

## "A Courageous and Wise Queen"

Esther 5: 1-14

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In the novel "Moby Dick," Captain Ahab says, "I don't want anyone on this boat who is not afraid of whales." That is a reminder that some people appear to be courageous, simply because they don't understand the danger they face. Fools never feel fear; heroes avoid showing their fear.

Indeed, there are folks who recognize danger, but are courageous because they are willing to act despite the danger. These individuals may experience a great deal of fear or anxiety, but their willingness to act is a demonstration of courage.

Folks, that is what we see in our text today. Our journey through the book of Esther brings us to chapter 5. Here we see a young woman who knows she is risking her life, but has the courage to do the right thing. Let's pause and pray the Lord would use His word to both encourage and challenge us today.

Here is a quick review of what is happening. Haman is a powerful, but evil political figure in the Persian empire with plans to exterminate all the Jewish people in the realm. He does not know however, that the queen of Persia, Esther, is a Jewess. She attained that position through a series of remarkable providences, while concealing her ethnic identity.

Yet, now challenged by her cousin, Mordecai, Esther realizes she needs to act. She knows that likely the only way she can prevent her people from being annihilated is by asking for the help of the king. Esther also knows that she is risking her life if she approaches the king without being summoned. Yet, by the grace of God, she has the courage to do that. **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.**

Esther had asked the Jewish community to fast for three days, an indication she was seeking sometime of divine help. Ancient artwork depicts the Persian King holding a long scepter, with a guard alongside him with a huge axe. If he does not extend the scepter to welcome who has come,

apparently the guard would extend the axe and end that person's life. A significant moment in chapter 1, is when Queen Vashti refuses to come when the king summons her. A significant moment in chapter 5 is when Queen Esther comes to the king without being summoned. **Esther 5:2,3 And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court,...drum roll please... she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand.** The Lord is protecting her! This is a huge moment in the book of Esther. Had the king not extended his mercy, Esther's execution or banishment would not have only been but the end of the Jewish people.

There is no "Plan B" to stop Haman's wicked scheme. If King Ahasuerus would not receive Esther, there is little hope left. So, when he holds out that scepter, it is a time for the Jews of the Persian Empire, and for all God's people, including us, to cheer. **Esther 5:2b,3 Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 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."** The king may not mean that last phrase literally, it is likely an idiom, an intended exaggeration, but he is clearly interested in pleasing Esther, whom now the author refers to as "Queen Esther." The significance of her position is becoming more evident.

Esther could not be sure she would be welcomed into the king's presence, but if he does welcome her, she has a plan. She knows the king thinks very highly of Haman. She will play her cards very carefully in order to get the king to see how wrong his edict to exterminate the Jews really is.

Esther says to the king, **Esther 5:4 And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to feast that I have prepared for the king."** King Ahasuerus and Haman attend Esther's dinner party **Esther 5:6 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."**

The king is in a very good mood. The wine may have something to do with that and it might seem like a good time for Esther to explain what she wants. Yet, she says, what I want is for **Esther 5:8 the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.**” In other words, come back tomorrow, we will dine together again, and then I will tell you what I want. Now, I don’t pretend to know exactly what Esther was thinking. And maybe Esther was not fully sure of her reason, but God providently uses the delay to change the dynamic of the situation. Two important things happen before she meets with the king and Haman again.

First, the king has a dream that night. We read about that in Chapter 6. Second, before that, there is an incident described in verses 9-14 which leads Haman to overplay his hand. **Esther 5:9 And Haman went out that day (after dining with the king and queen) 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.**

He has felt that before. He hates Mordecai and all Jews. **Esther 5:10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh.** Haman brags to them about his wealth and the promotions he has received from the king. **Esther 5:12 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.** This man has become very proud, but adds, **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.”** Wow, we could stop and have a whole sermon here. Haman is a man who has everything he wants. Wealth, power, fame, the admiration of others, and yet he cannot enjoy any of it because of his hatred of Mordecai.

