

The tables begin to turn

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 September 2021

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 0 0] Our readings this evening are from the book of Esther. We read from Esther chapter 5 at verse 9. And we're reading to the end of chapter 6.

Chapter 6 verse 14. Esther chapter 5 from verse 9. 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 honoured 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.

[1 : 1 6] 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, 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.

That night the king could not sleep. So he ordered the book of the Chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

What honour and recognition has Mordecai received for this? The king asked. Nothing has been done for him, his attendants answered. The king said, Who is in the court?

Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him. His attendants answered, Haman is standing in the court.

[2 : 3 9] Bring him in, the king ordered. When Haman entered, the king asked him, What should be done for the man the king delights to honour? Now Haman thought to himself, Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?

So he answered the king, For the man that the king delights to honour, 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 honour, 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 honour.

Go at once, the king commanded Haman, 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.

So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour.

[3 : 55] Afterward, Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman rushed home with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh, his wife, and all his friends, everything that had happened to him.

His advisors and his wife Zeresh said to him, Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him.

You will surely come to ruin. While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared. Amen.

So Esther chapter 6, do you have that open if you can please? I wonder, as we approach chapter 6, I wonder whether you think of God as having a sense of humour.

Maybe that's not quite the right way of thinking about it, but the evidence seems to suggest at least that God has deliberately made us with a sense of humour, and that he seems to want to engage with us on that level.

[4 : 59] I don't really see how you could avoid that conclusion when we come to this chapter that one commentator calls the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible. Now, obviously, the book of Esther is intended to make a theological point.

That's why it's there for us in Scripture, part of God's Word, because it illumines his character. It gives us examples of men and women who do and don't live for God, and points us to the need for a true rescuer.

It does these things. That's why it's here. But let's not lose sight of the fact that, as well as those things, it is also a delightful story, isn't it? This is a wonderful narrative, carefully crafted to convey a point and to give the impression that's intended.

Just to be abundantly clear, when I say it's a carefully crafted narrative, I am not saying that it has been made up or that the record of events has been distorted in order to fit nicely into a predetermined structure.

But what I am saying is that, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer who puts this account together has recorded those actual true events in such a way as to convey the points that he wants to make.

[6 : 14] An accurate record structured to give an impression. And the irony in this chapter seems to be deliberate. Peter Lau suggests that, as we enjoy the verbal and dramatic irony in Esther, perhaps we'll begin to see more irony in our own world.

Irony can make us laugh when things are not as they should be, even when we feel like crying. Hopefully it points us to a better reality and helps us to trust in the one who has the power to make that reality come true.

So the writer, I think, intends to delight, to help us to feel in our hearts, to feel God's provision for his people, not just understand it in our heads, but to feel it, to engage all of our faculties and with them our sense of humor.

And so to convey that in this chapter, we see a couple of different themes at play. First, we have a delicious reversal. And then second, kind of interwoven with that, we'll observe the folly of pride.

Last week, remember, we saw the start of Esther's rescue plan, as it were, her first feast, to which she invited the king and Haman.

[7 : 30] Esther's plan swinging into action. But progress was really slow with that progress of seeking to resolve the threat to all the Jews. And much faster paced than Esther's plan was Haman's extra bonus plan, his plan to impale Mordecai.

And that's where our reading began. So we're left with that question, whether Esther will succeed at all. And if she does succeed in saving the Jews, will she do it in time to save Mordecai?

In the start of chapter 6, the scene shifts, shifts away from Haman's house, where the plan for the pole is being worked out, and shifts to the king's bedroom.

The clock is ticking. But the master storyteller wants to leave us in suspense before we see what will happen to Haman that we shift to this other sphere of action.

And it doesn't really seem to be the most gripping of scenes, does it? An insomniac king decides that the solution to his woes is the soft drone of his officials reading to him the dry record of the events of his kingdom.

[8 : 36] He hopes that will be enough to send him off to sleep. Seems quite plausible, doesn't it? And it might well have worked if it hadn't been that they got the record of Mordecai exposing an assassination attempt.

Remember, we read about that back at the end of chapter 2. And we noted then when we read it the strangeness of the fact that Mordecai wasn't honored in response, but actually Haman rose to power in the immediate aftermath.

