

Sermon 7: Esther 5: The Humble and the Proud

OUTLINE

Humble Esther
Proud Haman

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs 16:18-19, 'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.' 18:12, 'Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.' God exalts the humble and humbles the proud, is a clear lesson in Esther chapter 5. In Esther 4 we saw the exchange between Esther and Mordecai and saw two believers whose witness up until then was unremarkable and full of compromise suddenly take a turn in the right direction. We saw God using the calamity of the looming destruction of God's people to wake up Mordecai, the people of God and Esther as we saw them respond with repentance and prayer. The chapter ended with Esther getting the people of God to fast and pray for three days before she risked her life by going directly into the presence of the king uninvited. In this chapter we watch God's grace attend Esther who had humbled herself; and the pride that will come before the terrible destruction for Haman. These will be our two points, humble Esther; proud Haman.

Humble Esther

V1, 'On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace.' You can imagine how nervous Esther is feeling. This is the day she has to risk her life to save her people. Ancient reliefs have been revealed which show the Persian king holding a golden scepter with an ax man standing there too. This reinforces that Esther ran a real risk in entering the presence of the King uninvited. What is important for us to is although Esther does not know how this day will go, whether she will live or die; or she will be granted the lives of her people; she does what she can. One of the most common problems in understanding the providence of God is understanding that because God is sovereign does not mean that we do nothing, but rather we do our duty, we do what we can. This is seen here in Esther's actions. Esther has prayed and fasted; and now she dresses up and goes into the presence of the king. She wore sackcloth as a sign of her mourning over sin and sought the face of God for three days. And now she puts on her best robes, whatever perfume and make up she needs; she puts on clothes that remind the king of who she is to him, a queen. You have probably heard the saying, 'Pray like it all depends on God, and run like it all depends on you' as a way to show the proper balance in holding to God's sovereignty and human responsibility. This is part of what we are seeing here. Well this is what Esther is doing. She is not only depending upon her looks and royal robes; nor is she only depending upon God answering prayer but goes in person and dresses to make the best impression. We see here a recognition of the fact that God is sovereign but He uses means. God is sovereign but does not only work through miracles but ordinary processes as well. Applied to our lives it means: pray for the salvation of your lost loved ones, and preach the gospel to them; pray for a growth in holiness, but also deliberately avoid sin, root it out and pursue godly habits; pray for safety and wear a seatbelt; pray for health and

take your medicine; pray for character change in your children have family devotions, catechize them communicating truth to them and lovingly discipline them. It is not a lack of faith to use these means it is the obedience of a faith that recognizes the biblical teaching that God works by miracles but mostly He works by means. Esther wore sackcloth and she wore her royal robes.

V2, 'And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.' There was Esther putting on a brave face, she goes into the royal court. It looks like she did not go in making a show but meekly waiting to be seen. And once again we see this word 'favor' a word we have noted is a sign of God being with His people and opening the way for His purposes. We can almost see it in our minds. Esther enters far enough into the court to be seen. The king is busy talking to someone else. The guards react in that way that is quiet but full of tension. The king realizes something is going on, looks up and there is Esther. She is dressed as a queen in all her regalia, unlike Vashti. She has her head bowed, eyes cast down, showing her neck as it were putting herself at his mercy. You can see the thoughts working in his mind as he realizes that she would not just come in here at risk to her own life unless it was important. There is a dramatic pause, and then slowly the scepter which could be used in judgement is extended in mercy. Esther moves forward with meekness not strutting in the king's presence publicizing that she has the power to extract this concession from the king, full of self-importance, but with great humility touches the tip of the scepter as a sign of receiving his mercy.

V3, 'And the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." 13 of the 14 references to Esther as Queen Esther are found in this chapter, and here we hear it from the king's mouth. He recognizes she has a request and gives her his blank cheques approval. The language of up to half the kingdom is not literal but typical exaggerated court speech. Now at this point you would expect Esther to blurt it all out. 'I am a Jew; Haman wants us all dead; he has conspired against your queen; save us!' But she does not. Her request carries large implications and from a worldly perspective is almost impossible to grant. Esther is asking the king to give up on 2/3 of his annual tax revenue worth of silver going into his empty treasury. Esther was about to reveal a secret about her racial identity and religion that she has kept secret for 5 years, an identity that has recently been implicated by the king's highest official Haman. Esther is asking the king to prefer her request over Haman's. And she is asking for the reversal of a law that cannot be reversed. What we see next is Esther using wisdom as she moves the king to make him more amenable to her request.

