ESTHER’S PETITION

Esther 5:1-7:10 Key Verse: 7:3

“Then Queen Esther answered, ‘If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request.’”

Everybody likes to hear about times when, after a great struggle, good guys get rewarded and the bad guys get what’s coming to them. That’s probably the basis of the plot of most movies. Why do we like it so much? I believe it’s because of the sense of justice that God planted in each one of us. But when we look around at the real world, it seems like things turn out that way all too rarely. Where is the God of justice and reward in all that we see happening around us? In fact, he is there, but we need spiritual eyes to see the working of God’s justice and mercy behind the scenes.

Today’s passage is the turning point of the book of Esther, in which we do get to enjoy seeing the unfolding of God’s perfect justice. As we meditate on these events, let’s pray to grow in trusting that God is continuing to work in this way even today. And if we grow in faith like Esther’s, we will not only see God’s justice but be a part of its outworking by acts of faith.

1. Esther takes action (5:1-8)

It’s important to remember how the events in today’s passage depend on what happened in last week’s passage. We know that the wicked Haman, who had been elevated by the King Xerxes to a position of great influence, had used that influence to have a decree issued for the annihilation of all the Jewish people throughout all the Persian Empire. He did this just because one Jewish man, Mordecai, refused to bow down to him and pay him honor.

When Mordecai heard about the decree, he mourned and prayed, and then he urged his cousin Esther, who was now Queen Esther, to petition Xerxes for the lives of their people. But it was not a small matter for her to do this. The king had a rule that anyone who entered his court without being summoned would be put to death, unless the king made an exception by extending his scepter to that person. So, Esther asked for all the Jews in the Citadel of Susa to fast and pray with her for three days, saying that after that, she would go in to see the king, even if it cost her life. This is Esther’s great decision of faith, and it is the source of everything good that happens in today’s passage.

Chapter 5 verse 1 begins, “On the third day,” meaning after those three days of prayer and fasting by all God’s people. “On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace…” What great faith this small act took! She gained the strength to do this through the prayer support of all God’s people. I’m sure she felt terrified, but when the time came she did it. I believe Esther, standing there in her royal robes, looked more royal than she ever had before, even more than after her twelve months of beauty treatments. It makes me think of Jesus. After Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane until his sweat was dripping down like blood, he gained such spiritual authority to face his arrestors they were awestruck in his presence.

Verse 2 says, “When [Xerxes] saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand.” As we have seen, King Xerxes was not really a good man. He was very petty, and he could easily be influenced by Haman to take part in his evil plan. Actually, Xerxes, even though he is the emperor, is not even the main actor in this story—God is. From the eyes of faith, Xerxes is just another instrument in God’s hands. Still, imagine how relieved Esther was that the king was pleased and so she was not killed! More than that, however, she could see the king’s pleasure with her as a sign of God’s acceptance and reward of her faith.

In verse 3, the king asked, “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.” I’m sure there was some element of exaggeration in the promise to give up to half the kingdom. Nonetheless, it was meant to convey that the person was the recipient of the unconditional favor of the king and all the blessings of his kingly liberality.

Surely Esther could now be confident that Xerxes would stop Haman’s plan if she asked him to. But Esther did not bring up the issue right away. What did she request? Look at verse 4. “‘If it pleases the king,’ replied Esther, ‘let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him.’” Her request was to come to dinner! That’s a request that everyone likes to grant, assuming the company is good. Probably Xerxes was immediately relieved that Esther’s request was not too serious and he became even happier with her. He said, “Bring Haman at once so that we may do what Esther asks.” (5)

Why did Esther do this? In verse 6 we see that during the banquet, as they were drinking wine, Xerxes asked what Esther really wanted, promising again to give her up to half the kingdom. But Esther again puts him off, saying, “My petition and my request is this:If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king’s question.” (7-8) Her second request is also to come to dinner, although she does promise that at the second night of the banquet she will state her true request.

What do you think about Esther’s approach here? Someone might think that Esther was still feeling timid about asking the king to revoke his decree, and so she was delaying. Maybe she thought that she first needed to do everything she could to make the king pleased with her so he would be more likely to hear her request sympathetically. It could be a smart approach. Or maybe Esther was seeking to understand more about Haman and his relationship with the king, so that she could find the best way to present her request.

There may be an element of truth in *all* these reasons. But regardless, Esther is working together with God to do God’s good will, and God is using her greatly. We have seen that Esther has a cautious and circumspect personality. Nonetheless, she made a great decision of faith and now she is acting on that decision, using the wisdom that God gave her. This teaches that faith and using wise discretion don’t have to be opposed to each other. Even Jesus said, “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Mt 10:16)

It also teaches that God will put people in a place where he can use the gifts he gave them. God can use all different kinds of people. It doesn’t mean that we will always get to do things according to our own preference; I’m sure Esther would have preferred to not have to confront King Xerxes at all. But when we decide to do the work of faith where we are, we should not be ashamed to be guided by the wisdom God gave us, even though it’s different from the way others may think. Didn’t God know what Esther was like and put her in the right place for his purpose? It’s very assuring to realize that if God wants to use us, he will use us as us, not us pretending to be someone else! Let’s pray to work out our faith with confidence that God will use us as he made us.

