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“The Book of Esther”

by
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About the Author



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HISTORY

Some consider the book of Esther as one of the most fascinating books in God’s Word, while others doubt its validity because God is not once mentioned in this book. But knowing that the Canon of Scriptures is divinely provided and preserved, and “*every book of it, every chapter of it, every verse of it, every word of it, every syllable of it, every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High! ... not some part of it more, some part of it less; but all alike, the utterance of Him who sitteth upon the Throne; faultless, unerring, supreme*” (Dean Burgon Oath), we can hence wholeheartedly learn from this book without reservations.

The time period of Esther lies between the first return of the Jews led by Zerubbabel and the subsequent return led by Ezra. The Medo Persian Empire, which King Ahasuerus ruled, stretched from India to Ethiopia with 127 provinces. Isaiah, Daniel and Jeremiah prophesied regarding the Babylonian kingdom being toppled by the Medes and Persians. The Medo Persian Empire’s rising was not by chance. Though God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, Esther 1:1 is the work of God’s Sovereign Hand.

Sometimes we unconsciously think that world history is delinked from our God, as if God only controls Christianity and Christians. But history is really “His-story.” God ordains and orders history. He is Sovereign over the entire world. The Medo Persians’ expansive rule is not a testimony of their abilities to oust the Babylonians. The Medo Persian army was simply God’s tool to bring His promise to pass in “His-story.” The Babylonian tactic was to control and convert their captives, but the new conquerors’ strategy was to allow the people freedom. It was exactly God’s timing to use the Medes and Persians to allow His people to return to Jerusalem, after seventy years, as He promised that He would. This was God fulfilling His covenant. We must not miss this point right from the start.

THOUGHT: How do I view God’s Sovereignty?

PRAYER: We praise Thee, the Almighty and Sovereign God!

GREAT SUPERPOWER

Sometimes as we read Old Testament events, we can be at a loss regarding the time period and how events are related. At such times, having an overall picture is helpful. Who was King Ahasuerus?

Ahasuerus was the son of Darius the Great (520-486BC). He was also known as Xerxes the Great. He ruled from 486-465BC. He was one of the Persian kings who ruled during the eighty-year period between the first return of the Jewish captives led by Zerubbabel and the subsequent return led by Ezra.

In Ezra 4:6, the Samaritans appealed to this Ahasuerus in their bid to stop the Jewish returnees from rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. Ahasuerus' official title, Shahanshah, means "king of kings." Shushan, from which he ruled his empire, was an important ancient city at that time. He was at this point truly sitting on the pinnacle of the world superpower. We are not reading about just an ordinary king. He was indeed a very powerful ruler of his time, holding the lives of those in his empire in his hands: to crush or to let live. This was the power and status of the person Esther would be facing.

Esther would be put into this kingdom for a purpose. The book of Esther will remind us that no matter how impressive and powerful a man is, *"promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south"* (Ps 75:6). Superpowers are set up by God. Also, *"God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another"* (Ps 75:7). No matter how impressive and dominant a global ruler is, it is God who sets him up. And no matter how great and influential one is, every man ultimately dies and passes on. God is the true Monarch and only He rules forever. We must keep this fact in mind as we study the book of Esther.

THOUGHT: How do I view great and powerful people at work, in school and in the world?

PRAYER: Lord, may I see that Thou art the Ultimate Ruler and the King of kings in this universe.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3

ESTHER 1:2-4

PSALM 75

*“Lift not up your horn on high:
speak not with a stiff neck.”*

GREAT POLITICAL EVENTS

Ahasuerus’ father, Darius the Great, was defeated by the Greek forces. It is believed that the reason for this massive and prolonged (180 days) feast held was Ahasuerus’ plan to amass support to fight the Greeks. He would seek victory where his father failed. To impress his guests and win the princes and servants, powers of Persia and Media, and the nobles of the provinces, Ahasuerus made a great show of the possessions and glory of his prized kingdom. Why would they not be allied to such a great king with such riches, a glorious kingdom and majesty? He desired to impress them.

The events of great superpowers and political agendas may seem to be unrelated to Christians at times. The scene before us is the king’s palace in Shushan (or Susa, located in modern Iran). It would be through this very city that the great adversary, Satan, would plot to annihilate God’s people. He would try to use the most powerful empire on earth. But we will see how God would turn things around for His chosen people. Ahasuerus, the ruler of this mightiest empire, wanted to impress through this tremendous feast. Yet unbeknown to him, his desire to show off at this opulent banquet would kick off a series of events which God would use to deliver His people. So while the greatest ruler may seem to be working out his own plans, a Higher Authority is working His plans too. And He will be steps ahead.

As we view great political events around the world, we cannot but realize that there is also a spiritual agenda of Satan to destroy God’s people and His Church. Satan is relentless, *“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”* (Eph 6:12). While man seeks to impress with outward pomp to get his agenda achieved, God does not need to. Satan may think he has found the most powerful person to eradicate the Jews, but God will use very ordinary people to deliver!

THOUGHT: Am I impressed by great show of power?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to view things through spiritual eyes.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 4

ESTHER 1:5-7

1 JOHN 2:15-17

*“If any man love the world,
the love of the Father is not in him.”*

THE APPEALING HIGH LIFE

After practically half a year of feasting and showing off his kingdom to the princes and nobles, Ahasuerus threw a banquet. This was a seven-day feast for all ranks in the palace garden. Verses 6 and 7 describe both the elaborate decorations as well as the abundance of the best wine for all. One could visualize the fine environment Ahasuerus provided for his subjects and people living in Shushan. There were multicolored curtains of white, green, and blue, tied to fine linen and expensive silver rings on marble pillars. The couches were of gold and silver, and the pavements people stood on were of colorful rare marble. The drinking cups were not only made from precious gold, each one was individually designed to be different from the other to serve a huge number of people. All these portrayed the luxury and lavishness of the event and the city. Without a doubt, it was the high life provided by Ahasuerus in his kingdom. He wanted to use these to gain their allegiance, no matter who they were.

This environment created by Ahasuerus for his banquet is what every hotel, restaurant, shopping mall, tourist destination will aim for. Each year city streets are decked with decorations at various festivals to create maximum impact to attract everyone. Designer fashions, uniqueness of experience, and extravagance are key. That is how the world also seeks to captivate our desires too. No matter who you are, it tempts you with the high life with all its glitter, glamour, and glory. Remember the great tempter's offer: *“Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me”* (Matt 4:8-9). There is nothing evil in beautiful environments, but when we are tempted by them to love and worship the things in the world, then they have become idols to us. Satan too will seduce us with the world to gain our allegiance to him.

THOUGHT: Have I become captivated by the high life?

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to love this world with its glitter and glamour.

EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY

The celebrations described so far in chapter 1 describe to us a half-year long banqueting hosted by King Ahasuerus. And at the end of 180 days, there was yet another seven more days of eating and drinking. The king was determined to give everyone a merry time. Imagine the logistics just to host such an opulent feast for so many. The amount of food and drink, the number of cooks, waiters, and utensils must have been tremendous. There were 187 days of non-stop revelling in sumptuous delicacies, exotic cuisines, dainties for the taste buds, and the best wine fit for royalties. And all these were set in the luxurious environment of the palace and its exquisitely decorated garden. The abundance of royal wine was “*according to the state of the king*” (Esther 1:7) meaning befitting what a royal king would and could generously provide. Besides the non-stop feasting, there was a practically endless flow of royal wine to drink to one’s heart’s content. The aim of the king was that “*they should do according to every man’s pleasure*” (Esther 1:8).

In other words, the splendour and elaborate banqueting pointed to one thing: everything was to bring pleasure. All were designed to fill, thrill, and entertain the senses of even the most demanding connoisseur of food and drink. Imagine being at such a prolonged daily feasting, never worrying about anything except maybe your waistline. Well that is exactly what many would dream and fantasize about (except for the waistline part): eating the best food, having an endless flow of drinks, and to be merry with enjoyment every day. Is that what you too are seeking in life? Some live to eat rather than eat to live. Many work hard to earn as much as possible, so that they can eat and drink to their heart’s content at some posh hotels, for example. At such places, you will notice everything is put in place to promote a hedonistic lifestyle bent on pleasure-seeking to indulge every senses. Have you fallen for that? Life is more than these!

