

### ESTHER

#### Week 7, Chapters 5 and 6

We are in Esther chapter 5 and as we began to examine it last week we found Esther in the inner courtyard of the palace, going there unannounced and uninvited. Esther has forced this confrontation with the king at the urging of her step father Mordechai in hopes of saving her Jewish people from annihilation; and according to Persian Law a decision must be made on the spot by the king whether to offer her clemency for appearing without being summoned, or to dismiss her with the only penalty possible for her trespass being death.

Last week we read this chapter in only its Hebrew version. This week let's read it with the Greek additions included. I am reading from the Jerusalem Bible (an excellent resource, by the way, for serious Bible students).

#### READ ESTHER CHAPTER 5 FROM THE JERUSALEM BIBLE

The Greek additions are interspersed between verses 1 and 4 and again the purpose is to introduce the name of God into the book of Esther (because it is otherwise missing), and it is also to introduce some "spin" that makes Esther a reluctant, frail, terrorized Jewish woman who stands before a cold, menacing, egocentric gentile king, who is also her husband. The Greek addition says: "***She leaned on her maid's arm as though languidly, but in fact because her body was too weak to support her.....her heart shrank with fear.***" And as she approaches her husband we read: "***She grew faint and the color drained from her face and she leaned her head against the maid who accompanied her***". Next concerning King Xerxes the Greek says: "***his face afire with majesty looked on her blazing with anger***"; however God intervened and "***God changed the king's heart***" by giving him a milder spirit.

I cannot accept these additions. No where in Hebrew version of Esther have we seen the king as anything but kind to Esther when she is in his presence. No where do we find a cowering Jewish girl who was kidnapped and robbed of her freedom, placed kicking and screaming into the royal harem, forced to become the wife of the most powerful ruler on earth and subsequently becoming the Queen of the world, and now she turns to jelly at the mere thought of addressing her husband. But it does make for good theatre, and it does paint this gentile king as a barbarian and a brute. The Hebrew version shows us a courageous, humble, committed Esther who, after 3 days of fasting and prayer, knows that the Lord is with her and she is ready to accept whatever her fate. The Greek however has a whimpering, weak, unsure female that well fits the Greek stereotype for women in general. The Hebrew version shows a king who is glad his beautiful wife has come to him, treats her in a respectful manner, even though she broke protocol and was not formally invited, and is so taken by her courage and

stateliness to come that he sees it as a compliment to him and so responds with affection and generosity towards her. The Greek however makes him a typical ill tempered and impatient potentate who initially rails at this woman for showing up and upsetting his day, and would have her head removed if it weren't for God miraculously and instantaneously changing the king's mind.

Some of these additions don't even make sense. Mere handmaidens, lowly servants, accompany Esther into the inner court of the palace where none but the highest authorities and wealthiest of the Empire may appear? And only then if invited? Goodness, in the next chapter we find Haman, 2<sup>nd</sup> in command over the Persian Empire, pacing around in the OUTER courtyard of the palace hoping that the king will allow him in.

The king is open to hearing why Esther has come, and assumes that she has a request. And her request (for the moment) is only that the king and his 2<sup>nd</sup> in command, Haman, come to a private banquet that she has prepared. He of course has no idea what the issue behind all of this might be, but Esther is most wise in arranging a private audience. After all the matter is delicate and nothing that the palace guards and the king's advisors need to hear about.

Verse 5 has the king quickly accepting (he's proven to be an impulsive man), and telling one of his servants to go find Haman and to bring him immediately so that the two of them can attend Esther's banquet. Or, as I choose to characterize it, we have a king who is thankful to have an excuse to get away from the boring and tedious affairs of state, dealing with the self-serving agendas of the endless line of aristocrats who seek his favor, and instead just go hang out with his lovely wife for a few hours and have a nice quiet and pleasant meal and some wine.

And as verse 6 says: "at the banquet of wine", the king again asked Esther what she was seeking. This banquet of wine probably doesn't mean that the only thing served at Esther's banquet was wine, but rather that this was the pre-meal time when wine was customarily served. And let's face it: Esther no doubt wanted the king to be in a relaxed and happy mood and what better means to achieve that than a few glasses of wine to start things off?