And hearing this, obviously the king has some inkling that he failed to bestow proper honor. And so he checks with his officials, discovers this is indeed the case, and he's horrified.

And well, he might be, because this is a terrible loss of face. For an emperor of the ancient Near East to fail to offer proper reward for such service, it is shameful for the emperor.

It's the duty of governments not only to punish wrongdoing, which he'd managed to do, you know, he executed the conspirators, but it's also the duty of governments to reward those who do good.

[9 : 41] And Xerxes has failed to do so. And so recalling this, all thought of sleep has now fled. He must act quickly. And as is so consistently the case for him, he lacks the inclination to think for himself, to solve the problem on his own initiative.

So he casts about for someone to advise him. Who's there in the courts? And it just so happens that Haman, Haman is so keen to see Mordecai impaled that he hasn't waited for full light.

In the early hours of the morning, while the king was still, you know, 10 minutes ago trying to get back to sleep, Haman's already there waiting, first in line to see the king at the earliest possible moment.

So keen is he to see Mordecai done away with. And you can imagine Haman's delight when earlier, even than he'd hoped, he's summoned into the presence of the king.

But before he can get a word out about his own plans, the king preempts him with his own thoughts. And here is this joyous irony of the chapter as the king and Haman talk past one another, completely at cross purposes, each thinking that one thing is being conveyed whilst the other takes away something completely different.

[10 : 54] Haman, verse six, can't even imagine that the king might honor someone other than him. So inflated is his ego that not for one second does he think that someone else could be worthy of praise and honor.

He's straight in with his explanation of what he himself would like. Because the honors that he suggests are perfectly suited to his own desires, aren't they? He has no need for further wealth.

We've established already he's a very wealthy man. Now what Haman wants is he wants to dress up as king for the day. Royal robes, a royal horse, a parade of honor, everyone bowing down to him, amazed at how the king chooses to honor him.

Haman has aspirations far above his station. He wants to at least play at, if not have the reality of becoming king. So this is all set up.

And then in verse 10, we have this unexpected, but to us, delicious reversal. The king's words are recorded in such a way as to point out just how dramatic the reversal is.

[12 : 03] He says to Haman, do this for Mordecai the Jew who sits at the king's gate. Now, it's perfectly reasonable that the king needs to specify which Mordecai.

It's not a particularly rare name then, not like it would be now. But the fact that the writer bothers to specify is surely deliberate, isn't it? Because we as readers have no doubt as to which Mordecai is being referred to.

But the writer chooses to include that this is the Jew who sits at the king's gate. We're given first the name, then the reminder that he's a Jew, then the fact that he sits at the king's gate. You can imagine each of these things landing as a body blow on Haman, can't you?

Mordecai, the man who you hate. The Jew, the very people you vowed to destroy. Remember, the king never bothered to find out which people he'd agreed to let Haman eliminate.

The one who sits in the gate. You know, the one who sits there. Not standing, not bowing, just sits there, right there in public where everyone can see him.

[13 : 05] And yes, that Mordecai. And Haman, Haman can do nothing. He sees that the king's mind is made up. He fears to protest. Any attempt to see Mordecai impaled as he had first intended, well, that's surely going to fail.

In fact, for him to suggest it now would be to invite the king's retribution to fall on him. What would the king care about a slight to his prime minister's honor when that's set against a threat to the king's own life?

Haman has no choice. He must go and carry out the king's commands to the letter. And you can just picture, can't you, the look on Haman's face as he walked alongside that horse, parading Mordecai through the streets, shouting, this is what he's done for the man the king delights to honor.

We're not told about his inner thoughts, nor are we told one on earth went through Mordecai's head as this was happening. No, just he went and did as instructed.

And this reversal, where what Haman thinks is for him, suddenly turns out to be for Mordecai. This reversal functions as the hinge of the whole book.

[14 : 21] We can tell this is the hinge because the narrative of the whole book is structured to point us not only to victory for God's people, but to point us to this theme of complete reversal, an impending, what should go one way suddenly goes another.

See, God in the book of Esther doesn't just preserve his people by the skin of their teeth. No, what looked like it was going to be a moment of abject defeat, a moment of even annihilation, it turns out instead to be a day of great victory, a day of rejoicing.