THOUGHT: What am I working for and seeking after in life?

PRAYER: Lord, let me not be drawn into the pleasure-seeking culture in life.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 6

ESTHER 1:7-8

PROVERBS 23:29-35

“... we should live soberly, righteously,
and godly, in this present world.”

LEGAL TO DRINK WINE DOES NOT MAKE IT RIGHT

There was free-flowing royal wine provided by the king out of his generosity. The wine served was not only plentiful but was also the finest. Anyone could drink to his heart's content at this feast. This would be the dream of many people today. It was an invitation by the king to drink and hence it was legal for anyone to drink as much as he liked. Nevertheless, there was a law which Ahasuerus passed which was that no one could be forced to drink or to drink more than he wished to. All his officers in charge were to ensure that this law was observed and everyone respected it.

Well, it would mean that there would not be “yum seng” shoutings like at many Chinese wedding dinners. “Yum seng” means to finish the drink, i.e. it is a “bottoms-up” toast. Have we not often seen how some people love to insist, force, and challenge others to drink, just to get them drunk? Just because it may be legal to drink in your country, company event, school graduation, etc, does it make it right for the Christian to drink alcoholic wine?

Should Christians drink alcoholic beverages in the first place? There are many different words in Hebrew and Greek which are translated as “wine” in English. The meaning of “*wine*” in the Bible can range from grape or fruit juice, to water mixed with low alcoholic content for sterilizing purposes, to intoxicating alcoholic wine. Without such a proper understanding, we may think that God is contradicting Himself because He prohibits drinking “*wine*” and yet allows drinking “*wine*.” When God prohibits (eg. Prov 31:4-5), it refers to intoxicating alcoholic beverages; and where He allows (eg. John 2:1-11), it would be grape juice or water with a very low alcoholic content added for sanitizing purpose (1 Tim 5:23). The context informs us. Jesus turned water into the best fresh grape juice, not into fermented intoxicating wine.

THOUGHT: How should I respond when I am offered liquor?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be able to explain the right understanding of wine in the Bible.

EAT, DRINK, AND BE SILLY

We are informed here that Ahasuerus had a beautiful queen at this time, named Vashti. While Ahasuerus was entertaining the nobles and residents, Vashti was hosting the women in the king’s royal house. At the last day of the 187 days of feasting, Ahasuerus’ heart was merry with wine, in other words, he was tipsy. It was in this state of light headedness that he came up with the idea of showing off his attractive wife to the royalties, princes, and all present at the banquet. At best, the drunk Ahasuerus was proud to parade his wife’s beauty in a place filled with similarly drunk men. At worst, he was volunteering his wife for lewd entertainment. Imagine what husband would do this unless he was not of a clear mind at that moment. Whichever the reason, this action was going to result in queen Vashti’s banishment (Esther 1:19), practically resulting in a divorce occurring.

Indeed “*wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise*” (Prov 20:1). The reason God commands total abstinence from all alcoholic beverages is that even at the slightest intoxication, the mind cannot think clearly. All it takes is mild intoxication and a person loses his ability to think rationally. Under the influence of alcohol, he loses his sense of judgment quickly. Some Christians contend for moderate drinking and “social drinking” by quoting Ephesians 5:18: “*And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.*” But this verse does not mean drinking alcoholic wine in moderation is allowed over excessive drinking. The word “*excess*” (*asotia* in Greek) means profligacy. This verse is simply stating that “*drunkenness is riotousness.*” Stating that drunkenness is depraved is not supporting moderate drinking. Otherwise stating “*covetousness, which is idolatry*” (Col 3:5) would mean it is alright to be moderately covetous! Total abstinence is God’s teaching. Invariably, alcoholics start off as moderate social drinkers. The sufferings caused by alcohol are seen in broken families, loss of jobs, and spousal and child abuse.

THOUGHT: How is wine drinking and tasting viewed today?

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to be deceived by today’s wine culture.

TO OBEY OR NOT TO OBEY?

Ahasuerus had given command to his seven personal chamberlains to fetch queen Vashti to be paraded before the crowd of men. Seven servants were despatched to bring Vashti but she refused to go with them to the king! Her act of disobedience infuriated her king.

This passage has been used both to condemn as well as praise queen Vashti as a wife. Some criticise her for being an unsubmitive wife while others laud her for refusing to do that which was sinful because she must maintain modesty. Some agree that she did the right thing because she was in danger of being molested by a roomful of drunken men. But the text is not explicitly clear why Vashti refused to obey the command. Since there was no indication that Ahasuerus was making an unreasonable request, nor was there any suggestion that he was planning any immodest display of Vashti, it would not be wise to build a case, using this situation, for a husband-and-wife relationship. It is clear, however, that wives must submit to their own husbands in everything (Eph 5:24), unless it were a sinful or immoral thing (Acts 5:29). And husbands must never cause the wife to sin but instead present her pure to the Lord (Eph 5:25-27). One thing is for sure, one cannot use this to celebrate Vashti as a biblical feminist heroine, because she stood up for her rights and refused to obey the male chauvinist king.

But the point here is not about what the Christian marriage should be or what women's rights are, but rather how two unbelievers' (Ahasuerus' and Vashti's) actions would set in motion God's plan as we shall see in subsequent events that follow. Regardless of whether Ahasuerus or Vashti was right or wrong, the fact is that God was in control, and could and would work through the actions and decisions of even sinful man. Vashti's response would set the stage for God's plans.

THOUGHT: Does God's overruling hand mean that I can do as I wish?

PRAYER: My Lord, help me to make decisions that will please Thee.

COUNSELLORS

Publicly rebuffed by his queen, Ahasuerus (the most powerful man on earth) could have done whatever his furious heart wanted to her. Despite the fact that he was “*very wroth*” and “*his anger burned in him*” (Esther 1:12), the monarch did something rather surprising: he consulted with his advisors; and that such was “*the king’s manner*” (Esther 1:13) or his habitual reaction when faced with a dilemma. Who were these men that Ahasuerus turned to for counsel? These men “*knew the times*” and “*knew law and judgment*” (Esther 1:13). They were advisors who were knowledgeable about history and well acquainted with the laws of the land. These “*seven princes of Persia and Media*” (Esther 1:14) would be the top brains from various parts of the empire. In other words these men would be familiar with situations and with what to do based upon their laws in the kingdom. Because of their wide ranging expertise, the king allowed them the privilege to frequently be in his presence. This would allow Ahasuerus to have easy access to them and to obtain their counsel whenever he needed. That they “*sat the first in the kingdom*” (Esther 1:14) tells us that they were the top aides to help the king rule his empire. It is apparent that Ahasuerus had a high regard for counsel and ensured he could seek them oftentimes.

Ahasuerus, a pagan man, knew the value of taking heed to the best and wisest counsellors. Whether they were truly wise is arguable, but the king did surround himself with them. God reminds Christians of the value of sound advice: “... *in the multitude of counsellors there is safety*” (Prov 11:14). We should seek wise counsel from godly men. Moreover, we have the Omniscient, Omnipresent, Omnipotent as our God, and His Word “*is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*” (Ps 119:105). Believers have the best counsel in the Word indeed, and should value and use it instead of turning to worldly-wise and carnal methods when we make decisions and choices in life.

THOUGHT: Am I wise to seek and be taught by biblical counsel?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to seek wise counsels from Thy Word and from godly men.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 10

ESTHER 1:13-15

PROVERBS 16:9

*“A man’s heart
deviseth his way...”*

ALL THE POWER IN THE WORLD

Queen Vashti’s refusal to accede to King Ahasuerus’ beckoning call left the king nonplussed. To be defied by his queen before such an immense crowd of royalties, princes, and people of Shushan would be utterly humiliating. Ahasuerus would not be used to such embarrassment. From being merry with wine, he was now not only furious but also at a confused loss as to what to do next as a publicly spurned king. So he turned to his seven famous personal advisors because they knew the country’s laws and judgments. His question to them was: *“What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?”* (Esther 1:15), i.e. he turned to using the country’s laws.

