

ESTHER 6

THE LORD PREPARES THE WAY FOR ESTHER'S REQUEST

In the previous chapter, we read how the LORD granted Esther's request for an audience with the King. Haman was also specifically invited. Esther, however, does not yet make her real request known, but gives the matter even more weight by asking for a one day reprieve.

I said: Esther sleeps peacefully that night. But of the three, she probably is the only one with rest. Haman is furiously scheming against Mordechai, that Jew who will not show him proper honour. He can't wait for the morning to receive the king's permission to kill Mordechai. He does not think his plan can fail.

Also the king, as we read in 6: 1, could not find sleep that night. He asks his attendants to read from the chronicles of the kings of Persia, for that will help to pass the time. These chronicles are said to be so boring that they are guaranteed to put you to sleep. Better, I suppose, than counting sheep, unless these sheep in passing extol your virtues and feats.

A TURNING POINT?

We sense that we are coming to some kind of a climax in the developments. What follows in chapter 6 is very crucial, and has been called the turning point in the book of Esther. It is remarkable, if it is true that here is indeed the turning-point that Esther herself is not even mentioned except in the last verse of the chapter. It is not noted that Esther was the one who told the king about the assassination plot mentioned in chapter 2: 19-23. Mordechai discovered it, and Esther reported it, but she does not receive much attention in chapter 6. What is highlighted here is the conflict between Mordechai and Haman, between Israel and Amalek, and at bottom, between Christ and Satan.

Esther does not come to the foreground at all, and various events take place that are outside of her vision and beyond her control. The LORD does not depend on any one single person to achieve his goal, and that is something to remember. Her task is set and her involvement comes later that day.

PRIDE AND FALL

This is a chapter in which Haman's foolish pride really comes to the fore. It is also a chapter in which in typical Biblical style the tables are turned around. Haman expected to be honoured. But Mordechai is royally recognized. Haman must even function as the one who must personally in public honour his great enemy. Pride comes before the fall, and the fall is imminent. He who digs a pit

for another, will himself fall into it. I think that this is recognized by Haman's wife Zeresh, and his advisers.

In chapter 6: 13b, we find another key text in the book of Esther, "His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him: since Mordechai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, *you cannot stand against him* (italics added) - you will surely come to ruin!" You cannot stand against him. These people do not necessarily know why the plan against Mordechai will fail. They go by signs and events. Their superstitions make them afraid. They say to Haman: these are bad omens.

But they do not know the real reason why Haman's downfall has started. They do not take into account that the people of Israel are the covenant nation of the LORD, out of whom will come the Saviour of the world. There is something about those Jews that makes them a different people, but Haman's wife and friends do not know what it is that sets Israel apart.

I said: much of this happens around Esther, while she lays sleeping. The LORD does not sleep or slumber (Ps 121). He shows his sovereign grace in preparing the way for Esther's request to the king. He who keeps his Israel, will neither sleep nor slumber. I summarize this chapter as follows: the LORD shows his sovereign grace to Israel in preparing the way for Esther's request. We will see how Mordechai is greatly honoured and how Haman is deeply traumatized.

PURELY COINCIDENTAL?

I want to stress that the way for Esther's request must be prepared. Why is this so? Because her request will be for the king to undo an edict of the kings of the Medes and Persians, and this is legally impossible. What has been officially decreed, cannot be undone. Even to ask such a thing would be interpreted as gross insubordination.

There are many explainers who see the events described in chapter 6 as being purely coincidental. These things just happened, and so Esther ran into a streak of good luck. It so happened that the king could not sleep, that the history about Mordechai was read, and the king decided as yet to honour him. It so happened also that Haman had just entered the court to request that Mordechai be hanged. Being a vain man, Haman thought he would be the one who was to be honoured. Is it not completely coincidental?

It is seen by some explainers as a literary technique used more often in wisdom literature. One commentator was inspired to compare Esther with the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries. In these books the idea of "coincidence" is consistently applied. It so happens that something is found. It appears to be a clue. Other coincidences follow and clues are given until the reader is deeply caught up in the suddenly swift flow of events. What is initially seen as being coincidental, finally proves to be very significant. They say: so it is here. It is all pure coincidence that things just fall into place, as in a thriller.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE AGAIN

I noted in a previous chapter that there are in the Book of Esther no literary devices that mask reality. But some literary techniques may present the facts in this sense that they come to the fore much clearer and stronger. We see their relationship. This may be the case here, and there is no need to refute it. Everything does co-coincide, that means, it all comes together, but then in a way determined by the LORD. His providence, his almighty and ever-present power, cause all things go as they do, as they should, because he wants it to be so!

