

**SERIES:** God Incognito: As Seen in the Book of Esther  
**SERMON:** *Haman's Last Supper*  
**SCRIPTURE:** Esther 7-8  
**SPEAKER:** Pastor Dick High  
**DATE:** August 1, 2010

It's good to be together again today as a church family. This is the next to last of our Sundays with one service. Memories of last Sunday's wonderful 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration still echo in my mind. What a great time to be together.

This morning we re-engage our study in the book of Esther (two books before the Psalms). Because it has been two weeks since our last look, let's recall some of the highlights of the unfolding drama.

### **An Unfolding Drama**

The setting for the book of Esther is within the city of Susa in the Persian Empire. Most of the events occur within high government circles. The main characters we encounter are Xerxes, king of the Empire; Vashti, who is queen as the book begins but is soon deposed; Haman, who is elevated to a right hand position to Xerxes; Esther, a young Jewish woman who becomes queen in chapter 2, and her cousin and adoptive father, Mordecai. During the process through which Esther becomes queen Mordecai forbids her to reveal her nationality or family background.

Haman dislikes Mordecai; but beyond that desires to eradicate all Jews from the Persian Empire. He devises a plan to accomplish that, and with the king's permission, proceeds; even though the specific target of his animosity is not revealed to the king. Mordecai learns of this edict and presses Esther to intervene. That is no small feat, given the capricious, rash, and despotic nature of Xerxes.

Although we often think of Haman as the "villain" in these events, we should remember the encouragement of Christ to pray for our enemies. Lori Day, who teaches at Tien Shan International School in Almaty, Kazakhstan, reminded me of this when she shared the following incident. "Our kids were moved to pray for Mr. Morgon, the chief architect of the district, after a chapel service in which we talked about the story of Esther. It was clear to all of us that this man was a Haman, standing in the way of the Lord's work and subsequently headed for ruin. So our Esther, the president of student government, led the composition of the prayer for the building and Mr. Morgon and organized the students to pray every day. For the first six weeks, Mr. Morgon blocked us at every opportunity. He even sent our papers with all of our permission signatures off to another city where they were lost. But after six weeks, when we were in the process of acquiring all of the necessary signatures again, he called the head of our building committee and said he would like to help us. He signed the permission to build, helped us get all of the other signatures, and has been walking with us ever since, using his influence to help us. Our kids have kept praying faithfully every day, but they are now praying for Mr. Morgon instead of against him. And the second floor of God's building is now being built."

Through this entire thread of events we have emphasized that discernable indications of the providential hand of God are evident. Events were neither coincidence or things that “just happened” to occur

When we come to chapter 5 we have the vantage point of looking over Esther’s shoulder as she enters the king’s hall uninvited to intervene on behalf of her people. This act places her life in jeopardy, but the king extends his gold scepter indicating acceptance of her approach. When he asks why she has come Esther does not answer that questions directly; rather she invites the king and Haman to a banquet that day.

In chapter 6 we encounter another of the providential actions of God; when the king suffers a bout of insomnia he has someone read him the chronicles of his reign. During that reading he learns of a failed opportunity to honor Mordecai. As the king makes a commitment to honor Mordecai, who “just happens” to enter the court but Haman!

Haman is now given the “privilege” of honoring Mordecai? Ironic, it is! He intended to hang Mordecai, but instead must now see that Mordecai is honored! Haman does perform the assigned task, then rushes home to relate events to his wife and friends. Their interesting response contains unfavorable prophetic inklings. Let’s recall their response that begins in verse 13 of chapter 6 and then read into chapter 7, where our focus begins today. (Please follow along – page 357 in most of the pew Bibles.)

**6:13-7:10** *His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!"<sup>14</sup> (How are those for encouraging words!) While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.*

<sup>1</sup> *So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther,<sup>2</sup> and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again 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."*

<sup>3</sup> *Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request."<sup>4</sup> For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. 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."*

<sup>5</sup> *King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?"*

<sup>6</sup> *Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.<sup>7</sup> The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.*

<sup>8</sup> Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.<sup>9</sup> Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king." The king said, "Hang him on it!"<sup>10</sup> So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

### **Intense Interaction (Chapter 7)**

Perhaps it is an understatement to say this chapter could be described as intense interaction! Two people plead for their life; first Esther (that has been her plan from the initial invitation to Haman and the king) and then Haman (who faces the need to do so spontaneously!).

