

Esther 06-04-04B

Let's resume our study now in the book of Esther. You remember that we looked at this idea that Mordecai has responded to Esther's request for intercessory prayer. He has gone and spoken to all of the Jews in the Susa area.

And in the same way that the bad news spread, that the decree was coming, this purge was coming, and we had a little bit of discussion on the break about how secret was this decree. But if you think about it, and it's possible to read it in such a way that you understand that as soon as the decree went out, all of the Jews knew that they were in trouble. But this doesn't seem very practical, in my mind at least, because if Haman wants to take the Jews out and take all their stuff, then the element of surprise is going to be to his advantage, right? If this is the first month, and he's going to do this all toward the end of the year, then as soon as the word gets out, people can start fleeing.

They can be transferring their funds out of the bank and gathering their valuables and hiding them. This is why we have the Dead Sea Scrolls. The community that lived out in the desert was afraid that their stuff was going to be lost, that they were under attack.

It might have been the Essenes, it might have been someone else, but whoever put those manuscripts in those jars was afraid they were going to lose them and that they would not survive. These were valuables to them. They were the most precious things they had were their sacred texts.

So they put them in the clay jars and hid them in the caves because they were under some sort of attack. When everything is going well and you're thriving and prospering and all is peace and happiness, you don't take your sacred texts and stick them in a jar and hide them in a cave. You do that when bad times are coming.

Well, if Haman broadcasts this decree and says, Oh, by the way, as soon as everybody gets the word on this particular day, we're going to slaughter all the Jews, well, all the Jews are probably not going to show up, right? If a decree came out and said we're going to take all the Christians in Plano and Richardson and slaughter them all on July 4th, where do you think we'd all be on July 4th? Sitting here saying, I believe I'll go buy some fireworks? I don't think so. We would leave, right? So Haman has crafted this message in such a way that when he sends it out, it is sent to the officials, the satraps, the governors who are over each province. This is verse 12 and 13.

According to their language and their script, they have many different provinces. They have many different conquered peoples. So those who are in charge get this in their own language and it's sealed in the name of the king, sealed with the king's ring, sent by couriers into all the provinces to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews, young and old, little children and so on, on the 13th day of the 12th month.

Now this is the 13th day of the first month, right? So it's going to be 11 months from the time this decree goes forth before it's executed, right? Now, there's not a great sense of urgency. This could go in the normal diplomatic pouch, could be dispatched by couriers into all the realm. And if Haman is smart, he's not going to alert the Jews.

That gives them 11 months to pack up their stuff and move out and be gone. And then where is he going to get all the money that he promised to put into the king's treasury? So I think he carefully worded this in such a way that all he has to do is shortly before the execution date inform all of the people that it's the Jews. And because the officials get this word, but they don't know who it is, and it's 11 months off or 10 months off or however long it takes them to get the word, people are sort of perplexed.

They're scratching their heads over it. They don't know what to make of it. But when Mordecai finds out about it, he tears his clothes and goes out into the middle of the city and cries out.

Now, there's really no point in this if everybody already knows what's going on. But there is a point if they don't. And if Mordecai fills in the rest of the puzzle for everyone, and that's why it doesn't tell us until verse 3 of chapter 4 that in every province where the king's command and decree arrived, there was mourning among the Jews with fasting, weeping, and wailing.

Many lay in sackcloth and ashes because now they know. Now, it's possible that Haman was fool enough to put this in and everybody knew it sort of before Mordecai does, but it doesn't really make good sense to me. In any case, there is a point at which everybody knows.

So, except Esther apparently. And then she finds out through Mordecai. So then she says, "...gathered the Jews who were present in Shushan," verse 15, "...and fasted for me, neither eating nor drinking, for three days, night or day." Now, three has been understood long before the days of Jesus, long before the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord as a period of time for the fullness of something to take place.

On the third day, you do a thing. You wait this day, that day, and then on the third day, something happens. And it has a symmetry to it.

