

SERIES: God Incognito, as Seen in the Book of Esther

SERMON: **The Tables Are Turned**

SCRIPTURE: Esther 5-6

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Introduction: Scripture tells us “Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). “Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Nowhere can one find a clearer illustration of these truths than in the life of Haman, the Agagite—one of the key characters in the OT Book of Esther. Jeremy introduced you to Haman last Sunday in a really great message. (By the way, I hope you are grateful for the number of excellent teachers of Scripture that God has brought to us here at First Free. Pastor Phil, who is leaving today on a richly deserved month of sabbatical, brought another great sermon on July 4th. Please don’t take these gifted individuals for granted; relish the clear teaching of God’s Word).

And while I’m talking about gifted communicators, let me add my own word about Steve LoVellette, who will be our Sixtieth Anniversary speaker next Sunday. Steve and Barbara joined our staff when I was here the first time and served us for 11 years total. For the past fifteen years he has been at Faith Church in Cincinnati, serving with great faithfulness and distinction. Those of you who know Steve will certainly want to be here next Sunday; those who don’t will do yourself a favor by coming to meet him. There will be some special anniversary events that will enable us to celebrate God’s goodness over the years.

Now, back to the book of Esther. As you recall, Esther is a Jewish girl who has hidden her ethnicity and her faith as she has ridden to the pinnacle of society—she has become Queen of the Persian Empire. But when the wicked Haman, the highest official in the land next to King Xerxes, threatens Esther’s cousin and adoptive father, Mordecai, and not only him, but her entire race, she is challenged to make a courageous choice—to approach the King even though it was a capital offense to do so uninvited. “Who knows,” Mordecai asks her, “but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

By the way, that’s not a bad question for any of us to ask when we face a major challenge. Someone has said, “We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations.” Who knows whether we’ve arrived where we are “for such a time as this”? Who knows what God is up to? We can’t be sure, because He often doesn’t reveal to us the details of His purposes for our lives. But we’ll *never* know if we don’t show courage and trust God boldly, as Jeremy reminded us so well last Sunday.

Well, what was Esther’s response to this challenge? “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” We pick up the story this morning in chapter 5. Please follow along in your Bible as I read aloud:

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the

palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

"Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks."

So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. 6 As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "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."

Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home.

Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, Haman 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. "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. But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."

His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built.

Scene 1: Esther risks her life and survives. (5:1-8)

It may be hard for us to imagine the kind of pompous behavior exhibited by Persian royalty. The fact that the Queen herself has to fear death for showing up in the King's throne room uninvited demonstrates the height of arrogant power practiced by these ancient monarchs. Esther actually has good reason to be concerned for her life, not only because there is a law forbidding her action, but also because her husband is known to be fickle and impulsive, and it has been 30 days since the King has called for his wife. She has undoubtedly begun to wonder whether she has fallen out of favor with him, as Queen Vashti did before her.

But when Xerxes sees her, he extends his gold scepter, meaning she is allowed to approach him. In fact, he seems glad to see her and asks her what she wants. "Even up to half the kingdom, it

will be given you.” Now I don’t think he really means it; this is a figure of speech used in ancient times when a monarch wanted to sound especially generous. King Herod made the same offer to his niece Herodians, who opted instead for John the Baptizer’s head. But at the very least it indicates Xerxes is favorably disposed toward Esther.

Rather than spill the beans right then regarding what is on her heart, Esther invites the king and his second-in-command to a banquet. Immediately the King accepts the invitation for himself and Haman. I’m sure Haman doesn’t need to be asked twice. To be invited to a private banquet with the king and queen swells his already swollen head to near bursting.

At the banquet, while they are drinking wine, the king asks Esther again, “What is your request?” And again he promises her, “Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted?” He is well aware that the banquet itself is not what she wants but is rather a prelude to revealing her request. She obviously has something very important on her mind, something for which she has demonstrated a willingness to risk her very life.

In verse 7 she begins to reveal her request, but then stops. Look at verse 7 carefully. “Esther replied, ‘My petition and my request is . . .’ The next word in the NIV and most other translations, “this,” does not appear in the Hebrew and probably doesn’t belong. I believe Esther interrupts herself just as she is ready to unload, and instead she invites the king and Haman to another banquet. I see two possible reasons for her hesitancy. One is simple fear. She wants to tell the king of the danger she and her people are facing, but she just loses her nerve. She gets cold feet. But she can invite him to a second banquet the next day, and hopefully by that time she can drum up the courage to tell him.

