

Where Is God?

The Story of Esther, Part 4

Rest from Our Enemies

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

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This morning we conclude our series of messages on the fascinating story of Esther. The story takes place around 480 BC when Persia rules the world. The King of Persia, Xerxes, has banished his Queen for being disrespectful to him. Esther was chosen to be the new Queen from among hundreds of beautiful women brought to the palace. Esther is Jewish. She keeps her identity as a Jew a secret while she is at the palace afraid that it might hurt her chances of being chosen Queen. Then she has physical intimacy with the King outside of marriage. Then she marries him, and he is not a believer in the God of Israel. She has compromised her faith and moral principles to become Queen.

Now that Esther is Queen, will she use her position to live a life of luxury and comfort? Or will she use her position to serve God? The moment of decision comes when Haman who is second in power only to the king convinces the king to issue an order that all Jewish people are to be killed on a certain day. He does this because a Jewish man named Mordecai (who happens to be Esther's cousin) refuses to kneel down and pay homage to him when he walks by. Haman concludes that all Jews are a threat to his power and wants them killed.

Mordecai tells Esther of the plot and asks her to plead with the king for the lives of her people. This poses a problem for Esther. The king does not know she is Jewish. How will he react when he finds out that she had not been honest with him? The king also has not sent for her in 30 days. If she appears unsummoned before the king, she could be killed. Mordecai tells her that this is her moment of destiny. Perhaps she has become Queen for

such a time as this. Esther decides to risk her life to save her people. The only way her life will be spared is if the king raises his scepter to her when she enters the throne room. This is where we left off with the story a couple of weeks ago.

What happens when Esther approaches the King without being summoned? When he took one look at this gorgeous woman he had not seen in awhile the Bible says: “he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand...He said: ‘What is it Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half kingdom, it will be granted.’” She had cleared one hurdle, she was granted an audience with the King. A couple of major hurdles remained ahead. How would he react when he found out she was Jewish? And how would he react when she asked him to overturn his order to kill all the Jews? An order of the Persian King was considered irrevocable. How could he save face and revoke the order? Would the King refuse her request?

She does not blurt out her request in the throne room. She knows the King will need time to think about how to respond. She does not want to put him on the spot in front of the nobles and princes that hung around the throne room. She invites the King and his second in command, Haman—the instigator of the plot against the Jews, to a private banquet that evening.

The King and Haman come to the banquet and during the last course of the meal, a glass of wine, the King asks Esther again what she wants. She replies that she wants them both to come back the next night for another banquet. What is going on here? Does she lose her courage and can't blurt out the request? I think there is something far more profound in asking the King to return for another banquet.

In ancient cultures to invite someone to your home for a meal was a way of saying “I want a relationship with you. I want to get to know you.” It had deep emotional significance. Esther had not been summoned by the King for 30 days. To invite him to two banquets was

very wise. She was saying “I want to rekindle the relationship with you.” She desires a restored relationship with the King not just to have her request granted.

In the New Testament, Jesus says to Zacheus, the short little man in the tree: “Come, down I want to go to your house for lunch today.” Jesus expressed to Zacheus a desire to have a personal relationship with him. And he desires the same with each of us. While we are conversing, Jesus asks: “What can I do for you?” Usually we are ready. We have a list of things that we want Jesus to do for us. We blurt out our requests. “Bless my family. Help me to get a better paying job. Keep us safe on our vacation.” I think Jesus occasionally would like to hear: “Jesus, you have already done enough for me. All I want is to get know you better. Let’s just spend some time together and enjoy each other.”

By asking him to two banquets, Esther let the King know that her main agenda was to restore the relationship with him. Her requests were secondary. Now this might be interpreted as manipulation on her part. Was she trying to soften him up before she presented her request? I don’t think so. I think she genuinely wanted a relationship with the King. We see evidence of this in the different way she addresses the king in the two banquets. At the first banquet she says: “If it pleases the king”—she addresses him in third person. At the second banquet she says: “If I have found favor with you”—she addresses him directly and informally. The relationship has been restored.

Once the relationship is there, she will risk telling him her requests. She asks him to spare her life and the lives of her people from annihilation. Now everything is on the table. Queen Esther is Jewish, and she is asking for the king to spare her life and the lives of all the Jewish people who have been sold out by someone. The King responds: “Who is he? Where is the man who has done such a thing?” Esther responds: “The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.”

The King gets up and leaves in a rage. He leaves because he would need time to process all this--as Esther predicted. The King trusted Haman as his second in command to give him good counsel. Haman told the king that the Jews did not obey his commands and were subversive to the Empire. But Haman's real agenda was about his own ego and the refusal of Mordecai to kneel down to him. Suddenly the King realizes that Haman's advice could result in the death of the Queen and other innocent people.

While the King is outside, Haman does something outrageous and illegal. No male was allowed to be in the same room alone with a member of the king's harem. Haman should have left when the King did. But he stayed to plead with Esther to ask the king to spare his life. He approaches Esther who is still reclining beside the table—which is how meals were eaten in the Middle East. Haman approaches her and apparently trips falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The King returns at just that moment to find Haman in this compromising position. Not only did Haman fail to exit the room; he now is on top of the Queen. He just solved one problem for the King. The servants immediately covered Haman's face which was done to persons who were about to be executed. One of the servants suggested that the King order Haman to be hung on the gallows that Haman had built for Mordecai. And the King said: "Make it so." Another irony in the story: Haman had built gallows 75 feet tall to hang Mordecai and now he would be the one to die on the gallows.

Haman is out of the picture, but the edict to kill all the Jews on a certain day is still in effect. Esther must risk approaching the King without being summoned one more time. The King once again extends the scepter to her. She asks him to end the evil plot. The King cannot revoke his order, but he gives Esther and Mordecai permission to write a new order. They write an order that if anyone attacks the Jews they can defend themselves and take the plunder of their enemies. Esther hopes this will deter anyone from attacking the Jews

when they hear that they might lose their fortunes or their lives. The Persian army will not protect them from the Jews.

Some people decide to attack the Jews on the day of execution. There is a real bloodbath—the Jewish people killed over 75,000 of their enemies. Following their victories the Jews did not take the plunder. They made a statement that they were only defending themselves. They were not attacking others to gain riches for themselves. The Jewish people celebrate a feast called Purim (Pu'rim) which is still celebrated today:

Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, ²¹to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar ²²as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. ²³So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them. **Esther 9:20-23**

“The time when the Jews got relief or rest from their enemies.” The relief came because Esther sought out a relationship with the King as her first priority. Because of that relationship, she was able to save her people and deliver them from her enemies.

If we are anxious and troubled about people who are attacking us or are critical of us or are sabotaging us, we need to go to the King of kings. But rather than telling God how we want him to get rid of our enemies, what if we just responded to Jesus invitation to a banquet. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me.”

Rest from our enemies may not mean that attacks stop. Rest from our enemies comes when we spend time with the King. When we enjoy him and let him enjoy us without cluttering our conversations with requests and petitions. God is inviting you to a banquet because he desires a personal relationship with you. Will you respond to his invitation?

“Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”