It is time enough to make sure that everyone gets the Word, that everyone can fast, everyone can pray, they can say everything they need to say to God on Esther's behalf, and they can make it clear to God it's not a month-long fast, it's not an 11-month-long fast, it's three days. She says, do this for three days, and then I will go in. And this is a request that is quickly fulfilled by Mordecai.

Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther commanded him. And it's sort of a little smile at the corner of your mouth when you read that, because always before, Esther did according to all that Mordecai commanded her. Or Esther did according to all that the fellow in charge of the virgins instructed her to do.

She's the one that's always obeying, but now things are reversed. And she, who has always been submissive and always been obedient, and has always been sort of the follower, is the one giving the instructions, and Mordecai does all that she commanded him. Well, this brings us to chapter 5, and there's a fascinating sequence here.

I hope we'll be able to see it and catch it. Now it happened, on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, across from the king's

house, while the king sat on his royal throne in the royal house, facing the entrance of the house. So it was, when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, that she earned his favor.

She obtained his favor. This is a real active voice kind of thing. It's not passive.

It's active on Esther's part. And this is the first answer to prayer. What have people been praying? Esther told Mordecai, pray for me for three days.

Fast and pray. Everybody do it. And on the third day, I'll go see the king.

Well, what are people going to pray? If Esther gets beheaded, as soon as she shows up, well, all that fasting and praying were for naught, and her opportunity to be used by God as a part of Israel's deliverance goes away. So, what can they pray for Esther? They can pray that she will receive a favorable reception, that the king will not kill her. And so this first step is met.

The king extends the golden scepter that was in his hand, and Esther went near and touched the top of the scepter. So she's very close to the king. Now this is important.

Why do we need to know that she touched the top of the scepter? Is this just elaboration and embellishment and little nice details just for the sake of fleshing out the story? It does all of that. But every detail has a meaning, and every element of this story plays into what God is trying to tell us. Why does it tell us that Esther went near and touched the top of the scepter? We get a whole extra sentence here just for that.

Esther went near. Now this is the danger point. The king is capable of having her executed.

It is for fear of his displeasure that she... Well, maybe that's not the best way to put it, fear of his displeasure, but the possibility of his displeasure is what has caused her to ask for prayer. And so she walks right up, and this is sort of the principle, you might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. If you're going to do something, then do it to the hilt.

If you're going to do it, do it well. If you're going to do something, do it fully. Don't do something by half measures.

My father used to always say this about playing the piano. If you're going to play it, play it. Play it like Anna Lynn does, like Dr. Godbold does, and like Elizabeth does.

Play it with vigor. Play it with enthusiasm. Play it like you mean it.

And if Esther is going to go see the king, then she walks right up into his face. She walks right up and touches the scepter. And this is a bold move.

She could have come halfway and kneeled down with her head to the ground and tried to be all abject and cowering. This is a bold move, isn't it? She figures, well, I've got to talk to the king. I'm going to walk right up there.

Now, this is not the only thing. This is just one element. It's important for us to understand where Esther is, as you will see.

So, you picture this. Big house, big courtyard. The king is sitting on the throne.

He's facing the entrance to his house. He's sitting there. There are some scattered courtiers around.

And Esther has timed this because there's one person that's not present. Who's not present that might be expected to be there? Haman. Haman is not there.

We'll see that as we go forward. The king says to her, What do you wish, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given to you up to half the kingdom. Unto half my kingdom.

This is a favorite thing for kings to say, isn't it? This is what the daughter of Herodias ends up saying, right? When she, you know, Salome and the dance of the seven veils and all that. And she asks for the head of John the Baptist. Remember Herod says, Ask what you will up to half my kingdom.

Well, this is sort of a poetic or a hyperbolic, you know what hyperbole is, right? It's exaggeration. I don't really think Esther could say at this point, Well, king, I'd like half the kingdom. As long as you brought it up, I'd like the half where I can put all the Jews.

I'll put all the Jews in my half and then nobody can kill them. That isn't what... He's just saying, you know, I'll bring you up to a level equal to myself. This is what the implication of it is.