There is no logic to that, but it is how we, as human beings, sometimes act. Hatred, bitterness, envy, a desire for revenge, these are cancers of the soul. Like physical cancers they tend to grow and become all consuming. They will suck all the joy out of life and will eventually destroy a soul. As Rubin Carter said, *Hatred and bitterness only*

*consume the vessel that contains them. They don’t hurt anyone else.*

So, a good application today might be, “Don’t be like Haman.” Don’t let hatred, bitterness, etc. consume you. Don’t let those type of things keep you from finding joy and satisfaction in life. That actually means don’t let hatred, bitterness, etc. be a part of your life. Because if you harbor them, they will grow, and will make you an emotionally, spiritually, and maybe even physically, sicker person. I would suggest that today, even before you leave this room, ask God to enable you to **Ephesians 4:31a Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger.** It would also be a good idea to ask someone, a friend, maybe your spouse, to pray for you and give you some accountability. But getting rid of his bitterness and anger was not something Haman was going to do. Instead, **Esther 5:14 His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, “Let gallows fifty cubits (about 75 feet) 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.**

This is part of the reason why Haman is such an evil man. He has a wife and friends who encourage him to be more wicked. This could be the topic of another sermon. Choose a spouse and friends who encourage you to do good, not evil. Anyway, I don’t think Haman would have found any really happiness killing Mordecai, but as we continue in Esther next week, we will see why and how that doesn’t happen.

Let’s now turn our focus to a couple of other lessons the Lord has for us in this text. First, it is often important to be patient and not act or speak hastily. This is what Esther does. The king receiver her and asks, “What can I do for you Queen Esther?” Rather than saying, “You can put an end to Haman’s plot to exterminate me and all the Jewish people,” which is what she really wants, Esther says, “king, I want you and Haman to come for dinner.”

That happens and the king again asks, “Okay, Esther, what can I do for you?” Her answer is, “Come back again for dinner tomorrow, and I will tell you.” Esther is waiting for just the right time to make her request to the king. Now, in a narrative like this it is not always easy to know whether the author is endorsing or just reporting

what Esther does. Yet, as things develop in the next chapter, it is clear that she indeed is making the right choice. It is also consistent with what the rest of the Bible teaches. **James 1:19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.**

Folks, in our day, a time becoming more and more challenging for God's people, it is so important that we be willing to stand up and speak up for the truth. Yet, we also need to speak at the right time. And that right time is usually when people are willing to listen. How do we know when that is? I believe the answer is Holy Spirit inspired wisdom and spiritual maturity. We also need patience, a fruit of the Spirit, that enables us to be content fixing things in God's time, rather than trying to do it on our own. There is a tendency among some Christians, especially those who are zealous, but maybe not very mature in their faith, to blurt out whatever they know or whatever they think, without even considering how other people might respond. That is simply not wise.

One wise piece of advice I received from a school superintendent is this: "When someone is angry and yelling at me on the phone, I have never regretted keeping my mouth shut." Friends, people who are angry usually are not very good listeners. Words spoken in those situations are often wasted. It is much wiser to wait for the right time, for God's time and then speak the truth in love.

Friends, there are times when you have something important to say to another person. The lives of a million people may not depend on what you have to say, as was the case with Esther, but your relationship with your spouse, child, another family member, an employee, employer, neighbor, friend at church and all sorts of other situations will be impacted by words you speak and conversations you have.

Most important are opportunities you have to talk to friends and family member who are not believers in Jesus about why they need to turn to Him. Ask the Lord to help you choose your words carefully. Seek to speak with courage, clarity and compassion and ask God to help you discern when it is the right time to have that conversation. Esther understood the need to choose her words carefully, to think before she spoke, to not just

blurt our every thought she had. May the Lord help you to understand that as well.

