

Esther 5 Commitment and obsession

“There is no peace for the wicked”

We sometimes joke about strange things. If your life is busy, and you mention it to a friend, they will sometimes come back with what is actually *two* Bible quotes:

“There is no peace,” says the LORD, “for the wicked.”

(Isaiah 48:22)

There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

(Isaiah 57:21)

Not that they are probably meaning this at all seriously, I would really doubt that. But it is just curious and sad that wickedness could be thought of as trivial like that, basically a laughing matter. In the original contexts in Isaiah, this is anything but a joke.

Of course, I'm making far more of this than it really needs, and I don't suggest that you try picking up people on an essentially thoughtless remark. But it does strike me that we have a prime example of the serious truth of these statements in the chapter we've just read together. Isn't there just such a huge difference between Esther, so calmly in control – even though her life hangs in the balance – and Haman, who is totally obsessed with his hatred of Mordecai?

Esther's calm poise contrasts with Haman's driven obsession, as both devote themselves to their objectives

I know I've said it before, but I really think it does bear saying it again. The longer and more intensely you hold a grudge, the more *you don't* hold a grudge; it is the other way around: the *grudge* holds *you*. And you won't get many better examples – or do I mean *worse* examples – of that than Haman. You could almost pity how desperately sad his life has become. He is being consumed by his own evil – even as it looks as if his plans are all coming together. Even if he won, and achieved his objectives, he would still lose, in an even more fundamental sense.

So let's start in on the two different scenes as this melodrama unrolls before us.

Esther's calm poise
Haman's driven obsession

■ **Esther's calm poise (1-8)**

And you know how we have to start, don't you, when we come to introductory words like this ...

On the third day ...

(Esther 5:1)

The third day since what? Is there some relevance to this being the third instead of the thirtieth? If we haven't just read the immediately preceding verses, it pushes us back to them. And when we look back at the end of chapter 4, you'll immediately see just how relevant this is.

Chapter 4, I hope you will remember from last week, is where Esther finally comes into her own. The chapter started with what we probably *thought* was going to be the book's main character (if we managed to forget its title, that is!), Mordecai, calling the shots. Haman's seemingly unstoppable plan to exterminate the Jews has just been made public, and it is *Mordecai* responding:

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry.

(Esther 4:1)

Part of the reason for that is probably to attract the attention of Esther, the Jewish girl who has become queen – but who, by the looks of it, is actually leading a very secluded life in the palace, and is unaware of the huge uproar around the empire.

But after that conversation between Mordecai and Esther, which was actually conducted via intermediaries, when Esther is urged to use her position with the king, even at great personal risk, for the sake of her people ...

Mordecai also gave [Hathach] a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favour and plead with him on behalf of her people.

(Esther 4:8)

And when we get to the end of the chapter, after Esther has resolved that this is indeed a risk she must take ...

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."

(Esther 4:15-16)

... after this, and from then on, it is *Esther* calling the shots.

Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

(Esther 4:17)

Not just calling the shots, but, despite the appalling danger, not hesitating. She has asked for three days of fasting. And ...

On the third day Esther ...

(Esther 5:1)

... she gets to it. From here on until the end of the book, it is Esther, humanly speaking, in charge. We see her wind the king around her little finger with her feminine wiles. The other major power broker in the Persian court, we almost feel sorry for, as one glance at Mordecai sends him into a major meltdown, powerless before his own emotions – the grudge holding *him*.

But there is, first of all, the minor matter of ... death or life. And it appears that Esther has considered this, and uses all of her wisdom and subtlety. Indeed, perhaps she *has* been brought to this position, for such a moment as this!

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.

(Esther 5:1)

And yet, even if she feels not so much “the flow of history” leading her to this point, but the hand of God – though, of course, this book refuses to ever state that categorically – she approaches that moment in extreme weakness.

Yes, she puts on her “royal robes” ... she looks the very best she can, too right! But where had those royal robes come from? Simply at the (perhaps?) whim of the king she is daring to approach. Actually, all the power here is on the other side.

