

## AUTUMN BIBLE STUDY

### Esther 5:9 - 6:14

#### Plots, Parades and Providence



#### HAMAN'S UPS AND DOWNS (5:9-16)

Interestingly, in this passage we read nothing of Esther's emotions and thoughts. On the other hand, Haman's secret thoughts are aired frequently.

After dining with the king and queen, Haman leaves Esther's banquet 'happy and in good spirits.' He then runs into Mordecai, who neither rises nor trembles before him, and his emotions change. Mordecai simply ignores Haman. It is this act which eats at Haman's fragile ego – one that cannot survive any challenge, real or imagined. He is even more determined to destroy Mordecai's people.

We then learn of a conversation that Haman has with his wife Zeresh and his friends. In front of them, Haman boasts of his great wealth and many sons, of all the promotions the king has given him, and how he is above all other officials and ministers.

Haman, though, is painfully unaware of his own distorted vision, as he boasts that he alone was invited to dine with the king and queen. But, while Mordecai lives, remaining seated at the king's gate, Haman cannot find peace. His wife and friends propose a solution – get rid of this offender!

True to the excess of the story in general, the mode of execution proposed is quite literally overkill – that he be impaled/hung, not just enough to do the job, but seventy-five feet high, so that everyone in the city can see.

There is irony here as well, as Mordecai is already a condemned man. All Haman had to do was wait for the edict to take

effect, and Mordecai and all the Jews will be out of his life forever. But Haman is not a patient fellow – a year, apparently is too long to wait for his ego to be satisfied. Only a special public humiliation on an accelerated schedule will do.

So, Haman appreciates and agrees with the advice of his supporters. Since Mordecai will not *rise* up to bow *down* and Mordecai's actions *lower* Haman's *high* spirits, Mordecai must be strung *up* and that will *raise* Haman's spirits.

If Haman gets his way, it will be too late for Esther to save her cousin. But now comes another rich biblical theme, very much related to Haman's ups and downs – the theme of reversal; of divine justice turning power upside down. (See Proverbs 16:18; Genesis 37-50; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Jesus' death and resurrection).

#### A COMEDY OF MISMATCHED INTENTIONS (6:1-12)

A surreal series of providential coincidences runs as follows:

It is the middle of the night – the king cannot sleep. So, he reads, or rather, he has his servants read to him. What is read, banishes sleep for the night, when he realises that he has not rewarded the man who saved his life (see chapter 2). This must be sorted out.

Just then the king hears something. We are told, a split second before the king finds out, that it is Haman who wants to speak to him about having Mordecai executed. As the scene unfolds, neither the king nor Haman knows what the other is thinking – but we know, having heard of Haman's plotting with his friends and the king's conversation with his servants. The intentions toward Mordecai are contradictory, to say the least. We know that Haman is in for a rude discovery. As ever, the king seeks advice from Haman, "What shall be done for the man the king wishes to honour?"

Haman jumps to the conclusion that it is he who is to be honoured. Haman repeats the king's phrase, "The man whom the king

wishes to honour,” three times, and states that this phrase must be repeated more times in the streets.

We note the emptiness of the honour – nothing useful or practical, no cash reward nor security, no reversal of the death edict – it is simply something that Haman would enjoy. It is all about Haman’s ego.

For us, the reader, the tension is mounting, as we know the ‘one whom the king wishes to honour’ is Mordecai and not the one who is putting his foot in his mouth with every phrase.

We know what is coming next, as every extra thing the king inserts in his order, will rub salt into Haman’s wounded ego. However, Haman does the king’s bidding (after all he is the king’s chief lackey) and takes the robe out to Mordecai, who is at the king’s gate. This is the second time that Mordecai has been given clothes from the palace – this time it is the king’s royal robe.

We are not told what Mordecai thinks of this spectacle, but we know Haman’s feelings are clear for everyone to see as he runs home, mourning, with his head covered.

#### **COLLAPSE OF THE SUPPORT NETWORK (6:13-14)**

Again, with his ego bruised, Haman summons his wife and supporters. Haman relates everything that has happened to him. The supporters note that Haman has begun to fall before Mordecai, and predict that his final downfall is inevitable.

Haman’s wife and friends (*Hebrew: wise men*) mirroring his despondency, reverse their earlier position. Interestingly, they seem to base their prediction not on anything in Haman or his behaviour, nor on the king’s reaction, but on Mordecai’s Jewishness. Some kind of power seems to be imputed to the Jews by Haman’s friends. Before they finish speaking the king’s officials arrive and hurry Haman off to Esther. As Bechtel states:

*‘Circumstances seem to have conspired against Haman, and for once, we get the impression he is completely unprepared. Esther, however, is not. The chapter closes with a reference to the banquet she has prepared. We can be sure that her preparations involve more than food.’*

#### **COINCIDENCE OR PROVIDENCE?**

In speaking to the king, the previous day, Esther set a chain of events into motion. Though she has acted with shrewdness, courage and self-restraint, several events take place beyond her control or knowledge:

She did not cause Haman’s ego to swell with pride, nor did she engineer him encountering Mordecai that ruined his good mood.

She did not cause Haman’s wife and friends to suggest killing Mordecai, nor his trip to the palace to demand his execution.

She did not plan the king’s insomnia, nor his choice of reading material concerning Mordecai.

She had no responsibility for the way in which Haman arranged a parade to honour himself, only to be forced to honour Mordecai.

Esther’s situation seems to have become easier because of these providential/coincidental events. It would seem that Esther has had some help – but what kind of help is it? It is certainly fortuitous timing – the king’s insomnia, the bedtime story, and the awareness of his unpaid debt to Mordecai.

Did the planets line up just right, or was God’s hand at work behind the scenes?

Haman’s edict still stands - he is still one of the king’s highest officials. The Jews remain condemned. The king has not yet heard Esther’s petition. Yet, even before Haman’s friends finish warning him, the story rushes Haman to the next scene.