

Where Is God? The Story of Esther The Man Honored by His King

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This morning we continue with the intriguing story of Esther. She lives during the time when the Persians ruled the world around 480 BC. Esther is a beautiful young Jewish woman who is selected by Xerxes, the King of Persia, to be his Queen.

The book of Esther contains several powerful messages. There is no reference to the name of God anywhere in the book. Sometimes God chooses to work in visible and spectacular ways. Most often, God chooses to work invisibly through the ordinary events of our lives. When we cannot see him working, we wonder if he is there. The message of Esther is that God is always with us, and he is always working to accomplish his purposes even we can't see him.

When we first meet Esther she is less than an exemplary character. She compromises her morals and her faith to improve her chances of being chosen Queen. She keeps it a secret that she is Jewish. She has physical intimacy outside of marriage. She marries a man who does not profess the God of Israel as the one true God. In spite of her failures, God will use her to save his people. In spite of our failures and flaws, God wants to use us to accomplish his purposes.

God does not just use pastors and missionaries to accomplish his purposes. Whatever our profession, God can use us to help restore his kingdom. God was able to use Esther precisely because of her position as Queen.

The defining moment for Esther came when she heard about a plot to exterminate all the Jewish people in the Persian Empire. A Persian noble, Haman, was second in command to Xerxes. The King commanded that all persons were to kneel down and pay

him honor whenever he passed by. A man named Mordecai refused to bow down to the king. Mordecai was Queen Esther's cousin who had raised her when she became an orphan. Haman was furious that Mordecai would not kneel down to him like everyone else. He wanted to get rid of him. Haman concluded that all the Jews were a threat to his power, not just Mordecai. He approached Xerxes and told him about a group of people that did not follow the King's orders and followed their own traditions. He did not identify this group as the Jewish people. The King issued an order that on a certain day all the Jews were to be killed.

Mordecai appealed to Queen Esther to intervene and ask the King to overturn this order. At first Esther was reluctant for fear of her life. She would have to go to the King without being summoned. Anyone who entered the presence of the King without being summoned could be put to death. She thought it far too risky. The last Queen had been banished for being disrespectful to the King. Worse things might happen to her. Mordecai reminded her that she was Jewish, and her own life was in danger. When Esther came to grips with the reality that she could die one way or the other, she was set free. She came to the conclusion that she would go to the king and "If I perish, I perish." Rather than using her position for herself and her own comfort, she was willing to risk her life for her people and God's purposes. She would go to the king. The only way her life would be spared is if the King raised his scepter and spared her life.

That is where we left off with the story last week. Now, if you want to know if the King spares her life, you will have to come back next week. Those of you come to church on July 4th weekend will find out the rest of Esther's story.

Today we are going to look at one of the subplots going on in the story. Every good novel has at least one or two subplots that converge at the climax of the story. This subplot involves Mordecai.

After Esther has become Queen, Mordecai comes to the King's gate daily so that he might hear some news about how his cousin, the Queen, is doing. One day he overheard two of the guards plotting to assassinate Xerxes. Mordecai reported this to Esther who told the King. The report was investigated and found to be true. It was recorded in the annals of the king and credit was given to Mordecai for saving the king's life. Some time passes, and this incident was forgotten. This is where we will pick up with the story.

Esther 6:1-11

That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. ²It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

³"What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked.

"Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered.

⁴The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him.

⁵His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court."

"Bring him in," the king ordered.

⁶When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?"

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?"

⁷So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, ⁸have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. ⁹Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"

¹⁰"Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

¹¹So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

What an amazing turn of events. Haman had entered the King's palace at that very moment to ask that Mordecai be hanged immediately. The date for all the Jews to be exterminated was still several months away, but Haman could no longer tolerate Mordecai's refusal to kneel down to him. Haman built a gallows 75 feet tall for the hanging.

He wanted to make a public spectacle of Mordecai's execution. Haman wanted everyone to fear him.

When he enters the King's palace, he thinks this day is going to be even better than he had ever imagined. Not only will he get Mordecai executed, but the King is going to honor Haman in a grandiose manner. It just does not get any better. Then his whole world crumbles when he discovers that Mordecai is the man the king intends to honor. Even greater humiliation comes when Haman is the one who has to lead the horse around proclaiming honor to Mordecai. I can imagine he did it through clenched teeth!

The powerful message of the book of Esther I want us to focus on today is the danger of pride. Haman is consumed with pride. When Xerxes appointed him as second in command, Haman got an order from the king that everyone was to kneel down to him when he passed by. The Hebrew word literally means to "lie on their face" before him. Now the Persians only got on their face for the King. He was considered a deity and worthy of such homage. Haman insisted that people fall on their face before him like they would before the King. The people at the gate asked Mordecai why he refused to get on his face before Haman. Apparently Mordecai told them it was because he was a Jew, and he would not kneel to any man.

When Haman found out about this refusal he burned with rage. Here we see the nature of pride. Haman had many honors. He had a position second only to the king in power. In fact listen to what he tells his wife:

Esther 5:10b-13

Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, ¹¹Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. ¹²"And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. ¹³But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."

