

## Chapter 59 Esther 1-10

### The Hidden God of Esther

*“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this?”* Esther 4:13-14

The main story of God’s Advent preparation has focused on the events taking place in Jerusalem, but there is much more to the story. Up until now the primary emphasis in Haggai and Zechariah was on reconstituting the people of God, renewing true spirituality, rebuilding the temple, re-instituting the biblical law, and reforming the moral order. But as this was going in Jerusalem a larger drama was being played out six hundred miles away in Susa the winter residence of the Persian kings (located in modern Iran). Events were transpiring in the citadel of Susa that could have led to a genocide of Jews throughout the Persian empire. The destiny of the biblical community was under attack. State-supported violence threatened to undo the effort to rebuild the temple and regroup the covenant people.

In 474 BC, through the manipulative persuasion of Haman, the prime minister, King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) issued an edict of annihilation against the Jews. “Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods” (Esther 3:13). If this genocide against the Jews had been carried out, Jerusalem and the post-exilic community would have been wiped out. The work of Obadiah, Haggai and Zechariah would have been lost and Ezra and Nehemiah would never have returned to Jerusalem. If the edict of annihilation had been executed these renewal leaders never would have emerged and the course of history would have been dramatically different.

The book of Esther is history told as a story artfully shaped and styled, with an eye toward describing life in a pagan culture and a heart for understanding God’s salvation history. The book conveys a keen sense of power politics, the complexity of evil, and the transcending power of God’s providence. Skeptics may dismiss the work as sexy fiction or heroic legend, but the author begins with the same words that begin Joshua, Judges and Samuel, “This is what happened. . . .” Those who judge the story as too contrived or coincidental to be true may be forgetting that at times life imitates art. Dramatic irony, plot twists, villainous characters, and heroic personalities occurred in history before they found their way into literature. Besides, the life of faith trumps fate at every turn. There is no law against using drama to write history any more than there is a law against using jazz to play music. Vashti, Xerxes, Haman, Esther, and Mordecai, are real people living their lives in history, rather than actors on a stage reciting a script. No one is putting words in their mouth, but neither are they in control their own destiny. Some may find it easier to believe in a future determined by a random roll of the dice, but the underlying presupposition of the book of Esther is that history is guided by the sovereign will of God.

If we divorce the book of Esther from the rest of the Bible, it doesn't make much sense. For some Jewish scholars the message of Esther is that "Jews everywhere in all generations should celebrate Purim" (Fox, 3). Purim is derived from the Hebrew word "pur" which means "lots" and is celebrated in late February or early March. The festival commemorates God's victory over all the enemies of the Jews who cast their lot for the ruin and destruction of the Jews. For some the historicity of the story of Esther is unnecessary, because it functions as a parable celebrating the survival and the success of the Jewish race no matter how the lot is cast against them. The Esther scroll is valued as an ethnic tale that encourages and explains an annual custom and celebration.

Ironically, early Christian interpreters ignored the book because of its Jewishness. "For the first seven centuries of the Christian church," writes Karen Jobes, "not one commentary was produced on this book. As far as we know, John Calvin never preached from Esther nor did he include it among his commentaries. Martin Luther denounced this book together with the apocryphal 2 Maccabees, saying of them, 'I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities'" (Jobes, 21).

To those who cherish Esther's place in the canon of Scripture, Luther's perspective is especially disappointing because the book of Esther actually affirms one of Luther's key theological themes, the hiddenness of God. Luther believed that the divinity of Christ was hidden in his humanity and the supreme self-disclosure of God was revealed at the Cross. Only through faith was it possible to grasp the glory and truth of God because it was hidden in humiliation and weakness. Luther contended that the paradox of hiddenness and revelation was consistent with God's self-disclosure all the time. Unfortunately Luther did not see in the book of Esther the hiddenness of God on full display.

God is not mentioned once in the book of Esther, yet the evidence of God working behind the scenes can be seen everywhere. Prayer is never talked about explicitly, but we understand that God is answering prayer at every turn in the story. Jewish morality is never taught per se, but it is the distinctive Jewish moral order and identity that is preserved in spite of pending violence. The dice are thrown, the lots are cast, and the Jewish people come up short, but the covenant-keeping, salvation-making God comes through victoriously. "The great paradox of Esther is that God is omnipotently present even where God is most conspicuously absent" (Jobes, 49). One of the reasons the book of Esther is in the canon of Scripture is because it cannot be understood apart from the canon. "It takes the whole Bible to read any part of the Bible," and this is especially true of Esther (The Message, 1660). Instead of judging the story for what it doesn't say, we were meant to listen to what God is telling us in the story.

### **The Xerxes' Factor**

The story of Esther begins and ends with the most powerful man in the world, King Xerxes, son of Darius and grandson of Cyrus the Great. He ruled from 486 until 465 BC, when, according to Herodotus the most respected ancient historian of this period, he was assassinated in his bedroom

by some of his trusted advisors. He began his reign about fifty years after Daniel and about twenty years before Nehemiah. His empire extended from modern Pakistan to northern Sudan. “Xerxes is probably the Greek transliteration of his Persian name *Khsbayarsban*. In the Hebrew language his name takes the form *Abasuerus* (pronounced *Abaswerosb*). This name has no meaning in Hebrew, but when pronounced aloud sounds something like King Headache in English” (Jobes, 58).