Second, we should recognize how the Lord graciously is transforming our lives. It is not an explicit theme of this chapter, but it seems so clear that Esther is a much different woman than we saw in the first three chapters of this book. Remember she was an orphan born about 100 years after the Jewish people had been forced out of Jerusalem and started living in exile. It is unlikely that Esther had much opportunity to really learn what it meant to follow God's law and live in a way pleasing to Him. And then she is taken into the king's harem. She eats lots of non-kosher food that faithful Jews should avoid. She receives all sorts of pagan beauty treatments, and she sleeps with the pagan king, apparently without feeling remorse or guilt. And all the while she makes sure no one finds out that she is a Jew. It is hard to imagine that she is the one who will save the Jews.

Then Haman comes up with his plan to exterminate the Jews. Esther has to be thinking about what she can do to make sure no one discovers her ethnic identity. But then her cousin reminds her that she and she alone, has the opportunity to act and perhaps save her people.

So, what happened? Why is there this transformation of Esther's character? What is it that gives her this courage? How does she have the wisdom to approach the king in just the right way? Is it a natural maturity? No, it is grace, God's grace that enables Esther to become a woman of courage and wisdom. Oh, yes Esther makes choices, important choices. But underneath them, the Lord is at work in her life. No, He is not mentioned by name in the entire book of Esther, but her transformed life is an example of God's fingerprints being all over the story. And folks, I hope you can see God's grace at work in Esther's, because you need to be able to see it at work in your own life. In his book, "The Truth About Us," Brant Hansen makes this interesting point. In the Bible there is not really a contrast between good people and bad people, but between the proud and the humble. Now, that seems like an overstatement, but I think he may be right. In **Mark 10:18** Jesus says, **No one is good except God alone.** So, it seems there are really no good people. Or perhaps the "good people" are those humble enough to recognize

any goodness they possess is because of grace. **Proverbs 3:34** quoted in both James 4 and 1 Peter 5, tells us **“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”** That is illustrated throughout the gospel accounts. Those who oppose Jesus, are the seemingly “very good” Pharisees, while it is often seemingly “bad people,” sinners, who are willing to trust and follow Jesus.

Folks, I don't think anyone understood more clearly than the apostle Paul. He was one of the most brilliant and accomplished individual who ever lived. But he didn't let that go to his head. Oh, before he met the Lord Jesus, he did. He was a young man full of pride, thinking his abilities and accomplishments both impressed God and made him superior to other people. That pride also led him to persecute those who trusted and followed Jesus. Yet, while he traveled to the city of Damascus, Jesus Christ literally knocked Paul off his horse. And soon I realized that he was not a good man, but 1 Timothy 1:15, the chief or worst of sinners. If pressed, I think Paul would say, “Yes, there were others who did worse things than me, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and many others, but none of them matched my pride.”

Transformed, however, Paul now exhibits a genuine and deep humility. He views himself as the worst of sinners. He boldly declares **Ephesians 2:8,9 For by grace you have been save through faith, And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** And he challenges us with these words, **1 Corinthians 4:7 What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?**

Friends, that is my encouragement for today. Recognize and remember how dependent you are on God's grace. Some of you, perhaps, like the younger Paul, are under the illusion that you don't really need that grace, you don't need this Jesus stuff, you don't have any use for religion at all. Friends, if those are your thoughts at all, your soul is very full of pride. And I doubt there is anything I can say that will enable you to see how troubled your soul really is. But I do pray the Lord would open your eyes, mind and heart to the truth that will transform your life, the truth of the grace of God found in Jesus Christ. For those of you who are believers in Jesus Christ, who profess to be

saved by grace through faith, careful, be diligent, not to forget that grace. “What do you have that you did not receive?”

You may have a lot of gifts and abilities, you may have a resume full of accomplishments, you may have served faithfully in the church for years, you may have avoided all sorts of bad habits and sins that have ensnared others, you may have a reputation of being a good person, but what do you have that you have not received? Friends, don't forget in your mind or heart that grace you have found through Jesus Christ. If you do that, I believe that grace will continue to transform your life more and more into the image of Jesus Christ Himself.