

Trapping the Evil One in His Transgression

Esther 5:1-14

Go ahead and be turning in your Bibles to Esther chapter 5. As your turning, I'd like to briefly review the TIMELINE of events leading up to where we are tonight...

- In the third year of his reign, King Ahasuerus had a gaudy banquet, showing off his wealth and power before heading off to fight the Greeks. In a drunken state, he commands his (possibly pregnant) wife to parade before the entire city, and upon her refusal, he banishes her.
- Four years later, after being handily defeated by the Greeks, he replaces Vashti with Esther.
- Almost five years after that, Haman is promoted above all the officials who were with him, and he PURCHASES the right to annihilate the Jews.

So, Esther has been queen almost five years. Haman's wicked edict had been signed into law. The date for Israel's annihilation was set, and the Jewish queen had no clue! And why would she?! No one outside of Mordecai knew she was a Jew. She was just one more Persian beauty who was now seemingly untouchable at the king's side.

Mordecai makes it clear that she wasn't untouchable, and that, if she didn't act, she would still be destroyed and deliverance for Israel would come from elsewhere. However, if she was willing, she could play a part in that deliverance...

Esther 4:14b

"And who knows," Mordecai said, **"whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"**

And like a great cliffhanger at the end of an episode of some intense TV show, Esther says this just before the screen goes black...

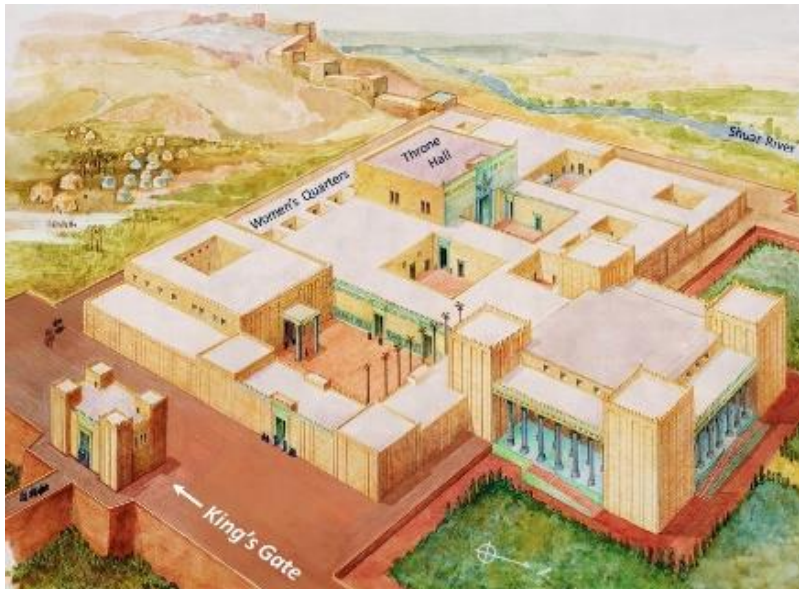
Esther 4:15-17

15 Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 16 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. 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

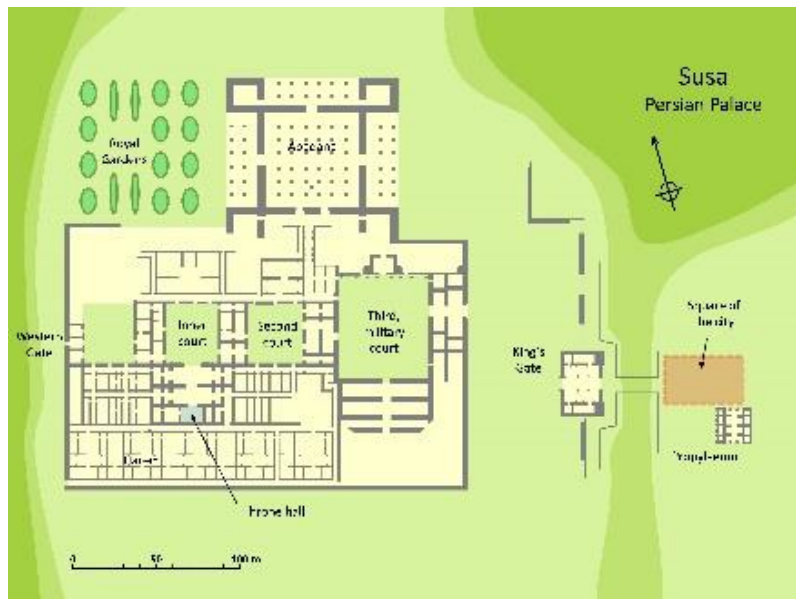
"Tune in next week for the next exciting episode!" Well, you've tuned in. I feel like I should've started this whole thing off with, "Last time on Esther," but anyway, we catch up with our heroine on day three of her fast...

