

Esther's Wisdom and Haman's Folly

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Preacher: Rev Iver Martin

[0 : 00] Right now, one of the flavors of the month is The Hobbit. The Hobbit, of course, is a book that was written by J.R.R. Tolkien and has recently been made into a movie, which I happened to manage to get to see in Edinburgh last week. Enjoyed it very much indeed. And of course, The Hobbit is one of the books that Tolkien writes from a Christian worldview. He was a great friend of C.S. Lewis.

And it's about, it's a fantasy, of course, about the dwarf kingdom, which is invaded by the evil dragon. And the dwarfs are evicted from the kingdom and from the city. And they make their way to the shire where the hobbits live. And they try to enlist the help of Bilbo to go all the way back to help them to get rid of and to defeat the dragon. And of course, as you probably know, he was very reluctant to go with them and had to be persuaded. And at one point, he has to stand in between two arguments. The argument that Saruman gave to him, which was this, only great power, he said, can keep evil at bay. That was Saruman's advice. But Gandalf's advice was this, no, he says, I have found that it is the small things that keep evil at bay. God works by that principle. That's the principle that you will find all the way through the Bible. It was through the smallness of the faith of Moses' mother that she hid him against the threat of Pharaoh's army.

It was the smallness of Hannah's prayer, which resulted in the birth of her son, Samuel. And through Samuel, God raised up a man who was going to lead the people of Israel against their enemies and to develop them in his purpose. When Goliath was threatening the very existence of Israel, it was not through King Saul that God worked. It was through David that God won the victory. And when God chose to redeem sinners from their sin, when he so loved the world, he sent his son to become small at Bethlehem when he was born by Mary and when he grew up in the home of an obscure family, a family that was unknown. He was born in secrecy and obscurity without the knowledge of the nobility at that time. It was through these people that God defeated the devil and all that he stood for. And Esther was one of those small things, small people, ordinary, not mighty people, that God used and he chose to save the entire Jewish nation from destruction. She had been enlisted out of her comfort zone in order to take the risk that could have cost her her life and to save God's people. There are two central characters, two opposing characters in chapter 5. There is Esther and what she does as she makes her way into the king's chamber and Haman as he makes his way from the king's presence with an illusion of grandeur back to his home only to be surrounded and encouraged by his friends into building a gallows where Mordecai, as far as Haman was concerned, was going to be hanged.

The story so far, as you'll know if you've been coming here, but you'll know it anyway, I'm sure, is that Esther has become queen to King Ahasuerus, the king of Persia, round about 450 BC.

[4 : 49] Haman, the Agagite, has risen to power and he demands that everyone bows to him. Mordecai, Esther's cousin who's brought her up, he refuses to bow to him like everyone else, and so he infuriates Haman, and so much so that he enters into a deal, Haman and the king, to eradicate not just Mordecai, but Mordecai's people who are the Jews. When Mordecai, as well as all the other Jews, hear of the plan to eradicate them and to exterminate them, Mordecai desperately gets in touch with Esther through an intermediary and he pleads with her to ask her to go to the king and to ask to plead for the salvation of the Israelites. Now, the plan sounds plausible to Esther except for two major problems. One is that no one is allowed into the king's presence without an invitation. If anyone were to come into the king's presence, then they run the risk of being put to death, and this wasn't just the theory, this was the practice. If anyone went into the king's presence without an invitation, that person could and would be put to death. The second problem was, and we'll see this further on into the book, the second problem was that the law of the Persians, that's why we have this saying amongst us even to this day, the law of the Medes and the

Persians cannot be revoked, and that was true once a law was made, and once this law was made to eradicate the Jewish people, it could not be revoked. But that's one that will have to come to, a bridge we'll have to cross later on towards the end of. The first problem was, how was Esther to get an audience with the king without him, without being executed in the process? Mordecai, as we saw the last time, he issues this great challenge before Esther, and he says, do you do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews? For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise from the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish, and who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this. And we looked at that phrase and how relevant it was for God's people today, for Christians today, and the opportunities which are being given to us, even as ordinary, normal people who are perhaps not very famous, we're not celebrities, we're not in positions of power, and yet the challenge is to take the opportunities that we have because God will use them to His glory in some way. We may not ever see the result of it, but God weaves into His plan the actions and the obedience and the faith and the courage of His people, and each one of us has been brought to this day-to-day for a reason. God has a work for us to do if we take hold of that challenge in faith, but it always involves us leaving our comfort zone. If we want an easy life, then don't follow Christ. Christ made that perfectly plain when He said, if anyone would come after me, He must deny himself and take up His cross daily and follow me. Following