If I'm the king and I have half the kingdom and you have half, I love you like I love myself. I give you possessions like I myself have. This is sort of the fondest thing that a king can say to someone that he wants to favor.

I bring you up to my own level. I have half and you have half. We split it 50-50 type of thing.

So it is an expression of great favor. It's not literal. Now, listen carefully to what Esther says.

Esther answered, if it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him. What? Esther's people are going to be exterminated. She has everybody pray for three days before she goes in and asks the king to try to stave off this horrible disaster when the king says, I'll give you anything you want.

Half the kingdom. Just ask. And she says, well, I'd really like you to come eat lunch with me.

This doesn't really sound as strange to someone in the ancient Near East as it does to us. You may or may not be aware of the ritual and the culture of the Middle East even down to this day where I ran into this when I was in the artillery going around to Arabic speaking artillery units. And we would have important things.

We had a tight schedule. People were shooting back and forth and artillery shells were falling and mortar shells and rockets were going back and forth and people were dying by the day. And we would be going in there to help an artillery unit do a better job of blowing up their assigned targets.

And we would go there. But you just don't go in and come straight to the point in that culture. You come in and chitchat for a while.

It used to also be this way in the South here in the United States. And it's this way in many cultures where it's impolite to come barging in and come straight to the point. You come in and it's a part of form.

It's a part of being above it all and having self-discipline and self-control and biding your time and waiting until the foundation has been laid and the groundwork has been established and many times not until after a meal has been eaten and people are in a more jovial and good fellowship type of mood. And then you bring up your important business. Well, Esther knows this.

And even though this is life or death for her and her people, she doesn't rush in and blurt this stuff out. This is great self-control. Esther remembers and realizes that there is a way to go about this.

And you don't come in all in a panic. You don't rip your clothes and come in and sackcloth and ashes in front of the king and say, Oh king, they're about to kill me and my people. Which is kind of what you would expect coming to this book, right? But Esther knows that there is a way to get this done.

So she comes in and says, if it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him. Now, the king, everybody plays by these rules. When I would go to the artillery units, we would come out there and they would say, Oh, Lieutenant Hall.

And I would say, Oh, Captain Aide or whoever he was. How are you? Oh, your unit looks great. And he'd say, Oh yes, your car is very shiny.

And then we would come on in and they would pour a cup of coffee. And so there's little Demitasse cups full of stuff like old motor oil. And you'd drink one of those and your eyes would kind of perk up and you'd say, Well, you know, so how'd that, you know, this chit chat, you know, non-essential stuff.

And then the second cup of used motor oil would come by. Drink that down. And there's still like a half inch of silt in the bottom after you get the liquid portion off and you're chewing the last part of it.

Then you're really alert and focused and so on. And after the second cup, we talk about our business. Well, you know, we'd like, we need to schedule this training.

When would you like us to come? Where would you like us to go? What units are we going to be working with? Et cetera, et cetera. Get all the stuff ironed out that needed to be talked about after the second cup. Then they would make a motion, make a little hand signal and here would come the third cup.

Oh, no, thank you. I've had plenty. Thank you very much.

The third cup is the unwritten signal that your host is finished with you and it's time to excuse yourself and leave. You never accept the third cup. You always accept the first.

You always accept the second. You always turn down the third. It's a great system and everybody understands it but it's all polite and everybody acts like they don't understand it.

And like it's just happenstance and oh, well, look at the time. I must be going. And away you go.

And it smooths the wheels. It lubricates the whole process. Everybody goes away smiling and a little buzzed from the intense caffeine rush from that thick coffee.

Well, we didn't know this. I mean we knew it but we didn't think it through is a better way of putting it because we've been trained and taught about all the things you don't do. You don't ever touch anybody with your left hand.

You don't lay your hand on the head of any child in the Arabic world. You don't sit and cross your legs and point the sole of your foot at someone. You've deeply insulted them and so on.

All of these different little things that are peculiar to their culture and so they said, well, you know, drink the first, drink the second, refuse the third, and get out of Dodge. And so we knew that. What we didn't think about is that as we went from unit to unit all in the same day that we would be drinking two cups and turning down the third.