Another possibility, however, is that Esther is playing the king like a trophy fish, taking her time and not rushing to reel him into her net, carefully maneuvering him into a position where he will feel obligated to grant her request.¹ After all, he has twice now offered to give her up to half the kingdom. He will lose a lot of face if he goes back on such a repeated promise. Certainly she shows great shrewdness (perhaps we should say “artfulness”) in the way she handles the king. She knows he values submissiveness and meekness in women, so she prefaces her request for a second banquet with phrases like, “If the king regards me with favor,” and “if it pleases the king . . .” She also specifically promises to reveal her request at the second banquet. She knows there can be no further delays, for the king’s curiosity has peaked.

The story now shifts to Haman.

Scene 2: Haman rides an emotional roller coaster created by his own insufferable pride. (5:9-14)

Please note that Haman leaves the banquet happy and in high spirits (verse 9). He’s on cloud nine. Not only has he been the sole guest of the king and queen, but he has been invited to another banquet the next day! But then you find the little word “but” in the middle of verse 9:

“*But* when he saw Mordecai . . .” There’s that obstinate Jew again! Everyone else stands when Haman rides by in his chariot—everyone but Mordecai! Suddenly Mordecai becomes the only person that matters to Haman—his happiness and joy are rapidly transformed to rage and despair by the sight of this one man and the perceived slight to his significance represented by Mordecai the Jew’s refusal to stand. What a ridiculous overreaction!

Somehow he restrains himself and goes home. By the time he arrives he is back on his game. He temporarily repairs his dented ego by gathering his friends together with his wife and boasting to them about his vast wealth, how many sons he had (presumably his wife already knew that), how the king had elevated him above everyone else, and how he was the only one invited to these two banquets!

Then that word “but” appears again. “*But*,” he moans, “all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.” Thankfully, his wife and friends come to his rescue. What are friends for, anyway? They tell him, “Have a gallows built, make it 75 feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then you can go to the second banquet with your nemesis totally out of the picture and be happy!” And the chapter concludes with the words, “This delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built.”

So, in the course of maybe an hour or two, Haman has gone from high spirits to rage to prideful boasting to deep depression to delight. I think it might do us well to stop and do a little psychological and spiritual analysis of this man Haman.ⁱⁱ His whole world revolves around his fragile ego. The smallest perceived threat is enough to throw him into a tailspin. He presents himself in public as this powerful, confident person, but like so many megalomaniacs he is actually deeply insecure.

What Haman craves more than anything is not simply significance, but rather being *seen* to be significant. Public respect and adulation is his idol. When the idol is fed, he feels good and is a hale fellow, well met. But when his idol is challenged, it drives him to rage and despair. Even though he still possesses unparalleled power in the kingdom, that isn’t enough. There is obviously a void at the core of his being that no amount of success can fill. He is a shell of a man, an empty suit.

Haman is beyond help, but we are not. Our hearts face the same temptation to bow to idols. Think for a moment about what it is that causes you to be angry out of all proportion. Or what is it that makes you feel a strong sense of achievement? More than likely one of your idols is being threatened or, alternately, stroked. How often have we, in effect, said to ourselves, “I know God loves me and has made me a joint-heir with Christ, yet all this is worth *nothing* to me as long as I do not have _____.” Fill in the blank. Is it financial security, a job, respect from peers, a relationship gone south, affirmation at work?

Allow me a brief moment of introspection here. I’ve been teaching and preaching for about 40 years. Early in my ministry I can’t tell you how often I spent half of Monday in bed with a serious headache. Some of that was due to coming down from the strong adrenalin rush I experienced on Sundays, and eventually I discovered that if I took my day off later in the week, the drop wasn’t

nearly so severe. But frankly, some of it was also discouragement and depression because I didn't get the strokes I felt I needed. There were times when I felt I had preached a real killer of a sermon, and no one noticed. Or someone would say at the back door, "Pastor, did you hear what Swindoll said about that passage?" I hated Swindoll (just kidding!).

But occasionally a strange thing happened. I would preach a sermon that just wasn't up to my personal standards. I would be ashamed and just wanted to walk out the back door and speak to no one. Invariably someone would come up to me on that particular Sunday and tell me how deeply their lives were impacted by the message of the morning. I wanted to say, "You gotta be kidding!" But I didn't; I just thanked them. If they only knew what a godsend they were!

What God taught me through those experiences is to realize that preaching was an idol in my life, and it was sometimes more about me than about Him. What I needed was to recognize that my goal must not be success or accolades but faithfulness. God can use my worst effort and trash my best (if He wants to) because it is His Word, not mine that He promises will not return empty. Let's read that promise in context, Isaiah 55:8-11:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Friends, let's not play Haman's game. Let's get off that emotional roller coaster created by pride and insecurity.