Esther 5:1

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.



This is an artist's depiction of what the palace of Apadana looked like. It was built by Darius I, and this is the palace that we believe is in view here in the Book of Esther.



Based on the archaeological site in Susa (modern day _____), we have a general understanding of what was where in the palace. You can see the King's Gate off to the right;

that's where Mordecai would have spent his time carrying out imperial business, worrying about Esther, and NOT bowing to Haman.

To the left, you'll see the words "inner court," which is where it's believed Esther stood, directly in sight of what's marked as the Throne Hall, waiting on the king to welcome her...or not.

All the Jews in Susa along with Esther and her young women had been fasting for three days. Can you imagine the WEIGHT she carried?! Yes, she was a Jew. If the edict was carried out and her true identity became known, she would die like the lowliest Jew. In that way, the stakes were the same for her as for her people. However, you know she felt like she held their lives in her hands. She had the *ability* to do something; therefore, she had the *RESPONSIBILITY* to do something, like Spider-Man! You know, "***With great power comes great responsibility.***" Yeah, I'm a nerd, but it's TRUE, and it's such a worthy sentiment!

Esther couldn't sit on the sidelines of history. She knew she had to act on behalf of her people, but she wouldn't do so without serious PREPARATION, and she wasn't going to go it alone either. She called on the **PEOPLE OF GOD** to help her prepare and carry this burden before the Lord. It's an example to us. So often, because we're just independent, American Christians, we determine to soldier on through whatever dire straits we're going through without leaning on others. Perhaps we don't want to be a bother. Perhaps we're fearful that we'll be judged. However, Paul taught the Galatians...

Galatians 6:2

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Have you noticed that it doesn't say "share" one another's burdens? The sentiment is clear in the Greek. We're to attempt to "carry away" the struggles of our fellow believers, doing everything we can to take it off them.

I know deep down you probably know this, but it never hurts for you to hear that I'm here for you. Our Staff is here for you. I pray that you are available for those around you to lean on, supporting them and guiding them in godliness when the need arises.

Yes, the Jews that Esther turned to were in the same predicament as she was; it just makes sense that she would rely upon them. However, for us, they're representative of the Spirit-centered relationships we should cultivate with others, to the point that they're effective in all circumstances, good or bad, secure or vulnerable.

So, Esther, her young women, and the Jews of the citadel fasted for three days. For what were they fasting? Scripture is SILENT on this, but I believe there are a couple things we can INFER. I definitely believe she sought the Lord for...

FAVOR

Esther hadn't seen the king in OVER A MONTH. She didn't know what kind of mood she'd find him in, so it's likely she asked the Lord to go before her and give her favor. No matter what situation we face, the Lord not only knows all about it, but He's already been through it and is waiting on the other side, ready and able to guide us through it if we'll let Him. Moses wrote...

Deuteronomy 31:8

It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.

If it was favor they fasted and prayed for, their prayer was answered in verse 2. As I think about this angst-ridden three days of preparation before approaching the king, I feel the queen was likely also seeking the Lord's guidance for a...

PLAN OF ACTION

When Esther sent instructions back to Mordecai about fasting, she didn't say anything about any plan to host a series of banquets to butter up the king and trap Haman. She just said she would go to the king after three days of fasting, and even then, Esther went to the king before the third day of fasting was complete, which I believe is indicative of her sense of URGENCY.

David encourages us in such times...

Psalm 32:6-8

6 Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.

7 You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

And then the Lord responds...

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Asaph, the chief worship leader under David, also wrote...

Psalm 73:24

You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.

It's been said, "When you don't know what to do, DO WHAT YOU KNOW TO DO." What do we "know to do?" Obey God according to His Word. No matter what you're going through, God's Word will speak to it. If we still lack wisdom, James teaches us that we have but to ask...

James 1:5-8

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

He says, "If you don't know what to do, ASK GOD!" However, you better be committed to obey whatever He reveals to you. That's what it means to "ask in faith." To flippantly ask God for guidance as if He isn't your only hope, seemingly waiting to hear from Him to decide whether or not you'll follow through in obedience is to dishonor Him because you're submitting His wisdom to your scrutiny. James says don't even bother asking.