And after about the fourth visit in a morning when you've had eight cups of this stuff, you're just hallucinating from all of the, and you're talking like, you know, one of those fast talkers on television. But everyone understands this. Now, Hazueras understands.

This is my whole point. That's probably the only thing you'll remember is my coffee story. But Esther and Hazueras both understand this.

And even though they're married and even though there are intimate terms, there are still these protocols to be observed. And so she doesn't just come right to the point. She says, well, like you and Haman to come to a banquet.

And the king understands that, well, the banquet is the venue in which this thing can be discussed. It's not appropriate to bring it up just off the cuff. So she makes this invitation.

If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him. Now notice, the banquet that I have prepared. So this is, I want, I hope that you can appreciate how brilliant Esther's tactics are here.

This is very carefully thought out. She's not been wasting her time in the last three days. And as people have been praying for her, what do you think they were praying? Give Esther wisdom.

And this wisdom is what is in evidence. She has already made the preparations for the banquet. If the king says, oh, I'm really busy.

I don't have time for banquets. She doesn't just say, I would like to have a banquet with you and maybe Haman can come. She says, I would like you to come to the banquet I have already prepared.

It's already on the schedule. The palace cooks have already made the chow. And it's online.

I'm going to be there and I hope you and Haman can come. Well, this intrigues the king. And of course, she doesn't play her hands.

She doesn't show her cards. And by the way, ladies in particular, and all of us in general, you don't always have to tell everything you know. There is an art of self-control in keeping back information until an appropriate time.

There's an appropriate time to discuss a thing. There's an appropriate time to show a thing or reveal a thing or engage in a particular kind of business. And it is the part of wisdom to time your revelation of information.

This is what Esther does. It's brilliant. Let the king and Haman come today to the banquet I have prepared for him.

Now, do you think the king has got a bunch of advisors and they've got his schedule filled up just like President Bush? The king is going to have to cancel some appointments because this isn't on his schedule. His stewards and people have not been consulted. The astrologers haven't agonized over this to see if it's a good day for a banquet with Esther.

But she's alone with him and Haman is not there to wave her off or to say anything. And so he says, bring Haman quickly that he may do as Esther has said. Notice the king doesn't say, I will do as you have said.

He's the king. But by including Haman in the request, the king doesn't have to look like he's yielding to her request. He can treat this as though, well, Esther would like Haman to be there.

Very, very subtle. Very brilliant. But by including, there are a multitude of reasons why Haman needs to be there.

But this gives the king the opportunity to accept without embarrassment, without belittling himself, exceeding to the wishes of the queen. Remember, that's what got Vashti in trouble. The king had a wish.

The queen wouldn't comply. Well, if the queen has a wish, is the king supposed to comply? It would be very awkward, very embarrassing. But if the king and Haman will come, the king says, bring Haman quickly that he may comply with the queen's request.

And of course, implicit in that is that he will be there also, but he doesn't have to say so. So the king and Haman went to the banquet that Esther had prepared. At the banquet of wine, the king said to Esther, what is your petition? See, he knows that her petition was not to come to the banquet.

He knows the rules. He knows that that was just the prelude. So now, look at this.

The king says to Esther, okay, we've gone through the formalities. We've had our first cup and our second cup. Now we'll get down to the nitty gritty.

What do you want to talk about? What is your petition? It shall be granted to you. What is your request? Up to half the kingdom, it shall be done. Then Esther answered and said, now in your Bible, if you've got a New King James, it says my petition and request is this.

Scratch out is this. You can see it's in italics, and it messes up the whole sense. You're going to miss the brilliant wisdom that God gives Esther here if you think this is her petition and her request because it's not.

This is a question. My petition and request? And this is a little delay. She repeats what the king... because now she puts herself in the position of responding to the king.

It would be an easy thing to say, well, here's my petition and my request, and she's the initiator, and he's supposed to respond. But by repeating his request, it's as though she's responding to him. He has asked what her petition and request is, and now she is the supplicant.

