

## Esther 5 "What to do with a Blank Check"\*

Proposition: In Esther 5 there are two scenes that help us understand the difference between a person of faith and a person of folly.

I. Scene #1: We see Esther's faith (1-8).

A. Esther approached the king (1-2).

1. The risk was real (1).
2. The result was desirable (2).

B. Esther was given a blank check (3-5).

1. Xerxes made an amazing offer (3).
2. Esther invited the king and Haman to a banquet (4-5).

C. Esther was given another blank check (6-8).

1. Xerxes repeated his offer (6).
2. Esther invited the king and Haman to *another* banquet (7-8)!

II. Scene #2: We see Haman's folly (9-14).

A. Haman was fickle (9-10a).

1. One moment he's at the top of the world.
2. The next, he's unsatisfied.

B. Haman was proud (10b-13).

1. First he boasted (10b-12).
2. Then he complained (13).

C. Haman was presumptuous (14).

Lessons: In Esther 5 we learn about...

1. We learn about ourselves.

- We are enslaved to our desires.
- We are powerless to change.
- We need a Deliverer.

2. We learn about God.

- At times He seems distant.
- Even then He is at work.

3. We learn about God's ways.

- He works through people to fulfill His plan.
- Ultimately, He did it through His Son.

God is the God of the "little things." Don't get me wrong. God is a *great* God, a matchless God. And God can do the miraculous--and does at times. But often--and might I say *typically* He chooses to display His greatness in the "little things" of life.

A large part of living the Christian life involves the common, the ordinary, the unspectacular. Some people don't like that. They believe the Christian life should be a series of "highs" where you *feel* God and *feel* good continually. I'm not a proponent of dead orthodoxy, but the biblical fact is that true Christianity is not *feeling* oriented.

God never intended us to live by our feelings. At best, our feelings are intended to be the caboose that follows the train, not the engine that drives it.

The Christian life is a life of *faith*, not feeling. And the stable Christian is the one who's learned how to affirm God, trust God, and see the hand of God in the "little things."

That's the message of the book of Esther. God is in control of all things, even the "little things" of life. There's no mention of God in this book, no mention of prayer, no mention of worship, and no mention of God's Word. It's just a story. But it's not *just* a story. It's a story that illustrates the providence of God.

Someone has well said, "The hand of God is in the glove of history." People may not recognize Him, but He's moving in the affairs of the world--right down to the *little things*.

Before we continue with the story, allow me to retrace what's happened so far. It's the fifth century B.C. and the Jews are in trouble. The Persian man, Xerxes, is king of the known world. A wicked man, Haman, convinced Xerxes to authorize a massive holocaust of the Jews to be carried out in eleven months.

The namesake of the book, Esther, was an orphan girl who was raised by her cousin, Mordecai. She went from obscurity to the king's palace when she won a beauty contest designed to find a replacement queen for Xerxes (who'd deposed the previous queen).

In the last episode, Mordecai convinced Esther that she needed to do something. Perhaps the key statement of the book were his words to her in 4:14, "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Esther requested that all the Jews fast for three days, after which she agreed she would go to the king. One problem. She wasn't allowed. No one was allowed to approach the king without invitation on the penalty of death. Now we're ready for episode 5. Once again, we'll see God in the "little things."

In Esther 5 there are two scenes that help us understand the difference between a person of faith and a person of folly.

#### I. Scene #1: We see Esther's faith (1-8).

In this scene Esther takes action. She does what she does for God and God's people. Three things happened involving Esther in verses 1-8. First...

A. Esther approached the king (1-2). Verse 1 explains, "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."

It happened on the third day. The first day was when Mordecai confronted Esther about the predicament. The second day was a full day of fasting. Now it's the third day.

Esther put on her best apparel, her "royal robes." Baldwin writes (85), "No doubt these were in keeping with the king's splendid robes of Phoenician purple, heavy with gold embroidery, worn over garments of white and purple, but suitably subdued by comparison to avoid detracting from the glory of the 'lord of all the earth,' before whom all who entered had to prostrate themselves." So as Esther entered the king's presence, she looked the best she could. It was a deciding moment.

1. *The risk was real (1)*. By coming to the king without being summoned, Esther had violated the law. She was at the mercy of Xerxes.

The LXX expands verses 1-2 and says that at this point Esther fainted when she saw the anger of the king's face. Then the king sprang from his throne, embraced her, and assured her that she would not be put to death. Whether it happened that way or not is mere speculation. What we do know is that...

2. *The result was desirable (2)*. "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."

Ponder those words. The king held out the gold scepter. Did God have anything to do with that? Not as far as Xerxes was concerned. He thought he was boss. Yet God prepared the king's heart, and even used Xerxes' self-seeking interests (the text says "he was pleased with her") to put in motion a sequence of events that would inevitably rescue the people of God. Here's what happened next...

B. Esther was given a blank check (3-5). "Then the king asked, 'What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.'"

Xerxes knew something big had to be on Esther's mind for her to risk her life, so he asks, "What is it, Queen?" And then...

1. *Xerxes made an amazing offer (3)*. He tells Esther that if her request relates even to half of his kingdom, it shall be granted.