Chapter one lifts the curtain on the opulent splendor of the Persian royal court. King Xerxes ruled over 127 provinces, but judging from this initial description, the essence of his administration was hosting grand banquets and commanding his wine stewards to let everyman drink to his heart’s content. He gave a banquet for all of his nobles and officials, and all his military leaders and foreign princes and governors. “For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty” (1:4). Six months of feasting, however, didn’t satisfy his lust for showing off. He gave a banquet, lasting for seven days, for everyone who lived in Susa, from the least to the greatest. Of all the things that might have been said about the Persian empire, the narrator seems spell-bound by the lavish display of wealth and luxury. Instead of summing up the scene as an extreme case of conspicuous consumption, the author chose to describe it the way Martha Stewart might have.

“And oh the cloths of white, percaline and violet, bound with cords of linen and purple on silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry and alabaster, mother-of-pearl and dark marble, with the drinks served in vessels of gold and vessels of various sorts, and much royal wine lavished with kingly bounty!” (1:6-7; Michael Fox, 14).

Jewish scholar Michael Fox writes, “The exclamatory listing creates a mass of images that overwhelm the sensory imagination and suggest both a sybaritic delight in opulence and an awareness of excess” (Fox, 17). Presumably the author knew that this extravagant display of wealth and power coincided with the great war council of 483 BC, which was convened by Xerxes to rally support and to devise a plan of attack for the Persian invasion of Greece, but he chose to leave the reader in the dark about important matters of statecraft. With no other competing message or mitigating circumstance, the reader is impressed with the wanton excess of a decadent, intoxicated, overly indulgent display of wealth and power.

Having set a lavish stage, the narrator introduces the characters and describes the situation that will eventually lead to Esther’s selection as queen. The modern reader is surprised to learn that Queen Vashti’s banquet for the women in the royal palace is a separate party from King Xerxes’ banquet. The separation of the sexes, or at least the exclusion of the noblemen’s wives from the king’s banquet, creates a tension. On the seventh day of feasting, an intoxicated King Xerxes commanded his seven eunuchs, all of whom are named, “to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles for she was lovely to look at” (1:11). Her famous refusal begs the question, why? Why would she say no to the most powerful man in the world? Xerxes was the picture of absolute power, surrounded by unbelievable wealth and seven castrated men whose only reason for existence was to obey his every whim. No one said no to the king, until Queen Vashti did. She refused to put her beauty on

display before an inebriated congress of Persia's upper echelon. The queen was unwilling to sacrifice her dignity by succumbing to the role of a concubine. The courage required to stand up to the king may be impossible for us to imagine.

Vashti's refusal set in motion the chain reaction of events that eventually placed two Jews at the center of Persian power. The narrator begins the story of God's sovereignty over the Persian empire with Vashti's basic human impulse for what was right. He could have easily started the story with Esther, but he chose to begin with Xerxes' decadent power and Vashti's strength of character. God was about to fan into flame this spark of human justice and common grace. Sometimes all it takes is one person to say no to change the world.

King Xerxes was furious and "burned with anger." He immediately consulted with his seven top legal advisors to determine on the basis of Persian law what should be done to Queen Vashti. Specifying each of the nobles by name only adds to the solemnity of this judicial process. Vashti's refusal to display her beauty among drunken officials touched off a national crisis. In an empire devoid of human rights, one little no was "quickly blown up into sexual politics on an imperial scale" (Fox, 168). Memukan, a member of the king's inner cabinet, argued that the queen's conduct will cause all the women to despise their husbands and that "there will be no end of disrespect and discord." So he advised the following plan of action: banish Vashti, select a new and better queen, and issue a royal edict throughout the entire realm that all women must "respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest" (1:20). The speech is almost as comical as its reasoning is familiar. Males in power are often threatened by women and feel the need to defend their power with rules that keep women down. The introductory chapter begins with an elaborate description of the royal court presided over by King Xerxes, the most powerful man in the world, and it ends with him "attempting to maintain his dignity despite the defiance of his wife" (Baldwin, 63). The narrator wants the reader to grasp the weakness of a regime that was undermined by one woman standing up to the unreasonable demands of her husband.

Herodotus describes Xerxes as "the tallest and most handsome of the Persian kings, as an ambitious and ruthless ruler, a brilliant warrior, and a jealous lover" (Jobs, 28). But our narrator tells a different story. For all his wealth and power Xerxes comes across as obsessed with honor, ostentatious, easily angered, lazy and indulgent. As we will see, "the all-powerful Xerxes in practice abdicates responsibility and surrenders effective power to those who know to press the right buttons—namely, his love of 'honor', his anxiety for his authority, and his desire to appear generous" (Fox, 173).

The political landscape has vastly changed since the days of the Persian empire, but the powerful influence of the Xerxes' factor remains. We live in the age of the imperial self, where everyone is tempted to be their own king and queen. Men and women alike have unwittingly modeled their lives after this Persian potentate. We want to have our own way and at the same time we want to be liked and honored by everyone. We feel that our standard of living and our self-esteem should rise in tandem. We see nothing wrong with living for ourselves and being generous to our friends. We only like people who serve our purposes and meet our expectations. The subtle yet powerful influence of the Xerxes' factor is diametrically opposed to the mind of Christ. The

apostle Paul encouraged us to have the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:5-8). Jesus and Xerxes are incompatible influences that represent radically alternative world-views. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves take up our cross and follow him; Xerxes calls us to believe in ourselves and live for pleasure. The pursuit of happiness guided by Jesus and the pursuit of happiness inspired by the imperial self are two very different journeys.

## **The Sex Contest**

There is just a hint at the start of chapter two that a calmer more sober Xerxes may have had second thoughts about his divorce from Vashti. In any case he sought and received advice from his personal attendants. They suggested a national search, to recruit beautiful young virgins from throughout the entire realm. No consideration appears to be given to the families, boyfriends, or the desires of these young women. They were not given any choice in the matter. They were herded into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Herodotus reports that it was not only females who were at the disposal of the king, but males as well. Five hundred boys a year were castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court (Jobes, 95). Who knows how many hundreds of young women were imprisoned in Xerxes’ harem only to be discarded after their one night stand with the king?

