

Sleepless in Susa

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Date: 27 February 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Good. Well, a very warm welcome to you all to our Wednesday lunchtime talk. If it's your first time with us here this afternoon, then you're very welcome indeed. It's very good to see you. Please do stay on after. There's tea and coffee at the back, so do make use of that. Good. Well, we took a little hiatus from Esther last week. I was unwell. It's my first day off in... I can't remember how long, but I was at home unwell, but you were in Phil's capable hands last week. But we're going to resume in Esther, so please turn to page 413 to Esther, chapter 5. Page 413, and I'm attempting something quite ambitious today. I'm not sure this has been done on a Wednesday lunchtime before, but we're going to try and do three chapters. Okay, so I'm going to read a chapter, and then we're going to spend a bit of time thinking about it, and then read the next chapter, and so on. It's a gripping story, so hopefully we can all follow through, but it's a really excellent and gripping narrative. So we're going to do that today. Let me pray, and then we'll read the first of these chapters.

Fathers, we come to your word now. Would you grant us grace, almighty Lord, to understand your holy word, and with meekness all its truth receive, and by its light forever live? We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Okay, let me read Esther, chapter 5. Before I do, a word of introduction. This section of the book that we're looking at this afternoon, it answers the big question about who is really in charge, who's really in control of human history. At this point in the story, everything is hanging in the balance. Remember at the end of chapter 4, Haman's edict to destroy all the people across the Persian empire. That edict has been issued, and Esther has resolved to go into the king. Remember, Esther is an undercover Jew. Nobody knows that she's a Jew, and she's there. She's the queen, and she's resolved to go to the king, even though it may result in her own death, and to plead the case for her people.

Esther's chosen her side, but what will happen now? What will happen to her and to her people? How will things pan out? That's the question in our minds as we begin chapter 5. And by the end of these chapters this afternoon, the big question about the fate of the Jewish people, that question is still unresolved. But we feel much more confident about the outcome, given what we see in these incredibly dramatic chapters. We feel much more confident about how things are going to play out. It's a gripping story. It's very well told, so listen well. And it's a story of two banquets and a sleepless night.

So chapter 5 is the first of our two banquets. So here we go. 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. 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. 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.

[3 : 5 4] And Esther said, If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I've prepared for the king. 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. And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, What is your wish? It should be granted you.

And what is your request? Even to half of my kingdom it shall be fulfilled. Then Esther answered, My wish and my request is this.

If I found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleased 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 asked.

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.

[4 : 58] Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. And he sent and brought his friends and his wife, Zeresh. 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 all the officials and the servants of the king.

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 to her together with the king.

Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. 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. Well, we see in this chapter that Esther, her decision to pledge her loyalty to the Lord and his people, that decision is then followed by faithful, careful planning and courageous action.

Esther's chosen her side, and now she does what she said she would do. She risks her life, and she goes into the king. And much to her relief, the king holds out that golden scepter.

[6 : 34] Now if the king had not done that, if he had not extended this mercy, then not only was her fate sealed, but the fate of her whole people suddenly takes on a darker turn.

But Esther, well in verse two and three, she was granted life instead of death. And so the deliverance that she seeks for her people, well it looks a bit more positive, doesn't it?

Now we expect, don't we, we expect that as Esther comes to the king, as the king receives her gladly, we expect that she will make her big request. We expect her to come clean about her real identity as one of God's people, and to make her appeal to the king, her appeal to spare her people, to save them from Haman's edict.

But she doesn't do that, does she? The king asks her, what is your request? And instead of launching in with her big request, she invites the king and Haman to a feast.

The king is delighted. And at that feast, the king asks again, Esther, what is your wish? It should be granted to you.

[7 : 44] And what is your request? Even to half my kingdom, I will give it to you. Will Esther now make her plea? Well, no. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to another feast, the very next day.

The tension. As we're reading through the book, we just wanted to get on with it, don't we? Make the request there, so what's going to happen to your people? But Esther, she's being quite clever here.

By doing things this way, she's doing everything she can to bring about a favorable response from the king. With every request the king grants, even if it's just to attend a feast, it makes granting that next request all the more likely, doesn't it?

By the time that Esther makes her big request in chapter 7, the king has made this big statement to Esther and to all those around him in the court.

He's made this big statement that he will grant her wish, even up to half his kingdom. He's made that statement three times by the time she actually makes her request.