Note other ironic turns or reversals that are described here. Haman finds himself in a position worse than the previous queen, Vashti. She was deposed and banished from the king's presence. However, Haman will lose his life as a result of the king's rage! Further, the one from whom Haman begs for his life, Esther, is Jewish; the very people he has plotted to kill. Additionally, the gallows that Haman had built become the instrument of his own death. Although there were inklings that things were turning against him at the end of chapter 6, it would have been difficult for anyone to envision how radically different things will be by the end of chapter 7.

My primary interest in this chapter is the skillful manner in which Esther communicates in her interaction with the king. It is not only what she says, but what she doesn't say that is worth attention. Interwoven with her communication we'll observe some character issues about Xerxes that give understanding to her chosen means of communication. Up front I do want to say that it can be tempting to conclude that it is Esther's carefully chosen words that win the day; but as Proverbs 21:1 remind us, "*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*"

On this point Iain Duguid observes: Esther's intricate plan was a necessary part of the process of bringing Haman to justice, a plan that required a combination of subtlety, boldness, and strength to carry it through. Yet Esther's plan by itself was not what turned around the fortunes of God's people.<sup>1</sup>

When Esther first risks entering Xerxes' presence in chapter 5, he inquires regarding her request. Her answer is an invitation to a banquet, to which Haman is also invited. At that banquet the king again inquires; Esther's response is an invitation to a second banquet and a commitment to state her request at that occasion. At this second banquet (7:2) it is the king who again initiates the conversation. I believe Esther is purposely allowing him to choose both topic and timing. I would perceive that the king's anticipation has been heightened by Esther's delay in stating her request. So once more he asks and once more he promises a generous response.

Esther's request, recorded in verse 3, evidences both courage and craft, "*If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life...and spare my people.*" We can only image the various thoughts that may have raced through the king's mind as he hears

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<sup>1</sup> Duguid, Ian. *Esther and Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary, pg. 91.

these words; neither Xerxes nor Haman knew that Esther is Jewish. And they would have no reason to think that her life was in danger.

With those words Esther drops a bomb with pinpoint accuracy! She draws on her perception that she is pleasing to the king. However, she (and we too) know enough about Xerxes to realize he is fickle and could change his mind and affections quickly. We should not underestimate the risk she takes!

Notice also that she has carefully avoided saying anything accusatory toward the king. It is his action that allowed Haman the unquestioned freedom to establish his evil edict. Xerxes does bear some responsibility for the position that Esther is in; yet you don't find suggestion of that in anything she says.

If you are familiar with the account of the prophet Nathan confronting David regarding his affair with Bathsheba, you see here a similar pattern of bypassing someone's defenses to bring them to a point of (righteous) anger. Both in that instance and here in Esther, a strong response is stirred.

By verse 5 we see that the king is fully engaged in the conversation! Note again, Esther only has to answer his question rather than making a direct accusation against Haman. The result of her identification of Haman is that he is terrified (we can only image what that would have been like for him) and the king, in a rage, goes out into the palace garden.

The likely quandary for Xerxes at this point involves the following. He is pleased with Esther and has three times publicly offered to generously respond to her request. But her request has more than likely faced him with his complicity in Haman's edict, even though he will not acknowledge his culpability. Further, in some previous situations, although he is a despotic ruler, ironically he has sought counsel for his actions. Perhaps there are issues of insecurity hidden behind the exterior of bravado. Regardless, there are no counselors available here for an immediate decision, and he's in a rage!

A fatal faux pas (social blunder) by Haman solves this dilemma. Haman's action in falling on the couch where Esther was reclining violated the extremely strict rules of court propriety. Haman likely had no ill intention toward Esther; he's just incredibly frightened for his life. Xerxes may well have known that but needed an excuse to execute Haman. And that is what occurs. So the chapter ends with Haman dead and the king's fury abated.

One of the ironies of Haman's life is that it illustrates Biblical principles stated in a number of verses from the book of Proverbs.

**Proverbs 26:27** *If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.*

**Proverbs 14:12** *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*

**Proverbs 16:4** *The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.*

It's as if each of these were written specifically as commentary on Haman's life.

A companion thought comes from the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:20. *“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’”*

With that verse providing a segue to chapter 8, I will read the first eight verses.