Into this pagan culture, the narrator introduces Mordecai, a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin and a descendant of Saul, whose family had been exiled in 597 BC and his cousin, Hadassah (Hebrew for myrtle), who is called Esther. The names *Mordecai* and *Esther* reflect the culture of their exile. Mordecai’s name was derived from Marduk, the state god of Babylon, and Esther meant “star” in Persian and may have been derived from Ishtar the goddess of love. Mordecai had adopted Esther when her parents died and treated her like his own daughter. Esther had a lovely figure and was beautiful, the only two qualifications she needed to be herded into the harem in Susa. What set her apart from the other beauty contestants was that she pleased Hegai, which was probably no easy feat given the fact that he was in charge of the royal harem. Since Esther had won his favor he moved her and her seven attendants into the best place in the harem (2:9). So we know Esther was beautiful and given her ability to win the favor of others we assume that she had an attractive personality. Of course, for all we know she may have won Hegai’s favor by not trying to win his favor. She makes us think of Joseph who impressed his masters in Egypt. Nothing is said in the narrative that would indicate how Esther felt about life in the harem or whether it clashed with her character. Was her life in anyway shaped by the word of God? We don’t really know, but we do know that she was the adopted daughter of Mordecai. About the only thing she had control over was keeping her nationality a secret, and she did that because Mordecai had forbidden her to tell anyone that she was a Jew. For his part, Mordecai kept in daily contact. He paced the courtyard everyday until he found out the latest news about his daughter. Esther and Mordecai appear to be two subversives working behind enemy lines.

In preparation for her one night with Xerxes, a woman completed twelve months of beauty treatments. She bathed in myrrh for six months and then in perfumes and other cosmetics for another six months. In the morning after her night with the king she returned to a different part of the harem administered by a different royal eunuch. Apparently the king wanted to keep his virgins and his concubines in separate quarters for reasons we can only speculate about. “The massed detail in the description of harem life reveals an oppressively regulated atmosphere: total dependence on the chief eunuch and a regimen devoted to preparation for someone else’s pleasure. Promotion depends on ‘pleasing’ those in charge. The harem is, of course, the world of the Persian Empire in fine” (Fox, 35). No comment is given by the narrator that would approve or condemn this situation. Since Esther was conscripted into the harem, she was not personally responsible for living a life she had no control over. She appears passive to the systemic evil that shapes her culture and her life. “Esther spends a year being worked over by cosmeticians” (Fox, 198). The narrator sees her neither as a victim nor an agent. She was imprisoned in her plush and pampered surroundings because of the lust of one man, but through it all she remains her own person and seems to rise above it all.

Xerxes created his own sexual fantasies and expected women to conform to his pleasure principle. Twelve months of beauty treatments for a one night sexual encounter sounds extreme, but we have our own cultural extremes when it comes to sex. Perhaps the fundamental difference between pagan Persia and pagan America is that royal hedonism is now experienced among the masses. harems are not in royal courts but in college dorms and today’s concubines are coeds. The burgeoning multi-billion dollar cosmetic surgery industry makes Xerxes perfume baths look fairly innocuous. Ancients might find our cult of thinness and obsession with breasts strange. The rules of the harem have changed, but are we still driven by the forces of lust. In an effort to win the admiration of strangers and to bolster their self-confidence, women do to their bodies, what kings like Xerxes demanded from their harems. Only now, women do it to themselves. The apostle Peter’s wisdom remains especially relevant for those who live in a culture obsessed with sex appeal and outward appearance, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (1 Peter 3:3-4).

When it was Esther’s turn to go to the king, the narrator reminds the reader once again that she belongs to a Hebrew family. She is Mordecai’s adopted daughter. Other girls played the occasion for all it was worth, but Esther asked for nothing special. She did not revel in the moment nor “reveal any special eagerness for the queenship” (Fox, 37). What was it about Esther that made her so attractive to the king? And not only to the king but to everyone. “And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her” (2:15). Did she end up winning the royal sex contest by being more than Xerxes’ sex toy? Who knows, there may have been a depth of character in Esther that impressed the king. Xerxes could have sex with anyone he wanted, but he could have only one queen. Esther won his favor. “So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti” (2:17).

When it came to sex and beauty, the Persian royal court was absolutely antithetical to the biblical

ideal. King Xerxes would never have imagined befriending a woman romantically in the manner expressed in the Song of Songs. Like the book of Esther, the name of God is never mentioned in the Song of Songs, but like Esther, it is a deeply theological book. The Song is the antithesis to the cult of sex in the Persian harem. Pleasure is not divorced from commitment, and love is not synonymous with lust. The heart is worthy of exegesis and the body intended for pleasure. Love is protected by fidelity and commitment. The Song explores the deep yearnings of love and revels in the physical and emotional side of love. The biblical ideal of beauty and sexuality creates a very different world than the one that existed in Susa. Xerxes used men and women up, like disposable products, in his fascination with physical beauty and in his quest for sexual pleasure. He reigned over a culture that was incapable of producing the quality of character he found so attractive in Esther. The citadel of Susa and the temple in Jerusalem represented two radically different ideals—two very different ways of living. By restoring the biblical community in Jerusalem, the Lord built a cradle capable of producing a teenager who could pray like Mary and a man like Joseph, who could obey the word of the Lord.