I believe Esther knew she needed a plan. The lives of an entire Nation depended upon what she would do in three days' time. Her actions had to be perfect, and I believe she knew to turn to the Perfect One for the perfect plan. I don't think she walked into that courtyard before the king's throne still fumbling around in her mind for a plan. I believe she not only had the plan, but she also had God's leadership on not waiting another day to execute it. As we'll see next week, part of God's plan included a sleepless night for the king THAT NIGHT, and Esther's meeting with the king needed to happen first.

So, had the Lord heard the prayers of these fasting Jews? Esther was about to find out...

Esther 5:2-3

2 And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 3 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.

WOW! I think the Lord answered Mordecai and Esther's prayers! The king extended the golden scepter to her. When you hear "golden scepter," you might imagine something like the bejeweled scepter that's part of the Crown Jewels, but we don't really have to imagine what it looked like.



This relief of Ahasuerus' father, King Darius, depicts him sitting regally on his throne, holding a long, thin rod, which is very likely the scepter that Ahasuerus extended to Queen Esther, sparing her life and inviting her to enact her plan.

What a relief! No pun intended. It could've gone either way. King Ahasuerus could've shook his head, and that would have been the end for Queen Esther. She went in faith, believing the Lord to have gone before her, but there had to have been a great deal of fear as well. She entered the king's throne room with fear and seemingly by the whim of an impulsive king. Aren't you glad that isn't how we enter the throne room of our king? Praise the Lord that, when we have a need, the writer of Hebrews encourages us, saying...

Hebrews 4:16

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God had clearly gone before the queen, though. The king extended the golden scepter to her, and as she touched the tip of it, he essentially asked her, *"What's on your mind, Queen Esther?"* He then made the grand offer to grant her anything she asked for, up to half of his kingdom! Again, do we see just how much God was moving in the background on Esther and her people's behalf?! As Proverbs 21:1 says...

Proverbs 21:1

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Before Haman had even ascended to such a position of power in Ahasuerus' empire, the former queen was deposed and replaced with Esther, a Jew raised by her cousin who was integral in the Persian government. Mordecai thwarted an assassination attempt on the king. Now God had given the queen favor in the eyes of the king. No, God didn't take away the free will of anyone involved; however, through untold circumstances, He manipulated situations knowing that the actors involved would make decisions that would lead to this moment. FOLKS, THESE AREN'T COINCIDENCES!!! The People of God were in danger, but He hadn't abandoned them, and He hadn't stopped working! Queen Esther had gone to the king to plead for the lives of her people, and she was met with the question, **"What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom."** To say things were off to a good start would be an understatement. It was time to put her plan in motion...

Esther 5:4-8

4 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. 5 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. 6 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. 7 Then Esther answered, My wish and my request is: 8 If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill 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.

A banquet? It wouldn't have been my first thought as a rescue strategy, but then again, I don't think I would've simply marched around Jericho as a siege strategy, nor would I have attacked Midian with only 300 men armed with clay pots, torches, and trumpets. Time and again, God's wisdom and might astound, but that was Esther's heritage. So, I believe Esther trusted God as she simply invited the king and her enemy, Haman, to dinner.

Well, given what we know about the egocentric Haman, such an invite stroked his ego further! We see no indication that Haman had any reservations about going. Why should he? He and the king were BFFs, and now it looked like the queen favored him just as much. However, even if Haman didn't feel like attending, what was he going to say to the king???

"Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked."

What would he say??? *"Actually, I thought I'd eat out today. Raincheck?"* NO! The king said, *"Bring Haman quickly!"* Haman didn't realize it, but Esther had laid the trap for him when she made her request of the king, and when the king eagerly obliged, it SNAPPED SHUT.



What does a trap do? You say, "Well, it...traps." Yeah, but more specifically, it LURES. It offers something you haven't got, and upon attempting to take it, it TAKES what little you have! Haman's sin was PRIDE, so God baited the trap with even greater status, and in so doing, He trapped Haman in his sin just as Solomon wrote...

Proverbs 29:6

**An evil man is ensnared in his transgression,
but a righteous man sings and rejoices.**

Haman thought he could do whatever he wanted with the people of God without consequence, but it was he who was in trouble. Our God is a God of reversals. Truly, the Book of Esther is one big IRONY. None of what we read is coincidence; it's just glimpses of God working in the background.

There's another reversal by God that utterly dwarfs this one, though. Two thousand years ago, the evil one thought he had the Son of God right where he wanted Him...



In the Garden, he had tricked humanity into obeying him instead of God, and now he was poised to destroy their Savior. It was almost too easy! The Jews and the Romans were happy to join in on his plot to kill God. The demonic host had to have been celebrating what was to be their dark lord's crowning achievement. That is, until He said three...simple...words...

