

Sermon 9: Esther 7: 'Hoist With His Own Petard'

OUTLINE

Request
Response
Retribution

INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite cartoons growing up was The Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote. One commentator has seen a parallel between the way God's providence works in the book of Esther and the rules that Chuck Jones the artist who devised these animations set for himself. Here are a few examples. '1. The Road-Runner cannot harm the Coyote except by going "beep-beep!"

2. No outside force can harm the Coyote—only his own ineptitude or the failure of Acme products.

3. The Coyote could stop anytime—if he were not a fanatic. (Repeat: "A fanatic is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim." –George Santayana)

11. The Coyote is not allowed to catch or eat the Road-Runner.'

We can see the parallels. Esther only uses her words to overcome Haman, despite being powerless she topples the powerful. Esther and God's people like the Roadrunner are not allowed by God to be harmed. Haman like the Coyote is harmed by his own actions. And Haman like the Coyote is a fanatic who is driven on by his own desires to his own harm. But there are some differences as well.

'9. The Coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures.'

Haman is not only humiliated but dies as an act of judgement by God. At this point the child friendly nature of the parallel breaks down and we see the harsh realities of a sinner having to give an account to a holy God. The events of the book of Esther now come to a first climax where the problem of Haman and Mordecai is resolved with the deliverance of Mordecai through the destruction of Haman. This is a microcosm of the greater problem of the law that has made legal a genocidal free for all against the people of God a real threat. As we zoom in on the fall of Haman we will look at it under three headings, request, response, and retribution.

Request

V1-2, 'So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ² And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." V1 opens so matter of fact but we know all the emotion that must be beneath the surface. The king would be the least emotional, maybe only concerned about the regular matters of state, and the mystery of Esther's request. She had risked her life to get something from him; she was putting off coming out with it increasing his curiosity but also signaling it was not going to be a small request. Esther would have been very on edge. She has been fasting for three days; and then feasting for three days. All the while building up to putting her request to the king. She has been hiding her Jewishness from her husband for 5 years; this would have included hiding her religion and loyalty to a different God. She was going to be going against the highest official in the land under the king and making some sweeping accusations that would mean a major reshuffling of government

positions. She was going to ask for privileges for a defeated people, not even Persians. Her request would cause the economy to suffer, her request would mean the loss of $\frac{3}{4}$ of the annual amount usually taken in tax. Her request was going to make the King himself look bad because it was a bad law that ended up putting the life of his own favorite queen at risk. She could not know how it would go; the request seemed impossible; will he be angry; will he be willing to change his mind at the cost of his reputation? Her nerves would be shattered as she came to the feast that day. And then there is Haman. He has had an emotional 24 hours. He has gone from the highest place of being invited to Esther feast; to rage that he builds a gallows; to excitement as he tries to get Mordecai killed first thing; to utter humiliation as he has to fulfill his own wish list for the man he hates the most. He was just gotten home and having a good cry and complain to his family that had just spoken words of doom and gloom. and he is whipped off to another feast. And there he is trying to keep a straight face and not let anything show. This is the way it often is though. On the outside everyone seems ok, but in fact everyone has their sins, their trials, the emotional burdens that they are carrying. Each one of us is a hot mess dressed up as success, pretending everything is ok when we are all in desperate need of God.

V3, 'Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request.' Esther has a big request, she gets the king to offer three times before she finally begins. As she begins here in v3 we see her suing wisdom. The king literally asked, 'what is your wish?' and 'what is your request?' Esther staying within the bounds set by his own words asks for her life as her wish; and her people as her request. It should be noted that she drip feeds the details leading with the fact that her own life was in danger, and then only that her people are at risk. There is no mention of the Jews by name, or Haman yet just these broad brushstrokes.

She continues in v4, 'For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.' Once again Esther employs tact, firstly, she talks about being sold. But here is the rub who sold the Jews for a promise of silver? It was the king himself, but Esther does not come out swinging. Then she groups herself with her people 'I and my people' and this is good tact because to attack the queen is also to attack the king making it personal. Esther bravely associates with her people and throws her lot in with theirs and they are in a very precarious position. Thirdly, we see her using the very wording of the law that Haman orchestrated the fateful decree. The words, destroy, kill and annihilate and in that order are quoted here by Esther back to the King who approved them.

We need to stop and appreciate the wisdom and the courage that Esther is putting on display here. People's lives are hanging in the balance and she is applying herself to prayer, fasting, keeping her calm, employing wisdom to negotiate the landmine of her request and yes she is also bravely risking her life. It would not be an exaggeration for me to say that we ought to do the same when it comes to preaching the gospel. People are dying, they are at risk of eternal damnation, God saves using us as His instruments, but it will involve prayer, wisdom and a willingness to risk ourselves for others. We know that God is sovereign in saving people. He is the author of our salvation from eternity past in electing us to salvation. However God purposed to use means. The Holy

Spirit uses the truth, arguments, convicted emotions, human messengers, our good works, a life of integrity, a person who shows they care by risking their reputation to share the gospel. Esther was a sacred but ultimately willing instrument in God's hand, are we?