### **Haman's Hate**

Before Haman is introduced, the narrator describes an incident that will have major significance later in the story. Mordecai is described as “sitting at the king’s gate” which suggests some level of participation in the regime’s legal and judicial process (2:21; 3:2; 5:9,13; 6:10,12). Esther has continued to keep her nationality and family background secret, “just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai’s instructions as she had done while he was bringing her up” (2:20). Presumably no one knew that Esther was a Jew and that she and Mordecai were related. Her decision to follow Mordecai’s instructions was a sign of her humility and good judgment.

In the course of doing his official business at the king’s gate, Mordecai became aware of an assassination plot against King Xerxes. He informed Queen Esther who reported the plot and gave the credit to Mordecai. The two officials were hanged and Mordecai’s involvement was duly noted in the palace records. The incident only goes to prove that the Persian Empire has nothing to fear from Jews. Esther has won the favor of the King and Mordecai has offered him protection.

The narrator introduced Haman with news of his extraordinary promotion: “King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles” (3:1). No reason is given for Haman’s sudden rise to power, a fact that stands in marked contrast to Mordecai’s service to the king. Haman’s identification as “the Agagite” recalls Saul’s failure to kill the King of Agag, leader of the Amalekites, when he was commanded to do so (1 Samuel 15; see Ex 17:8-16; Deut 25:17-19). In Hebrew, Haman’s name sounds like the Hebrew word for wrath (hemah). King Xerxes commanded that Haman receive the honor commensurate with his high office. “All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman,” that is, all but one. Mordecai refused to kneel down. No reason is given for Mordecai’s refusal to honor Haman.

Day after day the royal officials tried to persuade Mordecai to comply with the king's command. The narrator gives us no indication of what was in Mordecai's mind, but maybe we don't need to know his psychology because we have his history. Haman is an Agagite, an historic enemy of the Jews, and Mordecai has gone public with the fact that he is a Jew. Mordecai's refusal, like Vashti's, was neither pragmatic nor strategic. His reaction against Haman was based purely on principle, the depth of which appears far more dependable than his equivocating and disobedient ancestor, King Saul. Mordecai's refusal simply took courage, it was not calculated to achieve anything. The strength of Mordecai's *Jewish* conviction appears to come from his relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the covenant-keeping God of Israel, who remains unnamed, hidden in the course of these events, but totally sovereign over all that is happening. If Vashti could stand up to the king for the sake of her dignity, then Mordecai could certainly stand up to Haman for the sake of his God.

Haman was so humiliated and enraged by Mordecai's insubordination that "he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai" (3:5). Mordecai's refusal was quickly blown up into racial politics on an imperial scale. It wasn't enough for Haman to bring down Mordecai he must destroy his whole race. Mordecai and his people must be eliminated. Haman's immediate connection between Mordecai and the Jews implies the continuing solidarity of the exiled Jewish people.

Haman's next move was not to approach the king for permission to destroy the Jews but to ask the gods for the best time to kill the Jews. In the first month of 474 BC, known as Nisan, which is the same month that the Jews celebrated the Passover, Haman cast the lot. Casting the pur or the lot was a way of determining the will of the gods. Archaeologists have discovered these small clay cubes known as purim which are similar to modern dice. The lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar, meaning that Haman would have to wait eleven months before carrying out his genocide against the Jews. His hate is bound by the roll of the dice, but not by justice.

Having honored the gods and determined the most propitious time to act, Haman made his appeal to King Xerxes. There appears to be little doubt in his mind that he would be able to sway the king to ratify his plan for the mass execution of the Jews. Haman argued before the king that the Jewish people kept themselves separate, practiced their own customs which were different from other people, and violated the king's laws. He reasoned that the Jews deserved to be eliminated because they were different. There is a decidedly modern ring to Haman's argument. Under the ideology of multiculturalism, tolerance, and political correctness, Christians are increasingly seen as part of the problem, because they believe in truth and justice. The prevailing world-view, promoted on university campuses, in the marketplace, in the media, and in the halls of government, singles Christians out as uneducated, unreasonable, discriminatory, and prejudicial, because they believe in absolute truth. To proclaim the truth of the saving significance of Jesus, even to hold to basic principles of right and wrong, is to invite scorn and ridicule. Preaching the gospel of Christ is judged by many to be preaching hate. Haman's rage against the Jews was fueled by a Persian ideology of cultural conformity and political correctness.

To back up his argument, Haman, offered to fund the genocide of the Jews out of his own wealth. Power meant more to Haman than money and as we all know hate can inspire tremendous sacrifice. Ten thousand talents of silver or 375 tons of silver, at \$6.50 an ounce works out to more than 71 million dollars. The offer of money itself may have overshadowed any consideration Xerxes might have given to Haman's rationale. His polite gesture of turning down the money was simply that, a polite gesture required by his ego, but meant to be ignored by any savvy political lobbyist.

They say timing is everything and that could not have been truer in this case. The edict of annihilation was written by the royal secretaries in all the languages of the Persian empire and dispatched by couriers throughout the empire on the thirteenth day of the first month. The order "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day" eleven months from now, was given on the eve of Passover (Ex 12:18; Lev 23:5; Num 28:16). The state sponsored genocide of the Jewish race was announced on Passover eve and published throughout the Persian Empire. For many Jews, including Mordecai, the silence of God must have reached a deafening roar. Where was their God in this tragic chain of events? They must have asked, will the God of Abraham and Moses keep his covenant and protect his people? When the Jews in Jerusalem learned that the edict of annihilation had been issued on the eve of Passover they must have wondered if they would still be alive to celebrate the next Passover.