Jesus is active, courageous, obedient. So, I hope that that's the frame of mind that we're all in today. If you're a follower of Jesus, we have to be active and courageous and ready to take the risks. And that is exactly the marvelous example that's in chapter 5. That didn't mean that Esther was not afraid. I reckon she must have been terrified at the prospect. And yet, what? The one principle which guides Esther forward every step of the way can only be called biblical, God-given wisdom. It doesn't mean that we that we can do away with all our fears and our hesitation and our fear. But in Esther's situation, she inched her way forward. Despite the terror that must have been in her heart, she inched her way forward. Let me quote to you another quote from *The Hobbit*. I promise I won't ever do this again.

I want to do this just because it's so popular right now. There's one time when Bilbo was in a tunnel, and when he doesn't know what to do, and he's thinking to himself, and these are his words, go back, he thought, no good at all. Go sideways, impossible. Go forward, the only thing to do. On we go, so up he got, and trotted along with his little sword held in front of him, and one hand feeling the wall, and his heart all a patter and a pitter. That's the way that Tolkien describes the fear that was in his. Esther is the same. There's one hand on her sword, and there's another hand on the wall. Perhaps there is a great measure of darkness as she inches her way forward, but she's got her two hands are holding the two things that are necessary for her to make the right decision. The sword in her hand, and the hand that's touching the wall, that's feeling her way forward, inch by inch, step by step, as she's guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the way it goes, and that's the way it goes with

God's people. Their sword is in one hand, and with the other hand, they're feeling their way through their lives. That sums up what true wisdom is. Remember what the Bible says about true wisdom, that it begins with the fear of the Lord, and that's the way that Esther begins. As she makes her way into the king's chamber, as she makes her way into the king's courtyard, she is doing it by the fear of the Lord. How do we know that? Because she asks Mordecai to get everyone to fast. Now, amongst the Jewish people, fasting wasn't something that they just did on its own. Fasting always accompanied prayer. Fasting's no use by itself. Very often, people ask, well, is fasting still relevant amongst God's people today? I say it is. I say that with shame, because a long time since I ever combined.

But it's only relevant when prayer and fasting go together. I'll tell you why. Because the only good that fasting does is it focuses our minds on what we're praying for, and it takes away the distraction. [12:08] And that's why God's people remember in ancient times that if you were going to have food, it meant preparing food. It meant there was no—in those days, they weren't able to go to the fridge and take out a Tesco ready-made curry and put it in the microwave, and five minutes later, it's ready. No, they had to prepare, and that required long, hard work in gathering the original ingredients together. It took hours to prepare food, and these hours could have been spent in prayer. And that's what fasting was all about. It's when God's people, they were so aware of danger or what was happening amongst God's people that they just did away for a wee while, maybe 24

hours or two days or whatever. They did away with all the time that they took in preparing meals, and they concentrated themselves on prayer.

And if this wasn't a reason to fast, I don't know what. When the very future of the people of God was in doubt, of course they fasted, but they prayed, all of them, en masse. You know, there's nothing like a threat to our existence to focus our minds in prayer. I think I said that last time. And that there are times in the life of God's people when God allows them to experience danger and difficulty and darkness in order for us to get rid of all the non-essentials that are in our lives, which keep us from enjoying a truly focused Christian life that is committed to the Lord. Isn't that true?

I go amongst people, Christians all the time, and they all say the same thing. In our modern life that's filled with all the gadgets and the fullness and the excesses of 21st century, then God has been pushed out to the periphery. Isn't that true?

And there is no way in which God resolves that other than putting us through painful experience, even threatening and dangerous experiences in order for us to re-evaluate our lives. And that's what was happening there. I think I said last time that the Jewish people had perhaps become a little too comfortable in Susa and in Babylon and all these places where they had been taken as captive. They had settled down. They had built homes for themselves. And they had perhaps begun to lose sight of their true identity as God's people. And that's what happens when we're enjoying a great life, when everything's going well for us. We tend to lose sight of our identity as God's people. Oh yeah, we know that we're Christians, and yet it doesn't take up a great deal of our efforts or our time, because it's all taken up with ourselves. But that's what was happening yesterday. And you can see how there was only one solution to this great problem, and that was that that began with the Jews, all of them, declaring a fast. And they would have all gathered together, would have been praying in their homes, they would have been gathering in their homes, they would have been pleading with the Lord. They would have sometimes, I guess some of them, this is the first time they would have prayed in ages. But now they can see the danger that they're in. They're coming to the Lord, and they're remembering who they are, just like they were in Egypt, remembering and crying out to the Lord for deliverance.

