

Rise and Fall - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Esther 7:1-10** (#478)

Introduction: Irony is one of the most common themes found in the Book of Esther. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines the word in this context as: "incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result." Thus, the expected result of Haman's promotion would be that he would get his way in the kingdom. The normal result of such a powerful man opposing Mordecai would be that Haman will win and Mordecai will lose. Yet neither will be the case. That's irony.

And irony isn't only found here – it's all over the Bible. We see it at the cross, as Christ is mocked – and yet, His resurrection shows that those things which would normally signal a massive failure have, in fact, brought about exactly what Jesus said. We could also describe most of Paul's life as irony: a Jew of Jews who kept the law more stringently than most ends up being the one of the greatest missionaries for Christianity and – in the process – ends up being hated and plotted against by the Jews themselves. That turn around is what we call irony.

On a bigger level, our faith is built on irony. The unstoppable Kingdom of God is compared not to the rich and powerful countries and companies of this world, but – instead – to a mustard seed. The greatest shall be the least. These, too, are ironies. And it is to another of these ironies that we will be turning in the Scriptures today. In **Esther 7**, the entire story will take a turn from what would normally be expected, to something that only those who trust in the Lord could grasp. It's time to be amazed once more by seeing how our Lord is still at work...

7:1-6 We left the story on a cliffhanger last week. Haman had just been forced to publicly honor Mordecai all throughout town. He then went home and, shockingly, didn't receive the support and consolation there that he had before. Right at the height of his conversation with his wife and friends, one of the king's eunuchs showed up to escort Haman to the second feast that Esther had prepared.

The king and Haman arrive at Queen Esther's feast. On the second day, the king once more asks Esther what her wish is. Remember: up to this point, she has refused to say it, instead inviting the King and Haman to join her for a feast – which eventually turned into this second feast. The King, for his part, is savvy enough to realize that Esther does – in fact – have a request. But he also favors Esther, and we know from earlier in the book that he certainly enjoys being honored and wined and dined, so he goes along with this process.

Yet the second feast is now complete, and so – with words that echo what he already said back in **chapter 5** – he once more asks Esther what her request is. This time, however, she answers!

Esther's reply is telling. She very wisely presents her request in terms of how a law will affect her and her people. She speaks of keeping her life, and of the upcoming destruction of the Jewish people in Persia.

Don't miss *how* she argues her point – look at the second half of **verse 4**: “If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” Now that's an interesting thing to say, isn't it? In effect: “if the edict had merely imposed a slavery onto the exile we are already living with, then I wouldn't have even said a word.” Some might argue that this is just Esther being overly formal to making her point – and perhaps that's true. But I do think that there is a real possibility here that we need to consider: maybe Esther means exactly what she is saying.

Friends, it is hard for any of us who have grown up in America, under a Western-style democracy, to even grasp what it must have been like to live as a Jew in a pagan kingdom. We have certain ideas about freedom ingrained in us nearly from birth; it is likely that the Jews of that era didn't even have such a category. The freedom to worship the Lord might have been in their minds, but the idea that they somehow deserved economic freedom and prosperity? Probably not! The idea that their leader should somehow be representative of the people, and elected based on their will? Definitely not!

So it is, then, that Esther is likely not just saying something to sound respectful – instead, she really believes it. She sees that the King has the power of life and death over her and her Jewish people. To convince him to spare them, she doesn't resort to trickery or bending the truth. Instead, she does something far humbler by appealing to him over the dire circumstances rather than out of some ultimate sense of freedoms or being treated fairly.

I bring all this up to make two points. The first is to keep in mind, as you read the Scriptures, that there are similarities and differences between us here in 2020 and the people we read of in the Scriptures. We all need a Savior, we all sin in ways that aren't so different from one another. We each need to learn how to trust the Lord for living in our own situations. Yet, on the other hand, you and I aren't Jews. We aren't living, in human terms, in a monarchy. We haven't been exiled and sent to live in a foreign nation. All of God's Word is useful and applicable for us, but that doesn't mean the answers are always easy. Instead, you and I need to do the hard work of asking: "what is this showing me about the Lord? What is being taught here about following Him? What is it revealing about human sinfulness? About faith? And how should that change my life today?"