"It. Is. FINISHED!"

Now, this scene from *The Passion of the Christ* isn't recorded in scripture...



...the writhing, the agony, the raging screams of the devil. However, Paul reveals to us that, when Christ died, the devil knew he'd made a mistake. He had eternally lost. THE TRAP WAS SPRUNG. Paul wrote...

1 Corinthians 2:6-8

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

The Offspring promised to the woman in the Garden had accomplished His mission to make salvation possible for fallen humanity, and the devil *helped*. How that had to GALL him! God the Father manipulated the demonic realm into manipulating men to crucify Jesus, and just like that, God ensnared the Evil One in his transgression. Yes, he had bruised the Son's heel, but now he waits for his head to be crushed. As Solomon wrote...

Proverbs 16:18

**Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall.**

Next to Satan, I don't know if anyone embodied it more than Haman. Like Esther, we have an enemy who seeks to destroy us, and just as Esther was able to go above her enemy's head to the king, we too have access to the King. Our enemy, Satan, only has as much leash as he's allowed. One day he'll be jerked up by the chain swinging, bound with it for 1,000 years, and eventually cast into the lake of fire forever, never to trouble us again.

God never stops working. The Book of Esther is testimony of that. Sometimes it feels like the darkness is gaining ground in this world. Sometimes it even feels like PEOPLE are our enemies, but they're not. When the darkness becomes unbearable, when it feels like you're about to be swallowed by it, go talk to the King.

Esther did, and after the banquet, the king asks Esther what she wanted a second time. You'd have thought she would've gone ahead and made her request. Scripture is mute on why she didn't; all we can say is that it wasn't time, and next time we'll see how her patience worked together with a sleepless night and a good deed from the past.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," is all she said.

Well, let's wrap up the night talking about miserable people. Shall we?

Esther 5:9-14

9 And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. 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. 10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. 11 And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. 12 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.

What a BRAGGART. Our anonymous, biblical historian says that "**Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart.**" It wasn't a true, abiding joy, though. It was a CIRCUMSTANTIAL HAPPINESS. Life is all about HAMAN, and we can see that because of what he makes his life

about: wealth, earthly relationships, social status, power. And like everyone we've ever known who have tried to sustain themselves and their sense of IDENTITY and VALUE by such things, we see that those things aren't enough. Haman said...

Esther 5:13

Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.

As soon as he saw Mordecai, that "joy and gladness" EVAPORATED. That's the consistent disappointment of the life lived for self in the flesh. J. Oswald Sanders said it well...

"Love of self is soul-destroying, but love of Christ is soul-enriching."

Yet there are those who still make life all about themselves, and like Haman, they expect others to do the same. The thing is, we all have our own lives, don't we? We all have our own concerns, our own schedules to run, and so on. I doubt any of you sit around at home or drive down the road during the week wondering, "What's Matthew doing today?" You surely aren't pausing before making a decision and asking, "How might this affect Matthew (or someone else)?" And you shouldn't! You have your own life, as do I.

However, we all know folks who ENFORCE the understanding that life is all about them. They not only make life all about them, they expect you to make life all about them too! You're always expected to be available for them; if you can't be, it's an intentional slight. You're just extras in their movie. When you were born, someone was supposed to tell you that you were supposed to live in the background. *"The camera is only following them, but you're still expected to be in the shot, so it looks good for them. Got it?"*

The problem is that NO ONE GOT THAT MEMO, and as a result, these folks are MISERABLE! Now you see why we're talking about miserable people. Haman was one of those miserable people. He had it all! Everything was going his way, but when ONE GUY didn't bow to him, it TORE HIM OUT OF HIS FRAME! So, naturally, he decided to kill that guy's entire nation! *"Mordecai's so mean to me! I hate that guy! Why's he got to rain on my parade? Doesn't he know it's all about ME?!"*

Now, I don't believe anyone would actually SAY, "Life's all about me." No, we say it through our actions and thoughts, in the way we spend our time and treat others. If you're easily bent out of shape because you feel others don't think of you when they decide to do something, you could definitely be saying it.

This isn't saying that we have to stop caring about things in our own lives. Paul didn't tell the Philippians to stop looking after their own interests, he said, "**look not only to [your] own interests, but also to the interests of others**" (Philippians 2:4). At the end of the day, our highest affections should be toward Christ, not ourselves. We were made for God; the quicker and more fully we understand that the quicker and more fully we'll experience the true fulfillment and joy that Haman so clearly lacked.