[8 : 51] And so the king, he's almost painted himself into a bit of a corner, hasn't he? He had better grant her request, mustn't he, when it eventually comes. Otherwise, he's going to look ridiculous. He's made that big statement three times by the time she actually asks what she really wants to ask.

It's a clever strategy from Esther. She doesn't just barge in there and demand deliverance for her people. No. She gives herself the very best opportunity for success with her actions here.

And so when the pressure is on, as it was here, when the stakes are high, we don't just let go and let God. Yes, he is at work, as we'll see, but that doesn't mean as people sit back and do nothing.

It doesn't mean they don't use their brains. Rather, we give ourselves the very best chance of success, given what we know, given our circumstances. And that's what Esther does here.

There's no guarantee it would work. She doesn't know how it'll play out, but she gives it the best shot. Well, there's the first banquet. And after the banquet, verse 9, the focus from the camera shifts away from the big picture of the whole covenant people of God, and it zooms in on a conflict with two men, Haman and Mordecai.

[10 : 13] Haman, in verse 9, he struts out from the feast. He's feeling the top of the world, wouldn't you? You've been in a feast, a private feast with the king and the queen and you, nobody else.

You feel pretty special. But then he sees Mordecai, the Jew, as he leaves the palace. And quickly, his joy, his elation quickly turns to anger.

And when he got home, he offloads to his family. Kind of feel for his wife, don't you? He's there recounting his greatness. Look how great I am. And then he thinks about Mordecai and how all that means nothing to him so long as Mordecai is still alive.

It's not enough for Haman to know that Mordecai's fate is already sealed. Remember, Mordecai is one of the people of God. He's one of the people that's going to be taken down and destroyed by that edict that Haman issued a few months later.

Mordecai's fate is sealed. There's a date in the diary for his death. But Mordecai, Haman, for Haman, that's not soon enough.

[11 : 25] And so he leaps at the suggestion from his wife that Mordecai be hanged on an enormous set of gallows the very next day. And so here at the end of chapter 5, the fate of the Jewish people is very much in the balance, isn't it?

Esther's not yet made her request. But Mordecai's fate, well, his fate seems sealed, doesn't it? The most powerful man in the land apart from the king, Haman, Haman's determined to hang him on the gallows the very next day.

The writing's on the wall for Mordecai, isn't it? But nobody could have seen what was coming the next day. Let's read chapter 6. On that night, the king could not sleep and he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before him, before the king.

And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the threshold and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

And the king said, what honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this? The young men who attended him said, nothing has been done for him. And the king said, who is in the court?

[12 : 55] Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. And the king's young men told him, Haman is there standing in the court.

And the king said, let him come in. So Haman came in and the king said to him, what should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor? And Haman said to himself, whom would the king delight to honor more than me?

And Haman said to the king, for the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head the royal crown is set.

And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, thou shalt it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.

Then the king said to Haman, hurry, take the robes and the horse as you've said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew who sits at the king's gate.

[14 : 10] Leave out nothing that you've mentioned. So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai, and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.

Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman hurried to his house mourning and with his head covered, and Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him.

Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, If Mordecai before whom you have begun to fall as of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him.

Well, it's an extraordinary chapter, isn't it? An unsuspecting Haman swaggers into the palace where he wonderfully trips over his own pride, saying to himself, look at verse 6, Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?

It must be the absolute definition of pride coming before a fall. But it is a fall that really is beyond the control of any human agency.

[15 : 28] That is so clear from what unfolds in these chapters. Esther is totally unaware of Haman's plan. She doesn't know what she plans to do to Mordecai and neither does Mordecai.

Nobody knows apart from Haman and his family. There's nothing they could do to stop what was going to happen, what he was intending. And given Haman's power, his position, his authority, Mordecai seems destined for the gallows, doesn't he?

But what a staggering reversal of fortunes for Haman and for Mordecai we see unfold in this chapter. And that reversal is so clear when we see the astonishing words uttered by Haman's own wife, Zeresh, the one who just a few hours earlier, a few verses before this, had suggested the plan to hang Mordecai.

Look at what she says at the end of the chapter, verse 13 of chapter 6. If Mordecai, before whom you've begun to fall as of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him.

Now that is a staggering confession from a pagan unbeliever who only the day before was confidently plotting Mordecai's assassination. It's astonishing.

[16 : 47] 24 hours later, she's saying the absolute opposite. She seems to be vocalizing the same reality that Mordecai spoke of in chapter 4, verse 14, when he confidently speaks of relief and deliverance that will rise for the Jews, even if Esther doesn't take her stand.

