

A timely response?

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] This reading is from Esther chapter 4 beginning at verse 12 until the end of chapter 5. When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai he sent back this answer.

Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place.

But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai.

Go gather together all the Jews who are in Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do.

When this is done I will go to the king even though it is against the law. And if I perish I perish. So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

[1 : 05] On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall facing the entrance.

When he 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. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

Then the king asked what is it Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom it will be given you. If it pleases the king replied Esther.

Let the king together with Haman come today to a banquet I have prepared for him. Bring Haman at once the king said. So that we may do what Esther asks. So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared.

As they were drinking wine the king again asked Esther. Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom it will be granted.

[2 : 07] Esther replied. 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. Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence.

He was filled with rage against Mordecai. Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home.

Calling together his friends and Zeresh his wife. Haman boasted 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 am 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. His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him.

[3 : 15] Have a pole set up. Reaching to a height of 50 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.

This suggestion delighted Haman. And he had the pole set up. Okay Esther chapter 5 this evening. So have that open if you can please. November 1957. President Dwight Eisenhower gave a speech in which he declared.

Plans are worthless. But planning is everything. Or if you want a more Germanic flavor. Helmut von Moltke made a proclamation in 1871.

Which through translation and kind of amalgamation down through the ages. Has now been shortened to the adage. No plan survives first contact with the enemy.

[4 : 17] Plans are vital. But plans don't always go according to plan. This matches up with our experience. And matches up with what God tells us to expect.

See chapter 4 showed us the urgent need. For Mordecai and Esther and the Jews to develop a plan. A plan for their salvation from annihilation. Haman has his plan to see them killed and destroyed and annihilated.

And they needed their plan in chapter 4. And now here in chapter 5 we see that plan developed. And we see that plan begun. The problem is that alongside Esther's plan.

We also see another plan forming at the same time. Because Haman makes a new plan. That's seeking to accelerate the pace of his vengeance upon Mordecai.

And so we come into this chapter with this question of whose plan will succeed. Esther appears in these verses to be proceeding at quite a leisurely pace really.

[5 : 20] Will that be sufficient to counter Haman's more rapid approach as he sets up this massive pike intending to see Mordecai hung upon it in the morning?

So chapter 5 begins with the cliffhanger on which we left chapter 4. When Esther approaches the king, will she live or will she die?

And by the end of chapter 5 we have a whole new cliffhanger on which to leave the drama for another week. With Haman's impaling spike set up ready. So through chapter 5, verses 1 and 2, we see a dangerous approach as Esther comes to the king.

That's succeeding in verses 3 through 7 by a shrewd strategy. And verses 8 through 14 show us a renewed threat. Dangerous approach, shrewd strategy, renewed threat.

So verses 1 and 2, a dangerous approach. Remember the nature of this threat. This comes from back in verse 11 of chapter 4. So chapter 4, Mordecai persuaded Esther that it is worth the risk.

[6 : 50] And so here, after three days of fasting that she asked the Jews of Susa to join her and her attendants in, after those three days, Esther sets off for the inner court.

She prepares herself for the encounter as best she can, dressing herself in royal robes, hopefully wanting to be seen with a sense of respect.

What she is due as the queen. And cautiously, wisely, she doesn't just barge right in to the hall where Xerxes is sat. She kind of stands at a distance in the inner court.

You know, where he can see her looking out through the doors, but where she's not, you know, being deliberately invasive and attacking her. But make no mistake, even standing outside the door of the throne room, by coming into the king's presence, into anywhere he can see her, she's placing her life in his hands.

We're told here in verse 1 that she comes to the inner court. Well, that's exactly where verse 11 said no one was to approach. It is a risky approach.

[8 : 00] But wonderfully, the tension is very quickly diffused for us, isn't it? Verse 2, he was pleased with her. He held out the scepter to save her life. So what are we to make of that?

Was Esther kind of overstating the reality of the risk when she spoke to Mordecai because she just didn't really want to do it? Well, no, I don't think so. If it wasn't a real danger, there would have been quite a different interaction between Esther and Mordecai back in chapter 4, wouldn't there?

Now, the risk is real. So why is this happening? Well, on a human level, this is the reality of life in the courts of a capricious toddler king, isn't it?

A king who does just whatever strikes him as pleasant at any particular moment. He happens to be in a good mood. He happens to be more interested in seeing her than he has been for the last 33 days.

