

A Tale of Two Banquets

Esther 5:1 -7:10

Well brothers and sisters, in keeping with the prominence of food and feasting in the story of Esther – let me say that we’ve just witnessed the part of the story where the villain gets his ‘just desserts’, and there is a great deal of irony and poetic justice going on as this plays out.

So... a quick recap from last week – King Xerxes, decided to honor Haman the Agagite, and elevate him above all the other nobles and princes in Persia, for no apparent reason. It was simply a gracious unmerited gift from the King.

Ironically Mordecai - who uncovered a plot to kill the King and saved the King’s life, an action which certainly merited a reward - had nothing done for him and appears to have gone unnoticed.

And it is doubly ironic that it was Haman’s unmerited rise to power and Mordecai’s refusal to acknowledge this which lead to the diabolical plot to destroy the Jews.

And today we see that Haman is so fed up with Mordecai, he’s going to kill him in advance – but just when it seems things are at their very worst... events turn around and justice is served.

And though the writer of Esther doesn’t mention it explicitly – it is implicitly assumed that we understand God is working behind the scenes... in response to the fasting and prayers of the Jews and has begun to work salvation for them by turning things around.

At the beginning of this chapter Haman thinks he is on top of the world – things couldn’t be going better for him.

He’s been honored, he has the King’s favor, and he is the only guest invited to a series of banquets which Queen Esther is giving for the King - and he has the power and the means to be able to dispose of political adversaries like Mordecai.

But as the proverb says, “Pride comes before the fall” and all these things which seem to give him honor and status, which

contribute to his pride, will in fact be used against him to orchestrate his downfall.

So how does this happen?

Well the night before Haman is going to hang Mordecai it just so happens that the King can't sleep, and "co-incidentally" he decides to review the records of the events of his reign.

I don't know if it's because these minutes might be very boring and put him to sleep, or if he simply wanted to do some work since he couldn't sleep anyways, or if something was bothering him about the decree which He had allowed Haman to issue and he couldn't quite put his finger on it...

But whatever it was, reviewing the minutes results in discovering that Mordecai has never been rewarded properly for exposing the assassination plot on the King's life.

So Xerxes' is trying to figure out what should be done to rectify this situation and figures he should speak to an advisor,

and "co-incidentally" Haman has just entered the court.

Now here is some more irony, both of them want to do something about Mordecai - Haman want to ask the King for authorization to execute him, and the King wants to ask Haman for advice on how to honor Him.

But Royal prerogative means the King speaks first - he doesn't tell Haman who it is He wants to honor. And because Haman is so vain, He assumes the King could only be thinking to honor himself so he suggests an extravagant reward, but to his horror he discovers the King wishes to honor Mordecai.

And this is the beginning of the end for Haman – it all starts to unravel before him. Now he must exalt the one who refused to exalt Him, there was no way the King would authorize Haman's request to have Mordecai executed now...

More irony – Haman had come to ask permission to elevate Mordecai by hanging him from a 7 story gallows – but instead

he has to elevate Mordecai by honoring him in a most extravagant way. His downfall has begun.

And nobody seems to sympathize with Him – in fact when His wife and friends hear about it, they see it as a bad omen...

If you have to elevate the person you were going to execute – fate is against you, and all the more since it was known the Jews were God’s chosen people. His wife says “sorry dear – this is the beginning of the end for you.”

And when he has finished honoring Mordecai and the King’s servants come and **take him away** to Esther’s second banquet – the way its described sounds more like a condemned man going to his last meal than a great honor being bestowed upon someone.

And in fact Haman is going to his last meal – as Esther has finally summoned up enough courage to speak to the King about the decree to destroy her people.

For Haman this has become a bad day gone even worse - he is horrified to learn that Queen Esther is also a Jew. He might have just as well outright conspired to assassinate the Queen.

He is in deep trouble and he knows it – but there is one last chance however, ironically he can plead with Queen Esther to spare his life, but even that goes wrong...

Xerxes comes back into the room just as he is pleading with and it looks like Haman is trying to molest Queen Esther.

The King is furious – He doesn’t even have to pronounce the death sentence – the guards know it automatically – and Haman gets his just desserts – executed on the very gallows he had intended to use for Mordecai.

So, as was mentioned before, this is one of those stories which says a lot by not saying much – so by not specifically saying that God has intervened here, where we would certainly to expect to hear something about that...