She's not trying to impose her will on the king. She is acceding to the king's will in revealing her request. It's a very subtle thing, but it's very diplomatic.

It's very clever on Esther's part. It's very wise because in every case, the king has an out to preserve his dignity. Very big in the ancient Near East and in the Middle East even today and in the Orient.

Saving face, never being embarrassed, never being belittled or humiliated, and the king most of all. So, Esther says, my petition and request? If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, which is as yet unstated, then let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said. You see that shift? I will do as the king has said.

He's not saying, please do as I have said. Do you catch that? And notice something else. Esther has very deftly handled this situation because listen to what she said again.

Read that closely. Verse 7. My petition and request? If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, what does that mean? If you are really going to grant my request, as you have said, if you're going to, then please come to this banquet tomorrow. Now, what does that mean? If the king shows up at the banquet on the morrow, what is he saying? I grant your request without having heard it.

Before she ever gives the request, she says, you say, I will do your request, and so on. And she says, well, if you will do my request, if I found favor in your sight, and you're going to grant my petition and fulfill my request, please come to the banquet tomorrow. Now, if the king shows up, he is saying yes.

He has said yes by showing up before she ever reveals it. It's just absolutely brilliant. And this, by the way, is the reason for the two banquets.

Why does she not just reveal her petition and her request at this banquet? She doesn't yet have the undeniable, incontrovertible promise of the king. If he proves by his actions, by showing up the next day, that he really means what he's saying here, when he says, what is your position? It shall be granted to you. What is your request? Up to half the kingdom it shall be done.

And notice, who is present now? Who is here to hear what Esther says? Haman. Now, if Esther reveals the nature of the request at this banquet, Haman could intervene, couldn't he? Haman could say, oh, well now, wait a minute. I've got good reasons for this.

And Haman could make an argument. But, when the king shows up on the morrow, it's too late to make an argument. He's already said yes by showing up.

He has said yes the previous day, and he has confirmed it by showing up. It's a double yes. And no matter what Haman says, it's too late.

The king has already shown his favor and granted her petition and fulfilled her request. Let the king and Haman come to the banquet, which I will prepare for them. And tomorrow I will do as the king has said.

Now, this also is naturally intriguing for the king. And I think he has to admire Esther and her self-control and her cleverness. And this is part of being beautiful.

You don't just put all your cards out there on the table. There is an element of mystery. There's an element of drawing your victim into your web here.

And that's what Esther is doing. But, keep in mind, much of this is because of Haman. She is having to work around Haman.

And the first time, she comes to the king when Haman's not there. The second time, she gets the king's yes answer in spite of Haman's presence. And she doesn't reveal the nature of the request.

And Haman can't do anything between the first banquet and the second banquet because he doesn't know that anything's amiss. He doesn't know what's in the request. And he's there.

It's absolutely brilliant. But, here's the point. We're going to have to close.

We're about out of time. But, listen. Intercessory prayer.

Why do you think Esther has the perception and the wisdom and the self-control and the wit to do this brilliant, strategic enmeshing of the king to procure his favor and the granting of this request? She is calm. She's cool. She's collected.

And she's relying on God because she knows that those people have prayed and she herself has prayed. And this is the answer to their prayer. It is in the soul of Esther.

It is in that faith and obedience that the answer of God can be found. Well, this is the kind of thing we can pray for each other, can't we? Wisdom. Self-control.

Peace. Patience. Humility.

To see clearly and to act in faith. It's the greatest prayer you can pray for another believer. These people have been praying for three days and Esther is in beautiful shape as she faces the king with her life in her hands and yet very deftly draws him into saying yes without ever revealing her request.

It's brilliant. I don't even know what it is and I say yes, says the king. Well, this is where we have to leave off.

We'll pick up here in verse 9 of chapter 5 next time. Father, thank you for the wonderful truths that are revealed to us in your word. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will impress them in our hearts.

May we too be worthy of the challenges and fulfill the potentials that bring us to the kingdom for such a time as this. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.