

April 19 Lesson 8 (NIV)

AN EXECUTED SCOUNDREL

DEVOTIONAL READING: Luke 19:11–26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Esther 3; 5; 7

ESTHER 7:1–10

¹ So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther’s banquet, ² and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, “Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.”

³ Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request.

⁴ For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”

⁵ King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?”

⁶ Esther said, “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!”

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. ⁷ The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

⁸ Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.

The king exclaimed, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?”

As soon as the word left the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face. ⁹ Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, “A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman’s house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.”

The king said, “Impale him on it!” ¹⁰ So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king’s fury subsided.

KEY VERSE

They impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king’s fury subsided.
—Esther 7:10

JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

Unit 2: God Promises a Just Kingdom

LESSONS 6–9

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HOW TO SAY IT

AhasuerusUh-haz-you-ee-rus.

eunuchyou-nick.

HamanHay-mun.

HarbonaHahr-boh-nuh.

MordecaiMor-dih-kye.

SusaSoo-suh.

XerxesZerk-seez.

Introduction

A. An Outrageous Injustice

After serving nearly 25 years for the murder of his wife, 57-year-old Michael Morton walked out of a Texas prison on October 4, 2011. He was released and officially exonerated after DNA evidence proved his innocence and pointed to the crime's true perpetrator.

Investigation into the initial prosecution of the crime also revealed that the district attorney in the case had illegally concealed evidence that pointed to Mr. Morton's innocence. As a result, the district attorney spent time in jail himself and was stripped of his law license.

Miscarriages of justice and abuses of power stir our outrage all the more when they involve officials who have been entrusted with maintaining a just society. Today's lesson will identify a corrupt, prejudiced official whose abuse of power could have resulted in the destruction of God's covenant people. Little did this individual realize that certain Jews were in positions to foil this genocidal intent.

B. Lesson Context

The story of Esther is one of several in the Old Testament to portray the success of Israelites living in foreign surroundings. In a few noteworthy cases, these Israelites rose to influential positions (examples: Genesis 41:40–43; Nehemiah 1:11; Daniel 2:48, 49).

These accounts illustrate God's care for his covenant people. They also illustrate his resolve to use them as agents of influence even when (or especially when) they faced opposition, criticism, and ill-treatment.

The events in the book of Esther take place in the Persian citadel of Susa during the reign of Xerxes I, also known as Ahasuerus (485–465 BC; see Esther 1:1, 2). Key figures in the account are the close relatives Mordecai and Esther. They were part of a Jewish community that had remained in the area even after a decree in 538 BC allowed them to return home (Ezra 1:1–4; Esther 2:5–7).

Esther became queen after Vashti, the previous queen, was divorced by Xerxes (Esther 1:10–22). Xerxes subsequently replaced Vashti by holding a beauty pageant, which Esther won (2:1–18).

Throughout the selection process, Mordecai forbade Esther from revealing her nationality, and she complied (Esther 2:10). There is no indication that the king himself would have held her Jewish identity against her. Perhaps Mordecai was aware of a general prejudice among the members of the royal court in the larger community.

Eventually, a scheme to destroy the Jews materialized. Xerxes' highest official, Haman, had developed a fierce animosity for Mordecai (Esther 3:1–5). This resulted in Haman's seeking an edict from Xerxes for the annihilation of all Jews throughout the Persian Empire (3:6). Haman secured this edict without revealing to Xerxes which people he had targeted for destruction. A date for their eradication was set, and the Jews found themselves in grave peril (3:7–15).

Mordecai convinced Esther to act, at the risk of her own life, to save her people (Esther 4). A key part of his appeal was to consider the possibility that divine providence was at work. This possibility can be seen in his question, "Who knows but that you are come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (4:14). Esther's subsequent resolve is seen in her reply, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (4:16).

After three days of fasting, Esther went before Xerxes and received his mercy (Esther 4:16–5:2). She asked that he and Haman join her in a banquet, where she would answer the king (5:3, 4). When prompted at the meal to offer her petition, she requested only that they come to another feast the next day (5:5–8).

I. Scheme Explained

(ESTHER 7:1–4)

A. Second Banquet (vv. 1, 2a)

1. So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet,

Esther's invitation to *the king and Haman* results from Mordecai's telling her about Haman's plan to slaughter the Jews (see Esther 4:7, 8, 15, 16). The *banquet* hosted here is the second the two men attend at Esther's request (see the Lesson Context).

2a. And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine.

Overindulgence of *wine* seems to have contributed mightily to Vashti's dismissal as queen (Esther 1:7–10). At Esther's *banquet*, however, *the king* seems much better behaved.

