

Esther 6: When God Turns the Tables

A Bible Study on the Providence of God

Study Bible Studies Not stated

Preamble

We now stand at a dramatic turning point in this story of Esther. Up to this point we have seen Haman rising in power and honour. He had the upper hand and felt assured of success in his efforts to destroy Mordecai and the Jews. Beginning with this very night, we will see how God's providence begins to turn everything upside down for Haman. His defeat was eventually so complete that, in a single day, he not only failed to achieve his desire to eliminate Mordecai, but he himself fell from the king's favour completely and was later hanged. It is quite interesting to note how the story is building to a climax within a single day, as two opposing forces, quite independent of each other, seek the king's favour to achieve totally opposite goals: Haman to slay Mordecai, and Esther to deliver Mordecai and the Jews of the kingdom.

What Is Going On With the Main Players?

The profound interplay of God's dominion and human will, which is what this book is all about, becomes more explicit in this chapter. Before we proceed with the chapter, let us take a quick look at what state the four main characters are in at this juncture.

King Xerxes seems to be showing rather more sober conduct than we saw in the previous chapters. We saw him then as a very impulsive person, and probably a chronic drinker incapable of taking decisions on his own. He seems to have sobered up, and is now very curious to know what request his beautiful queen is going to put forward. Esther had made sure that he was placed under great mental tension, and the wait for the second banquet, twenty-four hours away, had become unbearable to him.

Then we see Esther as a happy person, for more than one reason. She had escaped sure death for appearing before the king uninvited. And that very evening, at the sixth banquet, she had gained the upper hand over the king and got him virtually to beg to know what she wanted. He was prepared to give her half his kingdom, should she ask for it. In spite of this happy situation, we have no evidence that this success had gone to her head. She knew that there was going to be another day and another banquet, and was prepared to wait it out, probably continuing in prayer.

Haman craved something that even his money could not buy: respect. He could buy the trappings of success and power, but his lust for popularity had become an obsession with him. He was happy for all that he possessed, and exhibited this happiness when he gathered his friends and his wife the previous night to boast about his great possessions, position and power. He was happy that the queen had invited him along with the king to her banquet. In the midst of all this, he was also indignant about Mordecai's total disrespect for him. He was all set to hang Mordecai, but was also very tense, not being sure whether the king would grant his permission to do so. He could not have been thinking of God at any point during these events.

When we look at Mordecai, we see a cool customer. He stayed completely focused on his goal. He was humble in his approach but sure of success, primarily because he had complete faith in God and also because his cause was just. We see in him a spiritually mature conduct, which becomes all the more prominent later in this chapter.

The Will of the People

We know that God works through three methods to accomplish what He wants: the natural order, miracles and providence. We discussed this aspect when we studied chapter four. Now let us consider what people do when they find themselves in situations such as those our main characters are facing at this stage.

There is the righteous way of facing the situation: we plan, pray or trust. In other words, we make plans within the framework of the order and dependability of God's creation; or we ask God to intervene in our affairs, conceding that our knowledge and perspective are limited; or we place our trust in God, knowing that He is in control even when circumstances seem to indicate otherwise. Esther's and Mordecai's conduct amply demonstrate such an approach.

In contrast, we make mistakes by disobeying, demanding and despairing. We violate the natural order of creation and disobey God's will, not even stopping to discover what His will for us is. We also assume that we fully understand what is needed, and expect God to agree with our plans and answer our prayers in our own way; or we simply resign ourselves to the thinking that God does not answer prayer, nor will He respond to our needs, and continue to live a miserable life.

The choice is ours as to which of these two paths we wish to follow. In our present context, we will see how Esther and Mordecai benefited by choosing the right path of planning, praying and trusting, as opposed to Haman, who chose to disobey, demand and despair.

Let us now proceed with the chapter.