The army of the world superpower was at Ahasuerus’ command, great and small turned up at his banquet invitation from all 127 provinces, and his officers and chamberlains obeyed his every command. But this world ruler could not get one woman, his wife, to come to him. It probably interrupted the entire mood of national celebration. This incident truly puts the power of man in perspective. Man can have all the power in the world, yet in effect, he is powerless to move the will of one person.

This incident shows us that whatever pomp and power men can display, they are still weak and not in control of anything in reality. Only God holds true and absolute power over man and events. Only God can move a person to respond or not to respond. Only God is sovereign. He is in control because only He holds all the power in the world. How big is your view of your God?

THOUGHT: How do I view possessions and power in this earth?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to depend upon Thee rather than on power and position.

SHOW-OFF EMBARRASSED

The riches, grandeur, glory, and splendor that Ahasuerus displayed was with the intention to maximally impress others concerning who he was, how much he owned, and how much he controlled. He spared no effort, and carefully coordinated all the events to ensure no one missed seeing his position, power and possessions. He wanted to be admired and revered. There was just one more thing at the end of the 187-day show of pomp that would cap off Ahasuerus' elaborate procession of ceremonious display of his majesty: that he possessed a most beautiful wife too. How he would be the envy of all men then. But to his greatest chagrin, his queen refused to come. It was at the height of Ahasuerus' carefully coordinated glorifying of himself that his pride would be punctured. Instead of gaining the admiration and accolade he had hoped for, he became a laughing stock. It would have been less embarrassing if he had not been so ostentatious in his bragging. God made sure that this would happen on the final day of Ahasuerus' haughty show. *"What shall we do...?"* (Esther 1:15). The high and lofty king was humbled, deflated and at a loss.

There is a lesson for all of us. God warns: *"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall"* (Prov 16:18). Do we jump at opportunities to show off to others? Or worse, do we scheme to show off what we possess, are capable of, or have achieved? Perhaps we just revel in our minds how great we are? Pride is the first sin that entered the universe even before Adam's fall. Satan was well endowed by God. Then he wanted to be worshipped. A proud look (Ps101:5), a haughty spirit (Prov 16:18), and boasters (Rom 1:30) are what God hates and finds abominable (Prov 6:16). He will cause them to stumble and fall (Jer 50:32), bring them low (Isa 2:12), and then humble them (Isa10:33). Satan fell like lightning with just the thoughts of pride in his heart before even acting them out! Guard your heart!

THOUGHT: Am I a show-off?

PRAYER: Lord, convict me whenever the sin of pride wells up even in my thoughts.

A LEADER’S EXAMPLE

The king quickly sought the advice of his country administrators regarding what to do in view of his queen’s refusal to obey his command. He understood, as a king ruling a kingdom, he needed to know the implications. Among the seven advisors, Memucan led the discourse. He described the consequence of Vashti’s action and asserted that her refusal to come to Ahasuerus not only insulted the king, but also had far reaching negative effects on the princes and people across the kingdom. Memucan concluded that Vashti’s act of insubordination would be followed by all women in Media and Persia. Women would have no respect for their own husbands as a result. And if they did not want to do what their husbands wanted, they would cite this event. If Vashti could disobey even the king, then why should they obey their own husbands? Much disagreement would result in families because of the queen’s action.

Whether Memucan’s assessment of the situation was accurate is arguable. But he was right to conclude that what happens in the lives of leaders and their actions are watched carefully by people. And that people do often take after the leaders’ actions. How the king responded would be noted. As a queen, Vashti’s actions could indeed set the example for others to follow. Leaders must be cognizant that whether they like it or not, they virtually live in a glass house. And their lives are constantly under scrutiny. Are you a leader in some capacity? As a parent, you are a leader by default. You see children mimicking parents. Likewise, the state of the church is often reflected in the lives of what its leaders practise. What a leader condones, what a leader does or does not do, can and does often influence many others. If a leader sins, others will often follow after his footsteps thinking what is done is not sinful since the leader does it. Leaders can stumble many. Leaders must take special heed of Christ’s stern warning against stumbling others in Matthew 18:6.

THOUGHT: Am I a good example to my church, my family, my friends?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to honestly assess my actions and choices.

IS DIVORCE JUSTIFIED?

Memucan advised Ahasuerus further in the matter of queen Vashti. He counselled the king to put out a royal command for a new law to be written among Persians and Medes. It would declare that *“Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus...”* (Esther 1:19). Notice the title “queen” is dropped off already. Her royal position and possessions would be stripped from her and given to someone else. In other words, she was no longer worthy to be their queen. In effect, Memucan was advocating that the king divorce his queen.

Divorce rates are at alarming levels in many countries, even in conservative nations where divorce used to be taboo and was to be avoided. It is no longer a stigma today. And it is but an easy way out. What justifies divorce? For the world, it can be the smallest thing which displeases them, or simply loss of interest, i.e. not pleasing anymore. For the believer, a marriage covenantal bond ends only when one party is no longer alive. God hates divorce. *“What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder”* (Matt 19:6). Divorce must not be an option in the Christian’s mind. When one entertains such thoughts, he will no longer seek to resolve issues in the marriage. God can help to mend things if we humble ourselves to obey Him at all cost in all things. When a marriage reaches such a bad state, it can usually be traced to disobedient and spiritually weak lives. Since *“God hath called us to peace”* (1 Cor 7:15), God wants us to exercise forgiveness and reconciliation just as He forgives us and reconciles us to Himself no matter what we have done.

Marriage is not to be entered into lightly. Marriage is not trial and error. A marriage entered into in error will be your trial thereafter. Marriage is a most blessed covenant for mankind. Ensure you marry the right person according to biblical standards in God’s will.

THOUGHT: Do I see marriage as a lifelong bond?

PRAYER: Help me to obey Thee, Lord, and not the impulses of my flesh.

MAN’S FAVOUR IS TEMPORAL

Ahasuerus was so proud of Vashti’s beauty that he wanted to parade her to his people. Up till now, Vashti was the favoured and prized trophy of the emperor of the Medes and Persian kingdom. The term “*royal estate*” (Esther 1:19) is the same word as “*kingdom*” in Esther 1:2, 4. It was no small kingdom and to be crowned queen over it with the king was an honour few would experience. She was given the liberty and resources to throw her own royal banquet at the king’s royal expense. She would have easily been the most admired woman in her time, envied for the favour of the king upon her. In that one moment, she went from being the queen of a great and powerful empire to being totally divested of all her royal honour. She had fallen out of favour. It did not take long for Memucan to convince her doting husband and king to drop her like a hot potato. It all happened in the same night of the event. To prevent any repercussions on himself, Memucan ensured that Vashti would never regain favour with the king: he made Vashti’s banishment a law in the country’s constitution. When such laws were passed, they were irreversible even by the king himself. It was recorded that Memucan’s saying “*pleased the king and the princes*” (Esther 1:21). So Ahasuerus changed from wanting to present Vashti for her beauty, to wanting to put her down and embarrass her before the entire empire.

How fleeting man’s favour is! Ahasuerus and the princes were pleased probably because the edict against Vashti would vindicate their manhood. Human beings are fickle and will change constantly, especially if it is in their own favour. Do not feel secure when others favour you. Thank God for His unchangeable favour upon us. Moreover, how true God’s Word is: “*Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised*” (Prov 31:30). We should be more concerned that we are in God’s favour than seek to gain favour by pleasing man. Ladies, do not seek to attract someone by your looks. And men, do not be fickle but be faithful.

THOUGHT: Am I trusting in the favour of man or God?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to seek Thy favour instead of man’s.

HONOUR - COMMANDED OR GAINED?