B. Second Request (v. 2b)

2b. and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Xerxes once again expresses his willingness to hear Esther's *petition* (see the Lesson Context). Having been asked to wait during the banquet of the night before, he is no doubt intensely curious about what's on Esther's mind. Thus his exaggerated offer of up to *half the kingdom* (see also Esther 5:3; 9:12; compare Mark 6:23).

C. Second Response (vv. 3, 4)

3. Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request.

In ordinary circumstances, *Esther* may have drawn out the process over more days with more banquets and wine. Xerxes himself may have expected the process to draw out further, given the custom of multi-day banquets (Esther 1:5). But for Esther and her people, time is running out. At least two months have elapsed since the king's extermination order was issued, leaving less than nine months before it is to be enacted (3:7; 8:9, 12). That may seem like plenty of time in a modern sense. But it's not, given the vast expanse of the Persian Empire and the limitations of ancient methods of communication.

Therefore Esther does not waste time on any multi-day etiquette of presenting a request, beyond the single-day delay so far. She has a history of modesty in her requests (Esther 2:15), so she probably knows that the king will assume that she won't ask for anything extravagant now. Esther has been queen for several years at this point (compare 2:16 with 3:7), so it's quite likely that she has developed a sense of when to push the king and when not to!

4a. "For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated.

Esther begins to expose Haman's plot to destroy the Jews (Esther 3:9). Haman must be the one to connect the dots first: Esther is a Jew! Her statement *my people have been sold*, phrased in the passive voice, avoids implicating the king (see also 4:7). The heaping up of phrases—*to be destroyed, killed and annihilated*—emphasizes the dire consequences of her *people* being sold.

4b. “If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”

The second part of Esther’s statement is difficult to interpret. Esther could mean that she would have kept silent if her people were “only” *sold* into enslavement rather than to death. On the other hand, Esther might mean that she would keep silent if economic loss from their enslavement would not equal the loss from their deaths. Oppression in slavery would still hold out the possibility for God to release his people (compare Psalm 81:10), but death would not. Either way, this is Esther’s diplomatic way of stressing the extreme importance of the issue.

Esther conveys that she has seriously weighed the situation before speaking up. She may not realize that Haman has withheld the identity of the people he has targeted for destruction (Esther 3:8–11). One would think that the king himself would have asked that identity. The fact that he didn’t indicates his absolute trust in Haman. And since the decree has now been sent all over the Persian Empire, one wonders if the king is still unaware of the identity of the group being targeted (compare 3:12–15 with 8:9). Such lack of awareness would indicate the extreme isolation of the king.

II. Culprit Exposed

(ESTHER 7:5–8)

A. King’s Question (v. 5)

5. King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?”

Some wonder why the king can apparently be so clueless. But the questions are reasonable given the facts that (1) it’s been several weeks since he was involved in this issue (comparing the time references of Esther 3:7, 12; 8:1, 9); (2) kings are busy people and therefore delegate tasks to subordinates (3:10, 11); and (3) the king is just now being made aware that *Esther* is part of the target group. In any case, the king is still trying to put together the bigger picture.

B. Queen’s Answer (v. 6)

6a. Esther said, “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!”

If *Esther* has been concerned that Xerxes would become defensive, here she is probably relieved to be able to point the finger squarely and only at *Haman*. She does not identify him as her personal enemy but as *an adversary and enemy*.

Esther has stated her concern with humility and deference, following the expected protocol of the royal court. Tact is of utmost importance (compare Daniel 2:14), given that Esther is accusing the king’s most trusted adviser of treachery that involves misuse of the king’s own power. She is careful to level this accusation at Haman without implicating Xerxes himself.

6b. Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

Haman’s reaction is like that of many who are caught in wrongdoing: his once steely exterior becomes a “deer caught in the headlights” look. Interpreters often identify this moment as the

climax of the entire story. *Haman* knows he is exposed; the only question is how *the king* will react. Esther has completed her speech and speaks no further in this chapter.

C. Culprit's Arrest (vv. 7, 8)

7a. The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden.

With his blood boiling (compare Esther 1:12), *the king* storms out. He need hear no self-defense from Haman. The king has put the pieces together, and Haman's guilt is obvious. The king's highest official has abused royal authority, though the king does not know why. Haman has had his own best interests, not the king's, in mind.

7b. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

The king's intentions toward *Haman* are clear (compare Proverbs 20:2). Haman must do something, but he has no good option. He cannot follow *the king* outside, nor can he add to his guilt by fleeing. The warning from his wife and friends, thematic of the book as a whole, should have been heeded: "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!" (Esther 6:13). Their words are certainly coming true.

