focus on an even deeper irony.

Haman had everything, but Haman wasn't happy. The point being that once our hearts get untethered from God, once we stand alone at center stage, once life becomes entirely about us and our wants and needs and circumstances and prospects, we become subject to appetites and ambitions and passions that can never be satisfied. No matter how much we grab, we'll always want more. The Serpent promised our ancestors in the Garden that if we reached for the fruit God said we couldn't have, we would "*be like God*", get our way, rule the world. And we've been grabbing ever since, but, the truth be told, it doesn't work, doesn't satisfy. The unhappy, bitter, restless heart of Haman is proof that nothing we can grab, no amount of wealth and power, no number of experiences and relationships, nothing we can do or own or master will ever give us the confidence and tranquility and goodness that men can only borrow from the heart of God.

Because God's original design was that we become like God only when we're willing to let him be God. Only when we put God center stage and learn his terms and live within his boundaries do we gain those qualities that allow us to rest in what we have, to be happy with what he's given us. It is the conviction that God is God, that he's in control, and good and there for us that frees us from that restless dissatisfaction which otherwise drives people to tear apart their marriages and families and churches, and, on a larger scale, so un-tethers people that they become monstrous, like Haman, sweeping away whole people groups because they can't imagine a God who will hold them to account.

So Haman and his partisans imagine that, with the favor of both king and queen, they are now in a position to do away with Mordecai, the boldest and most vocal of God's people in the Persian capital. And they are so bold about it as to begin to build a gallows that night so that Mordecai the Jew can be done away with next morning. But it turns out that, beyond their sight, in the palace, a very different wind is starting to blow in the heart of the king.

Xerxes can't sleep. I used to like to see his insomnia as sheer, supernatural coincidence, that God in answer to the prayers and fasting of his people simply prevented the Persian emperor from falling asleep. And I do think that God is at work here and that the three days Mordecai and Esther led prayer meetings in the capital did absolutely turn the tide in Xerxes' heart and mind. But the more I read this story the less I think his insomnia was sheer coincidence.

Think about it! His queen, whom he loves, that day had stormed his inner court against all custom and precedent, and she had risked her life to tell him... what? The whole strange episode had been followed by an equally strange luncheon where the queen wouldn't say what trouble had propelled her to take such risks. So the king and Haman were invited to attend the queen at another mysterious luncheon the next day. But the dynamic between the three had caused enough disquiet in Xerxes' heart that sleep was not coming easy. And I don't think the king had his scribes ransacking the palace records looking for bedtime stories. I would go so far as to say that Xerxes' sleepless night foreshadowed the sleepless night that Jesus would spend in prayer before he called his apostles to rule his kingdom 500 years later in Luke, chapter 6 and the other gospels. Xerxes and Jesus both up all night sorting through big decisions each for his own kingdom.

It follows then that the king's reading the account of Mordecai's heroism some years before was not a coincidence either. My guess is that Xerxes was likely aware that a mid-level bureaucrat from his palace had set up in the Susa city square, wailing his heart out about some injustice enacted by the new prime minister. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that Xerxes actually knew that Mordecai and his queen were connected in some way, that a flurry of messages had been run from the queen's apartment to the city square while Mordecai was out there. After all, you don't stay a Persian emperor for long without knowing what's going on in your own palace.

My point here is that the prayer and fasting we do for ourselves and our families and our church generally doesn't operate entirely independently of human factors. A king who loves his queen and finds her unable to talk to him ought to be up all night, ought to be trying to learn what in the blue blazes is going on. And three days of fasting and prayer by all the believers Mordecai and Esther could find in the capital ought to result in the king having a serious change of heart, ought to provoke serious questions about a new chief minister who's caused this level of upset.

So I think that Xerxes was supernaturally moved by God's Spirit and motivated by his entirely human love for his queen to stay up all night, doing his imperial due diligence. But like Esther the day before, the pieces haven't entirely come together in a picture the king can understand. So like Esther the day before, Xerxes resorts to a sort of half measure, he decides to honor Mordecai, just to see who will react how.

So as the sun starts to dawn, the king is determined to honor Mordecai for being the Friend of the Bridegroom that Mordecai has faithfully been ever since the he gave his little Hadassah as a bride to the king and she became Esther, queen of the Persians. And at the very same moment, sunrise, Haman arrives in the outer court seeking an interview to gain Xerxes' permission to

hang the very same man Xerxes wants to honor. Now this is absolutely a God-ordained sheer coincidence. Neither of these men has a clue what the other wants to ask him.

This is what three days of fasting and praying and a little bold action by the queen will buy you. And the point to be learned from this is that no amount of clever human manipulation could have turned events in exactly this way. Only God could have orchestrated the collision that took place between Xerxes and Haman that sunrise in a way that saved Mordecai's life in the nick of time.

But I think it's also true that Mordecai's outspoken courage in the palace gate and in the city square, and Esther's equally courageous diplomacy and tact in the inner court worked together to awaken Xerxes to just how wrong his realm was starting to go. The point being that neither prayers and fasting nor human courage and commitment would have worked without the other to save God's people in those days. God uses both. God has commanded us to practice both.

It fell to Esther and Mordecai to practice their spiritual disciplines and to lay their lives on the line in a dark and difficult time for God's people. This was not Moses seeing God atop Mt. Sinai, this was not David and Solomon ruling from horizon to horizon during Israel's glory days. This was God's people, far from home, powerless and outnumbered, no great prophet to show them the way, no great miracles to cheer their hearts, the world ruled by their enemies. But they went without their meals and they met in basements and back rooms to pray and they lay their lives on the line even when their God couldn't be seen or heard or even safely mentioned out loud.

And we should pay attention because this is what Jesus and the apostles and prophets warned us the last day would be like. Paul wrote to Timothy, *"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."*

When I was a boy, the church my mother brought us to was like the Galleria Mall in Sunday mornings. It was difficult to park, everybody went who wanted to be respectable and belong in the community in those days fifty years ago. But it's not like that today. The more the church bends toward show biz, the fewer people come overall, and they less consistently every year. And we can bow to the trend, become half-hearted and intermittent ourselves to the things of God as the years go on. We can teach less, expect less, make do with less and consider it inevitable.

Or we can listen to Jesus in Matthew 16, when he rebuked the Pharisees for understanding the weather but not understanding the times in which they lived. Dozens of Hamans have crossed the stage of human history in the centuries since Esther and Mordecai stood their ground in the

swirl and shadows, but God's people are still here. People have worshiped God and learned their gospel and lived out their faith in flesh and blood for two hundred years in this place where you and I are gathered today.

The question is not whether God can preserve his people in darkness and swirl, he's proven he can do that. The question is "Do we want in?" Will we love and trust Jesus to the point of worshiping him every week as the Scriptures command? Will we handle his gospel together as something sacred and important and not an afterthought or only as entertainment? Will we love each other and work with each other as Jesus commanded and not give up the project at the first sign of sin or trouble or upset?

God will save his people. That's what Mordecai told his frightened, hesitating foster daughter. But, Mordecai said, God might not save Esther if she wouldn't stand with her people in their time of need. Likewise today, God can still be counted on to save us. But the question is how many of us really want in when God comes calling.