And meanwhile, Esther, behind the wall of the palace, is fasting herself, and I guess praying herself. But she's also feeling her way forward. Her hand is on the wall, and her other hand is on the sword, and she's in darkness feeling her way forward. It's clear to me that she spent ages thinking and planning what she was going to do, how she was going to make her move. What she did in chapter 5 is not the product of some kind of impulsive person, a person who does now and thinks later.

[16:13] She must have sat down for a long time and prayerfully worked out in her own heart from what she knew about the Persian system, what it allowed and what it didn't allow, and what she knew personally of Ahazuerus. Because I guess that at this time, round about this time, she would have at least in part got to know him a little bit better. I don't know exactly how much she knew him, because she was only one of many, many women who he connected with. And so she wouldn't, I mean, she tells herself that it was some time since she had seen him last. And yet she knew enough to know how to make her move. Now, what does wisdom do? It begins with the fear of God. We've said that already, with the fasting and with the praying. But then I want you to notice that her wisdom knows where and when to act. Her wisdom knows how to speak. Her wisdom knows who she's dealing with.

She's using the right procedures. She knows the law of the land of Persia. It's no use her saying, I belong to the Jewish nation. God is our God. And we don't care what you say, because we are God's people. And you are pagans, and you worship false gods. And I'm here to tell you that I worship the true God. No, that would have got her beheaded right away. But she knows what the right procedures are. She dresses in her royal robes. Why? Because God had put her in that position for a reason.

She recognized that by his providence, she was queen. I guess, like we said a while ago, I guess that it would have been really hard for her to go through the process of being chosen queen.

And yet, she did it. And by God's providence, she was there at the right time. She's going to respect the authority of the king, whether she likes that authority, whether she would choose to be in the palace or not. I'm sure she would never have chosen to be where she was if she was given a free choice. And yet, she didn't have a free choice. But she respects the authority of the king. And she knows also that she cannot just blurt out her problem when she does go into the king. And when he amazingly, remember, of course, that he really loved her because of her character, which I'm

absolutely sure is connected with her faith in the Lord, although it doesn't say that, all the signs are that she was a true believer in the Lord. And I'm sure that that shone in her character, and it won the king's heart. There's just something about Esther. So, when she appeared in her royal robes, and she's standing on the outside, and she's waiting, she's not marching into the king. That would have been arrogant. But he sees her on the outside, and his heart is won over once again. There's no question of him having her put to death because he loves her. And so, he holds up. As soon as he sees her, he holds out the royal scepter to her, which is a signal for her to come in. And he knows right away that she must have something to say to him. There must be a reason why she's taken the chance, and where she's laid her neck on the line. That was the penalty. She's laid her neck on the line.

There must be something that would have made it all worthwhile. And so, he asked her, what is it that you want? And he was so filled at that moment in time with love and admiration for Esther. He said, look, it doesn't matter what it is, up until half my kingdom. Now, here's the question.

[20 : 14] Why did she not just tell him? Why did she not just blurt it out? There was the opportunity. She might have said to herself, here it is. God has given me an answer to my prayer.

I'm just going to say it. She didn't. She chose to delay. Why was that? Well, can you not see?

If she had chosen that moment, remember the king's not alone. He's got all his nobles beside him, all his advisors. He's always surrounded by people who are telling him what to do. That's made clear in the first chapter. Can you imagine what would have happened if she had said to him, you have made a law with Haman to destroy my people? How embarrassing would that have been for the king? It would have showed him up. It would have introduced a massive awkwardness in the king's court, and his gut reaction as king would have just said, look, take this woman out of here.

He's already been mortified by a woman, by his previous wife. Remember the previous wife all the way back in chapter 1, where he called his wife to display herself to him and to all his buddies, and she refused to come? And you can imagine how embarrassing that would have been for him.