Chapter 9, verse 1, makes this explicit. On the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. That's when the elimination was supposed to happen.

On this day, the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. The tables were turned.

The book of Esther is a story of reversal. If any of you are more up on your literary terminology than I am, maybe you know this as peripeteia, which Aristotle defines as a change by which the action veers around to its opposite.

[15 : 42] You expect one thing to happen and dramatically, the complete reverse comes about. See, the book of Esther is the story of the deliverance of God's people in defiance of what the odds would lead you to expect.

And here, here in chapter 6, this is where that reversal begins. The honor that Haman thought was for him goes instead to Mordecai. The tables have begun to turn.

That's one reason to call this the hinge of the book, the point where the turning begins. There's another reason to call it the hinge, and that comes from looking at how the overall story is structured. We've seen already in what we've read thus far in this book, we've seen several feasts, haven't we?

And maybe it's becoming apparent just how dominant a feature they are in this book. In fact, almost half of the times that the Old Testament uses this word feast, almost half of them are in the book of Esther.

Esther has just 167 of the 23,000-odd verses in the Old Testament, less than 1% of the length of the Old Testament, but 45% of the references to feasting.

[16 : 50] Feasting is a big deal in the book of Esther. It'd be a nice place to live, wouldn't it? The book begins with a pair of feasts, right?

First, the feast for the nobles, then the feast for the people at large. And the book ends with a pair of feasts. First, a feast for the Jews throughout the empire, and then a feast for the smaller set of the Jews within Susa.

And inside those pairs, you've got a feast for Esther's coronation, and a feast when Mordecai rises to authority. And inside those, Esther's two feasts for the king and for Mordecai.

So we've got this far. We've had Esther's first feast thus far. So do you see how the two mirror together? This structure's called a chiasm. We've seen those once or twice in the Psalms and so on, named for the Greek letter chi, you know, shaped like an X, though it's pronounced as a hard C-H.

So we call this a chiasm. I wonder if a hinged structure would be a better name, because there's only really two legs to the structure, not four. But if you are reading Christian books, you may find this term of a chiasm being used.

[17 : 58] So it's a word worth knowing. Anyway, the point is, what does this structure convey? Why is this structure here? Why does the writer, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, choose these scenes to tell us about such that they form this structure?

Well, the point of a chiasm is to focus attention into the middle. X marks the spot. And what is it we find sandwiched between Esther's two feasts in the middle of this chiasm?

chapter six. Mordecai honored, Haman shamed, at least in his own eyes. This is where the reversal begins. This is the pivot point of the narrative.

This is what it focuses in on. And that may well not be what you might expect. Because you'd think that the pivot point would be the highest point of dramatic tension within the narrative, wouldn't you?

That's, you know, if you're writing a film script, things begin to turn around just at the point where you think they cannot get any worse, don't they? And that's almost always a scene with a dramatic confrontation between the protagonist and the hero facing off against the antagonist, the villain.

[19 : 13] But we don't get that face-off until the second banquet, the next chapter, when Esther goes and confronts Haman. But as Esther is structured, the pivot point of this peripety, it comes earlier.

The reversal begins before the tension of the narrative is resolved. The pivot comes because of the aftermath of an apparently insignificant, it's a sleepless night.

We all have them. It's an ordinary thing on which somehow everything turns around. The shift begins. And by setting the pivot in the context of this insignificant event where at least half the main characters aren't involved at all, the focus is shifted away from the people involved.

Karen Jobes says, making the pivot point of this peripety an insignificant event rather than the point of highest dramatic tension. By doing this, the author takes the focus away from human action.

If the pivot point of the peripety had been at the scene where Esther approached the king uninvited, there was tension there. Or the scene where Esther confronts Haman, where the tension is coming.

[20 : 28] Then the king and or Esther gets spotlighted as the actual cause of this reversal. But if you separate the pivot point, the point where the reversal begins, if you separate that from the point of the highest dramatic tension, then the characters in the story aren't spotlighted as the cause of reversal.

And so it is reinforced the message that nobody in this story, not even the most powerful man in the empire, nobody in the story is in control of what is about to happen.

