

The Book of Esther: Timing Is Everything
Chapters 7 & 8
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When the curtain dropped last week, Haman was hurrying home with his head covered by a paper bag, humiliated at having to honor the one man in the world he despised above all others. But, if he thought he would get a sympathetic, comforting response from his family and friends, he was woefully mistaken. Their dire predictions of further embarrassment and loss to Mordecai are still ringing in his ears when the palace eunuchs arrive to fetch him for dinner with the king and queen. One can only imagine his state of mind at the prospect.

Acts VI, Scene 1 starts as Ahasuerus and Haman settle in for their second fine dining experience as Esther's guests, and all eyes are on the queen. Two questions crowd to the foreground: Will Esther finally do it? Will she finally ask the king to spare the Jews? Having seen her already twice postpone her request, we are left to wait and wonder. And then, if she does finally ask, how will she make her case?

Before moving ahead, let's pause a moment to consider Esther's timing. Once again, the wine is flowing, suggesting the king's receptivity. Now, however, Ahasuerus has Mordecai's loyalty fresh in his mind. Meanwhile, Haman has erected a 6-story spike on which to impale Mordecai, and after the recent turn of events is almost certainly rattled. His experience of having to honor his most hated enemy—and publicly, no less—has to have affected his equilibrium. From Esther's perspective, this is prime time.

Right on cue, Ahasuerus repeats his question: "What is your petition...and what is your request?" This time Esther is ready. "If I have won your favor and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request." Direct, concise and utterly clear, Esther states her need and unambiguously ties her destiny to the destiny of the Jews. It's critical that the king understand that he can no longer view Esther as an individual or a personal possession but as part of a larger identity.

Esther's next words both shock and inform. Only after the request is clearly named does she proceed with a word of explanation: "For we have been sold, to be destroyed, to be killed, to be annihilated." Her next statement almost apologizes for having to bring this to the king's attention: "If we had been sold merely as

slaves, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” Note the way Esther diplomatically points out the king has been duped. She frames her argument in such a way that it deflects attention from the king’s culpability and instead focuses it on this as yet unnamed enemy. And, clearly, Esther has done her homework. Her argument reflects knowledge of Haman’s rhetorical deception about his intent to destroy rather than enslave the Jews. Finally, her words characterize the plot as an affront to the king and not just as a threat to herself or her people. Given Ahasuerus’s vanity, this is a crucial point. Esther has crafted a brilliant case. The only question is: will it work?

It can work only if Ahasuerus “gets it,” and for a change, the king finally asks a question to probe and better understand the situation. “Who is he and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” Again, Esther is ready. “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Her words name Haman as their common enemy—as compared to chapter 3 where he was identified only as the enemy of the Jews. Sensing this new and formidable alliance, Haman is understandably “terrified before the king and queen.”

Act VI, Scene 2 begins as Ahasuerus chooses this pivotal moment to storm out into the palace garden. Whether he is trying to control his characteristic rage or perhaps simply needs a moment to reorder his perception of reality, we are not told. Haman, however, is absolutely clear about the implications of this new reality and acts decisively. Seeing that “the king had determined to destroy him,” he stays behind to beg for his life from Queen Esther. It is interesting that he assumes Esther has the power to grant it to him and astonishing that he hopes she has the inclination.

Unfortunately for Haman, Ahasuerus “just so happens” to re-enter the room in time to see Haman throwing himself on the couch where Esther is reclining. The audience knows that Haman is throwing himself upon her mercy as much as her couch, but Ahasuerus jumps to other conclusions. “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” Even as the king misunderstands, Haman once again understands. In a wonderfully vivid metaphor, the narrator tells us that “as the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face.” Without question, Haman knows the gig is up.

A decision is obviously in order. Yet, as we have seen previously, the ever-pliable Ahasuerus is open to suggestions at such moments. This time it is Harbona the eunuch who advises the king and pronounces Haman’s highly appropriate sentence. “Look!” Harbona points out helpfully, “the very gallows that Haman has

prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, 50 cubits high."

There is a sense in which Haman is condemned here by the excesses of his own ego. The extravagant height of the spike in Haman's back yard can be seen even from the palace. Freshly inspired by the sight, Ahasuerus issues his first direct order in the entire story: "Execute him on that," he says, and the servants are quick to comply.

The irony here, of course, is that Haman is ultimately punished for a crime he did not commit. He was not, after all, assaulting the queen. But, Haman got the right sentence even if for the wrong reason. In yet another run-in with providence, God uses even a clueless king's misunderstanding for divine purposes. Ahasuerus makes his decision and Haman is dispatched to his doom.

Back in chapter 3 when Haman first proposed his outrageous edict, we commented on his "evil genius," a combination of a brilliant mind and cunning deceit. We wondered then if he would ever meet his match. Could anyone arise who could outwit him, countering every ounce of his evil with good?

Here, Esther's character rises to the challenge. She has been patient in implementing her plan of attack. She has been brilliant in her analysis of her enemy's methods. And finally, she has been every bit his equal in her power to persuade. Perhaps she *was* brought to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

Act VI, Scene 3: Ahasuerus has had a full day. It all began with a bout of insomnia. Then came the discovery of Mordecai's unrewarded loyalty, followed by the misconstrued consultation with Haman over how to honor a faithful servant of the empire. Perhaps he caught a nap while Haman was parading Mordecai around the public square, but then there was dinner to prepare for and then that exhausting scene with Haman, culminating with his "attack" on the queen and the necessity of having Haman executed. Yet Ahasuerus' day is not over. There is still much to be done and the king seems to be on a roll.