Well, we have one more chapter of this amazing story to wrestle with this morning, so I ask you to turn to chapter 6.

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. It 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.

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

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

The 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.

His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered.

When 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?" So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, have 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. Then 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!' "

"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."

So 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!"

Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him.

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!" While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.

Scene 3: A series of “coincidences” leads to an incredible turning of the tables. (6:1-13)

The first “coincidence” we find here (please notice the quotation marks around “coincidence,” for I don’t believe there really is such a thing) is that Xerxes is sleepless in Susa. Now be honest here—wouldn’t you expect that the King of the Empire would choose something other than the Congressional Record to deal with his insomnia? After all, he had unlimited resources and could easily have called for fine cuisine, fine wine, or dancing girls. Actually I suspect this choice is just another indication of his pride, since the record of his reign was written by sycophants who always put the king in the best possible light.

Another coincidence is that the readers “just happen” to turn to the section that recorded Mordecai’s exposure of the two officers who had tried to assassinate the king some time before (2:19-23) The king inquires about what honor or reward had been given to Mordecai for this deed, for Persian kings were famous for their diligence in rewarding those who served them well. (It was good for public relations, to say nothing of personal safety). He is told that *nothing* was done for Mordecai. One can almost imagine Xerxes leaping out of bed, rushing out on the balcony to get some fresh air, with his servants in tow, and demanding that this omission be rectified immediately.

But just then another coincidence occurs—Haman happens to enter the courtyard below. Remember, his wife and friends had suggested he seek an audience with the king to ask permission to execute Mordecai. He has wasted no time. He wants to be first on the king’s agenda for that day. But before Haman can even ask his question, the king has one for him:

“Haman, my man, what should be done for the man the king delights to honor?”

Immediately the wheels begin to turn in Haman’s small mind. This is his lucky day! Who could the king possibly want to honor more than Haman himself? Sure, the king hasn’t mentioned the name of the person he wants to honor, but he has probably just tactfully omitted his name so Haman wouldn’t have to be embarrassed about asking for what he really wanted! So he outdoes himself developing a plan that will feed his idol and stroke his ego.

Notice that he doesn’t ask for wealth or power, because as the second-highest ranking official in the government he had all of that he could handle. Instead he asks to be treated like the king. He suggests a royal robe the king has worn, a horse the king has ridden, a royal crest (on the horse’s head, no less, which the Hebrew makes clearⁱⁱⁱ), and the person should be led by one of the king’s most noble princes through the streets of the city proclaiming that “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!” This man’s not too subtle.

Imagine Haman’s joy when the king responds, “Go at once. Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested . . .” But then he hears those awful, unbelievable words, “. . . for Mordecai the Jew.” And not just Mordecai the Jew but the king adds, “Mordecai the Jew who sits at the king’s gate.” Haman knows that Mordecai *sits* at the king’s gate; in fact, he sits there when everyone else stands. And then the king unwittingly drives the stake even further into Haman’s heart: “Do not neglect anything you have recommended.”

Haman has no options. He has to do exactly what he himself has suggested be done for himself—only for his arch enemy. The irony is delicious! His dream day has turned into his worst nightmare!

I find it interesting that verse 12 says, “Afterward Mordecai returned to the king’s gate.” It’s as though the author is saying, “No big deal for Mordecai. He doesn’t live for that kind of adulation. He isn’t going to quit his job like the average lottery winner and ‘move on up to the east side.’ No, he goes right back to work as a relatively minor magistrate in the courthouse.” Besides, I suspect Mordecai cannot truly rejoice in his reversal of fortune so long as his people still stand under sentence of extermination.

In contrast, we are told that “Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief.” He is humiliated, demoralized, devastated. He pours out his anguish to his wife and his friends. And once again they are so helpful!

Scene 4: Haman’s wife and advisers warn him against anti-Semitism (just a little bit late!) (6:13b)

Here’s their wonderful insight: “Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!” Oh, great! They’re just a little bit late with this advice! Please note that these are the same jokers who the night before urged Haman to feed his idol by building a gallows 7 stories high and having Mordecai

executed on it. Now they wax theological on him—they tell him about the Abrahamic Covenant. You know it, don't you, from Genesis 12, where God said to the founder of the Jewish race, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse."

By the way, I'm not sure how Haman's wife and friends know this—that the Jewish people are God's chosen people and that while God will allow them to be disciplined He will never allow them to be exterminated. Perhaps they knew it all along and only discovered that day that Mordecai was Jewish. More likely they are blowing with the wind. When it seemed that Haman was in the king's favor, they were completely supportive. Now that he's in trouble, they're ready to bail on him!