And unseen power controls this reversal of destiny because the pivot comes at the wrong moment. See, my friends, God is not bound by the significance of the people through whom he works.

God does not need to organize his affairs such that his objectives are achieved by significant people doing significant things. God is every bit as much at work in the sleepless night as in the obviously tense and dramatic going into the king's throne room.

I mean, ask yourself, why was the sleepless night the same night as Haman was busy setting up his pike? Why did the king turn to the chronicles not to wine or his concubines as the remedy for his sleeplessness?

[21 : 56] Why was it that particular event that happened to turn up in the reading? Why did Haman come to the palace quite so ridiculously early? Time after time the coincidences pile up. We could find more if we looked.

Why? Because God is in control. The tables have begun to turn. And this delicious reversal of Mordecai honored with what Haman intended for himself it whets our appetite for the reversals yet to come as God controls all that happens.

But before we move on from this chapter as I say I want to spend a few minutes reflecting on the folly of pride. See, why does Haman end up in this predicament?

Why does he get stuck in this unpleasant situation where he's forced to give honor to his greatest enemy? Comes down to pride doesn't it?

I love Peter Lau's phrasing he says the king's question might have thrown Haman off balance but it was the size of his head that toppled him. Yeah, something external throws him off balance but his own ego topples him all because he can't imagine the king could be honoring someone else so confident that he is the king's favored one.

[23 : 17] He's already had the pike set up for Mordecai before he has permission to use it so confident that his position is sure that he's the one who will be honored that no other possibility occurs to him.

But the truth is that Zeresh and the advisors they're the ones who have the right of it. Verse 12 Haman having been forced to honor Mordecai he rushes home with his head covered in grief.

Just like last chapter he relates everything that's happened this time with not a hint of the boasting that marked the previous account no he is no longer holding his head high instead his head is bowed and the advisors and his wife they tell him why.

Since Mordecai before whom your downfall has started is of Jewish origin you cannot stand against him you will surely come to ruin. She knows the truth doesn't she?

And she's not alone in this role as a foreigner recognizing the power and authority of God. Think about the sailors in the book of Job. Job? Jonah. The sailors in the book of Jonah or Rahab and the Gibeonites during the conquest of the land or Naaman who goes to Elijah seeking healing or King Nebuchadnezzar and then in the New Testament the centurion who stands at the foot of the cross and exclaims surely he was the son of God.

[24 : 43] Unexpected people who recognize the power and authority of God. And that is the vital difference isn't it? See the biggest problem with pride the problem isn't how it results in you thinking of yourself so much.

The problem isn't so much how it results in you treating other people the problem fundamentally is how pride leads you to treat God. And what Haman shows is that he is not willing to bow the knee to anyone.

I don't think he's even happy bowing to Xerxes though presumably he must do it. Haman can't stand to not be given what he thinks is his due.

He shows this in the honor that he dreams up for himself doesn't he? He dreams of usurping the king's own place royal robes and all that. The problem is not that he wants Xerxes' place the problem ultimately is that he stands opposed to God.

This ancient end move between Agag and Yahweh it's reared its ugly head once more. So Haman's head was Haman's fall it wasn't predictable according to what anyone could see happening and yet his fall was utterly predictable in the light of God's word wasn't it?

[26 : 04] You and I knew this was coming from the moment he was introduced didn't we? We sang a few minutes ago from Psalm 16 whoever turns to other gods will find remorse and shame.

Psalm 2 exhorts the nations kiss the son lest he be angry. Those who refuse to bow willingly to bow the knee in humility they'll find that their lofty pride only gives them further to fall on the day when they must ultimately bow.

Just at the moment when Haman in his pride thought he was going to have his decisive victory he's going to get permission to put Mordecai up on that pike.

He thinks this is his moment. He thinks the honor is being offered to him. He thinks he's going to put to death his great enemy and at that very moment the tables are turned.

Victory turns to ashes in his mouth. It's a dramatic reversal. Remind you of anyone? Jesus Christ shattered the devil's plans.

[27 : 13] He defeated our great enemy. He hung there apparently dying. He hung there apparently defeated. The devil thought he had won the day.

He thought it was his moment of triumph. And in that very moment God's great victory was won. The tables turned once and for all.