### **Esther's Strategy**

"When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly" (4:1). Without any thought for his own personal safety and self-respect, Mordecai immediately went public with his grief. His highly visible response is indicative of Mordecai's identification with the people of God. He was not wailing loudly and bitterly for himself but for his people. If he had been concerned for his own safety he would have fled, but instead, he boldly and passionately bewailed the injustice of the edict and the plight of the Jews. Mordecai was responsible for two strategies, one overt and the other covert. Although he openly identified himself as a Jew and publicly defied Haman, he insisted that Esther keep her Jewish identity a secret. The convergence of these two strategies, the overt and the covert, the insider and the outsider, reminds us that the cost of discipleship is, or ought to be, equally shared by those who have a high profile and those who work behind the scenes. Regardless of the circumstances we are in this together. No one who is a disciple of the Lord Jesus can escape suffering and sacrifice. If we set apart Christ as Lord of our lives, we are opening ourselves up to the challenge of witness in a hostile culture. All of us need to "be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope that [we] have" (1 Peter 3:15).

If Mordecai had not reacted to the news of the edict the way he did, Esther may never have taken the action that she did. Even so, her instinctive and emotional response was to cover up whatever was disturbing Mordecai. "She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them" (4:4). Since her relationship to Mordecai was unknown, it was not a

matter of her being embarrassed over his public display of anguish, but of her desire to pacify her father's anxiety. She felt sorry for Mordecai, but she remained detached from the cause of his sorrow. Esther's response is typical of our attempt to recognize and encourage those who lament the world's injustices. Although our response may be well-intentioned, it often misses the point of the public lament. Like Esther, our first response to a crisis is to offer some kind of material provision. In this case, Esther sent clothes for Mordecai to put on instead of his sackcloth. She wanted to remove the symbol of his pain, without dealing with the source of his pain. Esther seems to be unaware of the edict, which implies her isolation from the harsh realities outside the royal court. She deals only with what she can imagine: Mordecai dressed in sackcloth.

Esther's response to her grieving father was superfluous. The issue was never about clothes. But her "generosity" is a picture of the American church's response to a grieving global church. We don't like to imagine our brothers and sisters in Christ suffering, so we are moved to write a check and make some material provision. But consider the implications of Mordecai's lament being satisfied and Esther's responsibility being fulfilled with a new set of clothes. If Mordecai had accepted the well-intentioned but misguided gift, all would have been lost. His refusal of the gift was necessary for Esther to grasp the true extent of the problem and to move from being passive to taking action.

Mordecai must have had his sources on the inside because he was able to inform Esther through her assigned eunuch Hathak, of the exact amount of money Haman was willing to invest in his plot to annihilate the Jews. Mordecai gave Hathak a copy of the edict and explicit instructions for Esther "to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people" (4:8). Given Mordecai's forthright approach, we should not be surprised that Mordecai counseled Esther to do the same. Nor was it surprising for Esther to remind Mordecai of the danger in approaching the king uninvited. Mordecai's response to Esther is rightly famous and conveys a now or never, call-to-arms. He called for a courage equal to his own and a sacrifice potentially greater than his own.

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape" (4:13).

Mordecai's first sentence challenged her individual identity and placed her in a community much larger than herself. Esther's true identity was not tied to the king's house but to her father's family. Her status as queen did not compare to her family heritage and her place in the palace was unable to protect her from the ravages of evil. This is true for every person who has succeeded in the eyes of the world. If we think that status and success will provide meaningful security we will be sadly disappointed.

"For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish" (4:14).

Mordecai's second sentence is a remarkable statement of faith, because he assumes the deliverance of the covenant people no matter what, *even if Esther refuses to help*. Furthermore Mordecai insisted that the risk involved in helping did not begin to compare to the consequences for refusing to help. His underlying thesis echoes Jesus' statement, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit your very self?" (Luke 9:24-25).

“And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (4:14).

These two emphatic sentences are followed by a question designed to appeal to Esther’s own sense of significance and fulfillment. In the eyes of the world becoming queen to the most powerful man in the world defines the pinnacle of success, but not to Esther. Thankfully, Mordecai knew his daughter well enough to know that. He tapped her deep-seated yearning for purpose beyond the opulence and indolence of the royal court. He challenged her to see this moment in history as God’s sovereignly appointed time for her to fulfill his will.

Old Testament scholar Karen Jobes applies the impact of this truth so well she deserves to be quoted:

“Perhaps, like Esther, you have been brought to this moment in your life by circumstances over which you had no control, combined with flawed decisions you made along the way. Perhaps instead of living for God, you have so concealed your Christian faith that no one would even identify you as a Christian. Then suddenly you find yourself facing calamity, either in the circumstances of your life with others or just within your own emotional world. Regardless of the straits you find yourself in, turn to the Lord. Rend your heart, not your garment; ‘fast, weep, mourn,’ and return to the Lord your God. His purposes are greater than yours. And, who knows? Perhaps you have come to your present situation for such a time as this” (142).

Mordecai’s insistence that his adopted daughter conceal her Jewish identity, coupled with his daily concern to find out what was happening to her, sounds more like a father’s concern for the security of his daughter than a preoccupation with using her strategically. Nevertheless, in the hour of crisis, Mordecai saw it as his responsibility to challenge Esther to live up to her calling in spite of the danger. This is a powerful example of the “principle of the cross” at work in a father-daughter relationship, in a manner similar to the father-son relationship demonstrated between Abraham and Isaac.

This is the turning point in Esther’s life. Up until now she has been passive to the cultural forces that dominated her life. She has had little choice in her life. She was orphaned and then adopted, conscripted into the king’s hareem, subjected to the royal regimen, and expected to have sex whenever the king dictated. But now she proves that she is not the product of a pagan culture. Her passivity is turned to action. “Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai:

‘Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish’” (4:15-16).