The threat was real, but the risk pays off. It just happens. A capricious king does as he pleases. Looking from the outside, this fortuitous turn of events, well, we look and we see once again evidence of God's hand at work, don't we?

[9 : 17] That it isn't really just happenstance, that the king happens to be in a good mood. We see God's hand at work not in the obviously miraculous, but God's hand at work in the things that just happen to turn out the right way.

Esther didn't know that as she dressed herself that morning. Events are driven forward here at one and the same time by divine providence and guidance and by human initiative and courage.

Both drive events forward. And this event is something of studying contrasts, isn't it? Think back to Queen Vashti in chapter 1.

See, Vashti, like Esther, violated the law. But Vashti did so by refusing to come when summoned, where Esther violates it by coming when not summoned. Vashti's absence enraged the king.

Esther's presence elicits its favor, and so on and so on. There are contrasts between Vashti and Esther, between the events as they stand. But the biggest contrast in these couple of verses is between Xerxes as king and God as king.

[10:35] See, folks, there's a danger, isn't there? There's a danger sometimes that we're inclined to approach God with the kind of trepidation that Esther must have felt approaching Xerxes.

Because Xerxes has the power of life and death over Esther, right? He either holds out the scepter or doesn't. Well, God's power is even more absolute.

God is capable of doing whatever he chooses. And God has been clear that the wages of sin is death. There is a risk of death coming into God's presence, isn't there?

Coming to a holy God. We know in ourselves we deserve death. And so sometimes we're focused on that and we approach God with this kind of fear.

But the wonderful truth is that we do not need to approach God with that kind of trepidation, do we? We don't come to him knees or tremble, or at least we shouldn't, because God is not a capricious toddler.

[11:43] God isn't benevolent one day and then harsh the next. No, we're invited to a God whose character does not change, who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

We're invited to a God who invites us to call him Father. He describes himself in those terms. We're invited into the presence of a king, yes, but of a king who is the very definition of love.

We're invited to a God who reminds us that he delights to give good gifts to his children, even more than to earthly fathers, and certainly more so than this earthly king here in Esther 5.

Esther placed her life on the line. She went before the king in terror. But Hebrews 4 says to you and to me, let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Last week we heard about Xerxes' policy banning anyone wearing sackcloth from coming into the palace. Here we have the danger of those who come uninvited.

[12:53] What a contrast to that, that as one commentator puts it, our king has an open door policy. His door stands open. His welcome is ready.

He invites us to come with confidence. The door to God's very throne room stands open to you and to me. So, Esther's first hurdle is past.

She's safely into the presence of the king. She's made it that far. So how will she proceed? Verse 3 continues, Well, the king offers her whatever she pleases, up to half the kingdom.

And so she seizes the moment she tells him the problem, and they live happily ever after. Except she doesn't, does she? She doesn't tell him the real problem.

She doesn't grasp the opportunity. No, she invites him to a banquet. She bottle it? She just not have the guts to go through with it?

[13:56] Well, there can't be that. We're told she already has the banquet prepared. This was always the plan to invite him to the banquet, not to tell him there in the throne room.

So, does she fail to capitalize on him being more positive than expected? You know, she was expecting him to be nervous, and so she had the banquet lined up, and she just doesn't think to change her plan.

Well, maybe, I suppose. Well, I'm not convinced by that theory. No, I think Esther's pretty wise not to take this offer at face value.

See, the commentator seemed pretty sure that when he says, you know, anything up to half my kingdom, that this is a kind of stock phrase, you know, not really intended to be taken literally.

He's not actually saying, you can have those provinces over there to go and do with as you please. Nobody really thinks that's on the table. And see how the same phrase comes back again in verse 6, exactly the same wording, up to half the kingdom.

[14:58] So, maybe this is just kind of generic language. And so, some go so far as saying, well, this is kind of a formulaic way of saying, well, he is disposed to be generous, which is good, but a kind of general disposition to be generous, is that really strong enough to see a supposedly irrevocable law overturned.

Because she's also up against the considerable sum of money that Haman promised the king. Probably doesn't qualify as half the kingdom, but, you know, it's about half the tax revenue for a year. It's a pretty significant amount of money.