Wow! Talk about an open door! Up to half of the kingdom, and it's yours. Two things come to my mind when I consider that offer. One, what a fickle king. And two, what a great God! Dear friend, we serve the God who can turn the heart of the most powerful people on the planet. The book of Esther illustrates the truth of Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases."

Some suggest that the offer is simply an example of Oriental courtesy that was not intended to be taken too literally--perhaps like our expression, "He promised her the world."

Regardless, whether literal or figurative, the offer is still amazing. What's just as amazing is what Esther does with the offer. She pleaded with Xerxes to spare the Jews, right? No. Actually...

2. *Esther invited the king and Haman to a banquet (4-5)*. Verses 4-5 read, "'If it pleases the king,' replied Esther, 'let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him.' 5 '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."

That's not exactly the response we expected. The Jews are in trouble, Esther's given a blank check offer, and she uses it to promote a banquet? Why? And why did she include Haman on her guest list?

Commentators have proposed numerous explanations for Haman's inclusion--such as to make the king suspicious (or jealous) of Haman, or to lull Haman into a false sense of security. Maybe she just wanted

Haman to be present when she spoke to Xerxes about Haman's plot.

But again, why *this* request? Why didn't Esther simply "lay it on the table?" We're not told. My hunch is that Esther knew Xerxes well enough to realize that timing was important. She knew Xerxes had been hoodwinked by Haman. She also knew the way to Xerxes' heart was through his stomach.

Notice how in verse 4 she mentions she's already prepared the banquet. That indicates Esther was not just fasting for the previous two days. She was also planning and preparing. Don't equate waiting on God with *inactivity*. Waiting on God means we submit to God and invite Him to lead us, work in us, and work through us. I see the evidence of faith here. Esther took God at His Word, and took action in anticipation of what God would do.

Xerxes' response fits his character, "Bring Haman *at once*. Let's go eat!" To use the modern vernacular, Xerxes was a "party animal." He parties twice in chapter one (the first lasted 180 days!), again in chapter two (2:18), again in chapter three (3:15), and he's ready to go again in chapter five! Here's a man whose primary interests are women, leisure, food, and alcohol. Does that kind of person stand in the way of God's plan?

Watch what happened next--verse 6, "As they were drinking wine [the Hebrew says, "at the banquet of 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.'"

Sound familiar? In verse 3 Esther was given a blank check. Then in verses 6-8...

C. Esther was given another blank check (6-8). In essence...

1. *Xerxes repeated his offer (6)*. What do you want, Esther? Name it and it's yours, up to half the kingdom. And Xerxes is quite emphatic, saying twice, "It will be given you...it will be granted."

So what did Esther do with the second blank check? Surprise!

2. *Esther invited the king and Haman to another banquet (7-8)*! "Esther replied, 'My petition and my request is this: 8 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.'"

This time Esther begins as if she's going to state her petition. She begins, but then stops. For a second time she postponed giving a direct answer to Xerxes.

Two questions come to my mind at this point. The first is, what's Xerxes' doing? I recognize he's the head of the most powerful world empire of his day, but doesn't he have a schedule? Doesn't he have appointments? Apparently not. If he wants to take a couple of days off for partying, who's going to object?

My second question is, what's Esther doing? Why the second delay? Why wait until tomorrow to take advantage of an offer that's on the table today? The simple truth is, we don't know why. We're not told. Was Esther's hesitation due to fear? Maybe. But I get the sense that Esther's actions are motivated by faith more than fear at this point. She prepared the first banquet even before she knew if Xerxes would spare her life, let alone attend the party. And as I read her second request, she seems calm and unhurried, as if she's confident God will work. It's just not the right time yet.

The whole thing seems rather mysterious and suspenseful, doesn't it? You might be thinking, "What does this have to do with faith?"

Have you noticed that so much of living for God involves *waiting*? It seems to me that Esther 5 offers us an

accurate picture of the way God typically works: behind the scenes, through ordinary, unspectacular events in which we don't see Him.

Yes, the God of the Bible can part the Red Sea. But usually He lets His people build boats.

Last Sunday we paid off our building debt less than nine years after we moved into it. A miracle? Not technically--God didn't suspend any natural laws. But was it a work of God? Without question! God worked through His people. He gave us jobs and incomes. He gave willing hearts to people who gave sacrificially.

A person of faith is someone who knows God, who believes God, who trusts God every moment of every day knowing that He is in control of everything--even the little things. Is that true of you? The opposite of faith is exemplified in the next scene...

## II. Scene #2: We see Haman's folly (9-14).

Esther did what she did for God and His people. That's what a person of faith will do. Not so a person of folly which is what Haman was. In short, Haman did what he did *for himself*. We'll see three characteristics of Haman in verses 9-14.

A. Characteristic #1: Haman was fickle (9-10a). "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. 10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home."

Here's the evidence of a fickle person.

1. *One moment he's at the top of the world.*

2. *The next, he's unsatisfied.* That's Haman. When he left Esther's party, he was "happy and in high spirits." He was on the top of the world. But remember, when you're on the top of the world, there's only one place you can go--and that's *down*.