And so still today we say kiss the son lest he be angry. Friends, if your pride is such that you will not bow to God, then hear the warning of these verses.

Recognize with Zeresh that no one can stand against those of Jewish origins or more properly against the seed of the Jews. The seed does mean descendants. It is talking about Jews in general, but seed is a singular word here.

It is also pointing to the one definitive seed. No one can stand against the seed of the Jews, against Jesus himself. Those who try to stand against him will surely come to total ruin.

[28 : 25] Now Zeresh gets as far as realizing that Haman can't prevail against the Jews. She sees something of the power of God, but I don't know whether she knew what to do with that realization or whether it just kind of drove her to despair.

And I suppose that could be true of people today as well, that they're driven to see God's power and despair in the face of it. But actually there's no mystery about what to do with this realization is there?

Kiss the son, come to Jesus, repent of your opposition, repent of your pride, and throw yourself on his mercy. And we rightly recognize that this is first and foremost a call for what you must do if you have never done it before, if your pride has utterly prevented you from bowing to God.

And maybe some of you are watching who are in that situation. But it's also an ongoing call, isn't it? Because the truth is our pride rears its head again and again and again.

Rather than wanting to usurp the place of the emperor of the Persian empire, actually our pride is such that so often we end up wanting to usurp God's own place.

[29 : 52] That even having said that we want to follow him, what we end up doing is doing anything but. It's following our own plans, our own desires because of our pride.

Well, the solution is the same, isn't it? Kiss the sun, come to Jesus, repent of your opposition, repent of your pride, and throw yourself on his mercy.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we are sorry when we have failed to give you your due, when we have failed to live the way that you call us to live, when we have acted as God of our own lives, when we have sought to be in charge, thought we know better than you how things should be organized, how we should behave.

Lord Jesus, we are sorry as we come to you in repentance. Thank you that we do so coming not to an angry God who will punish us, but rather coming to a God who delights to show mercy.

And so we depend upon that mercy afresh today. we know we will need your mercy each and every day of our lives. Give us the humility to seek it, not to think that we are sufficient, but to come again and again in repentance, seeking your mercy and your grace.

[31 : 35] Lord, thank you that you always welcome us to come to you, that you welcome us to come whatever our situations, whatever our circumstances.

Lord, in this room there are some really difficult situations represented. There are people here who have been struggling in pain for years and decades.

There are people who have days where they can hardly function at all. There are people who have days where their anxiety is such that they know they should trust in you and yet really struggle to do so.

There are people whose home situations are beyond their understanding, beyond their ability to control, that cause such grief and pain.

Lord, thank you that in all of these situations you are sufficient. in each of these situations, Lord, give strength to come to return to you, to cast ourselves daily upon you as the one who gives mercy and as the one who offers comfort and protection and loving care.

[32 : 59] Thank you that whatever we face, we do it with your loving arms wrapped around us. And we pray that those loving arms would be readily apparent to the young people as they head off to university.

Lord, we pray for Nathan in these first few nights in his new living arrangements as he makes new friends, as he establishes himself up in Glasgow.

Lord, be with him, comfort him, care for him, be all that he needs. And as Abby and Esther prepare to go off later this week, as they move to the other side of the country as well, Lord, go before them.

May they know that as they arrive, they have not gone away from you, but to a place where you already are, to a place where you will be beside them in all that they experience, to a place where you intend not only to equip them to survive, but to thrive, to flourish, to serve you to bring honor to your name in what they do there.

Lord, we recognize that in whatever situation you place us, your desire is for us to bring you glory in the choices that we make, in the ways that we act.

[34 : 22] And so, Lord, we pray that you would equip us as a church, as families, as individuals, you would equip us to glorify you in whatever you have called us to.

We pray to you for Duncan as he begins his work as the minister at the church plant in Helensboro. Thank you for calling him and Lydia to serve your people there, and we pray that as they settle into their new home and as they settle into their new family in that church, that you will bless them and through them and through your church gathered there, you will bless that town and that region, that it might be a beacon of hope in this lost world.

Lord, thank you that you are a great God, that you are at work in this world, not absent but wonderfully present each and every day.

To you be all the glory. Amen.