He begins by giving Haman's house to Esther. From the king's perspective, what could be more fitting after Haman plotted the death of her and her people and assaulted her, too? Mordecai has also earned an additional reward. The parade was fine for recognizing his role in foiling the assassination attempt, but now Esther has acknowledged him as her uncle. This means that he, too, was the target of Haman's treachery. What better reward for him than the king's own signet ring,

recently retrieved from the finger of the unfortunate Haman? One might think that recent experience would give the king pause before handing over his signet ring again, but at least Mordecai is a better choice.

The focus then shifts back to Esther. Now it is her turn to make some decisions. The first is to appoint Mordecai to run her newly acquired house. There is a delightful symmetry in this detail given the bitter animosity between the two men throughout the story. It is the last imbalance to be rectified at the level of the individual characters.

Yet, this is not just a story about individuals; the fate of a whole people still hangs in the balance. Esther's next act recognizes this. We don't know how long a period of time elapses between verses 2 and 3, but the king holds out his scepter once again to Esther, indicating that in spite of the risks, she has initiated another interview.

Act VI, Scene 4: However long the interlude, Esther's tone is markedly changed in 8:3. She falls at the king's feet, an indication of her rising level of desperation in the face of the real and dangerous crisis still confronting the Jews. She reminds Ahasuerus of the corporate nature of the impending doom and takes a definitive stand with her people: "How can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" She does not even bother to argue for herself. Her words may even be intended to curtail any attempt by the king to spare her and let her people die. Her rhetorical questions are her last, best attempt to make the king understand that she and the Jews are one. If he cares about her, then he must do something about Haman's edict.

Ahasuerus's reply, issued jointly to Esther and Mordecai, is disappointing in the extreme and seems as if he has not even heard Esther. He reiterates what he has already done for the queen and her uncle and suggests that they can write any edicts they want. But, that's not what Esther asked for. She asked for a revocation of the old one, not permission to write a new one. But, then comes the bombshell: "For an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with his ring cannot be revoked." Now, we are truly incredulous at how free Ahasuerus has been with his signet ring. At the same time, we're struck by the reality that the words of a dead traitor have proven more powerful than the commands of a living king. The only option left seems to be to fight fire with fire—edict with edict.

I encourage you to take a few minutes this week to lay Haman's edict from chapter 3 side-by-side with Mordecai's edict of chapter 8. The parallels are

striking. Mordecai literally takes Haman's edict and works through it point by point, constructing a counter-edict that responds to each element. Esther and Mordecai's first choice was that Haman's edict could be revoked entirely, eliminating any need for violence. Failing that, the counter-edict at least tries to ensure that it will be a fair fight.

There are some important differences between the two. Mordecai's edict gives *permission* to destroy, kill, and annihilate, while Haman's *ordered* these actions. Mordecai's edict is framed in terms of self-defense, while Haman's was undisguised aggression. Note, too, that Mordecai's edict specifies that violence be used in response to "any armed force" that might attack, while Haman's edict directed violence against the general Jewish population, including women and children.

The response to the two edicts is striking as well. After the first edict, the king and Haman sit down to drink. After the second, it is the Jews who are having a celebratory drink. Pandemonium breaks out in Susa in response to both edicts, but the confusion is characterized by shouts of joy in the latter instance. Mordecai dons sackcloth and ashes after the first, but is royally dressed after the second. Finally, the Jews become increasingly isolated in the aftermath of Haman's edict while after Mordecai's, they can hardly count the converts—sincere or otherwise.

Throughout this drama we have seen God's hand at work. It has usually been hidden, well out of sight, with God not even receiving any direct credit when good fortune smiled on the Jews. In today's text we see that even a clueless, pagan king can be a useful instrument in working out God's divine purposes. It is a reminder to us, I think, not to judge who or what God can or cannot use. Once again we are called to trust that God is at work even in situations that seem hopeless to the naked eye. To God, there's no such thing as hopeless.

Second, I am intrigued that even though Esther has been highly successful by any measure, she still runs into a buzz saw that may spell doom for her ultimate aim. She's risked her life, she's fingered the despicable Haman, she's achieved the king's complete cooperation, yet for all her success, the horrific edict still stands and the day of annihilation looms. I take two truths from this: sometimes, we will do our best and give it everything we've got and we still may not prevail. Right does not always win in this lifetime, and that is a reality that we need to be able to speak to both theologically and compassionately. Esther takes the side of the suffering, *regardless of the outcome*, and so must we.

Then, I am struck that Esther, for all that she has done thus far, has been operating out of the belief that Ahasuerus can and will fix this for her. But, sometimes God places us in situations in which we must become the agents of action. No one else is going to fix the problem, come to the rescue or make things right. It is a reminder that we must constantly discern how God is leading us in particular situations—sometimes we should wait, sometimes push ahead. There are times for both, but it's seldom clear-cut which it is in the moment. That's why the Esther's fast and spiritual preparation was so critical.

Finally, in a drama like Esther's we can be tempted to put her on a pedestal and see her and her life as something special and therefore, not very much like our own. But, that would be a huge mistake. Great lives usually don't seem great while we're living them. They are usually embarrassingly regular. We want our lives to count for something, yes, but seeking to be extraordinary isn't the answer because great lives are never achieved by making greatness the goal. That was Haman's problem. Driven by hubris and ego, he made greatness his goal. Instead, I want to suggest that the way to live a great life is to make it your goal to live for God. When we embrace the glory of God as our purpose, we will end up doing great things precisely because we do God-things. We likely won't grab headlines, but our lives will have real—and enduring—significance.

There is still an element of fear as this act draws to a close. The thirteenth of Adar still looms large. The difference is that it now looms large for the Persians as well as the Jews. Next week we'll find out how it all ends. Amen.