Everybody's talking about him, and he's lost his credibility amongst his courtiers or whatever you call them. Now, if she had said what she wanted to say right away, it would have been the same thing again. Yet another embarrassment for the king. And of course, we all tend to defend ourselves, won't we? We go on the defensive. He would have said right away, well, if I am first and foremost a king, I cannot have my wife coming in here. I've been through all that before.

[22 : 18] But instead, there is this marvelous, skillful, delicate feeling her way, her hands on the wall. She's in the darkness. She's feeling her way, inch by inch by inch.

And she needs, if she's going to bring her plea to the king, she needs to take him out of his official environment and into a less formal environment. Because this is a personal, private inquiry. And she knows that if she brings her problem to the king there and then, he is in an official capacity and has to act officially. Remember, the laws of the Medes and the Persians can't be revoked. So she knows she has to get around him quietly, lovingly, skillfully.

Not deceitfully, but skillfully with wisdom. That's what wisdom is. Wisdom is the quality that each one of us should have in growing measure. The quality that not only lives for Jesus, but knows how to live for Jesus in a pagan world. And that prayerfully makes our way forward, asking that God will bring about the events and the events and the challenges and the coincidences and the happenings into which God wants us to go, but knowing how to behave towards others. And it's particularly in our dealings with other people that we need wisdom, isn't it? Not saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Not spoiling the whole thing by blurting out what we think to be the right thing, but it's the wrong way of saying it. It doesn't show the right respect. And all of these, they've taken a lifetime of Christian experience, as well as the application of God's Word in our lives.

And I would like to think that at the beginning of a new year, you'd be asking the Lord tonight for wisdom. Much wisdom. Because there's going to be lots of times we're going to need it.

[24 : 40] There are loads of times when we need it. Wisdom like Esther, to be able to set the goal in front of us, to know what that goal is, but not just to go for it any old way, but to ask the Lord to give you the means and the character and the manner in which you achieve that goal. Now, all of us have blown it in that respect, haven't we? We've learned, I hope, from our mistakes. And yet God increases our wisdom as we make mistakes in His service.

And so she advances in the darkness, holding her sword in one hand, feeling the wall with the other, and making her way slowly but surely towards the end of the tunnel. We'll read about that

later on.

Now, the other gentleman that we hear, if we can call him a gentleman, this is Haman. And he goes, of course, he's invited to the first feast that Esther has organized for them, was going to take place that very day. He can't believe his luck. He can't believe that the honor is being placed upon him, that he, of all people, is being asked, along with the king, to a feast that Esther has arranged for just the two of them. And he is filled with his own delusional sense of his own importance. The more he gets, the more he wants, the more he gets, the more he wants.

And he's just on a high. He's languishing in his position in the kingdom. It can't get better than this. And he's going to go home and he's going to surround himself with friends, friends who only think well of him. You'll never find out who you really are if all your friends are the ones who only like you and are not prepared to tell you the truth about yourself. That's the great thing about Christian fellowship. A true friend, like we sang in that psalm, is the friend who'll tell you when you go wrong. They won't tell you it unlovingly. They'll tell you it lovingly. They'll tell you it because they love you. But there is no point in having friends that only speak nicely about you because that's not going to tell you. That's only going to make you worse and going to encourage you to live the way you're living with all your faults and with all your sinfulness. But that's what he does and that's what he has to do because he doesn't want to hear anything bad about himself because he's addicted. He's addicted to himself. What are you addicted to tonight?

What can't you live without? What is it that gives your life its meaning? I'm not asking whether you're a crack addict or whether you're an alcoholic. If you are, it's great to have you with us. And Jesus can set you free.

[27 : 44] But we're all addicted. Jesus said that. He said whoever sins is a slave to sin. That means we're addicts. And what we're addicted to can be the most ordinary features of our lives.

But when it becomes a God to us, then we're blind. And the danger is that we go blindly through our lives not seeing the truth about ourselves. That's the way Haman was. He was so full of himself because his own importance gave him his... As long as that importance was there, then he was happy. But it didn't take much to send him crumbling to the ground again.

And there are loads of people like that. I read this week an article about Michael McIntyre, the comedian. And I was really interested in what he says at the end of the article.

He kind of bears his soul a little bit. And he says, once I've won the audience, I worry that everything's going to go downhill. I worry about it every minute to the extent that I ask people selling drinks in the audience if they seem happy. Did they enjoy themselves?