1. Haman prepares his own downfall (5:9-14)

In this part we get a closer look into the life of Haman, the author of the plan to eradicate all the Jews in the Persian Empire. As he went out from the first night’s banquet with Esther and King Xerxes, verse 9 says he was “happy and in high spirits.” As far as Haman knew, being invited to the royal banquet with the queen was another feather in his cap, another piece of evidence that he was highly esteemed by everyone in the kingdom.

Haman’s good mood did not last long, however. As he came out of the palace and past the gate on his way home, who did he see but Mordecai the Jew in his usual spot. Once again, Mordecai refused to rise in Haman’s presence or show any reverence at all. The rest of his walk or ride home, Haman was seething with anger. Even the fact that he had masterminded the death of all Jews, Mordecai included, just a few months from now, did not give him any comfort in this moment.

Haman himself grasped the paradox in this, and when he got home he gathered his friends and family around him to seek their advice. He started by boasting to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. “And that’s not all,” Haman added. “I’m the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.” (11-13) It reminds me of the words of the famous Rolling Stones song, “I can’t get no-ooo…sat-is-fac-tion…”

Why couldn’t Haman get no satisfaction, even with all he had? If Haman had had anyone among his family or friends who studied the Bible, they could have explained to him that it is the very nature of sinful desires to never be satisfied. A person who is greedy for money can never have enough, even if they become a billionaire. People who are addicted to drugs or alcohol don’t get real satisfaction from those things, it just produces a stronger and stronger desire for another hit. And a person who lusts after fame and people’s approval can never be happy if even one insignificant person fails to praise them.

Unfortunately, none of Haman’s friends had this kind of understanding; all of the people Haman had surrounded himself with were just as wicked as he was. The advice Haman heard from his wife Zeresh and his friends was, “Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself.” Our Bible translations differ on whether the instrument was a pole for impaling someone on or gallows for hanging someone on. Either way, the effect is the same. Haman’s friends encouraged him to use his influence with the king to murder Mordecai, a man who had not done anything to him except refusing to bow down. By preparing the murder instrument in advance, he could even feel better right away, knowing the deed would soon be done.

What wicked advice! We can say his friends were enablers of his wickedness. As for their perspective, they wouldn’t be the ones responsible for Mordecai’s death, so why shouldn’t they encourage Haman to do it if it makes him feel better? That’s how evil comes to fruition among sinners.

The power and influence that Haman as undeservingly received have enabled him to do great wickedness and injustice. However, evil cannot prevail permanently. The one who plots evil against the innocent is actually digging his own grave, as we will see.

1. Mordecai is honored (6:1-14)

Missionary Gideon’s message two weeks ago pointed out that the name of God is never mentioned explicitly in the book of Esther, but still we can see God’s hand moving behind the scenes in all things. At the beginning of Chapter 6, we see one small event without any direct human cause. It says that that night, the night between the two banquets, “the king could not sleep.” This small episode of insomnia turned out to be another vital link in the chain of events leading to God’s deliverance for his people. What did Xerxes do when he could not sleep? He ordered someone to bring in the book of the chronicles, the record of the events of his reign, and read it to him. Reading at nighttime is still a common thing for many people. I still like bedtime stories. Maybe Xerxes thought that he would be comforted by hearing about all the great things he had done, and so he could stop worrying and fall asleep.

So, what page of the chronicles did Xerxes’ servant open to, seemingly at random? It was the record of how Mordecai had exposed the plot of Bigthana and Teresh to assassinate the king. We read about that in Chapter 2. At the time, the king did not give any recognition to Mordecai for this. But now, hearing about it again, Xerxes decided to rectify his oversight, and he started looking for ideas about how he could honor Mordecai appropriately. Xerxes always depended on his advisors, so he asked if any of his nobles were out in the court. I guess it was morning by now. Who was in the court? It was Haman, of course! He had come to ask the king to kill Mordecai, the same Mordecai that Xerxes was seeking to reward!

However, Haman could not ask the king for anything until he did what the king had summoned him for. King Xerxes asked Haman, “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?” Haman, self-centered as he was, assumed that the king was talking about him, assumed that Xerxes was asking him in a sly way what Haman himself would like, kind of like how parents try to get their children to say what they want for Christmas without asking directly. So Haman described exactly what he would like to have done for himself. He said, “For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king’s most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’” (6:7-9)

Don’t you think this suggestion reveals a lot about Haman? He wants a parade for himself, with everyone in the town being told how great he is. His fame-seeking and praise-seeking are beyond all bounds. This suggestion might even seem a little bit treasonous, giving someone a level of honor that should probably be reserved only for the king. However, Xerxes thought it was an excellent idea, and since Haman was one of his most noble princes, he said, “Go at once. Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended.” (6:10)

I can almost hear the sound of Haman’s jaw hitting the floor when he heard this. But there is no way to disobey the king’s command and live, so Haman found himself in the very ironical position of having to give Mordecai the same honor and recognition that Mordecai would not give to him, and even more. “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!”