“Royal robes” is just literally, “royalty”. And that word just keeps hammering at us as we read the verse. Bear in mind that although we have the word “royal”, which isn't a whole lot similar in sound to the word “king”, in Hebrew they are *very* close. Over and over in this one verse, the same sound resounds: *royal robes, king's palace, king's quarters, king, royal throne*. How is Esther, little Esther, Hadassah, as she was called, that young Jewish girl, going to fare as she dares enter all this resonance of royalty?

In Persepolis, where Ahasuerus had another palace, he had placed a huge statue of a Persian warrior behind the throne, the warrior bearing a huge axe. Maybe there was one in Susa as well. But Esther would certainly have *felt* the presence of that axe. Remember the deadliness of the situation, as she had described it to Mordecai:

“All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law — to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden sceptre so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.”

(Esther 4:11)

So here is the scenario. On one side of the picture, the king with all these regal trappings, sitting on his throne. And at the doorway to the throne room appears ... *dares* to appear ... no, not just Esther. From here on in the book, she is almost always referred to by means of her title.

And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court ...

(Esther 5:2)

After all the tension has been built up, does that inclusion of the word “Queen” (which is also similar in sound to “king” in Hebrew, by the way) just fractionally give us the nod that this is going to work out OK?

Think of 500 years earlier, “only a boy called David”, going forth to battle the giant Goliath. Against overwhelming odds, you would have said. All the power is on the *other* side. And yet, it is one small stone from a sling that wins the day, not the huge cleaver that was Goliath's weapon.

Think of 500 years *later*, too, a wretch too weak to bear his own cross to the place of crucifixion, deserted by almost all of his followers, will surely be crushed before the combined forces of Jewish religious intrigue and Roman brute force:

“... for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ...”

(Acts 4:27)

And yet, isn't this the way that God will sometimes – or maybe even typically – work? Life is not even as random as it sometimes appears, with freak results just happening:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

(Ecclesiastes 9:11)

Sometimes it is not just “time and chance”, but God delighting to turn things on their heads:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

And let's be more specific than that. That's not just a principle. It is a principle with a pinnacle, a foremost example. When did God *most clearly* make this point, so that “no human being might boast” in his presence?

... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

(1 Corinthians 1:24-25)

So, folks, general point: do not expect your life to be one of confident striding forward in faith. Do not expect the path of your life to be smooth. Do not expect everything to resolve in happy endings in this life. Do not expect churches to storm into communities and congregations to bulge with the triumphant success of glossy evangelistic programmes.

Do not expect glory. Expect weakness. Expect weakness *here*.

Expect people to stumble in their discipleship – but hope for them to be restored and therefore to treasure the grace of God even more. Expect people to *not* be healed, but to limp in pain – and cause other people to wonder even more at the God who is sufficiently *enough* that that pain can be accounted a mere passing annoyance ...

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that

are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

(2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

So Esther is weak. She has no certainty of success before the king. But Jesus was nailed to a cross, and from that position there is *no* chance of success. It stops here. Until the utterly ridiculous, not just the uncertain or unlikely but the totally impossible happens:

... Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ...

(1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

The Esther principle, if you like, taken to the extreme. But yes, back to Esther, standing in the doorway, so very vulnerable. But, as we said, *Queen* Esther. Does that mean ...? *Could* that mean ...?

And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favour in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the sceptre.

(Esther 5:2)

The touching the sceptre wasn't a necessary part of the deal. But Esther was not just prepared for "if I die, I die". If she *didn't* die ... then she has quite a plan up the sleeves of those royal robes. For which, it would not do to appear too eager, too desperate. But teasingly inscrutable would do quite nicely. She touches the tip of the sceptre, and waits for the king to speak. What was it in Esther's mind that could possibly mean she would risk *death* to come before him?

And maybe, because this is the way he himself thinks, he reckons that Esther must be after something.