The king repeats his offer of willingness to grant whatever her request, no matter how large ("up to half of his kingdom" being an expression, not an actual offer of co-regency). But Esther is coy; she doesn't want to hurry matters and so suggests yet another get together. The subtle message she hopes her husband perceives is that her time with him is more important to her than the issue at hand. No doubt the objective is to disarm the king and make him even more amenable to considering her request. But she also carefully again includes the unsuspecting Haman, who will let down his guard thinking how wonderful it is that the Queen sees the king and Haman as an inseparable team. After all, we've seen that Haman craves, demands, the respect and adulation of everyone and so Esther is intentionally feeding that craving.

A lot is happening very quickly. After 3 days of fasting, the very next day Esther approaches the king, and on that same day he comes to Esther's banquet. The day after that there will be another banquet; so while the first chapters of Esther take place over months and years, we're dealing with hours now.

On the day of the 1<sup>st</sup> banquet, Haman leaves feeling on top of the world. The honors he is receiving he feels he deserves but nonetheless he is giddy over having achieved so much of his hopes and dreams of power and position to go along with his vast wealth. But his giddiness is short lived thanks to that stubborn old man, Mordechai the Jew. As Haman leaves the company of the king and queen he walks by the King's Gate on his way home and there sits Mordechai. After the 3 days of fasting Mordechai has exchanged his sackcloth for regular attire and is back on duty at his assigned place of operation: the King's Gate. The key word is sitting because as Haman approaches Mordechai remains seated. The words of verse 9 that Mordechai neither rose nor moved towards Haman mean that Mordechai simply ignored Haman; he never even acknowledged his presence. Let us remember that it was protocol and custom for everyone in the empire to respectfully acknowledge highest government authority and especially so the man who was 2<sup>nd</sup> only to the king. Haman's mood was destroyed. He was livid and no doubt humiliated because the King's Gate was a busy place and others in the regime would have noticed the blatant disrespect shown to Haman by Mordechai. We must understand; this act was worse than an insult. In the Middle East, life is controlled by the social dynamic of shame and honor (and still is to this day). Haman was shamed; and there are only 2 solutions to erasing the shame: the offender has to profusely and publically apologize, or the offender must be killed by the person (or family of the person) who has been shamed. For a Middle Easterner it is not possible to live without honor and no price is too great to keep it or to regain it. This cultural principle will play a central role in what happens next.

But, Haman shows restraint and doesn't immediately react; instead he goes home and calls for his wife and family friends (his advisors, really) to come to him. Haman began by puffing himself back up by bragging about his wealth, and having 10 sons (having many sons was a sign of favor by the gods), and how he was hobnobbing with the king, and reveling in how much power he now held in his hands (after all he had arranged to have an entire race of people destroyed merely because he didn't like ONE of them). And yet with all this money and all this power he was frustrated and just couldn't be happy because this darned Jew, Mordechai, wouldn't give in to him and bow down and show him the honor that he and his position of preeminence demand. In verse 13 we overhear Haman, after his boast, saying to his wife, family and advisors: ***"Yet NONE of this does me any good at all as long I keep seeing Mordechai the Jew remaining seated at the King's Gate"***.

I find this so interesting and as perhaps the creation of a pattern that emerges from here forward in the Bible and in human history regarding the relationship between gentile nations and Jews. It is fascinating that modern oil rich Arab nations as well as the poorer ones, and every kind in between, are obsessed with Jews and Israel. They simply cannot be happy or content as long as a single Jew remains on this planet, let alone can they accept the notion of Jews having their own tiny nation near to them. According to the official population statistics of each of the 21 Arab or Arabic speaking nations of the Middle East, their combined populations in 2014 are right at 400 million people. But they just can't live with, and say they feel threatened by, Israel and its Jewish population of less than 7 million (an almost 60 to 1 ratio).