Esther *commanded* Mordecai to *go*. She used that remarkable one word action verb that never fails to remind us of our Lord’s great commission. She recruited Mordecai as he had recruited her. She was now engaged in mission as he was, and her first act was to call for a fast among all the Jews in Susa. This fast was in sharp contrast to all the feasting that goes on in the book of Esther. If the feasting captured the ethos of a self-indulgent culture, then the fasting expressed

the covenant people's dependence upon the Lord. We have no reason to believe that fasting meant anything different to Esther than it did to Daniel. This fast also went beyond lamenting the devastating news of the edict of annihilation and focused specific attention on Esther's encounter with the king. To some, Esther's concluding resignation, "if I perish, I perish," sounds ominous, if not fatalistic. Michael Fox writes, "This is the courage of one who must do her duty without certainty of success, without a simple faith that a higher being will protect her." Fox may be right to conclude that Esther felt no assurance that she would be successful before the king, but I question his conclusion that Esther perceives her actions apart from faith. From this point on, Esther's actions seem driven entirely by her faith in the covenant-keeping God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If it were otherwise, she would not have called for a three day fast among all of the Jews in Susa and among all of her attendants. The fact that she was willing to live with the possibility of unanswered prayer did not mean that she acted apart from faith. On the contrary, she was willing to give up her life, because of her faith in the God of her people. Her faith statement was not fatalistic, if anything it points forward to the apostle's faith-filled determination when he said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

Through fasting *and prayer* Esther was wise enough to know that if she chose Mordecai's forthright approach she would fail. Ironically, three days of fasting produced a covert operation of feasting and three days of prayer provided the requisite patience to execute the mission. When Queen Esther, dressed in her royal robes, stood in the inner court of the palace, King Xerxes extended to her his gold scepter. "What is it, Queen Esther?" Xerxes asked. "What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." True to form, this mercurial despot, who could have just as easily ended Esther's life, wanted in this instance to be flattered for his magnanimity.

"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." Well aware of Xerxes' love of banquets and wine, Esther precedes to set the trap and build suspense. That night, as Xerxes and Haman were drinking wine, one of the king's favorite hobbies, Xerxes asked again, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." Once again, Esther shows considerable patience as she waits for the precise moment to pull the trigger. She had prayed and fasted, summoned her courage and implemented her strategy, but she sensed something more was needed. In a move designed to build suspense, she invited the king and Haman to another banquet the following night. "Then I will answer the king's question" (5:8). Haman left the banquet "in high spirits" but when he saw Mordecai at the gate, who "neither rose nor showed fear in his presence" he was filled with rage against Mordecai. With his adrenaline pumping in his veins, he returned home and called together his friends and Zeresh his wife. He did this so he could boast of his vast wealth, his ten sons, and his high honors, and get their perspective on his one nagging problem—Mordecai. The queen's invitation to dine with the king privately two nights in a row only served to confirm to Haman his extraordinary success. "But all this gives me no satisfaction," laments Haman to his wife and friends, "as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." His wife and friends had a solution: build a gallows 75 feet high and then ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. "Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself" (5:14). Haman liked the idea so he ordered the gallows to be

built that very night!

Meanwhile, the king could not sleep either, so he “ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him” (6:1). We might have expected Xerxes to employ the services of his harem, but instead he turned to history. Was the purpose of this late night history reading meant to induce sleep or pump-up the ego? Both Xerxes and Haman left Esther’s banquet with their minds racing and their egos stimulated.

We have to admit that it was an extraordinary coincidence that the court record read that night referred to the plot to assassinate the king uncovered by Mordecai and described earlier in the story (2:21-23). On the same night that Haman was plotting Mordecai’s death, Xerxes was asking what had been done to honor Mordecai for his heroic service. We can choose to see this as a contrived feature in a made up story or the direct intervention of God in a true story. The narrator implies that the success of Esther’s strategy depends upon divine intervention, so it is not surprising that unusual circumstances converge and point to the sovereign purposes of God.

The second coincidence was even more extraordinary than the first. In the early morning hours Xerxes sought the advice of whoever was in the court to determine how Mordecai should be honored. And of all the people to be in court waiting to see the king, who should be there but Haman. He had arrived early, eager to ask the king’s permission to hang Mordecai! When the king asked Haman, “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?” Haman immediately thought that he was the man to be honored. He thought to himself, “Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?” The narrator paints the picture of a man who wore his ego on his shirt sleeves for all to see. Since he already had plenty of wealth and power, Haman sought for himself the symbols of public acclaim that belonged to the king. Haman advised that the man the king delighted to honor should be dressed in the king’s robe, riding the king’s horse, led by the king’s highest official, in a royal parade proclaiming, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!”

Haman was all set to hear, “You are the man!” but instead the king commanded, “Go at once. 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” (6:10). How he managed to conceal the shock on his face is difficult to imagine. Giving the ultimate honor to a man he hated with a passion may be humorous for the reader but it must have been utter humiliation for Haman. He hurried home with his head “covered in grief” to tell his wife and friends everything that had happened to him. Their take on Haman’s radical reversal of fortunes could not have been more demoralizing. They concluded that Mordecai’s Jewish origin would be responsible for Haman’s ruin and that this humiliation before Mordecai was just the beginning of the end. Their reaction implies that the Jewish people had a reputation for strength and resilience, and beyond that, that the God of the Jews had earned the respect of the nations (Ezk 38:23). “While they were still talking with [Haman], the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared” (6:14). Talk about timing! This was an extraordinary twenty-four hours. Events had transpired that Esther could never have predicted that played perfectly into her plan to expose Haman and call for justice.