**8:1-8** *That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. (Esther “gets” what Haman had amassed for himself!!!) And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her.<sup>2</sup> The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.*

<sup>3</sup> *Esther again 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 had devised against the Jews.<sup>4</sup> Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him.*

<sup>5</sup> *“If it pleases the king,” she 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.<sup>6</sup> For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?”*

<sup>7</sup> *King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, “Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows.<sup>8</sup> Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring—for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.”*

### **The Remaining Challenge (Chapter 8)**

Imagine the scene: Relief that Esther’s life has been spared; at least for now. Satisfaction (if that term is appropriate here) that Haman has been removed. Surprise over being the recipient of Haman’s estate and that Mordecai is given such a position of authority. And concern (a very deep concern) that the part of Esther’s request to spare her people remains unaddressed.

That is why Esther approaches the king again (verse 3). Quote: “Whereas before she had retained her royal dignity, always appearing as the stately queen before the king, now she threw herself down like a common beggar, crying and asking desperately for mercy for her people.”<sup>2</sup> Once the gold scepter is extended, she immediately delivers her request, directly asking the king to put an end to Haman’s evil plan. This is clearly in contrast to the deliberate pace used when stating her first request and the oblique way in which she led to Haman’s identification as the perpetrator of evil. But, as with her initial request, she makes her relationship with the king an integral point.

Esther’s request also includes the suggestion that an order be issued to overrule Haman’s dispatch. The essence of the king’s response is twofold. First, his patience is wearing thin. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Duguid, Ian. *Esther and Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary, pg. 100.

Frederic Bush's observation that "the... imperative verb 'write' at the beginning of verse 8 strongly suggests that the words are spoken in a sharp and exasperated tone of voice. He is saying, 'Look! This is what I have done for you! Not only can you not expect me to do more, but I cannot do more.'"<sup>3</sup> Edicts sealed with the king's signet ring are irrevocable. That poses a real dilemma. However, secondly, Xerxes offers a suggestion that opens the door for an acceptable path to address the dilemma – writing another decree in his name in behalf of the Jews. It is up to Mordecai and Esther to wrestle with what to say in that edict.

What a great suggestion! And that from the king who had wearied of this interaction! Once again, the words of Proverbs 21:1 echo through my mind, "*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*"

Given this freedom of action Mordecai goes to work.

**8:9-17** *At once the royal secretaries were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language.<sup>10</sup> Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.*

<sup>11</sup> *The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies.<sup>12</sup> The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar.<sup>13</sup> A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.*

<sup>14</sup> *The couriers, riding the royal horses, raced out, spurred on by the king's command. And the edict was also issued in the citadel of Susa.*

<sup>15</sup> *Mordecai left the king's presence wearing royal garments of blue and white (a significant change from the sackcloth he had worn earlier), a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration.<sup>16</sup> For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor.<sup>17</sup> In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.*

Although we won't take time for a thorough evaluation this morning, it is worth comparing the wording of this edict penned by Mordecai and the one written earlier by Haman. One can clearly see the careful and deliberate parallel wording. The difference is the permission granted to them *to assemble and protect* themselves against those that *might attack them*. This does not eliminate

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<sup>3</sup> Bush, Frederic. *Ruth – Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, pg. 454.

Haman's edict, but that edict is now pitted against (and in many ways neutralized by) an equally irrevocable royal edict.

The outcome of this second edict is not reported until chapter 9; which Pastor Mike will share with us when he returns to the pulpit next Sunday. While that will provide opportunity to evaluate this edict in more detail than we have time to do today, I anticipate that questions have arisen in the minds of some about the parameters of Mordecai's edict. I can understand, at least in part, (although we neither approve nor accept) the rationale behind Haman's decree, issued as it is by an evil, vengeful man. And I can understand the permission given to the Jews to defend or protect themselves from attack. Yet, what is the purpose, intent, or justification for them to (as stated in 8:11) ***destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies?***

Are these words included in Mordecai's edict simply to make it very clear that what he writes specifically countermands Haman's edict? That may be part of the answer. And even if Mordecai's edict is considered defensive in nature, the wording is quite strong and does include the right *to plunder the property of their enemies* (by the way the text of chapter 9 reveals this not occur!).

Let me phrase the question in this way: Are there occasions when people (individuals, armies, or nations) legitimately act as agents of God's righteous judgment against sin and sinners? Was that not the role that Israel played in conquest of the Promised Land; action that they took because of God's explicit command and on the basis of His stated judgment of the peoples and nations that lived there? When one reads such passages of Scripture as Exodus 23 and 34; Leviticus 18:24-25; and Deuteronomy 7 and 20 it would be appropriate to answer "Yes."