Zeresh, Haman's wife, seems to come to the same conclusion, doesn't she? She's come to realize that the God of the Jews was not a God to treat with contempt. She knew, given the events of chapter 6, she knew that Haman was now on the losing side, the writing was on the wall.

She knew that things do not go well for the enemies of God's people. people. And that is a realization that all of God's enemies must come to sooner or later.

There are today, as there were then, real spiritual enemies of the Lord and his people. But they will have to reckon with the reality of the Lord God.

He wins. They lose. That is the testimony of Esther. It's the testimony of the whole Bible. So there's an extraordinary reversal of fortunes in this chapter.

[18 : 08] Haman's humiliation begins. Mordecai's honoring in the streets is a total reversal of what we expect. We expect him, don't we, to be strung up in the gallows, not honored in the city.

Great reversal. But how has it all come about? How does this happen? Well, the turning point is at the very start, start, start with chapter 6.

The king is sleepless in Susa. That is the thing that sets in motion a very unlikely series of events, a series of seeming coincidences.

The mighty Haman is rendered powerless by this chance event when the king just happens to have a sleepless night. He just happens to have the chronicles brought in and read to him.

It just happens to be the page that is turned to that records Mordecai's discovering of that plot. It just so happens that Haman walks into the palace at the very moment when the king is wondering how best to honor Mordecai.

[19 : 15] He's there to ask him to be strung up in the gallows. The king wants to honor him. Seems, doesn't it, such an insignificant thing, a sleepless night.

It's fairly common, isn't it? I have quite a lot of them at the moment. But as one commentator notes, by making the turning point of the whole story an insignificant event like a sleepless night, making that the turning point of the story rather than the point of highest dramatic tension, the author is taking our focus away from human action.

The characters of the story are not responsible for this reversal in fortunes, but rather there is an unseen power at work controlling this remarkable reversal of destiny.

It's clear as we step back and look at the whole story, it's clear that God is at work and ruling history according to, as perhaps Zeresh now realized, according to the ancient covenant promises he made with his people all those years ago.

And in particular, his promise that the Agagites, Haman's people, that they would be destroyed. And it is ironic, isn't it, that it is at this moment when the Agagites seemed strongest, when Haman was at his most powerful that the law brings about his downfall.

[20 : 46] and he did it not through spectacular signs and wonders, but through the seemingly ordinary, a sleepless night, the reading of the Chronicles.

Our God, who is Esther's God, he's Mordecai's God, he remains at work behind the scenes just like this in the ordinary events of day-to-day life.

He is at work directing all things in order to fulfill his purposes, his plans, his promises. He will do just as he said.

That is how he works. He worked through the ordinary birth of a child in an ordinary town called Bethlehem. A child who grew to be a carpenter, who would then die on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem like so many others.

But those seemingly unspectacular events 2,000 years ago, they were the way in which God brought about the greatest reversal of all, the greatest deliverance known to man. That's how he did it.

[21 : 57] Seemingly normal events. That is how God works. So by the end of chapter 6, things have, apart from any human initiative, things have really started to turn around.

Mordecai, who would have expected him to be on the gallows, isn't. Haman, who once looked so powerful, is clearly on the way down. Even his own wife sees it. But there's still a lot to be resolved.

How will Esther's request go? Will Mordecai end up on the gallows anyway? Let's look on to chapter 7. I'll start at chapter 6, verse 14.

While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived in hurry to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared. So the king and Haman went into the feast with Queen Esther.

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.

[23 : 04] And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom it shall be fulfilled. 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 for my wish and my people for my request.

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 friction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.

Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, Who is he and where is he who dared do this? And Esther said, A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman.

Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. And the king arose in his wrath from the wine drinking and went into the palace garden. But Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king.

And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking. As Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was and the king said, Will he even assault the queen in my presence and in my own house?

[24 : 29] As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, Moreover, the gallows that Haman had 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. So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

Then the wrath of the king abated. On that day, King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her.

and the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Things move quickly in this chapter, don't they? The tension, the irony, the drama come thick and fast. The king asked for the third time, verse two, What is your wish, Queen Esther?

[25 : 40] What is it? And then it comes. This is it. Esther is now going to risk it all. And notice how carefully Esther goes about at verse three.