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."

(Esther 5:3)

This must have been what she was hoping for. For before she had put her royal robes on, she had been in the kitchen with an apron on!

And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king."

(Esther 5:4)

See, even then ... food is the way to a man's heart! Only ... even a relative dummy like Ahasuerus must have worked out that there was going to be more to it than just a meal, even a feast. I mean, you don't risk *death* to just ask your husband to dinner, do you? So ... how could the king *not* say yes to this *trifling* request? ... which must, surely, be part of some bigger, fascinating intrigue?

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.

(Esther 5:5)

And the plan *does* go deeper on Esther's side. Even now, she is not ready to reveal her hand. Not that you could keep this up like the legendary 1001 Arabian Nights. Once more is all she could risk ... and, hopefully, all she would need. So, when, as predicted, the king asks again ...

And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

(Esther 5:6)

And the way the story is told, you can almost see the king being wound around Esther's little finger. The narrator is in no rush. The king is becoming putty in her hands!

Then Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: ..."

(Esther 5:7)

Just like on all of those TV shows where someone is eliminated from the competition each week. That drawn out pause ... Only it ends up feeling a bit more like when they have to take an advert break in *Millionaire*, before the answer is revealed. I can almost picture Esther now like Kaa the snake in the Jungle Book, saying, *Look into my eyes*, as the king is held in suspense before her.

And yet, the moment passes, and it really *is* "Come back tomorrow".

"If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfil 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 said."

(Esther 5:8)

And we will have to wait for that next day to arrive. First, we have seen Esther's calm poise – though I suspect her heart rate *might*, at points, have been just a bit raised. But nothing compared with Haman, and his

■ **Haman's driven obsession (9-14)**

You would think that this would be the pinnacle of Haman's success, the best day of his life. And it *was* ... to start with. A sudden summons from the king ... maybe that would have been a bit nervy to start with. But this feast, goodness ... you just couldn't imagine a more honoured position than this within the whole Persian empire, could you! So no wonder that ...

And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart.

(Esther 5:9)

But just look how things change so quickly. "No peace for the wicked", we said. And doesn't this just show precisely that! Here was something that a man could have taken fully legitimate pleasure in:

In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.

(Proverbs 16:15)

And yet it proves to be a very fragile bubble. It's not as if Mordecai even does anything now. Mordecai maybe doesn't even notice Haman is around.

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.

(Esther 5:9)

Mordecai's just there, going about his business, but just the sight of him and all the old ill-feeling just tumbles out and enrages Haman again. Folks, isn't that just what unforgiveness is like? Just to hear the name, or see the person across the street – or across the church – and those old feelings rise and overwhelm you again.

It's difficult enough when we *have* forgiven someone – which is a decision and an act and an open-ended commitment, to *not* go down that pathway again, to *not* recount to ourselves or to others or to the person you're forgiving, or even to God, what it was that caused that initial rift. But when you *haven't* committed yourself to that ...

Just this week we visited a friend who lives on the road down to Malpas in Truro. We went out for a rather wet walk along the river, and we came to the gate or barrier on the river, just downstream from Truro. In times of especially high water, those gates can be closed, to prevent flooding in the town. I remember many years ago, before that barrier had been built, when one day an especially high tide meant that water came up through the manhole covers in Victoria Square.

But now they have a barrier than can be closed. Apparently, on the very highest tides, even that can be slightly overflowed. But the relatively little bit of water that slops over the top, at the peak of the tide, doesn't cause that much of a problem.

And you can see this with Haman here. He has *no* defences against this hatred of Mordecai. When the tide rises, he is just swamped. The best of days becomes another dark day of bile and fury. He goes home in a blinding rage. And maybe some company will help to distract him from this mood.

Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh.

(Esther 5:10)

Must have been a horrible party, though. Haman must have been such a terrible bore, regaling them with stuff that they must have already known. Do you think his wife needed to be reminded of how many sons they had?