We cannot otherwise explain the king's inability to sleep that night. Was it a common occurrence that the king could not sleep? Was he a chronic insomniac? Was he bothered by matters of state that needed resolution? Maybe intrigued by Esther's mysterious doings? As a famous writer once wrote, "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown."

In any case the king cannot sleep. So he orders the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign to be brought in and read to him (6: 1). Some say, as I noted earlier, that these chronicles were so boring that one inevitably fell asleep. Real bed-time stories. I can't judge that, but I do think that Xerxes was listening with more interest than some explainers suggest. He wants to know if anything has been missed or overlooked. Was he thinking about Esther's mysterious behaviour? Could recent events somehow be linked to Esther's request. It could be that the king did not want to be caught off guard the next day.

MORDECHAI'S RECORD READ

It so happens that the servant reads the record of Mordechai's exposure of the would-be assassins Bigthana and Teresh. In fact, Mordechai had saved the king's life (see: Esther 2), for these assassins were officers, possibly even of the imperial guard, close to the king and would have been able to carry out their plan. The king asks, "What honour and recognition has Mordechai received for this?" The answer is: nothing! Again we understand that here, too, we see the providential hand of the LORD. He knows the pages of the chronicles because he determined their contents. He knows exactly where the feat of Mordechai is recorded. And he wants it to be read now!

I think that it is telling that at the time Mordechai was not honoured for his deed to save the king's life. As you know, Mordechai told Esther about the plot, who, in turn, told the king. Mordechai sort of stays in the background. He does not seek his own glory. He does not want to be upwardly mobile. His exposure of the assassins was perhaps more out of concern for Esther than for the king. For if the king is killed, will the queen not be in danger also? Generally there was a complete housecleaning after an assassination. So Mordechai kept a low profile.

At this point Xerxes knew that Mordechai was a Jew, who fell under the edict of annihilation (see verse 10), but he did not know that Mordechai was Esther's relative. This information is given later, as described in chapter 8: 1. But when he

discovers that Mordechai was not recognized for his courageous deeds and uprightness, he feels that something must be done to honour the man.

THE DOING OF THE LORD

Mordechai was no schemer. He did not play games of intrigue. He did what he considered to be the best in a given moment to protect Esther. But now the king -at this very point- wants to honour Mordechai. This is the doing of the LORD! For the recognition of Mordechai at this very moment will completely neutralize the plan of Haman to have Mordechai hanged. And that is God's very own work. The LORD will elevate Mordechai to quite another position than on a gallows.

We discover all these things because we know the whole history and can oversee the entire unfolding of the events. We see indeed how God's sovereign grace surrounds and protects Mordechai and Esther for the sake of his counsel of redemption, for the salvation of his people, and for the coming of the Messiah! Grace is never only personal. It is imparted for the whole body, for all Israel.

The important thing now is how we see all this relating to us. The LORD, who has not changed, remains in charge. How he constantly works for our benefit, even when we sleep. Setbacks become forward strides, if we recognize the loving hand of the LORD. We learn that we are in this life together, as people of God's covenant, and that the grace shown to one benefits all the others as well.

IMPECCABLE TIMING

Mordechai was very unassuming in his act of bravery, for he was not self-centered. Here was a man who cared for the relief and deliverance of the Jews (4: 14). So he sought no recognition for what he did. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Even now, after the publication of the edict, Mordechai does not come to the king to say: you owe me a favour, at least let my family and Esther live. I have saved your life; now you save ours. Mordechai wants all Israel to be delivered! This book is truly canonical, for this is the line of all the Scriptures.

And then you see how the LORD guides things, how he has set the stage, and how he rules the principal characters. I imagine that by now it is morning, and in the outer court already people are gathering who have official business with the king or his immediate ministers. King Xerxes wants to clear up the matter of recognizing Mordechai right away, and that is behind his question: who is in the court? Whoever came with a question or request will first have to obey the order of the king.

Now we read in verse 4 that Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordechai on the gallows he had erected for him! The king wants to honour Mordechai, while Haman wants to hang him. Is there a greater irony than this? Again we see the impeccable timing of the

LORD. We sometimes think that the LORD is too early or too late, but he is always right on time. It is not always easy to discover this, so it is important to confess clearly that God's schedule is perfect. It is a matter of faith for us to believe that God is always on time, acts according to his schedule. Therefore we can be patient and bide his time.

THE ROYAL TREATMENT

Haman is called in and the king immediately asks him: what should be done for the man the king delights to honour? Remarkably, no name is given, just as Haman had not given the name of the Jews but spoke of a "certain people" (3: 8). Xerxes shows here that he also is able to put people to the test. His question may have been asked in this way -without a name attached- in order to get an impartial, non-partisan opinion from Haman. But egotists are always partial and partisan to themselves. Haman thinks that the king means him -for is he not the favorite of the king?- and therefore he makes some far-reaching suggestions! Actually Haman goes too far here, for he suggests that the man who is to be honoured will be treated like the king himself! But because of his self-obsession, the man does not see even that he is going too far. Life's like that.