## The Tables Turned

The convergence of these phenomenal circumstances culminate at the second banquet. Esther's strategy worked better than she could have expected. Haman's rage against Mordecai resulted in a hastily built seventy-foot tall gallows. But the king's insomnia led to an unprecedented recognition of Mordecai's service to the king, unwillingly orchestrated and carried out by Haman. Esther hosted the banquet that night, well aware of the power of God to shape the events that were unfolding.

Once again King Xerxes asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted" (7:2). This time Esther was ready. Her answer began with a double entreaty of respect followed by the most personal request possible: "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition." Although we live in a very different political age, Christians today are not exempt from showing respect for people in authority. Even though certain officials may not deserve our respect personally because their deeds are reprehensible, their position of authority is not arbitrary. It is not demeaning to submit to the governing authorities (Rom 13:1-7). We should have the same attitude that Jesus had toward Pilate, when he said, "You would have not power over me if it were not given to you from above" (Jn 19:11).

Esther petitioned the king for her life. She made it personal. She knew how to appeal to an unprincipled, arbitrary ruler. She used her carefully acquired personal collateral to gain the king's support on behalf of her people. Finally and courageously, Esther identified herself with the Jews. "If it pleases you grant my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated." She continued, "If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king" (7:4). Her final point may seem like groveling to some, but it is important to keep in mind the erratic and unpredictable nature of an absolute dictator. Esther's task was to make the king, who was ultimately responsible for this edict of annihilation, overrule his decree.

Ironically, the dialogue presents Xerxes, the most powerful human being in the world, as a person easily manipulated and unaware of having ordered a genocide against an entire race. "Who is he?" shouted Xerxes, "Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther had every right to say, "You are the man!" but for good reasons she didn't. Instead, she turned and pointed toward the mastermind of the edict and said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"

For a second time in the space of 24 hours, Haman suffered an unexpected and devastating shock. It was bad enough that he had to honor Mordecai with the very protocol he imagined for himself, but now he was condemned as an enemy of the queen and her people. Xerxes rose in rage, "left his wine," and went out into the garden. We cannot help but feel the narrator's sarcasm when he slips in this little detail about the king leaving his wine. The king was so

distraught and angry that he left the one thing he seemed to enjoy the most—drinking wine.

When Xerxes went out into the palace garden, there was no doubt in Haman’s mind that he was as good as dead. In desperation, he stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. And just as he was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining, pleading for his life, Xerxes returned. “The king exclaimed, ‘Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?’” Haman’s sins were many. He was guilty of massive greed and a lust for power. He was driven by uncontrollable hate and rage against Mordecai and his people. But in the end, he was ironically condemned to die for a sexual sin he never intended. It was doubly ironic that he should die on the gallows that he had erected to hang Mordecai, that his estate should be given to Esther, and that Mordecai should be appointed by Esther to be its trustee.

Haman personified human depravity. Evil is often thought of in abstract and impersonal terms but it is inevitably personal. Evil originates in the human will and it is realized through human actions. Outside forces are always in play, but they must not be allowed to excuse or rationalize the personal responsibility of the individual to account for their actions. Haman may be an extreme picture of evil, but he is a picture of us all. Perhaps, the big difference between Haman and us is that he paraded in public those very sins that we try so hard to conceal. Haman-like depravity is rooted in every human heart. Looking at Haman, we hardly need the prophet Jeremiah’s warning that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer 17:9). Haman’s demise on the gallows was justified. “For the wages of sin is death. . . .” (Rom 6:23). There are consequences for living immorally in a moral universe, for pursuing injustice in a world created by a just God. God gave Haman up to his own lustful dreams and evil ambitions and in the end they led to his demise.

Only one thing remained for this great reversal to be complete. The edict must be overruled and the Jewish people saved. Once again Esther pleaded with the king, “falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he devised against the Jews” (8:3). The defeat of Haman did not automatically end the impact of Haman’s evil. Esther’s personal victory in the palace would have meant little if the enemies of the Jews had been allowed to carry out their reign of terror. Esther refused to lose sight of her cause and the greater justice issue—saving the Jews. This two stage advocacy for justice is illustrative of the process that God’s people continue to pursue to set people free from the bondage of sin and death. The defeat of the “bad guy” is important, but preventing the evil he devised is even more important. For Esther this meant indicting Haman and changing the law.

In both phases of her pursuit of justice, Esther made her appeal on personal grounds. She used herself to leverage salvation for the Jews. She put herself between an absolute dictator and the edict of annihilation. It is not only evil that wears a human face, but justice does as well. Esther embodied the pursuit of justice. Even when the advocates of justice are able to base their appeals on the laws of the land or a constitution or a bill of rights, the pursuit of justice is inevitably personal. If those who cry out for justice do not treat others justly or are unwilling to sacrifice for the sake of justice, then justice will fail. Haman *selfishly* manipulated Xerxes into signing the edict of annihilation. Esther *sacrificially* attempted to persuade Xerxes to overrule the edict of

annihilation. Make no mistake, both sin and righteousness, injustice and justice, are personal. Justice is not a general abstract notion or principle, but a personal, life and death commitment, requiring our all. Esther stood in the gap and called for justice. Her most persuasive argument was herself. “If it pleases the king,” Esther said, “and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king’s provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?” (8:5-6). Esther surrounded her moral appeal (“the right thing to do”) with her personal appeal. Xerxes probably found Esther’s personal and emotional appeal more persuasive than a logical argument based on moral principle.