Mordecai's Good Deed

On the very night between Esther's two banquets — on the eve of her request to save the Jews, and on the eve of Haman's request to hang Mordecai — an event occurred that brought Mordecai, and with him the Jews, into the king's favour. The king was unable to sleep that night, and so he called for the chronicles of his reign to be brought and read to him. One event in the chronicles that drew the king's attention was the record of Mordecai saving his life by informing him of the conspiracy of two of his doorkeepers to assassinate him. No reason is given as to why the king could not sleep, but surely God's providence was behind it.

He must have retired after a great feast of wine, yet he could not sleep. There is no evidence anywhere in the book that he suffered from insomnia. He could have asked his attendants to tell him a story, or to sing to him. He could have asked for the company of one of the beauties of his harem. The fact that he did none of these things, and instead had the chronicles read to him, could not have been mere coincidence. Rather, it shows us God at work.

We see here how God uses such small things to bring about great purposes. Again, no miracle was worked, no impressive ritual performed, and yet God's providence worked one of the greatest deliverances in history — and what God used to do it was the sleeplessness of a king.

The importance of this information coming to the king's attention at this particular time cannot be overstated. By this means God brought Mordecai into the king's favour at the very moment he needed it. We have seen how Haman had argued for the destruction of the Jews on the grounds that they were unprofitable to the king. And here we see God showing the king conclusive proof that one Jew had been incredibly profitable to him, having in fact saved his life. Again, this information could not have come before the king at a more opportune moment, for, unknown to him, both Haman and Esther were about to bring great requests before him, both concerning this very same Mordecai with whom the king was so well pleased.

The King Resolves to Honour Mordecai

When the king realised that nothing had been done to honour Mordecai at the time he saved his life, he began asking around for ways to honour him.

Several lessons can be learned here. First, it was only right for the king to reward Mordecai. Those in authority ought to reward faithful service, not merely punish disobedience.

Second, we see Mordecai's attitude towards the reward. He seemingly

bore no bitterness towards the king for not having rewarded him earlier. He did not use this information himself, or through Esther, to influence the king to change his edict against the Jews. At the same time, when he was eventually rewarded, there is no evidence that he became proud or arrogant, as Haman would have done. He behaved as though he had simply done the obvious thing because it was right to do so, and not because he sought honour from men. Unlike Haman, who later suggested lavish honours when he believed he himself would receive them, Mordecai had apparently made no request for reward whatsoever. And when none came, he made no complaint to the king either.

Eventually he did receive the greatest reward he could have hoped for. When that reward came, it came at a time that made it far more valuable to Mordecai than any reward given earlier could have been.

In our own lives we often want immediate benefit from our conduct, emphasising material reward. Christians may not receive their reward immediately, so that it may seem, as with Mordecai, that the righteous receive evil in return for good. But the reward will surely come, and when it comes it will be far superior to, and beyond, all our expectations.

The King Seeks Advice

The king was still trying to think of a fitting way to reward Mordecai, so he asked who was standing in the court, wondering who might be present with whom he could discuss the matter and gather some ideas. Paradoxically, it was by now day, and Haman had come to the palace early to seek the king's permission to hang Mordecai. He was brought before the king. The irony here is remarkable: the king wanted to ask Haman's advice about how to honour Mordecai, at the very moment Haman was preparing to ask the king's permission to hang him. Unknown to either party, God's intervention was already deciding the fate of them all.

The King Inquires of Haman

The king put to Haman the question of what should be done to honour the man he desired to honour. The king did not name whom he meant, but Haman, in his boundless vanity, assumed that the king must surely be speaking of himself, and quickly conceived the greatest honour he himself would wish to receive. Again we see the astonishing vanity of this man. He did not even ask the king who was being discussed, but simply assumed, without evidence, that it had to be himself. In his pride, he could not imagine that anyone else might deserve to be honoured.

Convinced that it was he of whom the king spoke, he presumptuously

proposed the greatest honour he could think of. He was a glutton for honour. He had only just spent an evening boasting to his family and friends of his own greatness, as we saw in the previous chapter. Now note the irony: Haman sought death for Mordecai and honour for himself, yet on this very day he would carry out the reward for Mordecai — the very honour he had sought and devised for himself. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, instead of the honour he coveted, he would receive a sentence of death.