And this edict, it's sealed with the king's own signet ring. How's Xerxes going to look if he goes back on what he has said? He's not shown himself to be a king who's happy to lose face, has he? And even more fundamental than all of that, well, Esther surely by now knows his character. She's been married to him for a few years now. She's seen his capricious nature.

So, she knows that even if the offer of half the kingdom is an offer to be taken at face value, well, it's a rash offer, isn't it? That he would be perfectly capable of taking back.

[16:12] And frankly, you know, there's a few other people in the front. He's perfectly capable of having those other people executed in order to keep it quiet, that he'd made that offer in the first place. Esther knows her fall from favor could be even more dramatic than Vashti's earlier fall.

She's seen the king do her way with one queen. Why would she think that she is safe to believe this offer? So, she wisely lets this offer of an apparently blank check pass her by, and instead she invites him to the banquet.

Why a banquet? Well, presumably because she knows his character. It's not without reason that they say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. And we certainly know that Xerxes loved his feasts.

The whole book is marked by feasting, isn't it? Chapter after chapter, we see different people feasting. Esa knows what he wants.

She's shrewd in her actions. And we have this kind of same cycle and question again as the feast draws to its close in verse 6. Xerxes and Haman there lingering over the post-dinner drinks.

[17:23] The king returns to the business of what is it that she wants. He knows she wanted more than just a pleasant meal together. He returns to the matter at hand, and you would think that he'd be sufficiently buttered up for her to get to the point, but again, she just says, come to another banquet.

She has a carefully worked out plan that she has reason to hope will succeed. She's not just blindly hoping for the best, you know, figuring it'll all pan out.

She's not rashly pushing ahead. No, there was the fasting and praying during those previous three days. Surely in that time there was also the planning and the strategizing.

What stands the best chance of success in this kingdom before this king? Folks, I do wonder sometimes how often we shoot ourselves in the foot.

We fail to follow Esther's shrewd model. See, there are times to seize the moment, to say, this is my chance to speak to this person. I'm never going to see them again.

[18:28] I've got to take this opportunity. But maybe we might not be quite so quick to leap on every conceivable opportunity as if it were the only one that would ever exist.

Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to demand that Christian politicians come out swinging every time there's any issue being discussed on which we think Christians should have a particular perspective.

Maybe we might entertain the possibility that sometimes keeping quiet is the shrewder course.

Maybe we could admit that not every issue has to be treated as if it were a matter of life and death. Of course, for politicians, some issues are matters of life and death. They have to be principles at work. And it's right that we hold politicians, whether Christian or not, to account.

We expect them to be representatives of the people. But that doesn't necessarily mean that at every moment they've got to, you know, go full bore into it.

[19:30] And for us, well, maybe we return to the gentleness and respect that was being commended by Peter this morning. Ask yourself whether we're really furthering the cause of Christ most effectively by ramming the gospel down somebody's throat in a frankly offensive way the first time that we meet them.

Or worse, whether we're furthering the cause of the gospel by not actually proclaiming the gospel at all, just ramming the ethical standards that ought to flow from the good news of the gospel, just shoving those down somebody's throat, trumpeting those above all else.

That's not the kind of shrewdness that Esther displays here. That's not the kind of winning strategy that thinks through carefully what is likely to succeed. There's problems at the opposite end of the scale too, for sure.

But maybe we would do well to embrace Esther's patient approach more of the time. So the banquet draws to a close. Esther's plans are paused for the night.

We know there's another banquet coming tomorrow. We presume she has a strategy for it. But right now, it's on hold. We wait.

[20 : 50] And meanwhile, the next scene opens with Haman heading home. In high spirits, doubtless not least from the amount of wine that he's been enjoying at the feast. But once again, as he walks through in high spirits, once again he sees Mordecai's insolence.

And suddenly his positive disposition is over in a heartbeat. He is once again filled with rage. This fly in the ointment that spoils it completely for him.

And so he arrives home. And he starts off there boasting. He gathers his wife and his friends and he proclaims to them about his many sons as if his wife weren't perfectly well aware of how many sons he had.

And explains his great wealth. Explains how he's been honored by the king. And the crowning glory. Today, Queen Esther gave a banquet. And guess who she invited to it?

Look at me. Her, the king, and me. There we were. Feasting. It doesn't get much more exclusive than that, does it? Look how impressive I am.

[21 : 57] But he can't enjoy it. He says to them, this gives me no satisfaction so long as I see Mordecai sat there.