Pleased with Memucan’s suggestion to make a show of Vashti for her rebelliousness, and to pass the decree that “*all the wives shall give to their husbands honour*” (Esther 1:20), the king proceeded to send out his new edict to all provinces, i.e. 127 provinces, stretching from India to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1). This new law was translated into every language of each nation and given to every people, so that none could claim ignorance. The purpose of the command was to ensure that every man (male) should “*bear rule*” (Esther 1:22) or to be lord over, to rule as a prince in governing his own house. The irony is that this rapid, empire-wide proclamation probably served to highlight more vividly the king’s humiliation by his queen! Would not such an edict only serve to cause bad husbands and fathers to be tyrants at home, and the household to have no recourse? This may cause “*contempt and wrath*” (Esther 1:18) in the wife too.

Memucan’s proposal that all wives submit to honour their husbands, and the husband is to be the head in his home, is a good ideology for marriage. But, biblically, it is incomplete. God’s command for marriage includes the husband to love his wife; be willing to sacrifice anything, even his own life, for her; and to nourish and cherish her (Eph 5:25-29). With such a husband, the wife will submit joyfully, honour lovingly, and obey willingly. It is true that the Christian wife should submit regardless of whether her husband is loving or not, and it is equally biblical that the husband must love even if the wife is not submissive. True and lasting blessedness in marriage is when both obey God’s command. It would be very sad if a husband has to shout for honour and if a wife has to scream for love. Honour should be earned even in a marriage relationship. We cannot behave irresponsibly, live sinfully, act arrogantly, live selfishly, and yet expect honour and respect. Those who need to command others to give respect only reveal that they have failed to earn or deserve it.

THOUGHT: How is my behavior and attitude towards my spouse, family, and friends?

PRAYER: Lord, make me a biblical spouse.

ANGER, HASTINESS, REGRETS

It is generally thought that three years had passed since Vashti was banished and chapter 2 begins with Ahasuerus having just been defeated in his battle with the Greeks in 480-479BC. Ahasuerus did raise a large army outnumbering the Greeks but he was still beaten. Looks like his elaborate banquets to enlist allies did not yield positive results. And it was this extensive feast that cost him something that he now realized he treasured — his queen Vashti. When his anger subsided, his thoughts went to Vashti and he longed for her company once again. What she had done and the law that was hastily passed against her came into a different perspective now. He missed her and realized that in his anger, he had over-reacted. To pass an irrevocable decree now appeared to him to be overkill, even for what Vashti did. He regretted his rash action committed in the fit of anger (Esther 1:12) and pride. What seemed pleasing then now brought sadness and loneliness. He had to live with regrets now.

We often live to regret hasty and rash actions committed in a moment of anger. We wish we could turn back the clock, but know it is not possible. Some unkind words, some vengeful reaction, or some choices made when our minds were clouded by heated temper flying which now seem so uncalled for. But we cannot retract those words or actions once they have gone out. No matter how much we rue what we did, we can only nurse a remorseful heart, wishing we had not behaved the way we did. This is a lesson for us to watch our anger, and especially to think carefully before we react in moments when we are upset. Some things, having been done and said, will alter relationships (eg. marriage, family, and friendships) or situations in a significantly negative way. God's Word reminds us: "*Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? there is more hope of a fool than of him*" (Prov 29:20), and "*A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit*" (Prov 29:23). Hot tempers make a fool of us, and only pride prevents us from stopping such foolishness.

THOUGHT: Do I often react hastily only to regret what I did?

PRAYER: Lord, give me control over my spirit.

THE WORLD'S WAYS

The king's servants were probably in trepidation now, seeing the king's dejected and gloomy mood. Though he could not revoke the decree they led him to pass against Vashti which resulted in his current dismal grief, the king could pounce on them with a new law against them. So the servants quickly devised a way to fix the situation. They probably remembered that there was a “loophole” in the decree against Vashti, that the king could “*give her royal estate unto another that is better than she*” (Esther 1:19). So they astutely suggested that a replacement for Vashti be found. No effort was spared. Officers should be appointed to make this happen. The target was “*fair young virgins*” (Esther 2:2). This phrase was repeated, making the criterion clear. The choice of a better queen was purely a physically young and beautiful virgin. Such were then to be brought under the care of Hege, the king's chamberlain. Hege's duty was to prepare, beautify, and remove any unpleasant blemishes with their equivalent of today's high-end beauty potions. And the purpose was to prepare each one to sleep with the king. The one who pleased Ahasuerus best would sit upon the vacated queen's place. Ahasuerus was mighty pleased with the idea. It would seem his forlornness over Vashti was replaced with an anticipation of the pleasure promised.

Young girls sleeping with someone to whom they are not married? A man sleeping with girls to pick the one who pleases him most? How unthinkable and immoral! But yet this is a common occurrence today, is it not? Young unmarried couples going on holidays together, dating couples acting like husbands and wives, students experimenting with sex without batting an eyelid. Physical attractiveness is very much the only thing people seek after in a partner. Some parents even encourage their children to date as many as possible so as to gain experience and know what they like before they get married.

THOUGHT: God's will is for me to be sanctified and to abstain from fornication (1Thess 4:3).

PRAYER: Lord, help me to possess my body in sanctification and honour.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18

ESTHER 2:5-6

HEBREWS 11:8-16

*“... they were strangers and pilgrims
on the earth.”*

SHOULD I BE HERE?

Mordecai's introduction here contains much information. He was a Jew but had a Babylonian name. His lineage was from the tribe of Benjamin. Then verse 6 reminds us the reason this Jew was in Babylon instead of Judah was because his ancestors were captives carried away from Jerusalem. His great-grandfather was exiled from Jerusalem, carried into Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Why the mention of all these specific details of Mordecai's ethnicity, his lineage, the captivity, and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon? Is it not to ask what a Jew was still doing in Babylon? God had promised to deliver them at the end of seventy years of captivity. There were those who had returned already after the renowned Babylon of King Nebuchadnezzar fell. What was this Jew, especially from the tribe of Israel's first king, still doing in Babylon, living in Shushan under the Persian king? Zerubbabel had led the return to Jerusalem when king Cyrus allowed the Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1). But some of the Jews, like Mordecai, remained behind.

The Jews appeared to have become rather affluent despite being in exile under the Babylonians. Life was good for them where they were. Hence, some chose to remain behind instead of returning with Zerubbabel. Perhaps some of us may be living in such an affluent and luxurious environment that we are not willing to be where God wants us to be? Ahasuerus' aim was to enchant and gain the people's loyalty to him by providing them with comfort, luxury, and abundance. Have we become fascinated by the epicurean lifestyle and have become rooted to it? We must search our hearts to know why we are in the environment, the jobs, the pursuits we are in now. Does God want me to be doing something else and be somewhere else but I am not willing to leave this life of comfort and enjoyment?

THOUGHT: Have I grown roots in this world and made it my home?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to remember that I am but a stranger and a pilgrim here on earth.

BUT GOD IS BLESSING ME!

It is clear that the Jews were in exile in this foreign land because of their disobedience. But God in His mercy still blessed them while they were in captivity. In Ezra 1:5-6 they possessed vessels of silver and gold, goods, animals, and precious things. In Ezra 2:64-67 they had servants, maids, singers, a large number of horses, camels and mules. The captivity of the Jews in Babylon was very different from when they were slaves in Egypt. There was no reason why they should not obey God and return to rebuild the temple.

Sometimes, even while God chastises us, in His mercy, He continues to answer our prayers, deliver and even bless us. As a result, we can sometimes get complacent and over time begin to forget or ignore the state of chastisement we are in. We even begin to reason that since we are prospering, therefore God is not displeased with us. The fact that the Jews were in Babylon should have reminded them that they were under chastisement. And they needed to do what was right when the opportunity came. But since they were still experiencing God's goodness, they thought they did not need to return. They did not respond rightly because all seemed well anyway. They probably thought that they could not still be under God's judgment.

We too may fail to respond rightly and do what is needed because we think that since God is blessing, we must be fine. We must remember Romans 2:4: “*Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*” Do not confuse God's goodness while we are in sin with God's approval with what we are doing. For example, does your job cause you to sin or break the Sabbath? Do you make studies your idol? Or are you in an unequal yoke? Things may be well, but it does not mean God is pleased with you.