Haman's Advice to the King

Haman suggested that the man be clothed in royal garments that the king himself had worn, and be set upon a horse that the king himself had ridden, with a royal crown placed upon its head. Then one of the king's most noble princes should be appointed to lead the horse and its rider through the city square, proclaiming that this was how the king honoured the man who had pleased him. The man would, in effect, be honoured as "king for a day".

The King Honours Mordecai

The king was so pleased with the suggestion that he commanded it to be carried out immediately, in every detail, with no exceptions. To his horror, Haman himself was ordered to carry out the honouring of Mordecai the Jew. Imagine the shame and shock Haman felt on hearing this command. The honour was going to the very man he considered his greatest enemy — and, to make matters worse, the whole scheme had been his own invention.

We also see that this decree not only honoured Mordecai for his righteous conduct — though the king never intended it so — but simultaneously punished Haman for his vanity. Had Haman not been so arrogant in the first place, he would not have been troubled by Mordecai's conduct. Yet he was mortally grieved, because it was his vanity and pride that had been wounded.

Haman Returns Home Mourning

Having been so honoured, Mordecai returned to his former place at the king's gate, as humble as ever. Nothing is said of any pride on his part as a result of the honour he had received. Haman, by contrast, would have let such an honour go entirely to his head; yet when he himself felt slighted, he became unduly upset. After honouring Mordecai, Haman went home in mourning, covering his head in shame. But why? No one had wronged him at all — only his pride had been wounded. When he was honoured, he gloated; when others were honoured, he sulked and threw a tantrum. Mordecai, by contrast, showed no sign of gloating over Haman or boasting to his friends; instead, he simply returned to

what he had been doing before.

Haman Tells His Wife and Friends

Haman once again gathered his wife and friends together and told them of the latest events, as he had done the day before. But his story the previous day had been one of joy and glory, save for Mordecai's refusal to bow to him, whereas on this day he sulked and sought comfort in his shame.

Remarkably, his wife and friends, who had so praised him only the day before, now predicted his downfall. They told him that, if Mordecai was of Jewish descent and had begun to prevail, then there was no way Haman could prevail against him, and that he would surely fall before him. Note the fickleness of such friends, especially those who follow a man for the sake of his fame, wealth and glory. They are fair-weather friends, as quick to desert a man in his fall as they were to flock to him in his glory.

It is not entirely clear how they could be so certain that Mordecai would prevail over Haman. They said he would prevail because he was a Jew, yet they had already known Mordecai was a Jew — that, after all, was the very reason Haman sought to kill him. So why conclude this now? Perhaps they saw the significance of the turn of events: Haman had intended to kill Mordecai, but not only had he failed in that purpose, he had actually ended up honouring him. Perhaps his friends recognised this as an omen of things to come, though they would not have understood it as God's providence. Perhaps they also recalled the history of Israel's past victories over its enemies. They were rather like fans who cheer a team when victory seems assured, but turn away in disgust the moment it begins to lose.

The Call to Esther's Second Banquet

Now, as the irony multiplies, even as his friends were making their predictions of Haman's downfall, the call came from the king for Haman to join him at Esther's second banquet — the seventh banquet, to be precise. Haman was evidently feeling far from happy, nothing like as pleased as he had felt the previous day when he received the invitation to the queen's banquet. But he remained entirely unaware of what still lay ahead of him there.

Application

We shall see the outcome of that banquet next week, but let us consider what we may take home from today's chapter.

We hate others for practically no reason, or for the most trivial of reasons. Such hatred leads us directly towards our own doom.

We must understand that God has an astonishing record of making evil plans backfire upon the planners.

Pride and self-importance are not right in the eyes of God; rather, He wants us to practise humility.

An insatiable thirst for power and prestige is self-destructive.

Let us reflect on ourselves, and discover how much of Haman there is in each one of us, and quickly correct ourselves, humbling ourselves before our Lord.

Amen.