The story loudly proclaims that it is God at work turning everything upside down, and judging, cursing those who would curse Israel and saving His chosen people – the first have become last.

At the beginning Haman was raised up in honor, now he is raised up to be executed.

At the beginning Mordecai was unrecognized and despised and now he is honored.

At the beginning Esther was hiding her identity and afraid to speak up – now she has boldly revealed who she is and exposed Haman evil plot.

So the tale of two banquets is a tale of salvation, judgment, and the irony of situations being reversed.

And it's not only from Haman's downfall that is ironic, when you set the story of Esther in the larger overall story of the bible.... it's very ironic that the Jewish people eventually

became very much like the one who had plotted to destroy them.

You see God is has positioned Esther as Queen to save His people - so that... He could provide the ultimate salvation for everyone through them – Jesus Christ.

And the irony is that while God had graciously and mercifully stepped in to save them from destruction many times, by the time Jesus was born the Jews did not want to extend that same mercy and grace to the nations around them, or even to some of their fellow Jews.

When Christ was born, the Jews weren't just looking for salvation... they were anticipating their enemies' destruction. To them salvation meant destruction, that's ironic isn't it.

In many ways they had become exactly like Haman.

They felt God had honored them, chose them, and elevated them because they were so good and faithful in keeping his

law. In fact they had added safety laws around God's laws – so that there would never be any danger of actually breaking one of God's laws. Of course God would choose them!

And... they were indignant that the nations around them didn't recognize this and honor them. So they looked forward to the destruction of their enemies.

When the Messiah finally came to save His people - they had become proud and this pride would be their downfall.

Now – perhaps this irony was lost on God's people during Jesus' time – perhaps they were no longer able to see unmerited grace which had elevated them and God's faithfulness which had stepped in to preserve them so often...

So a large part of Jesus' ministry to God's people was reminding them about this grace and exposing the "Haman" type attitude they had developed so they could repent from it – by teaching them in parables.

One of those parables in Luke 13:22-30 was about a narrow doorway; Let me read it for you:

"Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

He said to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

"But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

"But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'

"There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the

kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

So here we see that proud exclusivism characterized by Haman expressed by God's people: *"Lord are only a few going to be saved... Lord it's just us Jews right! The rest of the gentiles will be destroyed right?"*

To which Jesus replies – well... you're sort of right, only a few will be saved but it's not like you think. In fact it will only be a few of you who will be saved – most of you will miss the boat because you are so proud and arrogant and you think you deserve to be saved.

Things are going to be turned upside down – the last will be first and the first will be last.

That's how God does it – we've seen it at work in Esther, we've seen it happen with Jesus – we are those who would be last – gentiles, and we've been adopted into God's family – now we're first.

But the warning of Haman's reversal, and the Jews of Jesus time extends to us too – lest we become proud and think we were adopted in because we would make better sons than the Jews had - because we're somehow better than them... we would have never missed Jesus like they did!

You see it's easy for us gentile Christians to become proud.

The Christian faith has contributed so much to the development of Western civilization and the strong stable societies we enjoy.

But pride comes before the fall and I think the Western church is going through a bit of a humbling experience by being pushed out to the margins of society because we've been proud.

We think God chose us because we're moral, decent, civilized people, as opposed to realizing that God chose us because we need his forgiveness and love – because without it we are lost!

God needs to humble us before He can use us, and in this way we can learn from Esther and Mordecai's humility in the story.

They only wanted to **prevent** the destruction of their people – if God saved them, that was enough.

It was an added bonus, or just desserts, that God judged Haman the way he did.

But nowhere do Esther and Mordecai seek out Haman's destruction or the destruction of the Persian Empire, that kind of judgment belongs to God alone at the time and place of His choosing.

Remember the wise advice of Proverbs 26:27 *"Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; if someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them."*

So brothers and sisters – this serves as a counter balance to the exhortation we received last week to speak up and stand up and expose the enemy's plots against Christianity.

We must do this – we must stand and speak out... but we must do so without giving into the temptation to desire God's judgement and destruction of those who oppose us...

Like Esther and Mordecai we must seek to prevent the destruction of God's people, Christ's body –the church...

But not seek the destruction of our enemies – God will deal with them in his own way and in his own time, as He did with Haman, and until He does we must remember our Lord Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for them.

And maybe, just maybe - because God is rich in mercy and grace in Christ – and we of all people should know this well... those who oppose Christianity will end up experiencing God's salvation instead of God's judgment... wouldn't that be wonderfully ironic! Amen.