The UN says that Israel occupies 7/10<sup>ths</sup> of 1% of the land mass of the Middle East. But that insignificant piece of land is just too much for them, according to the Arab League. It's not fair, they say; Arabs occupying 99.3% of all the land in the Middle East is not sufficient and the

remaining .7% is the bane of their existence. They are willing to lose countless of their soldiers and their children to endless wars, spend enormous sums of their government budgets on military capabilities, and to make the Jews and Israel a central and hateful topic of their children's education indefinitely until Israel capitulates.

Europe, which is historically anti-Semitic, is openly and unapologetically sympathetic towards the Arab position, and the present USA administration is beginning to lose its moral high ground and has a new and perceptible tilt towards the Arab viewpoint that the presence of a defensible Jewish nation in the Middle East is an unwarranted antagonism towards the Arabs. Why? There is no logical or rational explanation for it, anymore than why Haman couldn't take it in stride that but a single Jewish person in the entire city of Susa who showed him disrespect controlled his mood and his countenance. Mordechai's stiff-necked attitude of hostility towards Haman overrode the joy of Haman's vast wealth, his blessing of 10 sons and a loyal wife, and now a position of power, privilege and prestige surpassed only by the king. And even more radically irrational, Haman's conclusion was that his only solution to the irritation was that the Jewish people as a race must be exterminated; then he could finally be happy.

As we have learned, this madness is actually a spiritual issue and not a political matter; good versus evil; God versus Satan because Haman, and today the Arab world in general (although not every last Arab), carries hidden within their souls the spirit of Amalek. And sadly this same spirit has been dominant in Europe for centuries, and is now surfacing in those who run our American government at the highest levels. And this is why the story of Esther is contemporary and relevant to Christians as well as Jews; and it is why we need to pay attention and pay heed and to pray earnestly for Israel and the Jewish people to recognize their Messiah, Yeshua. Because for them, in this present world, there is no other deliverance possible. It was the same for the Jews of Persia. They had no hope, no means to save themselves as the enemy was too determined, too numerous, too powerful, having every advantage. God was their only hope then, and He is their only hope now.

Zeresh, Haman's wife, and his bevy of friends and counselors advised that Haman build a wooden structure and thereupon execute Mordechai. Let me point out that while most Bibles including the CJB say that the structure was a gallows that is not the case. The Hebrew word is **ets**, and it doesn't mean gallows; it means tree or pole, or can be stretched to mean most any kind of wooden structure. Hanging by the neck until dead was not a means of execution in that era. Rather the "hanging" meant to take the already dead corpse and to impale it, hang it like a side of beef on a meat hook, on that wooden tree or pole. The purpose was to warn, desecrate and humiliate.

Now the one problem with this 14<sup>th</sup> verse is the suggestion that the wooden pole be constructed 50 cubits high; this is at least 75 feet or the height of a 7 story building! And this was to be erected directly in front of Haman's house. And most scholars will say that such a height is ridiculous and can't be accurate. I will say that I agree with them, but for different reasons than they usually decide upon. It was common then, as now, to use hyperbole in our everyday speech when we're passionate or excited about something, and this hyperbole that we find in this passage should be taken in this sense and so it is meant to be taken figuratively. That is, when my wife tells me to come running that there is a cockroach the size of a Buick in

the bathroom, she doesn't mean and I don't picture, Bugzilla. When I say I have raked a mountain of leaves in my backyard, it just means there's a big pile, not something resembling the Matterhorn. The point is, the irate and inconsolable Haman was told by his family that he ought to build an impalement pole 50 cubits high (50 being a round number) only because it was an exaggerated expression of taking the most extreme revenge; not because they really meant that this thing ought to stretch even higher than the palace walls.

Needless to say, the mere thought of impaling the limp body of his nemesis Mordechai on his front lawn pleased Haman to no end, and so he ordered it done. But also notice that the issue of shame and honor is central to his decision. I told you earlier that for a Middle Easterner the only acceptable solution Haman had to recover his honor was to kill the one who had taken it from him (Mordechai was certainly never going to apologize). And by displaying the corpse of the offender literally at his front door, in such a public way, then he will have avenged the public humiliation Mordechai had heaped upon him. Everyone will be on notice that Haman's shame has been dealt with and his honor has been restored.