Mordecai, who sits and does not bow. And so his wife, Zeresh, who apparently didn't get that memo that a man must be lord in his own home.

Zeresh takes the initiative. Have a massive pole set up, she advises, and have Mordecai impaled upon it. A public display of humiliation for the man who dared to challenge the great Haman.

And just as the king was delighted with his advisor's suggestion a few chapters ago, so too Haman is delighted with this plan now. Why wait for December when you can deal with the primary offender here and now and mop up the rest later?

So he has the pole set up. What of Haman here in this scene?

[23 : 04] Maybe we could point out the emptiness of riches, that despite his vast wealth, Haman isn't happy. And we could go and find the quotes from the rich celebrities acknowledging that experience today.

That's true. It isn't Haman's biggest problem, is it? Because what Haman wants most isn't the riches. The riches are, if anything, a means to an end.

What Haman craves is public recognition. Haman wants the praises of everyone around him. He wants to walk through the marketplace and have people know who he is and show that they know it.

He wants the praises of everyone. He wants to be seen to be impressive. I mean, that's how he's behaved throughout these chapters, isn't it? Having risen to power, the king commands everyone to bow down to him.

I wonder whether that was the king's idea or whether Haman manoeuvred this pliable king into making just that proclamation. And he flies into this rage when he's not giving the honor that he thinks he's entitled to.

[24 : 11] And then again, how does he soothe himself when his desire for this honor and recognition isn't met? He gathers together a group of people to come and to praise him. He talks about his wealth and so on in order that they might admire him for these things.

His idol isn't his wealth. It's public recognition. Ian Duggett, he says, Haman is a case study in what happens in our hearts when our idols are challenged.

He made public recognition his idol and the result was that as long as he was receiving adulation, he felt great. However, when the achievement of his goal was challenged, he responded by lashing out in rage and seeking to feed his idol through boasting.

Even though he still possessed unparalleled power in the kingdom, that wasn't enough. There was a void at the center of his life that no amount of success could fill.

He craves recognition. Now, the truth is we may well be tempted by this same idol.

[25 : 21] tempted to feed this same sense of recognition. To a greater or lesser degree, most of us want to be well regarded by others, don't we?

We want people to know the great things that we've done. And so, perhaps with a little more subtlety than Haman, we boast of our accomplishments. And sometimes, sometimes we do it cloaked under a veil of seeming to seek to glorify God.

This is certainly a temptation for many a pastor. Look at all the people I have helped. Look at how the church is growing. But I'm not boasting because I say at the end, God has been good to us. I think maybe there's a character, an overlap between the sort of character that's willing to, you know, stand up in front of people week after week and talk to a crowd of people.

That there's an overlap between that character trait and an inclination to seek public recognition, to want to be seen to be impressive. It's not a hard line to draw from one to the other, is it?

[26 : 34] But the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11, if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. Paul's not unaware of his strengths, but what he chooses to put on display are his failings.

I wonder whether that's true of you or me. I don't wonder whether it's true of you or me. I know it's not true of me. That's not what I want you to look at. But it should be.

Because in Paul's weaknesses, in my weaknesses, that is where God is glorified.

When everyone can see it was not Paul that did it, it was not me that did it, it was not you that did it, it was God at work. And you know it has to be because there's no way it could have happened any other way.

That is a very different kind of boasting, isn't it? So my friends, if you are tempted by that idol of public recognition, how are you to put it to death?

[27 : 41] Boast in your weakness. But maybe that isn't your particular temptation. If it's not, well I think actually we can generalize a little bit from the example of Haman.

Because how did we know this was Haman's particular favored idol? Well we know that because of how he reacts to it. When the idolatry of recognition is being built up by the events, by what's happening around him, whether that's the invitation to the prestigious event or whether that's the ripple of bows, when the idol is being built up, Haman's mood rises.

And when something threatens that idol, he's enraged. So if we're going to generalize that, then here is the question. With what do your moods rise and fall?

What, when it's threatened, tempts you into disproportionate anger? If something that in the scheme of things is to be honest a minor inconvenience, if that ruins your whole day, well then you're idolizing comfort, aren't you?

If your whole morning is going to be thrown off the first time this season that you have to scrape the frost off the car because you're a few minutes later getting off and away, well comfort and convenience has become an idol and it might not be quite that trivial.