She pleads for her own life and her people. But she doesn't yet disclose who her people are. She goes on and pulls the king in. For we've been sold. I am my people to be destroyed, to be killed, to be annihilated.

And notice that Esther unashamedly ties herself to her people. She really has planted her flag with her people. And she uses that to her advantage.

Someone wants her, the queen, the one who the king has some huge affection for, the one who has just thrown two banquets in two days. Someone wants her dead.

And the king, verse five, is absolutely enraged. Who is he? Where is this man who dared do this? Then the big reveal.

[26 : 44] Esther has the king right where she wants him. And she points to Haman. It's him. A foe, an enemy, this wicked Haman. Zeresh was right, wasn't she?

The game is up for Haman. And he's terrified. The king flies out in a rage. Haman turns to the queen for mercy.

Big mistake. And as the readers, as those who've been reading this from the beginning, who know Haman for who he truly is, we're cheering, aren't we, at this point?

This is justice. This is one of the fiercest enemies of God's people, being brought to justice. the one who had just that very morning put up a gallows in his garden for Mordecai.

We rejoice to see this evil, evil man, this enemy of the Jews, meeting his downfall. Can't help but enjoy the aside from Harbonah, the eunuch there.

[27 : 51] Just for your information, your majesty, just take a look out the east window. You might just see the gallows that Haman's erected in his own garden. Just to make you aware of that, just so you know it's there. Hang him on that, says the king.

Haman, hung on his own hubris, on his own gallows. Complete reversal of fortunes for Haman and for Mordecai.

Just look at the start of chapter 8. The very heart, at the very heart of the Persian empire, there's been a complete turning of the tables. The great enemy of God's covenant people, he's been removed.

And one of the key leaders amongst God's people, Mordecai, he's taken his place. Total reversal, total turnaround. The very last sentence I read, Mordecai is given the house of Haman.

It's delicious iron, isn't it? Complete turnaround. But all is not resolved, is it? The edict, the edict, that Haman issued, that still remains intact.

[28 : 59] The fate of God's people across the whole empire, that still hangs in the balance. We'll see the conclusion to it next week. But isn't it just a wonderful indication of God's grace to individuals that he saves Mordecai in this way?

There's a whole empire of Jews whose lives hang in the balance. But we also see the Lord at work just to save one man. Our God is so huge, so powerful and capable, he can do both those things at the same time.

He can be at work in the life of one individual and bring about great reversal in their lives whilst at the same time bringing about salvation for a whole people. He can do that.

He's a powerful God. He's gracious. He loves individuals just like Mordecai here. Before we finish, let's not miss the big lesson of these dramatic chapters.

At the outset, in chapter 5, all seemed to be with Haman and against God's people. But what a staggering reversal there is.

[30 : 10] Yes, God's people act faithfully here. Esther's brave. She's courageous. She thinks about how she's going to go about this. They take action. But the key action, the key turning point was down to the Lord alone operating in the seemingly normal events of human life.

And through it all, the seemingly powerful Haman, he is brought, crashing down, the enemy of the Jews. And so we need to know that the enemy, no matter how desperate things may look to you and I, the enemy never has the upper hand.

God is ultimately in control. And that ought to bring you and I great encouragement today. Because we do see, don't we, we do see evidence of the great enemy at work.

The great enemy that Haman ultimately served. We still see him at work. We do feel the pressure of a rapidly secularizing world. There are real enemies of the gospel, of the church.

And the evil one will use all sorts of people, institutions to further his own ends. Here, it was Haman. For us today, it's all sorts of different things. But, in the end, he won't win.

[31 : 40] And you and I, because of the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, you can know that reality with far greater certainty than Zeresh knew.

Zeresh knew the real deal. She knew what was really going on. She knew that the God of Israel was not a God to be messed with. And you and I can know that with even greater certainty now, can't we?

So, let's take heart and put on, as the Apostle Paul encourages us, put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil knowing that our God is at work behind the scenes.

That's the big message of these dramatic chapters in Esther. Let me pray and then we'll close. Father God, we do thank you so much for your word, your living word, and how relevant these events are, these dramatic events, how much they have to teach us.

And so, Lord, help us to be a confident people, confident because we know that you are at work, behind the scenes, even in the seemingly normal events of human life.

[32 : 59] You are at work directing things in order to bring about your purposes, to bring about your plans. So, Lord, help us in the midst of all our fears and worries to see beyond the visible and to live by faith.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay, final installment next week as we finish Esther. See you then.

Thank you.