Is that the role that Esther and Mordecai play here? Exodus 17:14-16 is clear that God condemns Amalek for their unprovoked attack on the people of Israel during their journey toward the Promised Land. Verse 16 specifically states *The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation*. As observed in previous sermons from Esther, that is Haman's heritage. His animosity against Mordecai and the Jewish people in the Persian Empire is not only personal; it is also ancestral in nature. Centuries after this word of the Lord in Exodus 17, but also centuries prior to the time of Mordecai and Esther, Saul had opportunity to fulfill the command of Exodus, but failed to do so. Whether intentionally, or unintentionally, the actions of Esther and the edict of Mordecai do fall in line with the Lord's judgment stated centuries earlier. That does not in itself justify every aspect of their edict, or suggest approval of all of their behaviors and choices. But it does provide necessary Biblical context for evaluating the events in the book of Esther.

Beyond these considerations there is the broader subject of "holy war" that is raised by Mordecai's edict. What are the parameters of such actions? Is this an Old Testament phenomenon not found in the New Testament? Personally, I think some of the prophetic battles addressed in Revelation must be considered in a discussion of this subject. And how about the occasion when God uses the evil nation of Babylon as His instrument of judgment on His own people, the nation of Israel? Is that also "holy war?"

Time does not allow adequate address of this subject today. Because this issues flows over in to chapter 9 it will be addressed in significant detail by Pastor Mike next week – I know; I’ve seen the manuscript! But it is a serious subject and there are numerous legitimate questions. Prayerfully read through chapter 9 and 10 during the week and wrestle with some of these questions yourself.

That said, what are some legitimate applications of Esther 7 and 8 for us today. The first one I thought of is rooted in the book of Habakkuk. He is the prophet that puzzles over God’s use of the nation of Babylon as His instrument of judgment on His people, Israel. God’s word to Habakkuk in 2:4 is this; *the righteous will live by his faith*. That is not to suggest that we ignore our questions, but rather it is God’s challenge to regularly affirm our faith and trust in God, particularly when circumstances are difficult.

Hebrews 11:6 reminds us that *“without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that **he rewards those who earnestly seek him.**”* Obviously no time frame is established regarding the reward to our faith; that itself is part of the life of faith. Faith is accepting God’s word as truth and affirming that He is faithful in His daily care for those who live in personal relationship with Him. Romans 4:20-21 illustrates the faith of Abraham when it states, *“Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, **being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.**”*

One of the purposes of corporate worship is to encourage each other in our life of faith; to continue to make the choice of obedience to God’s word to give guidance to our thoughts, attitudes, morals, and behavior. We do that through singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs together, through prayer, through giving from our finances to God (an expression of gratitude and trust that He will provide), through sermons rooted in Scripture; and through monthly gathering around the Communion table to remind one another that Christ died for our sins and rose to life, offering us the gift of salvation.

As we gather each Sunday, I invite you to ask the Lord to encourage you in your faith, and then look for Him to do that throughout the various aspects of our worship service. And then thank him when He does. Maybe that will occur as you visit with someone and learn of how God answered a prayer. That can be an encouragement to us to persist in prayer, believing that God will answer. Or perhaps there will be a specific phrase in a song that was sung that is timely to circumstances that you are facing. That could be God’s encouragement to you that He cares for you and you can face another week at work knowing He is present with you. It could be something from the children’s sermon in today’s service; a reminder that God knows the plans that He has for you and that He will give you the strength and patience to follow that plan (even if right now you don’t know what that will be). It may even be as basic as holding the bread and cup of communion in your hand a little later in the service this morning and being reminded that Jesus Christ gave His body and allowed His blood to be shed, standing in your place to receive God’s wrath for your sin.

As we soon transition to a time of communion, I will close with a final quote. “Every Lord’s Day is a day of feasting when we celebrate the great reversal of our eternal fate. Are we celebrating

that reality in our hearts Sunday by Sunday? Like the pagans of Esther's time, people still go to church and identify with the covenant community for all kinds of different reasons. Just being in church on a Sunday is no evidence of our genuine status as belonging to Christ. We must ask ourselves directly, 'Am I trusting in Christ's death in my place? Am I a genuine part of his community today? Will he say of me personally on the last day, *This one is one of mine?*'"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Duguid, Ian. *Esther and Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary, pg. 110.