THOUGHT: Have I become so accustomed to living with sin that I am no longer affected by it and am taking God's grace for granted?

PRAYER: Search me, O God, and reveal any wicked way in me that I should repent of.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20

ESTHER 2:1-6
PROVERBS 15:3

*“God, in His ordinary providence,
makes use of means.”*

HISTORICAL DRAMA OR DIVINE HAND?

Revisiting the events thus far, they seem just like secular history: a king who wanted to show off his power, possessions, and glory, was only to be publicly humiliated by his queen. And the queen’s refusal to obey her king resulted in her being deposed with no hope of return. It led to the vacant position of a queen that had to be filled urgently to lift the lonely king’s spirit. This chain of events kicked off an empire-wide search for the replacement queen.

The drunkenness and hasty action of a king, the stubborn refusal of the queen, and the impossibility of the queen ever returning to the throne no matter how much the king missed and yearned for her — all these may seem like a saga that occurred randomly in some king’s life at some point in Medo-Persian history, with no hint of any sacred significance at all. But this string of events would soon make apparent His Providential Hand as the drama unfolds further.

The Westminster Confession of Faith well defines providence as, “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.” Because God is Omniscient, His foreknowledge is perfect and He never makes mistakes. From Baker’s dictionary, the word “providence” comes from the Latin *providentia* (Greek: *pronoia*) which means essentially foresight or making provision beforehand. God does not only see and know the future, He also governs and directs according to His own wishes for His own glory. God knew a man, Haman, would be up to something (even before Haman himself knew), and He was already making provision for delivering His own people from extermination as we shall see. The vacancy left by Vashti was a critical piece of the jigsaw.

THOUGHT: Nothing happens by chance and without purpose.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, help me to always trust Thee.

DUTY OF FAMILIES

Esther, meaning star, is introduced for the first time in this book. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah, meaning myrtle. She was described as both fair and beautiful. She was Mordecai’s uncle’s daughter. When both her parents died, leaving her orphaned, Mordecai took her in and looked after her as his own daughter. He treated his cousin Esther as his own child and was like a father to her. Why and how Esther’s parents died was not explained at all. But Mordecai’s care for another Jew and relative is mentioned and noteworthy for our learning. Caring for an orphaned child is no easy task.

God’s Word teaches us that, *“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith”* (Gal 6:10). When we see someone in need, it is an opportunity for us to minister. Even this is not by chance. God presents and brings to our attention an occasion for us to be of help to another human being, and especially to another believer.

There is another principle of responsibility that we must learn. *“Honour widows that are widows indeed. But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God”* (1Tim 5:3-4). Children and relatives of widows must care for the widows. This teaches us that we cannot lay upon the church or charity the duty of care when, as relatives, we have the obligation to do so ourselves first. Church should certainly help genuine widows who have no one to depend upon. If relatives are to care for widows, it is even more needful then for children to care for their aging or sick parents. Even despite His sufferings upon the cross, our Saviour fulfilled perfectly the fourth commandment of honouring His mother.

THOUGHT: Have I been derelict in my duties to others?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to be willing to help others whom Thou bring my way.

A PIN IN THE HAYSTACK

The king’s command had reached all the 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1). The command was to gather together all the fair young virgins to the Shushan palace. Esther 2:8 tells us that *“many maidens were gathered.”* *“Many”* denotes abundance in numbers. There only seemed to be the criterion of physical beauty, but no limitations as to how many would be gathered. The word *“gather”* has the idea of assembling by collecting into one location. It is like heaping into one bunch. In other words, we see that out of the hundreds of thousands of young maidens from far and wide, only these were selected, and then bundled into Shushan. And there was a specific purpose. Among these, the particular maiden that pleased the king most would be the one who would be picked to be Queen Vashti’s replacement. It was a funnelling process, to eventually choose that very one which would cheer the forlorn king. It is highlighted here that it was in this process *“that Esther was brought also unto the king’s house.”* Out of the many in the nation’s “beauty pageant,” Esther was also among them.

That Esther was among the many was certainly no coincidence or chance. This “beauty queen” search resulted from Vashti’s actions, Ahasuerus’ loneliness, and his servants’ proposal for a replacement queen. But still, with so many selected, would Esther be picked? We know she was. This is literally like being able to find a pin in a haystack. And this pin in the haystack was placed strategically by God to be found at the right time and right place. We sometimes worry because we wonder whether, out of so many course or job candidates, will we be selected? Out of so many school applicants, will my child be chosen? Or amidst so many Christians, can God bring the right person into my life to be my spouse? Or in the midst of many troubles brewing in life, is God aware and working? Let us remember the lesson here. If it were God’s will, we need not worry about being lost in the haystack.

THOUGHT: Am I worrying about where I will be, what I will do?

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for Thou always know what is ahead.

FAVoured BY MAN

Hegai was the custodian of the king's concubines. As their keeper, Hegai was also their guardian to watch over and care for them. Esther pleased Hegai and she obtained special favour from her new guardian. He treated her with extra priority and attention. These new ladies from the provinces needed to be prepared and groomed to meet the king. Hegai put Esther under his special care. He provided for her all things needed for her beauty preparations. Whatever was needed for her to impress the king was given. Moreover, seven maids were assigned to Esther to ensure she got maximum support and lived in the best part of the palace. Hegai seemed intent on making Esther succeed, an exceptional favour for a newbie.

As the keeper of the king's harem, it is safe to say that Hegai has seen his fair share of many concubines and beauties. But somehow, among all in the existing harem, and among the many new ladies who had just arrived, Hegai just simply took a special liking to Esther quickly. How does one explain such favour? One could argue that it was looks. After all, the search was for "*fair*" (Esther 2:2) virgins, and Esther was described not just as fair, but "*fair and beautiful*" (Esther 2:7). But only God could have made her such. Moreover, for Esther to be so well liked and given so much special privileges and treatment in such a short time was the work of God in Hegai's heart. Outwardly, all the physical provisions to ensure Esther received the best help and would stand the best chance to succeed were from Hegai.

This is the beauty of this book. God did not use any miracle to bring Esther into the palace. Through events and man's choices, God was arranging the jigsaw puzzle piece by piece into its place. Nothing happens by chance. Not even the favour and help of man. Does your boss, teacher or colleague seem to be helpful and kind towards you? Do not take it for granted or attribute it to yourself. Favour of man is also from God for His purposes. Give thanks to Him.

THOUGHT: The favour of God is the most favourable of favours.

PRAYER: O Lord, keep me humble under Thine Hand.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 24

ESTHER 2:10-11

MATTHEW 10:29-33

*“...whosoever shall be ashamed of me
and of my words, of him
shall the Son of man be ashamed...”*

ASHAMED OF YOUR FAITH?

As instructed by Mordecai, Esther did not reveal her Jewish identity. Various speculations have been offered as to the reasons. Some felt that they had lived in a foreign land for too long and had lost the sense of the importance of their testimony as God’s chosen people. Others postulated that there was rising unhappiness against the Jews. Another view was that Mordecai simply wanted Esther to be chosen and keeping secret her ethnic background as a slave of the Persian kingdom would help her chances. Others felt Mordecai did it for self-promotion.

Based on Ezra 4:6, it could be a combination of all these reasons. It is plausible that the current complaints against the Jews sent by the Samaritans to Ahasuerus would be adverse to Esther. And since it was unlikely that Mordecai was afraid to be known as a Jew because he did not hide it from Haman (Esther 3:4), then it would stand that his concern was mainly for Esther. And because Mordecai later did ask Esther to reveal her Jewish identity to the king (Esther 4:8), it seemed that Mordecai’s concern then was for Esther to be chosen. Could it not be that, with the complaints against the Jews, Mordecai hoped for Esther to represent her people to the king one day?