To accentuate Haman's ruthless and amoral character, to end the chapter we're told that he was so delighted at the prospect of murdering Mordechai and having his shame removed that it raised his mood, and his wife essentially said: there, there, everything's OK now. Run along and have a nice time with the king.

Let's move on to chapter 6.

### **READ ESTHER CHAPTER 6 all**

As a matter of housekeeping just know that there are no Greek additions to this chapter. The Hebrew version that we just read is all there is.

Verse 1 begins, "that night" the king was having trouble sleeping. "That night" is referring to the last sentence of chapter 5, so it is taking place within hours of Haman's meeting with his wife and advisors and the decision to erect an impalement pole in front of his home for Mordechai to hang.

I said last week that this section of the story reads like a comedy. Well the coincidences, misunderstandings, role reversals, and resulting embarrassments all pour out of what happens next. And it is funny, and it is most appropriate to laugh (unless, I suppose, you are a Haman supporter and don't much care for Jews). Just like many of us who can't quite enter our sleep mode for some reason, and we lay there on our beds staring at the ceiling or tossing and turning, we might turn on some music, or read a book, or in some cases listen to a person talking until we fall asleep. In fact I have a grandchild who (I'm told) used to listen to my Torah Class CDs to help him go to sleep (never quite decided how I ought to take that).

So I guess Xerxes wasn't much of a reader and he calls a scribe to come in to his bed chambers with the royal records (essentially the minutes from the various meetings the king has had), and read them to him until he falls asleep. And wouldn't you just know it, the record the scribe chose just happened to be the time when Mordechai brought news of an

assassination conspiracy and it saved the king's life. And when the king hears this, he doesn't recall rewarding Mordechai for performing such a good and loyal deed on the king's behalf. The king's servant looks at his records, and says no, nothing was ever done.

Well, just at that moment the king notices that Haman is pacing around in the outer courtyard of the palace, obviously hoping the king might see him. He is in the outer court because had he come to the inner court he would have risked what Esther risked; coming unsummoned to the king requires death unless the king rules otherwise. So here is Haman, on his way from his meeting with his family, having just authorized the installation of an impalement stake to stick Mordechai on, hoping to bring this matter before Xerxes for his approval. After all, Mordechai was a Persian government official and Haman certainly wanted the king's approval. And this happens at the same moment that the king just realized he had never properly honored Mordechai for saving his life! Haman despises Mordechai and has arranged for his death; the king thinks Mordechai is a great guy and deserving of an award for saving his life.

But even more, the king has already elevated Haman to a high position, and yet he has also promised Esther (twice it would seem) to happily grant whatever is her request. And of course Haman's intent is the opposite of Esther's request. Haman is digging a deep hole for himself but he has no idea of it.

So the king, being a generally gracious man according to the Hebrew version, sees his 2<sup>nd</sup> in command standing outside and bids him to come in. What perfect timing the king thinks! The king doesn't do anything without seeking an advisor for council and now such good fortune that an advisor just happens to be standing the courtyard! So the king decides to delegate the decision on just how to honor Mordechai to the man who is about to murder him. But it gets better.

As the king and Haman begin to converse, the king is thinking about Mordechai as the man he intends to honor, but Haman is thinking the king must be speaking about him. Haman is a glutton for personal honors and recognition and so he is blind to everything else. After all he just spent the day before as the one and only guest of the king and queen, and was in the morning going to again receive the same honor. Who else could the king be speaking of but Haman?

So Haman responds with his self-serving advice of what the king ought to do, and it's a doozie. First the person being honored should be adorned not with merely royal garments, but with royal garments from the king's personal wardrobe. The honoree should then be paraded around the city not only on a horse from the royal stables, but on the same horse that the king uses and the horse adorned with a crown. And to top it all off, the king's most respected official should place the royal garments on that person, and put that person on the king's horse, and personally lead that horse around Susa, shouting and proclaiming that person's greatness. This waschutzpah to the max. And it probably aroused at least a bit of suspicion by the king because kings learned early (if they survived long enough) to always be on the lookout for the slightest hint of someone who had their eyes on the throne. Essentially Haman asked for every vestige and symbol of the monarchy of Persia to be bestowed upon himself (not realizing that the king had intended it for Mordechai). While we're not told so, it is hard for me

not to conclude that Haman had become so swelled up with self-importance that he was actually contemplating the possibility of himself one day becoming the King of the Persian Empire. Had not everything else he had aspired for and sought, worked out to his benefit?