[29 : 13] Or if the unexpected bill that drops through the door, if that causes not just disappointment, but anger, even though the truth is you can afford to pay it, well if that's the reaction then, is your wealth not an idol?

Family's a tricky one because there are times when it's righteous to be angry that another person is being threatened or harmed. Parents are rightly protective, but we still need to watch this one.

There absolutely is such a thing as idolizing family. So, if your child not achieving the academic or the sporting success that you expect, if that causes you to be angry with the child or angry with the school that you think has failed them or angry with God, if that lack of success causes anger, then you've crossed that line, haven't you?

I think there's probably more subtle signs too. So, this is my challenge. Watch your emotions. Watch how you feel this week.

When you find yourself feeling high as a kite or you find yourself down in the depths of despair or you find yourself off in a rage, when you find yourself feeling these things, trace it back.

[30 : 47] What caused you to feel that way? Because there's a good chance that behind that event that caused that emotion, that underneath that event you will find idolatry.

You will find the thing that is more precious to you than it should be. the thing that in some respects you are placing where God deserves to be.

Now, if we generalize that and we find our idolatries, what do we do with it? Well, let's look again at Haman's example. How do we respond to these things?

Well, Haman hasn't recognized his pride. He hasn't recognized his desire for recognition as idolatry. And he might not care if he did know it was. But still, how he responds to his situation is instructive. Do you see that when he's setting up this poll, what he's responding to, what he's dealing with, is a symptom, not the actual problem.

[31 : 53] The supposed solution to his wounded ego is to have Mordecai killed. Somebody hurts you, have them removed. Now, most of us are not in the position to have somebody executed for offending us.

But we're still inclined to respond to challenges and difficulties at a surface level, aren't we? My wealth is threatened.

We'll go and find a way to get more of it. Or better, you know, campaign for a system where somebody will just give me free handouts so I don't actually have to work. My sense of self-worth is challenged because a mistake I made might be seen by somebody else at work.

My boss might hear about what I got wrong. Well, I'm going to go and deflect attention by pointing out somebody else's flaws. We deal with the presenting problem, right?

Just like Heyman did. But it's not a solution, is it? Because the problem isn't really how I feel.

[32 : 56] The problem is the idol that has hold of my heart. And so the only true solution is to confront that idol head-on. So why is suffering a blessing?

Well, because when suffering comes, we're forced to confront the idolatry of our comfort. Why am I affronted by this pain? Why does it feel wrong?

wrong? Like I don't deserve this? Well, because I've got it in my head that I'm entitled to a life of comfort and ease. Why do I get so concerned when the unexpected bill comes up?

Because I'm trusting my money to keep me safe and well fed, not the God who clothes the ladies of the field in all their splendor. So folks, your idolatries, they may not lead to an existential threat to a whole race of people.

But the truth is your idolatries are a threat to your soul. And they may well be a threat to others around you as well.

[34 : 11] So when you've watched your emotions and you've identified that idol, what do you do with it? My friends, bring it to God. Because remember, God is not the capricious toddler king.

God doesn't require you to come to him in trembling and trepidation. Even when you're coming and saying, this is what I've got wrong. This is the thing I've tried to put in the place where only you should be.

This is the way I have failed. This is the idol I've been following again. The one that I've repented of ten times before. Here it is again.

My friends, God loves you as a father. He offers you forgiveness. He offers you help. So come and confess before him your putrid idols and ask him to release you from their hold.

And then when you find yourself next week carving that idol afresh, do the same thing with it again. let's pray.

[35 : 27] Lord God, thank you that though our plans are uncertain and often subject to counter plans and rarely go exactly as we intend.

Thank you that your plans are not like that. Thank you that even our worst idols cannot stand up against you.

And thank you that you have shown us your character, your loving forgiveness. Thank you that you stand ready to forgive time and again and again.

So Lord, when the evil one whispers in our ears that you you are like Xerxes, prone to fly off into a rage, when he says that in our ears, give us the strength to respond with your word, to say, no, I know what my God is like, and to come and to throw our worst deeds before you, to bring them to you as the only one who can forgive us for them, as the only one who can put those idols to death, as the only one who can give us hearts of flesh instead of stone, as the only one who welcomes us again and again and again.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you purchased on the cross the right to do that. You paid the price for our forgiveness.

[37 : 11] Help us to recognize that it is sufficient. Amen.