Technically, King Xerxes was unable to rescind his previous edict. However, the first edict which he had signed and sealed—the one he blamed entirely on Haman, could be overruled by issuing a new edict. The responsibility to write another decree “in the king’s name in behalf of the Jews” fell to Mordecai. One wonders if these two irrevocable imperial edicts, issued within weeks of each other, not only caused confusion but contributed to the ensuing conflict. The citadel of Susa could certainly be accused of sending out mixed signals. The two edicts parallel one another, with the second edict drawing on the same language as the first. Only this time, instead of sanctioning the annihilation of the Jews on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, the month of Adar, the Jews were authorized by the state to defend and avenge themselves on their enemies. Apparently, the first edict was written in all the languages of the empire except Hebrew, but the second edict was also issued in Hebrew. Special note is also made of the fact that the decree was sent out to all the provinces by the king’s race horses. The edict “granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies” (8:11).

News of this second edict touched off joyous celebration in the city of Susa. “For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor.” Remarkably, “many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them” (8:16-17). The upside of all of this political attention, first an edict of annihilation and then an edict of vindication, convinced many to become Jews. It is hard to imagine this taking place apart from a significant witness to the covenant-keeping testimony of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The central truth of Yahweh continued to define the people of Israel and the net effect of the two edicts raised their profile. The very people who had been singled out for terrible persecution were now being vindicated.

### **Mordecai’s Victory**

Instead of a one-sided reign of terror against the Jews on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, the Jews were empowered to defend themselves. “On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them” (9:1). On the 13<sup>th</sup> day five hundred men were killed in the capital city of Susa. Three hundred more were killed on the 14<sup>th</sup> day, along with the ten sons of Haman. Throughout the

empire the Jews killed some 75,000 of their enemies (9:16). The narrator stresses the justice of their cause by emphasizing three times that the Jews did not take their enemies' plunder. But most readers find the death toll not only surprising, but shocking, and a part of the story that they wished wasn't there. How do we rejoice in a victory that cost so many lives?

We are in the habit of compartmentalizing religion and relegating it to the emotional and private sphere of life. We tend to separate the impact of our faith in Christ from the real world of business and politics, world affairs and science. We forget that Jesus is the Lord of the nations. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. There is no sphere of life that does not fall under his command. History is not divided between secular history and redemptive history. There is only one history and at the center of that world history stands the Cross of Christ. There is only one Truth and that truth embraces the totality of life. There is only one destiny and that destiny embraces all people. There is only one judgment and everyone comes under this judgment. There is only one hope of salvation and that is found in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In spite of modern sensibilities, the conclusion of the book of Esther reminds us that the cause of justice is a life and death struggle. Just as Yahweh commanded and sanctioned Joshua and David's military campaigns as judgment against evil, so Mordecai and his fellow Jews waged a violent, yet just war against their mortal enemies. Of course, the crux of this whole story is how God preserved the Jewish people through whom he promised to save the world. The truth underlying these events goes all the way back to Yahweh's covenant with Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3).

The events that transpired in 474 BC not only point back to God's sovereign selection of Israel, but they point forward the cross of Christ. Jesus, the very incarnation of God, took upon himself the sin of the world. He died not only for our personal sins, but for the sins of the nations and races, the sins of exploitation and racism, the sins of dictators and dope addicts, the sins of economic oppression and state sponsored violence. In other words, all sin and evil were nailed to the Cross of Christ. Through the Cross, God paid the price for our sin, for all sin, that we might be saved from "the wrath of God against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom 1:18).

Since Jesus, the Incarnate One, has come, the people of God are no longer identified geographically or racially. No national borders encompass the chosen people. No Jerusalem temple or prescribed sacrificial rituals define the faith. Like any other national identity, the Jewish people have a right to their land and their self-preservation, and the right to take military action to defend themselves against aggressors, but the time for a holy war has passed. "Literal, physical holy war was once necessary for the survival of the Messiah's race until God's redemptive purposes were actualized in human history on the cross of Jesus Christ. This certainly does not mean that because Jesus has come, the Jewish people are now expendable! However, the Jewish people need Jesus the Messiah, the divine warrior and king, to deliver them

from death no more or less than the people of other nations” (Karen Jobes, 193). The people of God are drawn from every tribe, nation and people group. They are no longer preserved by military might but by the sustaining grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The Body of Christ, the Church, knows no borders or nationalistic identity.

The judgment against evil that we see in the Old Testament is a precursor to the universal and eternal judgment against evil that is affirmed in the New Testament. Mordecai’s victory is a sign of the vindication that will one day be universal and eternal when Christ comes to judge sin and evil once and for all. As a representative of the people of God, we were meant to see ourselves in Mordecai’s victory. The closing picture of Mordecai was meant to give encouragement not only to the Jews who celebrate Purim but to Christians who follow the Lord Jesus, the risen Messiah. The same man who put on sackcloth and covered his head with ashes in order to call attention to injustice was honored with royal robes and a large gold crown. The symbols of his success point forward to the day when the followers of the Lamb will be clothed in righteousness and crowned with glory. Mordecai was the object of hate and rage but he became prominent and powerful because of God’s saving work. Like Mordecai we may suffer for righteousness sake, but “our present suffering is not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom 8:18). The same man who was willing to risk the life of his daughter Esther, whom he loved more than himself, but not more than the will of God for his people, was empowered to seek the welfare of all the people of God. Mordecai is a picture of the last becoming first. He was an Old Testament reminder of a New Testament truth that nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ. The challenge before us is to believe in the God of Mordecai, who will turn things around and put an end to the Xerxes’s factor and Haman’s hate. The God of Esther will turn the tables on evil, once and for all, and create an upside down Kingdom, where the last will be first and the first will be last.