But regardless of the situation, there was no excuse for Mordecai and Esther to conceal her identity. We must never imagine that hiding our Christian identity will help God’s cause. We must also never deny Christ (Matt 10:33) even when we think that our well-being is under threat. Our problem is our fear that God cannot deliver us. But God can. Daniel never hid his faith from the kings when in exile in Babylon, neither did the first Jewish returnees under the Persian king. While God in His Sovereignty overrules and brings good though men choose to sin, it does not make our sinning right. In fact, through how God circumvents the dire circumstances against His people and prevents disaster, it only shows His Omniscience and Omnipotence.

THOUGHT: Do I hide my Christian faith from man?

PRAYER: Lord, help me never to deny Thee.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25

ESTHER 2:12

1 CORINTHIANS 13:6

*“Charity... Rejoiceth not in iniquity,
but rejoiceth in the truth.”*

RIGHT PARENTAL CARE

Mordecai was greatly concerned and he worried for Esther who had been as his very own daughter (Esther 2:7). He wanted to know how Esther was faring, and how she had progressed. We can almost imagine Mordecai pacing up and down in front of the court of the women’s house, wringing his hands together, peering over the court accommodations, hoping to see Esther or hear something from her. Perhaps Mordecai saw other parents give up their beautiful daughters in a bid to fulfil their dream of being parents of the queen of the empire, and he also hoped that beautiful Esther would beat them all.

Parents often worry about how well their child would do in this world. One day they go away and stay in university dorms, or go overseas to study or work. We pace around at home, we hope for phone calls or emails, wondering what has become of our child. But, what are we truly concerned about? Are we exercising right parental care and acting responsibly? Some parents can have very distorted ideas that “to glorify God” means that our children must be successful, rich, highly educated, live the high life, never mind if they marry unbelievers. But often it is selfishly motivated. In pushing our child to succeed no matter what, the result is that our child’s life bears no semblance of being a child of God. On the same note, parents do need to exercise the right parental guidance in what they allow. Do you permit, or worse persuade, your child to participate in school or social activities that would parade them in indecent clothes, crude dances, lewd cheerleading, or ungodly musical performances, for example? Do we let them be in places that would expose them to temptations and compromise their testimony for the Lord? We must be very sensitive to what we recommend or permit to come into their lives. Mordecai was worried if Esther would perform well rather than what Esther was getting into. There are many Mordecai parents today. Let us not be one of them.

THOUGHT: Am I bringing up my child as a child for God?

PRAYER: Give me wisdom and courage to make godly decisions for my children, O Lord.

UNEQUAL YOKE

Only after twelve months of careful cleaning and beauty treatments can a maiden meet King Ahasuerus. This purification was more of a physical ridding of uncleanness and blemishes. It was for the aim of marriage. Each maiden hoped to stand the best chance to be King Ahasuerus' wife and be crowned queen. It is also believed that the 12-month period was to ensure that they were truly virgins and that none were pregnant. This also ensured that any child they bore would truly be the king's seed. It was wrong for Mordecai to allow Esther to be part of such a marriage, even though it was to the king of the empire. But Esther was not free from guilt too. She allowed herself to be part of it, and did not seem to resist Hegai's enthusiastic help to prepare her for marriage to the pagan king. As Jews, they should have been clear that they should never marry a pagan. But Esther allowed herself to be carefully prepared for twelve months for such a marriage. And Mordecai stood outside to watch it. There was no excuse for Esther to be unequally yoked in marriage just because they were in Babylon. Daniel and his friends (before Esther) did not compromise their faith, practices or obedience to God's Word. Ezra and Nehemiah (after Esther) were zealously obedient to God's Word. Joseph, as a slave, fled in the face of temptation.

But you say, “Did it not bring good in the end?” or “Esther might have suffered if she did not obey!” God is clear that the believer should never be unequally yoked with an unbeliever (2 Cor 6:14-18). He did not add any exception to the command. The book of Esther is not promoting the behaviours of Mordecai and Esther. It only shows that God is able to bring about His plan despite the sins and failures of His people. It does not mean He is pleased. The lives of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah while in exile only contrast and condemn these actions of Mordecai and Esther. They obeyed God at all cost, and God delivered them and also fulfilled His plans through them. There is never any justification for the believer to marry an unbeliever.

THOUGHT: Nothing in this world is worth damaging my witness for God.

PRAYER: In times of great temptation, help me to stand firm, O Lord.

FORNICATION

After twelve months of preparation, the moment each maiden had been looking forward to arrived. It was her date with the king. She would be sent to spend one night in bed with the king. The king's choice was based on purely carnal and sensuous criteria right from the beginning. He would marry her and make her queen if she pleased him. So anything she asked for to help her impress the king were provided for her for that night. And she must compete to please the king because the unsuccessful ones had a very sad end. If she failed to please the king, she would go to the “*second house of the women*” (Esther 2:14). i.e. as a reject sent to another house meant for concubines under a different custodian, Shaashgaz. The young woman would remain as a concubine for the rest of her life, but yet may not even see the king ever again, unless the king called for her. She was then doomed to a miserable and lonely life.

Do all these sound so unthinkable and immoral to you? But in reality, such activities and behaviours are more common and rampant today than you think. It is called dating, one-night-stand, even “love.” In God's eyes, sex within marriage is honourable, but outside of marriage it is fornication. Yet today, premarital sex is common. The world would call you a prude and deride you if you were a virgin. Teenagers are pressured and tempted into sins of the flesh. Young people involved in dating are most prone to fall into fornication. A young girl who wishes to gain the “love” or secure the “position” in the guy's heart gives in to his physical advances and indulges in heavy petting. The Christian must keep his (or her) body unto sanctification, and not defile the temple of the Holy Spirit. “*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God*” (1Thess 4:3-5).

THOUGHT: How will I respond to sexual advances or innuendos?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to keep myself chaste and pure for marriage.

DOES THE END JUSTIFY THE MEANS?

It was Esther’s one-night-stand date with the king. Esther had the favour of everyone who set eyes upon her, and King Ahasuerus loved and favoured Esther more than all the others. He crowned her his new queen. Perhaps you may think that if Esther did not participate in all these, she would not have become queen, and would not have been in a position to save the Jews later. And so, this fact alone should “justify” these sins. Does the end justify the means? Of course not! Some contend that slaves like Mordecai and Esther had no choice. But Christians always have a choice. It is a matter of whether we are willing to bear the consequences of the choice and trust God. Did not slave Joseph run out of the palace from Mrs Potiphar? Esther was in a better position than Joseph, because she was not even in the palace yet. It is interesting that at this point God brought up the name of Mordecai’s uncle (Esther’s father), Abihail. His Jewish name means my “father is might.” It was as if to remind the reader that both Mordecai and Esther needed not have sinned because God was Mighty to deliver, regardless of the situation.

Situational ethics and pragmatism have crept into many believers’ thinking and living. It is the belief in the philosophy that whether our choices or actions are right or wrong depends on the situation. There are no absolutes, except what “good” results from the action. “Good” depends upon benefit to self or others. This means that one cannot enter a situation with the absolute moral law of the Ten Commandments as his reference standard to decide what is right or wrong. Instead, one is to do what is pragmatic. Christians must never subscribe to such ideas but must always do what is right biblically and trust in the Almighty God for the results. God can deliver the Jews without Esther and Mordecai breaking His laws. The Jews were delivered not because of their sin, but God did use them in spite of their sin.

THOUGHT: Have I made ungodly choices because I “have no choice”?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to obey Thee and trust the outcome to Thee.

SO THIS IS LOVE?

The king had fallen head over heels in love with Esther. He “...loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins...” (Esther 2:17). Ahasuerus was so thrilled that he threw an immense feast for his princes and servants in the empire in Esther’s name. Moreover, the enamoured king not only pronounced a waiver of taxes but gave out presents generously as befitting a king. He wanted to proclaim his love for Esther. And marriage followed quickly, making Esther the new queen. How romantic, some may exclaim! Maybe some girl is wishing she would find such a guy? But, note: there was a second round of virgins meeting this amorous king (Esther 2:19). So this is love?