Second, notice that though Mordecai and Esther have been very active in their planning, none of those plans have depended upon their own wisdom, as if they could think – or trick – their way out of this situation. Instead, I would argue that what *isn't said* in this book is precisely the point: it is because God's activity is so obvious that it doesn't need to be spelled out all the time. So, the Book of Esther doesn't record random circumstances that just happen to work out in the Jews' favor; instead, what we have before us is a picture of real-life faithfulness. One that isn't compartmentalized to just being something for Saturdays (or Sundays either!). A faith that isn't bolted on to everyday living, but instead is part and parcel of it. In our secular world we who call on Christ need to be challenged by that. Your Christian faith isn't simply another demographic part of your life, some checkbox for a census form, or a calendar entry for Sunday mornings. Christ demands that it be woven in to your very life. Your comings and goings. Your talking and your sitting, your walking and your rising, to paraphrase **Deuteronomy**

6. If it isn't, then now's the time to get serious about trusting Jesus for salvation and to live accordingly: to pray, read the Word, and to live differently.

With those points made, let's talk about how the King responds to Esther's request. Remember, he is the King. He could laugh at her, he could decide to keep on with the plan that he and Haman had made. But he doesn't. Instead, we find the King immediately demanding to know who has allowed such a thing. Clearly, this is where we see that the King was not fully aware – though he should have been – of all that Haman intended with his decree. Only now does Esther identify the culprit – Haman! And so Haman's no good very bad day gets worse!

Let me speak an application before we move on: we need to know what Christ requires of us: who we are, how we have sinned, and how sin has changed this world. We need to have a better grasp of who God's enemies truly are and are not. It isn't the powers of this world – the things that news moguls and politicians want us to be upset over. Instead of battling against flesh and blood, we are called to see that our battle is a spiritual one. Esther and Mordecai's actions show that they grasped this distinction, which is why they act and speak as they do.

Therefore, the fight must be won by the Lord. Our role is to trust His commands and take them as our marching orders. You don't need to try and "help" God, as if He couldn't possibly understand our world – of course He knows what it's like: He sustains it! Instead, you and I are to agree with the Scriptures, stand with the Lord, and to embrace our call as disciples of Jesus above all other identities.

Now, in closing, let's see how things turn out for God's enemy – for Haman...

7:7-10 In the ways of the world, this is irony at its finest: Haman is rich and powerful, second only to the King, surely no one should be able to stand against his plans? But this is where my earlier point comes to bear: if we see things spiritually, then we see how wicked Haman truly is. To try and wipe out the people that God Himself has chosen to preserve is foolhardy in the extreme. In that sense, we shouldn't be surprised by what is written here...

The king arises in his wrath and heads into the garden – to think, to cool off? Whatever the case, this leaves Haman with the queen and, seeing the mortal danger he is in, Haman appeals to Esther for his life.

The King returns right as Haman appears to be getting a bit too close to Esther. I think it's likely that he isn't intending anything improper – probably he is only trying to win her favor in his distress – but whatever the case, the King interprets this as yet another sly and deceptive move by Haman and responds violently. Haman is immediately grabbed by the King's attendants and Harbona – one of the eunuchs – makes a suggestion of his own: he knows of the gallows that Haman has been preparing for Mordecai, and he subtly puts the idea into the king's head to put that tool to use on Haman himself. The King agrees, and has Haman hanged. Only then is his wrath completed.

Brothers and sisters, it is a gruesome end, to be sure. But a necessary one – and a reminder: the wages of sin is death. Not just for people like Haman, but instead we all have a date with the gallows because we are all sinners who deserve it. Yet, not too unlike Esther with the King, there is one escape: if God would pardon us. This He does for any who trust in Christ – God's Son – as their Savior. Do you?

Throughout the Bible we are warned against hatred. It isn't some petty sin to resist, instead it is a threat to our very lives. **Proverbs 26** tells us that those who set a trap for others inevitably get caught up in it themselves. **Psalms 141** finds David praying that the wicked fall into their own nets. Friend: it is sadly common and accepted in our world to plot and scheme against others. We would be naïve to think that we Christians are never tempted as well. So heed the warning: Haman brought about his own condemnation. Are you? Or have you been changed and redeemed by Christ, freed from evil desires, motivated by the Holy Spirit inside you? The good news is that though we all deserve condemnation, we can gain the freedom and life that we don't deserve, and then we can extend that same grace to others precisely because they don't deserve it either. That's the Good News offered by our Lord to all who trust Him. Let's pray...