So once again the theme of honor and shame arises. And since Haman is in the process of restoring his personal honor that had been taken from him by Mordechai (for publically humiliating Haman), what better way to assure this his shame is dead and buried than to be paraded around the Persian capital city in the king's own robes and led by a high and known government official?

But then the other shoe drops. In verse 10 the king says: great idea! Now you go and do this for Mordechai the Jew! And by the way, don't leave out anything you suggested to me. Well, if you were Jew reading Esther by now the tears are streaming down your face and you are gasping for air as you can't stop laughing.

And it appears that the king has no idea of the hatred between Mordechai and Haman. His palace isolation, much like for Esther, disconnects him from the everyday life of his citizens. But it had to be known far and wide of the enmity between Mordechai and Haman because it was so public and visible. So how much more it was going to impact and the news would spread like wildfire, when Haman leads Mordechai around the city shouting his praises. Haman wasn't going to be foolish enough to not obey the king. He did as he was told, and the humiliation was unbearable.

So at the end of the royal pony ride, Mordechai (who had to be having the time of his life and relishing every second of this moment) dismounts and walks back to his seat at the King's Gate; where this whole mess started in the first place. Haman heads for home, mourning his fate and wondering how it could have all come to this. He finds his wife Zeresh and his friends waiting for him and he spills his emotions to them oblivious to the reality that a lot more than hurt feelings was at stake, here.

His wife and friends can see what his hatred and humiliation have blinded him to. Since Mordechai is a Jew, and since Haman is the one who has ordered all the Jews in the Empire killed, and since the king now sees Mordechai as a valuable ally that was worthy of the highest royal honor, Haman has just slit his own throat. He can't win.

I have a friend who is a Palestinian Arab and Christian. He was a former sniper commander for Yasser Arafat and a former Muslim. He escaped from the West Bank after attempting to kill a person he knew, in order to avenge an insult, and came to the USA. Here he met Christ and it changed his life. He is now a missionary to the Muslims and lives in Jericho.

I once asked him why the Arabs hated the Jews of modern Israel so much. His answer surprised me: unbearable humiliation. He said that a question that the officers in Arafat's army often asked themselves in private was: how could so few Jews defeat so many Arabs? Battle after battle, war after war since Israel became a Jewish State in 1948; the enormous, well armed, combined armies of several Arab nations could not drive the Jews from their homeland. Worse, Israel had turned the tables and captured the West Bank and Jerusalem from Jordan,

the Golan Heights from Syria, and the Sinai from Egypt. The Arabs hated Israel all the more because in the culture of shame and honor, Israel had heaped shame upon them with their victories. And every time the Arabs tried to recover their honor by attempting yet again to defeat Israel, the result was nothing but more shame heaped upon them. Can you hear the echoes of the story of Esther as Haman, who hates the Jews with a fire that can't be quenched, keeps finding himself defeated as his plans go awry? Haman has every advantage. He is powerful, wealthy, has hordes of advisors and the king's ear anytime he wants it. On the other hand Mordechai is just an ordinary man; a Jew whom God has decided shall survive. Haman can't win and he doesn't understand why. As a result his hatred for Mordechai increases in direct proportion to his inability to affect the solution he so desperately desires: extermination of Mordechai and all the Jews.

Chapter 6 ends when Haman, still fuming, hears a knock on the door as the king's officials come to him telling him its time to go to Esther's quarters for that next banquet that he's probably forgotten all about in his despair. No doubt he's torn; on the one hand he desperately wants the honor and the trappings of such a privilege as to be privately dining with the king and queen; on the other he just wants to hide under his bed for a while and lick the wounds of his humiliation.

We'll eavesdrop on that banquet and watch some pivotal happenings in chapter 7 next week.