By the way, we weren't created to live on the top of the world, but at the feet of the King. Peter exhorts us in 1 Peter 5:5-6, "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." Jesus said it's the poor in spirit and the meek who have God's approval (Matt 5:3, 5).

Haman was on cloud nine, but that changed when he saw Mordecai. Mordecai still isn't bowing--he's a man who's not influenced by what people think of him (remember it was his refusal to bow that instigated the holocaust edict). And Mordecai's insubordination infuriated Haman.

Notice how fickle a person who lives by his emotions is. One moment he's in high spirits, the next he's so filled with rage he can't see straight. It's not enough for Haman to know that Mordecai's going to die in a few months. Now it eats at him that he has to wait!

Listen. If you are a person who lives by your emotions you are in for a roller coaster life. The solution isn't merely to "Buck up" like a stoic. Haman did that. He "restrained" himself. The solution is to learn to live with a different orientation. A person of faith focuses on the Lord and His Word, rather than himself and his circumstances.

B. Characteristic #2: Haman was proud (10b-13). A proud person is a self-focused person. In Haman's case it showed up in two ways.

1. *First he boasted (10b-12)*. "Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, 11 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. 12 '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.'"

Proverbs 12:23 states, "The heart of fools blurts out folly." Haman was a boaster. He loved himself and he loved to talk about himself. That's the opposite of a person of faith. Haman bragged about his wealth and his many sons (he had ten according to 9:7-10)--which indicates his priorities were out of whack (his money meant more to him than his family). Then he gloated about his favored status with the king, and the fact that he was the *only* person the queen invited to join the king for dinner.

That's one way pride evidences its ugliness--through boasting. There's a second way, and Haman exhibited it, too. First he boasted...

2. *Then he complained (13)*. "But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate." Haman wasn't satisfied. A proud person never is. He always thinks he deserves more. Instead of being thankful, he, like Haman, worships the gifts rather than the Giver.

In fact, without a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, you'll never be satisfied. The reason is you were created by God and for God--to know Him, to worship, serve, and obey Him. The average American is just like Haman. We have so much, but we're not satisfied. We want more. The truth is, things won't satisfy. They can't. Only Jesus can.

C. Characteristic #3: Haman was presumptuous (14). "His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built."

Haman's folly is matched by his wife's. What a fitting pair. Her name, Zeresh, is Persian and means either "golden" or "one with disheveled hair." One fool is bad enough. Now we've got a room full of them having a conversation.

Zeresh and Haman's friends offer this counsel, "Hey, you don't need to take that guff from Mordecai. Get rid of him. Build a gallows 75 feet tall. In the morning ask the king if you can hang Mordecai on it. Don't wait eleven months to get rid of that guy. Get rid of him now. You deserve it. You deserve to be "happy" (14).

Haman was a man who thought the world revolved around him. And in his presumption, he took their advice and built the gallows--a decision he would soon regret as we'll see next time.

But what's the point of the story? God didn't give us His Word to entertain us, but to change us. So let's look in the mirror.

Lessons: In Esther 5 we learn about three things...

1. *We learn about ourselves*. The truth is, we are more like Haman than we'd care to admit. In fact, the Bible says that we enter the world with the same basic, threefold problem Haman had.

- First, we are enslaved to our desires. Ephesians 4 describes the natural man as being "separated from the life of God," as having "lost sensitivity," and as one who is "given over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." That's true of every person born into this world. We enter life enslaved to our desires.

- Second, we are powerless to change. 1 Corinthians 2:14 states, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them."

- Third, we need a Deliverer. We need someone to rescue us from our sin and its eternal consequences. And that's exactly why God sent His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus gave His own perfect life to pay the penalty we deserve as sinners. He conquered death, and promises to rescue anyone who will call upon Him in faith.

Take inventory. Have you admitted the truth about yourself, that you are a sinner, enslaved to your desires and powerless to change? Have you admitted your need for the Deliverer, Jesus Christ? I encourage you to do so right now. There's hope!

2. *We learn about God.* Two things in particular in Esther 5...

- At times He seems distant. Where is He? We don't see Him. We don't *feel* Him. But...

- Even then He is at work. That's the message of Esther. Even when things look bad, God is still at work. We can *know* that.

Shortly before his death Mark Twain wrote, "A myriad of men are born; they labor and sweat and struggle;...they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble for little mean advantages over each other; age creeps upon them; infirmities follow; ...those they love are taken from them, and the joy of life is turned to aching grief. It (the release) comes at last--the only unpoisoned gift earth ever had for them--and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence,...a world which will lament them a day and forget them forever."

That's what life boils down apart from God. You live, you sweat, you toil, you die and are forgotten. But no. We know that God is present. Even when He seems distant, He's at work.

3. *We learn about God's ways.* You can't put God in a box. His ways are higher than our ways. Esther 5 reminds us of an important lesson about how God works...

- He works through people to fulfill His plan. In this case it was Esther. He used Esther, as we'll see in future weeks, to rescue His people.

- Ultimately, He did it through His Son. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him (John 3:17)."