In any case, the man to be honoured must be treated royally. He must wear the king's robe, and ride the king's horse, and be led through the city by one who calls out: this is what is done for the man whom the king delights to honour!

Scarcely has Haman said these words, and the king applies them to Mordechai. Go at once, he commands, and do everything you have recommended for Mordechai the Jew who sits at the king's gate! Do not neglect anything you have commanded. The orders are now presented as having come from Haman himself. There is divine irony.

Mordechai is greatly honoured, and for the moment his stature is that of the king of Persia. Mordechai did not seek this honour, but had to accept it when it was rendered. He was probably embarrassed by it, but undergoes it as demanded by the king.

NEVER WRITE OFF GOD'S PROMISES

Imagine Haman walking in front of the royal horse with a royal plume on its head, calling out constantly: this is what is done for the man the king delights to honour! And everywhere in the streets people bow down to show respect and honour to Mordechai. If Haman does not himself say these words, and lets his servants do the heralding, he is still at the head of the procession.

And everywhere in the streets people bow down to show respect and honour to Mordechai. Even Haman was never honoured in such a way in Susa. You will understand that Haman is deeply devastated by this unexpected turn of events. Never had he imagined such a thing to happen. The man who would not bow to him as the prime minister, now receives homage from the whole city, while he, Haman, is treated as a common servant.

And Mordechai, who was always unafraid of Haman, is amazed as well. How wondrous are God's ways. The great enemy of the Jews must show honour to one of their people. When it comes to the salvation of his people, the LORD leaves no avenue closed. How the Jews in Susa must have taken courage from this event, for they, too, witnessed it in amazement. God is preparing something wonderful for his people!

We may never write off the promises of God. We should never say: the situation is hopeless, here there is no way out. We may not see the way at a given time, because we are limited in our vision, but that does not mean there is no way. And for us it is clear how all God's promises have deepened and function now clearly in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Our Lord is the living proof indeed that with God all things are possible.

NEVER GIVE UP ON GOD

It is really sad and terrible to see that Christians sometimes give up on their Saviour and Lord. Then they give up on themselves as well. Just bitterly and resignedly accept whatever doom may hit. The sky is falling in, and all they can say is: I told you so, I saw it coming. A negative attitude never becomes a positive road. We even stop thinking of, or working towards possible solutions. What's the use? Does anyone in the church today have this negative approach to life? Life with the Lord Jesus as Saviour and King does not allow such an attitude. The Jews in Susa saw what happens when the Lord rises to help his people. There is no limit to what God can do.

God does not necessarily answer every prayer as we would like. His ways are higher than our ways. Neither may faith in his promises and ability lead us to sit back and do nothing. We must pray and work in true faith, tirelessly, as Mordechai does for the benefit of his people. But we must believe: whatever answer we receive, is for our good and God's glory. The way for the upright, which may go through many hard times, does lead to glory in Christ Jesus. And the way of evil men will perish. That is the law of God's kingdom, proclaimed in his Gospel.

For we see that when Mordechai is dropped off at the king's gate, and there resumes his former position, and when things return to normal, Haman speeds away in great turmoil. It says in verse 12, "But Haman rushed home, with his head covered, in grief...." He can't wait to go home. He is deeply hurt and ashamed. He covers his head, so that no one will see how deeply humiliated he feels.

YOU CANNOT STAND AGAINST HIM

When Haman comes home, he does not quietly retreat to think the matter over, but he calls his family (his wife anyway) and all his friends together to tell them what has happened to him. Some of them may have seen the procession. He blurts it out in frustration, anger, and fear. I think that it is apparent from the description that Haman is deeply traumatized, which means, severely wounded in his self-esteem, deeply hurt, to the point even that he does not know anymore what to do.

At a previous occasion, Haman's wife and friends had calmly offered a solu-

tion: build a gallows and ask the king's permission to hang Mordechai on it. Now that seems like ages ago. This avenue is closed off. This time his wife and friends cannot find words of consolation nor offer a counter-strategy. Instead their assessment is rather startling. They respond (verse 13b): since Mordechai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him -you will surely come to ruin! This is a very clear and perceptive assessment of the situation. Haman's wife and friends see the long-term implications. The edict may backfire terribly.

The downfall has started. They've probably seen it before in the case of other nobles how once you are sliding out of the king's favour, the process continues. Zeresh and his friends very properly connect what has happened to the fact that Mordechai is "of Jewish origin." Haman wanted to destroy all Jews, but he is already stuck with the first one. The Jews apparently will not take this edict sitting down, but are preparing a counter-attack.