It is as if God used the word “love” mockingly here. On the one hand, Ahasuerus was grandly pledging his “love” for his sweet heart and beauty queen; on the other, he was still a roving Casanova, sleeping with other maidens. How sad for Esther. The world’s love is very different from biblical love. What thrills your heart? Romantic dinners with a good looking partner? Expensive gifts, sweeping outward shows of affection, and hopefully a marriage proposal and wedding photographs that cannot be topped by another? Movies have painted a certain picture of what love is. Some seek to re-create these movie experiences in relationships. The right kind of romance is not wrong but that is not all there is in love. Faithfulness and loyalty with spiritual duties are traits Christians should look for. But people talk about “falling in love” or “falling out of love” as if it were uncontrollable. True love is a conscious and steadfast commitment. Only biblical love will bring lifelong happiness and fidelity. The Christian criterion for a life partner must be based on godly character. We must wipe out the wrong image and concepts of love and choose according to God’s will. Do not immediately be bowled over when someone says “I love you.”

THOUGHT: What am I looking for in a life partner or in my spouse?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me what biblical love is in a relationship.

TRAIN UP THE CHILD

While going through an entire year of grooming under Hegai and living in the king's palace, Esther did not reveal her Jewish identity. The reason given was simply because Mordecai had given her strict orders not to. Esther “*did the commandment of Mordecai*” (Esther 2:20). The word “*commandment*” here is the same as that in Esther 1:15. Vashti would not perform the king's commandment. Esther was an obedient child. Verse 20 attributes Esther's habitual obedience to her upbringing by Mordecai. How did Mordecai bring up Esther? The word “*commandment*” here has the connotation of an authoritative word issued. Mordecai, being the foster father, was the authority over Esther. The word “*brought up*” has to do with training, nurturing and providing for as a parent. Esther was taught to follow her foster father's instructions. She abided by them even though she was no longer directly under his care. And she did so all the while under Hegai's oversight.

Parents must not underestimate the importance of training a child. Firstly, a child must be taught to respect parental authority. Without it, the child will resist instructions. Secondly, the child must learn to obey and do as taught whatever the situation he is in. Finally, the aim is so that the child will continue into adulthood doing what he has been taught, even when parents are not there to watch him. The best time to train and nurture such behaviours is when he is still a child. Training is to instil in them God's ways. If parents train children to follow the wrong ways, they will also continue in the wrong behaviours and values. If a child is allowed to do as he pleases, and his disrespect for rules and disobedience is not dealt with, he will grow up unbridled. It will be too late then. It is not easy, but the child is placed in a parent's hand by God for the parent to nurture. Parents cannot abscond from their role. What Mordecai and Esther did was not laudable. But the fact remains that when it comes to training a child to be naturally obedient to parent, Mordecai did well.

THOUGHT: Have I been diligent in my parental duties?

PRAYER: Help me, Lord, to bring up my child to be a child of God.

THE RIGHT PLACE, THE RIGHT TIME

Mordecai seemed to be in the king’s administration. In today’s reading, two highly disgruntled staff conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. The reason for them being so furious with deadly hatred for the king was not mentioned. However, Mordecai came to know about the murder plot and he informed Esther the queen. How Mordecai got wind of the plot was also not mentioned. In turn, Esther made sure the king was made clearly aware that his life was in danger from these chamberlains who were close by. And she specifically stated that the information came from Mordecai. Hence Mordecai’s name was cited in the national records. The plot was exposed and confirmed after imperial investigations, and the two perpetrators publicly hanged for treason.

In Esther 2:21-22, the words “*In those days*” seem so innocuous, “*while Mordecai sat in the king’s gate*” seems so mundane, “*the thing was known to Mordecai*” appears so coincidental, given that a plot to kill such a powerful king must have been kept very secretive. And, the plot being discovered by the foster father of “*Esther the queen*” is surely so coincidental. What are the chances of all these political intrigue being exposed and made known to the king by his queen? None of these occurred by pure chance. It was purely Providence. The invisible Hand of God was at work. Both Mordecai being in the king’s court and Esther being crowned queen before this murderous plot was uncovered are but demonstrations of God omnisciently moving the chessboard of time and place. Mordecai’s name being chronicled in national documents was a critical key move of God which would become clear later. The word “luck” must never be part of the Christian’s vocabulary. Our All-Wise and All-Knowing God is sovereignly in control and working things out in our lives for His purpose.

THOUGHT: Do I often use the word “luckily”?

PRAYER: Lord, make me more aware of Thy Sovereign control.

SPILLING THE BEANS

We learnt yesterday that nothing happens by chance. The plot to assassinate the king must have been highly secretive and a well-guarded piece of information. Being the king's close guards, they would have been smart and careful people. But yet God would make the plan known to Mordecai. To spill the beans on the king's trusted and close chamberlains could have had serious repercussions on Mordecai. What if the king dismissed it as false without investigating? Mordecai himself could be hanged instead for insulting and accusing the king's close aides. And for Esther, it was no easy decision either. Being new to the palace and newly crowned as queen, how much did the king trust her? To bring such a serious allegation against those who had been with the king far longer than her could spell the end for her. After all, even Vashti was so unceremoniously deposed at the advice of the king's close aides. But both Mordecai and Esther did something with the information they got.

Knowledge is responsibility. God had placed Mordecai at the right place and time so that Mordecai would gain the knowledge of the assassination conspiracy. God did not reveal how Mordecai got the information, almost as if not to detract from the important point. The key was what Mordecai did with the information. Esther too was perfectly placed to get the information to the king rapidly by virtue of her new position. But if Esther was not willing or too fearful to relay the information, then the plot would not have been exposed. God put both of them where they were and gave them information because He intended for them to use it. They had a responsibility. When we know sin has been, is to be, or is being, committed, we have a responsibility to act. Sometimes it means that there can be serious consequences for the other party. Sometimes it may mean consequences upon our relationships with the other party. But what is sin and evil must be stopped before it hurts more people.

THOUGHT: Have I avoided exposing sin because I want to be a “good guy” and do not want to “rock the boat”?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to use knowledge responsibly.

ANOTHER PROMOTION

Chapter 3 begins with *“After these things.”* These *“things”* were about how Esther ended up being queen, Mordecai saving the king by informing Esther, and Mordecai’s name being noted in the king’s records as a result. It was following these events that a new character, Haman, was introduced. And in verse 1, his promotion was mentioned specifically. Haman was highly elevated by King Ahasuerus, and positioned to a rank above every other prince around him. Haman was an Agagite. This means that he was a descendent of the Amalekite king, Agag. This would be a significant point later on. The Amalekites attacked the children of Israel when God led His people out of Egypt. Here we see the children of Israel’s old enemy (Esther 3:10) being put into an important position of power and influence. The intrigue begins.

The reason for Haman’s promotion is not mentioned. But it is clear that it was a significant advancement in a world superpower. King Ahasuerus even gave command that all must bow and show respect to Haman. Would there be concerns rising in the hearts of the exiled Jews at such news of the promotion? How would such an enemy of God’s people view the Jews in the land? What might Haman do to the Jews in view of the historical fact that the Jewish prophet Samuel hacked to pieces his ancestor king Agag (1 Sam 15:33)? Sometimes we get worried when we see people who hate Christians being promoted to high positions in politics, at the work place, and in society. Do we then fret and get concerned? We need to learn to trust that God has not lost control, or that He has not noticed. We will see that as the drama unfolds on this chessboard, God is very much in command of the situation and can never be taken by surprise.

THOUGHT: Does God’s enemy seem to have the upper hand now?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to know that Thou art always in control.

TO BOW OR NOT TO BOW

By virtue of Haman’s new top rank and elevated position above all princes in the kingdom, all the king’s subjects “*bowed and revered Haman*” (Esther 3:2). This was commanded by the king. Bowing and reverencing would mean to bow down, even to prostrate oneself, in respect before a monarch or superior. But Mordecai absolutely refused to do so. Some contend that Mordecai would not do so because of the Second Commandment. It would be bowing and worshipping someone other than God. The word “reverence” is used for both bowing in honour and respect as well as bowing in worship of God. The usage here is the former. Moreover, the supreme king would likely not command others to bow to Haman as a god, and nothing Haman said in Esther 3:8 would indicate he was to be treated as a god. But whatever his reason, Mordecai’s refusal to bow would kick off a chain of events.