Of course, a life lived for the God of the Jews, was the FARTHEST THING from Haman and his wife's minds. After Haman finished his little tantrum, the writer records...

Esther 5:14

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.

HA! Did you hear that? *"You tell the king to..."*

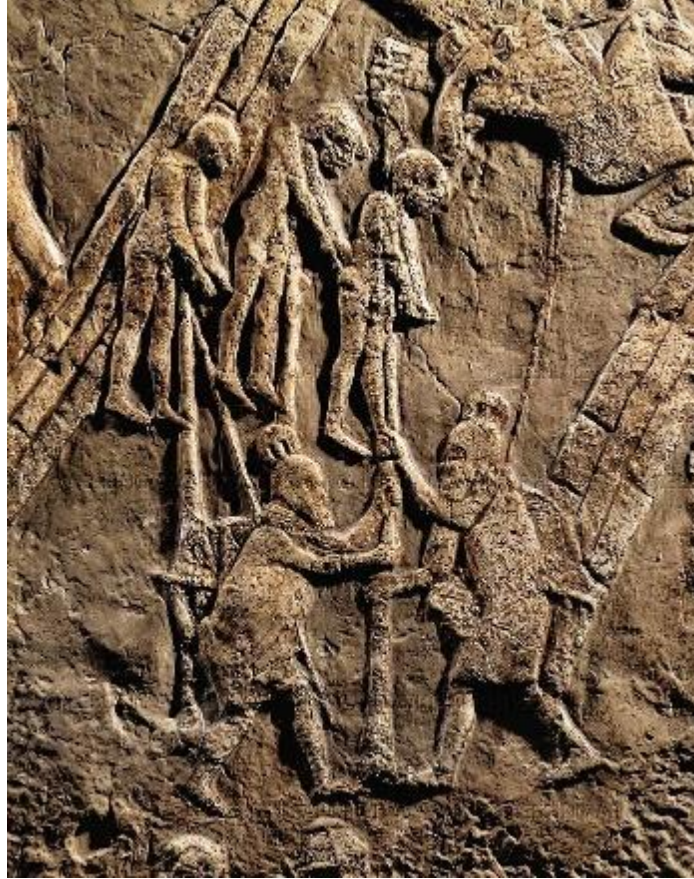
Now, I know that, throughout this story, everyone has gotten used to telling the king what to do, but you've got to admit that these folks have gotten pretty full of themselves! They've gotten a little too familiar with the king, a little "big for their breeches," right?

"Tell the king..." Ha! It's pinnacle of pride, which we all know precedes DESTRUCTION and a terrible FALL (Proverbs 16:18).

What a TWISTED BUNCH! *"Just tell the king to impale Mordecai on a pike, and then 'go joyfully with the king to the feast.' That'll be fun, right?"*

This is the whole "life is only about me" exemplified by the way we treat others. To Haman and the rest, Mordecai was just a fly to be swatted. His life was insignificant and shouldn't be allowed to continue. So, his helpful wife and friends encouraged Haman to just kill the guy and get back to enjoying life!

Oh, but they were going to send a message as they did it. These "gallows" which were PIKES, not platforms with nooses, as portrayed in this relief...



...they were to be built 75 FEET HIGH! There was no tree that grew that high in that region, not to mention much, if any, of their architecture reached that height. Mordecai's impaled body would have been easily visible from almost any location in Susa. It was a message...

"Life is about HAMAN. This is what happens to anyone who says or acts like it isn't."

Now, I doubt you've anyone here is as far gone as Haman, impaling your offenders on pikes, but the truth is, the older we get, the easier it is to expect things to be a certain way—OUR WAY. How can we short-circuit this natural tendency? Paul tells us...

Galatians 6:7-8

7 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

Haman only sowed to the flesh. The pride in his heart lit the fires of his own destruction. By attempting to take out his childish rage on Israel, he pitted Himself against Almighty God, an UNWINNABLE fight. However, Esther prepared herself to follow the Lord. As we deny ourselves and focus on sowing to the things of God in our lives, we get to experience the truly abundant life of the second person in this verse...

Proverbs 29:6

**An evil man is ensnared in his transgression,
but a righteous man sings and rejoices.**

God's will is UNDAUNTED. Everyone has the freedom to partner with God in His grand plan and enjoy the eternal rewards that accompany such allegiance, or they can battle against Him and incur His eternal wrath. Either way, God never stops working, and His will never ceases to advance. Take heart when things in your life seem bleak; God's just working in the background. Even when His efforts are undetected by our eyes, may we faithfully apply His will in our lives, knowing that the righteous will sing and rejoice forever.