8a. Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.

Persian royal banquets involved reclining on beds, like couches, instead of sitting at a table (compare Esther 1:6). Desperate for mercy, *Haman* approaches the queen who is reclined on her *couch* to plead for his life. Her silence may have increased his desperation, for he falls onto her couch. Ironically, Haman was enraged earlier when a Jew would not bow down to him (3:5), but now he will find himself at the feet of one of those same Jews.

8b. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

How *the king* might have handled Haman's treachery before seeing the man on his queen's couch no longer matters. Xerxes indicts Haman for violating harem protocol and, even worse, appearing to *molest the queen* (compare Genesis 34:7; 39:14). In the Persian system, the only men allowed near the queen or the king's other wives and concubines were eunuchs. Otherwise, an advance on any member of the harem was considered an affront to the king himself (example: 2 Samuel 16:21, 22).

The king's officials thus act on what they recognize as a capital offense. They cover *Haman's face* because he is no longer worthy to see the king.

III. Scoundrel Executed

(ESTHER 7:9, 10)

A. Just Idea (v. 9)

9a. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king."

Esther has taken some of the king's *eunuchs* into her confidence during the passage of years (see Esther 2:8, 9, 15; 4:4, 5). One of them has knowledge of Esther's difficulty, probably from joining in her fast (4:16; compare 1:10).

The eunuch *Harbona* speaks up to inform *the king* that *Haman* has erected a high structure for a humiliating execution of *Mordecai*. Haman had left the first meal in high spirits. But after another confrontation with Mordecai on the way out, he once again became enraged. At the suggestion of his wife and friends, he had gallows set up with the intent of having Mordecai hanged on it (Esther 5:9–14). The height of *fifty cubits* (about 75 feet) reveals Haman's intent for Mordecai's demise to be a brazen public display.

9b. The king said, "Impale him on it!"

If *the king* had any remaining notions of sparing Haman's life, those thoughts now leave him permanently. Mordecai had saved the king's life previously (Esther 2:19–23; 6:1–11); the king now returns the favor.

B. Just Result (v. 10)

10. So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

The execution takes place immediately, given the time indicator in Esther 8:1. For *Haman* to meet his end in the manner *he had set up for Mordecai* is the supreme irony of the book (compare Proverbs 11:5, 6; 26:27); it is a prime example of poetic justice. Such an outcome points to God's work on behalf of his covenant people. God brings Haman's wickedness down on his own head in the same way the Bible often declares (examples: Psalm 9:16; Matthew 7:1, 2). Before that day's end, Xerxes will give to Mordecai the signet ring that he had entrusted to Haman, along with the position and authority that Haman had held (Esther 8:2; 10:2, 3). The Jews find deliverance by a second decree of the king (8:11, 12). The Feast of Purim (derived from the word *pur*; see 3:7; 9:24, 26) commemorates this deliverance each year. This celebration includes not only a meal but also hearing the book of Esther read aloud in a synagogue and giving food and other forms of charity.

Conclusion

A. Behind the Scenes

Like many people, I count the story of Esther among my favorites in the Bible. Though the book famously does not mention God by name anywhere, its many twists and turns strongly hint at God's providential hand with his covenant people. From Esther's selection as queen, to Haman's execution, to the Jews' deliverance—the eyes of faith clearly see these events as much more than luck or happenstance. Rather, God was at work behind the scenes.

We therefore should see God as the main character in the account. The actions of its human characters are of mixed quality. Xerxes consistently acted under the influence of alcohol and with a hot temper. Haman always acted in self-interest and pride. Esther and Mordecai seem not to have resisted Esther's participation in a contest that resulted in marriage to a pagan king (contrast Ezra 10). But God worked his will through all parties nonetheless.

Like Esther and her relative Mordecai, we are God's imperfect servants in rectifying the wrongs in the world. But God can and does work through us nonetheless. There are two extremes to avoid: (1) thinking that confronting evil is all up to us and (2) thinking that confronting evil is all up to God. The proper path to take in any given situation will depend on prayer, Bible study,

and openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We must always consider the possibility that God has placed us in a circumstance “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

There is no guarantee that every incident in the lives of God’s people will have a tidy ending, as the book of Esther does. Evil sometimes enjoys temporary victories. The path to triumph over evil is often unclear, recognized only in twenty-twenty hindsight. But with Christ working in us and through us, we can live with the assurance that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).

B. Prayer

Father, open our eyes to the opportunities you have for us. Give us courage to act, even when we don’t know your plans. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Act justly in every situation.¹