I want to do this for the rest of my life. I want people to stay with me and keep coming back. The only thing I'm focused on is the sound of the welcome compared to the applause at the end.

[29 : 30] I need the end to be as good as or better than the beginning. Sometimes I worry about things changing and people not liking me anymore. I feel that I'm walking on a knife edge.

That's what's going to happen. When your life consists of what makes life meaningful for you, you have to have it day by day. It's easy to think about Haman, isn't it? It's easy to imagine him walking out as pleased as punch his head, bursting, walking out the gate through the courtyard and all this crowd of people and they're doing a Mexican wave and reverse. Down they go.

And it's marvelous, isn't it? It must have been marvelous for him to have this sense of his own importance. And yet there was one.

He looked across and there he was, same as always, that one man who refused to bow.

And all his joy was destroyed. Look at what he says. He says, it's really quite amazing, isn't it? He says, this means nothing to me as long as Mordecai the Jew is sitting at the king's gate. You see, if you put all your faith in one thing, then it's going to be destroyed very easily if it's not Jesus.

[31 : 12] Jesus. Perhaps you're here tonight and you're not a Christian and you're all ready for Christmas.

Everything's arranged, more arranged than it ever has been. You look back over the year and you've had a good year. Everything's going well for you. Everything is in its place. You're an organized person. You're looking forward to this great time with your family and friends. Nothing wrong with that. But let me tell you this. If that's what gives you your satisfaction and your happiness and your meaning in life, it will be destroyed. And it won't take much to destroy it.

And I can tell you that if you root your happiness in Jesus, then it won't matter. Events won't matter. It won't matter whether everything else is spoiled. Your happiness in Jesus, your joy in the Lord, nothing can destroy that. And that's what it means to have our meaning in life rooted in Jesus

Christ.

Because that's the only foundation upon which we can build our house. Remember Jesus' story about the house on the rock and the house on sand? If you build your house on the rock, then the storms will come and they'll blow and they'll beat on that house and the house will stand still because your house is firmly built on Jesus and what he has done in his death and resurrection. But if you build your house on the sand, it could be an absolute mansion and you could fill it with everything that you want. You could maybe afford to have the very best of everything.

[33 : 13] And you look at it and it's absolutely, the other one's not a patch on yours. And yet when the storms come and the wind and the rain beat against that house, and they will, your house will crumble.

I wonder what it was about Mordecai that ruined Haman's joy. And I reckon it was this, that Mordecai represented in his refusal to bow down, it wasn't just a personality thing. He represented the voice of God in his conscience. And he was the only person in the world that was prepared to tell him the truth about himself as God sought.

You see, it's possible to surround yourself, to build your life only with things and people that encourage you to live the life that you are living. But there's always that nagging wee voice. And you try and get rid of it, just like Haman, he tried his best. Nothing but the death of Mordecai was his aim. Because he thought that that would give him the happiness and the freedom that he wanted.

[34 : 41] But God has his way of reminding us what life is really about, reminding us that we are guilty and we need him to forgive our sins through Jesus Christ. And that voice is a voice that we don't like to hear. Sometimes it can have tragic consequences. If you're a Christian tonight, and if you're living your life as you should be living, then you'll be a Mordecai.

You will ruin someone's life and ruin their happiness. And someone will say, I wish that guy wasn't there. Because of all the things in this world that give me what I want, it's destroyed because that one person is bugging me so much. But you're doing the right thing because all you're doing is living as God wants you to live. And the more we drift into a secular world, the more that God's people, the more that God wants you to live, the more that God wants you to live. And the more that they will stand out, they will stand out. And they will be unpopular, just like Mordecai. And they will be obvious just by the way that they live. And that's why the easiest thing in the world is just to do what everyone else is doing. It was so easy for everyone just to do what everyone else is doing and bow.

You see, people, the population doesn't ask, why am I doing this? They'll just do it because everyone else is doing it. It's easier just to do, go along with the crowd. It's the same today. The hardest thing is to be a John the Baptist. He did the same thing. He went to the king. All he said was, you're not right in stealing your brother's wife. Now you think, Herod, I'm the king. I don't care what that guy said. But that was enough to get through to his heart. That was the voice of God.

[36 : 47] And I wonder tonight if you are listening to that voice. The voice that says, whatever happiness you're experiencing this evening, one day, your soul will be required of you.

Let's pray.