And Haman recounted to them the splendour of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honoured him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king.

(Esther 5:11)

This man should be the envy of thousands, with all these good things to rejoice in. But no. He cannot talk himself out of this black mood. He *knows* how well off he is, *BUT* he also realises that he is just incapable of enjoying any of it, because of this one thing.

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 by 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."

(Esther 5:12-13)

Folks, can I ask if there is something that typically spoils your joy? It could be that you're like Haman, and there is *someone* on whom you focus anger, perhaps even hatred. It could even be, though you might not have actually formalised it and spoken the words, but you have resolved not to forgive that person.

Or maybe you have some sneaking resentment towards God. Again, you might not have put it into words, but you're feeling that you can't really be happy *unless* ... something. Unless you are married. Unless you have children. Unless you have a satisfying job. Unless you have a home of your own. Unless you have a particular brand of car. Unless you are healed of this or that condition.

Or, on a different tack, not so much resentment but regrets: if only I had not done *that thing*, which I cannot feel that God can properly, fully pardon, that I must forever wear as some kind of badge of shame. Regrets can be a powerful poison to the soul, too.

Bottom line, though: unless *something*, whatever that something is for you, unless *that*, you will not accept that

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

(Psalms 73:1)

And you might even argue that there are things we *should* be continually discontented with. What if your children are not believers? What if your *spouse* is not a believer? Why has God not answered that prayer above all?

Now I don't have a clear answer to that one. Probably all of us have people in our lives whose salvation we regularly pray for, perhaps over decades. *Lord, why not them?* All I think I can do for you is to lay out two quotes from the same Bible author. Paul, who wrote about his countrymen:

... I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

(Romans 9:2-3)

And yet he also wrote:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

(Philippians 4:4)

See, Haman *cannot* rejoice. His best moments crumble to tasteless dust in his mouth. Even the brightest day in his life ... is just further darkness.

The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.

(Proverbs 4:19)

And that's precisely what we see in the final verse of the chapter:

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.

(Esther 5:14)

Goodness, that woman is a mean bit of work, too! And just look at the immense power at Haman's disposal. Just then and there – and reasonably late in the day, if he's already had a feast with the king and queen, and then had this party with his wife and friends – he can order the construction *before the next morning* of a gallows as high as a cricket pitch is long.

And he can go to bed happy in the ... well, we say knowledge, or *he* does, at least ... that next day he could just *order* the king to order the summary execution, without the slightest pretence, even, of legal process, of the object of his consuming hatred, Mordecai the Jew.

And that is where we are going to leave the story for a moment. It is just like the end of the penultimate episode of a TV drama, where you just can't see for the life of you, just for example, how that hero is going to escape from being unjustly convicted of some carefully concocted false allegations, and the true villain is going to be brought to justice.

Mordecai is going to face the chop, not long after morning light. We all know that king Ahasuerus can be manipulated into *anything*. So it's not looking good for our hero. Esther has avoided her own early demise by some crafty feminine wiles ... but her inviting Haman into the king's presence only makes it sure that Haman will have the king's ear, when he is a superbly good mood. Could be quite an own-goal for her team, really.

So how are you going to get out of *that*, huh? What could possibly be up God's sleeve, to save his people, despite this predicament they are in?

I've got two answers to that. First, the obvious one. Just read on. Though ... I'm not putting that up on screen until next time!

But second, the bigger answer, the biggest answer of all, is actually that we are here today to remember not just Esther and Mordecai, who escaped death, but Jesus who conquered by a totally different way. *Through* death. Who gave his life so that we could share in it. Those mocking words thrown at him on the cross were actually startlingly true.

So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself."

(Mark 15:31)

And Esther has risked it all, to save her people. We will have to wait and see how that turns out. But, finishing with a hymn again.

Yet cheerful He to suffering goes / That He His foes from thence might free

And we know already how that turned out, when the darkness of Good Friday noon gave way to the rising sun, on the third day, of Easter Morning.