I think this can teach us something about the nature of honor—true honor and false honor. We can all agree to be honored and praised is an appropriate reward for good deeds. But in this world, it does not always seem to come to those who really deserve it. We can be confident, however, that undeserved honor is not true honor and it never rests permanently on someone who doesn’t deserve it. Haman had schemed and flattered to obtain honor from king Xerxes, but he ended up having to give it to Mordecai, who legitimately did something good for the king. Mordecai did not need to fight for it. I’m not saying that this parade was Mordecai’s true honor from God. We know that the faithful often have to wait even longer than Mordecai did for their reward, even beyond this life. We know we should seek honor from God, not from people. But this event is an illustration of God’s fairness that we can trust in. God finally give honor where it is due.

After Mordecai’s parade, Haman ran home, it says, with his head covered in grief. Not only was he humiliated by having to praise Mordecai, he now could not do anything against him, since Mordecai was known and honored by the king. When Haman told this to his wife and friends, their tune changed drastically. Whereas the night before, they had told him to kill Mordecai and take it easy, now they said, “Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!” Too bad they couldn’t warn him about that the night before! People knew that the Jews had a special place in history and that their God’s protection was powerful over them. This is stated very eloquently in Isaiah 54:17: “‘no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and this is their vindication from me,’ declares the Lord.” Even pagans were able to read the signs written over Haman’s life. Here, they are acting as God’s messengers to Haman with the message of judgment. After hearing this, Haman did not have any time to try to figure out another plan. It was time to go to the second night of Esther’s banquet.

1. Esther’s petition (7:1-10)

At the banquet, the king and Haman are again drinking wine together, and again King Xerxes asks, “Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.” Now it’s time for Esther to finish her mission. What does she say? Look at Chapter 7 verses 3 and 4. “Then Queen Esther answered, ‘If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.’”

See how humbly Esther phrases her request. She does not rebuke King Xerxes for being so stupid to sign off on Haman’s plot. She does not demand anything based on her position as the queen. She is not asking something great for herself, only begging for her life and the lives of her people to be spared. Even though it was not a request directly to God, Esther’s petition can be taken as a model of Christian prayer, even the prayer of a sinner for mercy.

How did Xerxes react? In verse 5 King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?” Xerxes is immediately and totally on Esther’s side, ready to punish anyone who would dare to hurt her or her people. Think about why this is so: it’s because it’s not just Esther’s words but her character that testified to the king, as it had been doing from the first time she came into the palace. Esther won the King’s heart with her modest and humble attitude. From this we learn that humility is not weak; humility has great power. An army of a million people could not change King Xerxes’ mind; but quiet Esther could. And if even a senseless pagan king can be moved by such a petition, what does this say about how the loving God will answer our humble prayers?

By the way, who is the man who has dared to do such a thing? Now Esther answers clearly. “An adversary and an enemy! This vile Haman!” Esther now has clear spiritual vision to see Haman for what he is. He is the adversary of God’s people, the image of Satan. At this point, the pieces of Haman’s condemnation all click into place. Xerxes is so angry that he needs to go outside for some fresh air to figure out what to do. Haman is terrified, naturally, and tries to beg Queen Esther to spare his life. When Xerxes comes back in, he misinterprets Haman’s movements toward the queen and gets even angrier. There is now nothing left of the esteem that the king once held for Haman. The guards come and cover Haman’s face in preparation for his execution. One of the King’s eunuchs who was present, Harbona, helpfully volunteers that Haman had built a pole for impaling Mordecai, who had spoken up to help the king. So, there was only one thing do: impale Haman on his own pole.

Clearly, this illustrates the working of divine justice. The principle of God’s justice is that as one sows, so shall he reap. Jesus warned Peter, “all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Mt 26:52) We could also say that those who build the pole will be impaled on the pole. The weapon formed by Haman against the innocent was used against himself. We also learn that vengeance belongs to the Lord. The Lord repays, so we don’t have to worry about it; that’s not our job. Of course, we don’t always see such clear-cut justice in the world, but we can have faith in God’s final outworking of all things. We also learned from this passage then when it is God’s time to right a wrong, people’s fortunes can be changed so quickly. The proud can fall and the humble can be raised up in an instant.

Today we thought about Esther’s character, and how because of her discretion she could be used by God to petition a powerful emperor. But it was no one-lady show; she gained such courage through the prayer support of all God’s people. We also learned that God holds the reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked in his hand, for his right time. Some people don’t see the reward of their faith during their life on this earth. But it’s our joy to be part of a story that is bigger than ourselves and our earthly concerns, a story just as exciting as the book of Esther. In this spiritual battle, we should not underestimate the power of one humble prayer. In the end, no weapon forged against God’s children can prevail. May God bless you with this confidence and with prayerful faith.