Response

V5, 'Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?" I think we can all agree that Ahasuerus is not the sharpest tool in the shed. Esther dropped hints about being sold, she quoted verbatim words that he approved, they are sitting in a room with a man who offered to pay money to the king to wipe out a people and he even gave him his signet ring to authorize the whole affair. Even so he has to ask who and where the culprit is.

V6, 'And Esther said, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.' Finally we come to the great reveal. We have commented on Esther's wisdom and how like the prophet Nathan in confronting David of his sins gets him to commit to a verdict and become emotionally involved in the case before revealing the culprit, Esther does the same here. He has been holding it in for days, she has been pretending politeness while eating with the enemy, and now she can point the finger and tell it like it is. She highlights his actions as against the king naming him a foe and an enemy. There may be political insinuations in this. And she reveals his character calling him wicked. For who but a wicked man would merely for his reputation's sake butcher a nation?

Imagine you are the king for a moment, how would you respond? It has become clear that a law you passed because you have been manipulated will now result in the death of the queen you went to a lot of trouble to find. V7a, 'And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden.' Some have thought that the king was so angry he had to go for a walk to calm himself down. This is probably not the case. It is most likely that he now sees the matter clearly and there does not seem to be a path for him that does not involve him in some sort of humiliation. If he lets the matter stand to save face he has Haman in his midst who has used and manipulated him even to the endangering of his wife's life. And if he deals with Haman it cannot be without looking like a fool for not picking up on the fact that Esther was a Jew and yet dooming her people.

But it just so happened that when the king returned he could deal with Haman without losing face, v7b-9, 'but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. ⁸ And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face.' For Haman things went from bad to worse. You can imagine him as Esther kept speaking. At first she mentioned her life, but as soon as she mentioned her people something must have clicked. The language of sold, the quoted language of destroy kill and annihilate. He knew what she was going to say before he said it, and his worst nightmare came true as he who desired to be the most esteemed in the king's eyes was now the most hated. The king was not a merciful man, his death was written all over his face. His only hope would be if Esther could put in a good

word for him. Throwing all etiquette out the window he falls before Esther begging for her help. It is at this point that the king returns.

The king needed a pretense to have Haman removed here it is. Haman violates the proper court protocol in regard to the King's concubines. Technically Haman should have left the room when the king left, but he did not. No man was to be within 7 steps of a king's concubine but Haman is practically lying on top of her. It is very unlikely that Haman is trying to rape Esther; nor is it likely that the king thinks Haman is trying to rape Esther; but the king sees an opportunity and takes it. Haman is taken into custody with the charge of attempted rape against Esther put to him, the only possible sentence in his case will be death.

Retribution

'Hoist with his own petard' is a well known saying. I always had a picture of a man getting a big wedgy until he was lifted off the ground. But the saying comes from Shakespeare's Hamlet and it actually means a bombmaker blown up by his own bomb. Another equivalent would be a poisoner dying by his own poison. Like Wile E. Coyote who is often caught in his own traps while trying to catch the Roadrunner, Haman is hung on his own gallows. V9-10, 'Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." ¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.' It just so happens that the Eunuch Harbona just happens to know of a gallows that Haman had built to kill Mordecai. He just happens to know that Mordecai is the one who saved the king in a past assassination attack. It does raise the question whether Harbona was the Eunuch who had to read the king a bedtime story when he could not sleep. Now it is likely that this large wooden structure is not a gallows like the traditional hangman would use, but more likely a wooden stake where a person would be impaled alive until they died. Haman is put to death and the king's wrath is propitiated.

Several things stand out for us. Firstly, we see here as in other parts of the bible deliverance through destruction or salvation through a judgement event. The same event that drowned the Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea was the same event that delivered Israel. The same Passover that resulted in the death of the first born was the same Passover that resulted in Egypt freeing Israel. This idea of deliverance through judgement is penultimately seen in the cross where the same act where our sins received a full punishment becomes the act that delivers us from sin. Secondly, we have a graphic moment in Haman's experience that prefigures a little bit of what judgement day is going to feel like. One day we are going to have to stand before God and give an account. And just as Haman's wicked deeds were laid bare, and the undeniable truth of his guilt and the irresistible end of judgement for his sins dawned increasingly upon him. He sought for mercy but it was too late. Any opportunity for turning back had already gone; his portion was now only inevitable judgement. If any of us die in our sins and have to face God without having turned from sin and to Christ, Haman is a warning of the judgement that will come upon every sinner. Haman appeared in a secure position, he appeared to be able to sin without consequence but his precarious position was revealed and in a moment he experienced a total reversal. Rev. 6:12-17, 'I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its

winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" the third thing we see here is that upon the death of the sinner the wrath of the king is satisfied. I deliberately used the word propitiation earlier to get you to think about Christ. We take great joy in the death of Haman, there is an instinctive agreement that this sinner deserves what he gets. But here is the rub. We are Haman, we are the ones who deserve to die, and we should agree as much with the verdict as we agree with it here. This is the wonder of the gospel, that Jesus the perfect Son of God took the place of Haman, took the place of shame and humiliation. If you replace Haman with Jesus you are not as happy anymore because suddenly we know that it should not be Him, it should be us. Rom. 3:23-26, 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' If you have believed in Christ the His blood has covered your sins and you will never have to have a Haman moment when we stand before God on judgement day.