V4-6, 'And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king." 5 Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked." So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. 6 And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." What is going on here? Some have thought that Esther was losing her nerve and trying to work up her courage, but I don't think that is what is going on. Ahasuerus has a long history of people manipulating him and him making rash decisions. When Vashti denied him, he took bad advice that resulted in his regret; his young men have manipulated him making him collect 400 virgins

from all over the empire; Haman has manipulated him bribing him with silver to make a bad law that will result in the extermination of the Jews. It seems to me that Esther is using meekness and not manipulation to allow the king to make a good decision. She has put him on the spot in his royal court before witnesses, so that if she makes a request and he does not like it, he could react badly, and lose face. She put him in an awkward situation where she forced his hand to save her and he was obligated to grant her something. She makes a new scenario where in a private context, without the risk of losing face he can say no. He repeats his offer, and just in case he is still not really invested and needs an out she offers another opportunity for him to say no, not by having to refuse her in public but by not turning up at the next feast, v7-9, 'Then Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: ⁸ If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

A few things stand out here for me. Firstly, the beauty of her meekness. How refreshing to see a woman respect her husband and not trying to manipulate him. how refreshing to see a woman who guards her husbands reputation in public instead of the feminist fashion of treating all men like buffoons and happily embarrassing them in public. Secondly, I think her gentleness in dealing with people in this situation is refreshing, her concern to keep his dignity in tact is a good thing. I know I need to hear this. I love a good argument; I love to show you how wrong you are in an argument; I am happy to embarrass you in an argument; and I will put on the pressure so that you have nowhere to run and any capitulation can be a humiliating affair and they have to tap out and where truth can become a bludgeon. Or have you ever been in a situation where you are the innocent party and the other is completely guilty and you use your position to rub their noses in it. Thirdly, I see her faith in this. When we are fearful we want to try and control all the variables, we want to shepherd everything into the pen; we fear to take our hands off and step back and leave it in God's hands. Esther is giving Ahasuerus every opportunity to back out, some might think the fish is on the hook reel it in don't play with it. But she is leaving it to God.

In direct contrast to a humble and gentle Esther there is Haman.

Proud Haman

V9, 'And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.' Haman is a sad picture of our own hearts and the pathetic relationship we have to our idols. An idol can be anything that we treat as god; it is by definition that thing that controls your life, that thing you obey above all others, that which you sacrifice for, sing the praises of and talk about to others with enthusiasm, look to for your identity, your security, your identity, what you root your joy in, get angry and defensive when it is attacked, get depressed when you can't have it. Temperament and taste mean that we all have different idols that we prefer. Haman's idol was his pride, his sense of self-importance. Right out of the gate here we can see that Haman is joyful and glad of heart because Esther had singled him alone to be invited to a feast with the king. He thought of himself as better than all others and now the world around him is aligning itself to agree with him and he is in his happy place. You know you have an idol when everything in the world seems right, not because you are

saved, going to heaven, God is on the throne, but when this thing that is your idol is exalted to the highest place. But as with all idols they are easily rocked on their thrones and we see that Haman quickly loses his joy because his idol is not worshipped by others. Mordecai does not rise in respect; nor does he tremble at the power that he can wield. Nothing will upset a megalomaniac like ignoring them and pretending they don't exist.

V10-13, we see Haman try and comfort himself but it does not work, 'Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. ¹¹ And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. ¹² Then Haman said, "Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. ¹³ Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." Haman tries to tend to his wounded pride with self-congratulation; flattery; a little VIP treatment; surrounding himself in an echo chamber of those who affirm his idol. But there is a fly in the ointment, everything is not perfect according to his whims. And we see the terrible foundation building our lives on an idol is, 'yet all of this is worth nothing to me' all because one person will not recognize his idol. We look at Haman and we want to mock him because his ego is so inflated and so fragile, but this is us. We make enemies of people who criticize our idol; go behind the backs of those we love most in this world to serve our idols in secret; we threaten suicide, or just stop being a social human being as soon as we don't get what we want; we raise our fists up to heaven and accuse God of being spiteful because we cannot have our idol.

Now at this point you would wish for someone to preach the gospel to him; to help him to see as someone has mentioned that he has been filling the God shaped gap in his heart with the wrong thing, and this anger is a symptom of something being wrong. You wish someone would talk about the problem of the human heart as we are enslaved to all sorts of false gods. You wish someone would tell him that Jesus Christ has come down to earth to deliver us from the bondage of idolatry and bring us back to the freedom and joy of knowing the true God. You wish someone would talk about how a life with a heart filled with God and His love can overlook any slight upon our reputation and return good for evil. Instead we read this, v14, 'Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.' The only thing that alleviated Haman's wounded pride was the thought that Mordecai would be hung and a 25 meter high gallows the next day. Perhaps the publicity and fear he could garner from hanging a man everyone knew had not bowed would make up for any injury so far. With his pride soothed Haman probably went to bed that night excited about the early morning meeting with the king to have Mordecai hung; followed by a feast only he and the king were invited to. This is literally the pride that comes before the fall.

From Esther we learn about humbling ourselves before God; about using means; and being gentle with people; from Haman we see ourselves in a mirror and see the terrible which our hungry hearts turn things into gods that will only kill and cannot satisfy us. But there is one last thought I would like to leave you with. I want you to think back to Esther entering the king's presence at the risk of her

life. Friends, as sinners we have no right to enter the courtroom of the King of the universe. If we had to walk into God's presence right now we would die. Just as the priests who offered strange fire in the OT died when they went into God's presence presumptuously, no sinner can enter God's presence. But where Esther's life hung in the balance according to the whim of an unpredictable man; God has made a way that any sinner can enter into His presence and be received. Jesus Christ died on the cross taking the payment and punishment for our sins. By paying for our sin debt and making salvation available to all who believe upon Him, we can be justified in the eyes of a holy God and be received into His presence and His family. If you have trusted in Christ you need never enter the presence of God with fear, but with boldness approach the throne of grace for mercy in your time of need.