Haman is aware of all the stuff he has going for him, but none of it gives him satisfaction. All his joy is robbed by one man who refuses to kneel down to him. Aren't we a lot like Haman? Ninety-nine percent of the things in our lives can be fantastic. But one person snubs us, or ridicules us or just does not like us. We become fixated on that one person and that one incident and let it rob all the joy from our lives. Who is the one person or that one incident in your life that you are letting rob you of joy?

The reason we become fixated on those things is pride. Pride is total concentration on self. Pride makes us think that everything is about us. Pride turns everything we do into a means to an end to make us feel good about ourselves. For Haman his position is a way to get respect so he can feel good about himself. And that is a bottomless pit. When our life is built upon craving respect, it just takes one person's refusal to give us respect to send us into a tailspin.

There are two forms of pride. One is a superiority complex. I constantly compare myself to everyone around me. I have to have more. I have to have better. And I have to let everyone know how much better I am; often by putting others down. It is all about me.

The other form of pride is an inferiority complex. I constantly put myself down. I beat myself up. I am never as good as anyone else. But I am just as self-absorbed. It is all about me.

Whether we think of ourselves as superior or inferior, we are totally focused on ourselves, and that is the essence of pride. Humility is the opposite of pride. Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less!! A humble person is free to think about others. When you are around a humble person, you don't think about them being humble. You think of them as joyful and incredibly interested in you. They spend no time trying to impress you.

In 1995, when we dedicated the sanctuary, Lloyd Ogilvie was our guest speaker. At the time he was Chaplain of the Senate. Prior to that he was pastor of the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. Big name celebrities attended his church. He met regularly with the President of the United States, congressman and world leaders. He was a published Biblical scholar and world renowned preacher. Margaret and I had the opportunity to take him to dinner on Saturday night. I was a little intimidated to be around such a man. When dinner was over, Margaret and I both commented on how incredibly interested he was in us. He wanted to know about our lives, our children and our ministry. He overflowed with contagious joy. We felt totally uplifted because of our time with him. He never dropped a name. He was never pretentious. Lloyd Ogilvie was free to think about someone other than himself.

Pride is deadly. Pride caused Haman to seek the destruction of Mordecai and all the Jews. Pride eventually caused his own destruction. Pride makes us evil. Pride is not one sin among many. Pride is the root of all sin. Pride is the root of bitterness. I get bitter at someone because he has offended me. And if my life is all about me, I can't get over it when someone offends me. My bitterness causes me to lash out at the other person in destructive ways. And my bitterness destroys me emotionally and spiritually.

Pride is the root of worry. When I worry about something it is because I think I know exactly how things ought to happen, and I'm afraid they will not happen that way. I know how things should go, and I attempt to manipulate and control people and circumstances to make sure that things happen the way I want them to. When I think I know what is best, I put myself in the place of God. When I try to manipulate and control others, I put myself in the place of God. Pride is the root of worry.

Pride is the one sin that hides itself. It is like a deadly odorless gas. The more proud we are, the less pride we think we have. People will admit having a problem with lust

or materialism, but rarely pride. Be honest, during this message haven't you thought of two or three people you know who have a problem with pride? But did you put yourself on that list? If we are all sinners and pride is the root of all sin, then guess what? We all have a problem with pride.

What is the solution? We see it foreshadowed in chapter six of Esther. Haman wants to hang Mordecai. But the King wants to honor Mordecai for saving his life. The King asks Haman how to honor a man. Haman thinking it is he that the King wants to honor replies: put him in the royal robes, on a royal horse and march him through the capital with a nobleman proclaiming: "this is how the king honors a man." Putting on a royal robe meant that the King had granted some of his power to the person wearing it. Haman thought, "If everyone could see me wearing the king's robe, then they would know that the King values me." It would make him valuable in all their eyes. If the king puts me in his robe in front of the world, then I am worth something. While Haman is imagining all this glory for himself, the King says: "Great idea, do it for Mordecai." His self worth is totally shattered.

In all honesty, Haman asked for what we all want. We want someone of ultimate glory to say we are worthwhile; we are valuable. There is a King of ultimate glory. He came to earth and emptied himself of his glory. He did not think about himself. He thought about us. He was stripped of his robe and hung on a cross. He voluntarily put himself there to deal with our pride. Our pride leads to death. It destroys others around us and it destroys us. Jesus took the destruction caused by our pride into himself and died in our place. There is something so seriously wrong with us that it required the death of the Son of God to deal with it. There is something so incredibly valuable about us that the Son of God would give his life for us. The King of Kings loves us so much that he sacrificed his life in our place. He gives to us the royal robe of his righteousness. We are approved and accepted by God. We do not have to prove our worth to the world or to ourselves. God has provided our worth. I

can focus not on myself but upon Jesus and what he did for me. I am not superior to anyone else. I am not inferior to anyone else. I am simply loved by the King of kings. When I know who I am, I am free to give myself to others. I cannot be set free until I admit I have a problem with pride. I cannot be set free until I sit at the foot of the cross and see that my pride cost Jesus his life. And that Jesus loved me so much he was willing to give his life for my pride. Will you take your pride to the cross?