The sixth chapter ends with our final scene in verse 14: "While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared."

Scene 5: Haman is hurried off to Esther's second banquet, and his last. (6:14)

Unfortunately, you will have to wait for two weeks until we discover what happens at Haman's Last Supper. The tables continue to turn, not only for Haman, but also for Esther and Mordecai and for the Jewish people as a whole.

Conclusion: I want us to focus on a couple of things from our text today by way of application. The first is that strange law of the Persians that no one could approach the king without being invited, with capital punishment as the penalty if the king chose not to extend the gold scepter.

We have already talked in previous weeks about the fact that we also have a King, but one far different and far better than the one Esther had to deal with. She had to approach Xerxes with knees trembling and heart wondering whether she would survive the encounter. The Persian monarch was so fickle and capricious that no one could ever know whether he or she would be welcomed or executed.^{iv} But, . . .

1. Our King's scepter is always extended to those who are His children by faith. He regularly invites us into His presence. We have no need to be subtle, as Esther was, in framing our requests. He doesn't need to be bribed or stroked. We don't have to use psychological maneuvers to trick Him into giving us what we need. On the contrary, Hebrews 4:16 and Philippians 4:6 make it clear that our King has an open door policy. Listen to these words: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16)." "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Phil. 4:6)."

However, while access to our King is free and open, that access was not cheaply purchased. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He can hold out the gold scepter of His favor to us only because the judgment for our sins has fallen on Christ. Jesus paid our penalty and purchased peace with God and access to God for us.

Once purchased, that peace and that access is permanent. No one can now separate us from God's favor. As Paul asks in Romans 8:38-39, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." If we fully understood this great truth, then no worldly slight or setback or discouragement or trial could take away our joy and leave us in depression or despair. If we have the King's favor, what difference does it make what those around us think?

2. God's providence is seen even in the insignificant coincidences of life. The tables begin to turn in chapter 6, but Esther doesn't get the credit. She isn't even mentioned in the chapter. The entire shift of fortune for Mordecai (and later the Jewish people) hinges upon a case of insomnia. And then upon a weird choice of reading material. And then upon a chance meeting of the king and Haman in the early morning hours. Are these true coincidences? I don't think so—not for a moment! The fingerprints of God are all over this story. And they're all over your life if you will open your eyes to see them.

I don't suggest that we try to read divine meaning into every detail of life—that's a futile way to live. But I do believe we need to have a settled confidence that God is working (quietly for the most part) to achieve His purposes in our lives. "Luck" should not be in our vocabulary.

Karen Jobes writes so perceptively,

"Previously in Israel's history, God had used mighty miracles to deliver his people and to fulfill his promises. In the story of Esther God was using the ordinary events of life to realize his covenant promises to his people. . . . What a great God we serve! Any deity worth his salt can do a miracle now and then. Our God is so great, so powerful, that he can work without miracles through the ordinary events of billions of human lives through millennia of time to accomplish his eternal purposes and ancient promises."^v

3. Bow now or bow later.^{vi} Haman's fall was not predictable, humanly speaking. He seemed to have it all: fame, wealth, position, honor. Yet in the space of 24 hours he lost it all, was disgraced, and perished for all of eternity. How could this happen? It was not humanly predictable, but it was Scripturally predictable. The Abrahamic Covenant was established between God and the Jewish people over 4,000 years ago and it has never been repealed. It is still true today that God will bless those that bless the Jewish people and curse those who curse them. We've seen it with Hitler, we've seen it with Stalin, we've seen it with Arafat, and we'll see it with Ahmadinejad.

And while God's promise is true for the children of Abraham as a whole, it is especially true for the Seed of Abraham, who is Christ. Those who bless Him (i.e. put their faith and trust in Him) will be blessed; while those who curse Him will be cursed. Many, of course, would never curse Him in the normal sense of the term, but they are His enemies whether they know it or not. To be

neutral toward Him is to be His enemy. He Himself said, “He who is not with Me is against Me.”

Haman bowed the knee to Mordecai and declared his honor. He was forced to, against every fiber of his being. So also everyone will someday bow the knee to Christ. Philippians 2:9-11 makes that perfectly clear.

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

But, friends, it makes an eternity of difference when and how that bow occurs—whether in this life and voluntary, or in the next life and forced.

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- i. Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary, 63.
 - ii. I am indebted to Duguid for this entire discussion of Haman’s psychological state and the parallel in ours, pp. 65-67, 71.
 - iii. Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, 415.
 - iv. This point, too, is largely Duguid’s, 69ff.
 - v. Karen Jobes, *Esther*, the NIV Application Commentary, 159-160.
 - vi. Duguid, 81-82.