"You cannot stand against him." Mordechai has been elevated above Haman. This Jew once even saved the king's life. Do you think that the king will allow Mordechai to be hung? Revered one day, despised the next? The tide has suddenly shifted for Haman. His wife and friends say: you will surely come to ruin. Whatever plans Haman may have had, perhaps even one day to be king, are gone, and instead a ruinous process has started.

You cannot stand against him. There is a deeper meaning to this statement which Haman's wife and friends do not fully comprehend. The LORD God of Israel has placed Mordechai where he is, and exalted him thus. Because the line of the Jews must continue. The Agagites (Amalekites) knew from their own history how the Jews always prevailed under God's protection and blessing. Will it be any different now? Mordechai is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him! This people has always been a special people! Haman should never have reached out to harm them.

VERY TRAUMATIC

This is very traumatic for Haman. His wife and counselors do not give him much hope. They feel that a mortal blow has been struck, and that the end is inevitable. You will come to ruin: that means, you will lose it all, your wealth, position, and maybe even your life! The Lord is working towards the fullness of time, and he will not stand for the foulness of Haman!

Well, they offer him no comfort. What comfort can you really give to one who is feeling the wrath, the curse of God. A long-standing, bitter feud now comes to its climax! Haman and his advisors should have thought about this before it was too late. Now the ruin is inevitable and imminent.

Here the promise to Abraham is again fulfilled: I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you (Gen 12: 1-3). That rule still stands, even today. Jesus Christ gathers his church and even the gates of hell cannot overcome it. The Gospel is proclaimed under the most difficult circumstances and in dan-

gerous places, but it is preached! The enemies of the Gospel come to ruin. They see the change of heart and attitude in the believers who are encouraged that the LORD blesses them.

COMPLAINING ABOUT DISCIPLINE

There is only one proper way for Haman, and that is to humble himself before the LORD, the God of Mordechai. He has reached out his hand to damage the apple of God's eye. It is either repentance or ruin. The trauma that Haman undergoes here, is of his own making. When he went public with the edict against the Jews, he brought over himself the wrath of God.

Sometimes members of the church complain bitterly about the discipline used for their benefit. Easily the church gets the blame. Sometimes, indeed, certain matters are dealt with in an improper manner. But more often than not, those rightly admonished try to turn the tables around. They have themselves caused their own ruin. It takes Haman's wife and friends to show him the deep truth: God has elevated Mordechai, and that means Haman will be humbled even more. If he will not be humbled, he will be humiliated. The former is voluntary, the latter is not.

Look for a moment at the last verse of this chapter. The events now follow at a very rapid pace. The LORD escalates the process. Haman's wife and friends do not receive time to plan a strategy. Time is up. It says: while they were still talking with him (probably trying to do some damage control) the eunuchs of the king arrive and "hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared". Haman went to the first banquet in high spirits. Now he goes as a deeply-traumatized man. Probably the last thing he wants to do at this time is dine with the king and queen. And the worst is yet to come: he does not even know that the Queen is also Jewish, a daughter of Mordechai.

THE WORST IS YET TO COME

There eunuchs, it says, *hurried* him along. Because of all that has happened, it is already late. The king cannot be kept waiting. There is now a sense of urgency in the air. So Haman is rushed to the palace, through the king's gate, where he probably saw Mordechai sitting, and he is promptly ushered into the king's chambers for a banquet. It is true that we have in this chapter the final turning point: from now on the events will rapidly follow one another, there is no escape, and Haman is dragged down by his own sins.

Haman no longer has control over the situation. Actually, he never did, but now every semblance of power slips out of his hands. The LORD is in control of all things. His counsel shall stand in the lives of persons and in the life of his church. Which means that things can change very quickly. A prospect of certain doom can become a situation of great deliverance. We learn that the LORD sets the schedule, and we have to seek him, believe and trust him, and obey him.

Now comes the climax of this history. At the banquet Haman will be exposed for whom he really is. God has carefully prepared everything for the crucial moment that is now coming. The character and power of the LORD are evident in his careful, meticulous approach. He preserves his covenant people. He is the living God, and he has not changed. He is the loving God, for those who fear him. In fact, in Christ he has come even closer to us, and sealed the covenant forever in the blood of the great Lamb shed on the cross of Calvary. But God is a consuming fire to all who hate him (cf. Deut 4: 24; Heb 12: 29).

The Lord is not grand-standing, but lets us stand tall in his service. So that we can face even the greatest crises that are yet to come. Esther's most difficult moment is at hand. But God has prepared things in such a way that she will come through it well. Let us stand tall, and face it all, for when it comes to working in God's kingdom and participating in the promotion of the Gospel of salvation, everything is possible.