Should Christians bow? It is clear from the Second Commandment (Exod 20:5) that the believer should never bow to worship any man or any thing as God. The Hebrew word for “reverence” is used in the following: Ruth bowed in gratefulness and to honour Boaz (Ruth 2:10), David bowed to Saul as his lord and king (1 Sam 24:8), and Bathsheba bowed to king David as Israel’s king (1 Kings 1:16). It is not wrong to bow in honour and respect to a living person. God tells us to honour authorities (1 Pet 2:17). The Japanese bow as a greeting and sign of respect as well for example. It is not wrong for Christians to bow in respect to authority. The key is what the bowing gesture is understood, or meant, to be. The Apostle Peter refused to allow any to bow to him in worship (Acts 10:25-26). If it was worship or religious in nature, then the Christian is forbidden to bow. But the Christian must not bow to pictures of the dead or bow to a deceased in the coffin even if it was not about worshipping the dead. To do so is to infer that the dead can receive respect as if they were present and alive. For this reason, the believer should never bow to an inanimate object too.

THOUGHT: Do I understand when I can or cannot bow?

PRAYER: Lord, I must always bow to and worship Thee alone.

PATRIOTISM OR PRIDE?

The king’s servants could not understand why Mordecai refused to obey King Ahasuerus’ command to bow to Haman. They spoke with him about it but Mordecai ignored them. This went on day after day. Finally they decided to bring the matter to Haman. Mordecai simply said that it was because he was a Jew. So the servants wanted to know from Haman whether that was a valid reason for not bowing to him.

Different views speculate different reasons why Mordecai would not bow to Haman. Some say it was because he would not break the Second Commandment. But we have established yesterday that the command was not to worship but to show honour to Haman’s superior position. Others say that since Mordecai gave the reason of being a Jew, then it had to do with the old animosity between the Amalekites and the Jews. But so far, there is no hint of Mordecai being so patriotic and godly. He had allowed Esther to commit fornication, marry a pagan, and live in the palace where she would have to partake of a diet considered unclean for the Jews. Moreover, if Mordecai were so loyal to God, why was he not with the first Jewish returnees to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple but remained behind working for the Medo-Persian king instead? The more likely reason is found in the fact that “*After these things*” (Esther 3:1), which connected Mordecai’s saving the king against an assassination plot by those close to him, and Haman’s high promotion (Esther 3:1). All Mordecai got was his name recorded in some national archives (Esther 2:23). He should have been the one promoted and bowed to! And to make things even more intolerable, this was combined with his animosity, being a Benjamite of the tribe of King Saul, being made to bow to a descendent of king Agag of the Amalekites. His pride could not swallow it. This prideful behavior would be the cause of a potential holocaust against the Jews. Beware of personal pride and prejudices. It can lead us to act irrationally and stubbornly, bringing much pain to self and others.

THOUGHT: What thoughts drive my behavior?

PRAYER: “*Search me, O God, and know my heart...*” (Ps 139:23).

I WANT EVERYTHING AND MORE

Having heard the news that Mordecai would not pay obeisance to him, Haman probably took note to watch if it were true. He was probably really pleased up till now that the king’s servants bowed to him. But it was “...when Haman saw...” that it was indeed true that Mordecai would not, he was absolutely furious. He was not just merely annoyed or irritated, but was “...full of wrath...” i.e. overwhelmed with heated poisonous rage! All because one man would not show him the respect he wanted. Esther 3:1 describes to us the very significant promotion he had amongst and above all the princes. Being an Amalekite, yet being advanced to such a prominent position in the Medo-Persian empire, it was quite an incredible honour already. And most people would say that Haman had it all by now. What more could he ask for? Yet, Haman was not contented.

Pride and lust for admiration of man knows no bounds. Despite having so much already, Haman would not rest content. It did not seem to matter what he had already achieved by then, and that it was just one person among all the people who would not bow. Everything that he had already attained seemed to mean nothing except this one thing. And not having it sent him into a feverish rage. When we do not appreciate our blessings, we will keep focusing on what we do not have. And it will eat us up inside. Have you seen children who quickly lose interest in the toy they have in their hands, which they initially wanted so much, just because they see something that they could not have? No matter how many toy cars you buy, there is that one more that he must have. As adults, we often are like that too. The only difference is the toy. Consider our shopping frenzies, our displeasure at not being promoted even though we have a job, our unhappiness at not living in a landed property when we already have an apartment, our lust for a better car when we already have a car, our frustration at missing one “A” despite 7 other “A”s in exams, etc. The only cure is: “...godliness with contentment...” (1 Tim 6:6).

THOUGHT: Am I content with the many blessings I have received?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to war against the lusts in my heart.

THE OLD ENEMY

Being snubbed by Mordecai, Haman considered it far too inadequate and unsatisfactory to just punish Mordecai alone. Haman's colleagues had already revealed to him Mordecai's race. That information gave Haman the best means of gratifying his burning lust for revenge. Nothing short of killing every single one of Mordecai's relations would placate Haman's pent-up anger. Haman's aim was not just those in Babylon, but to annihilate the entire Jewish race in Ahasuerus' kingdom far and wide. Significantly, this included those Jews who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

Notice that in Esther 3:6 alone, the Jews were mentioned 3 times: *"the people of Mordecai"* twice and *"the Jews"* once. The extermination of the Jewish people was the focus. During this time, the Samaritans were also raising accusations against the Jews in Jerusalem to Ahasuerus as well. We now have a well-positioned Haman who was intent on eradicating Mordecai's people too. It is not difficult to see where this plan was going - the extermination of the Jews and hence the halt of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Satan will not rest. The Lord Jesus must come from the nation Israel. The Amalekites' attack on Israel when they came out of Egypt was a direct attack on stopping God's redemption plan of salvation for the world. Satan, the old enemy of Israel, would never stop attacking God's plan of salvation, His works, or His people. The age-old animosity was well used by Satan.

As top aide to the ruler of the greatest empire in the known world at that time, Haman would be a great tool for Satan's aim to attack and destroy God's people again. But Satan failed to realize that the Omniscient God, who knows the future, was more than twelve months ahead of his diabolical plans on this chessboard. A year ago, God had already preempted this plan and put Mordecai and Esther in place. God is never caught off guard because He is Omniscient.

THOUGHT: Satan will always attack God's work and plans.

PRAYER: I thank Thee, Lord, that Thou art Omniscient and can never be outwitted.

LOTS IN GOD’S CONTROL

Nisan is the first month of the Jewish year. It was in this month, and the twelfth year of Ahasuerus’ reign, that a new plot to destroy the Jews would commence. Haman superstitiously turned to the casting of Pur (lot) to find out which was the best day to execute his devilish plan to wipe out the Jewish race. It took twelve months of daily lot casting to find his auspicious “lucky day.” Is not this day the feast of Purim which the Jews celebrate today? Yes it is, and we will see why later.

Imagine “*day to day*,” and “*month to month*” casting lots and yet the “right” day would not emerge until the end of twelve months of doing so! What are the chances you say. “Luck” and “chance” are but in reality God’s control and providences. God was controlling the lots. Though Haman was doing it out of superstition or trust in his gods, God was controlling the outcome and delay. Daily, hatred probably gnawed in Haman’s heart each night, but he did not come to his senses and abandon this destructive path. He was bent on satisfying his anger. How longsuffering is God’s mercy even to such a person as Haman. He was given a whole year to repent and yet Haman would not. Then God gave him over to judicial hardening. God’s sovereignty controls both inanimate things and human beings. We will see that this casting of lot would be Haman’s downfall.

Even as believers, we must be cognizant when God puts roadblocks when we are intent on pressing headlong into sin. Is there something you are pursuing that is contrary to God’s will? Day and night it possesses your thoughts. You try to find anything or anyone which might give you a “sign of approval.” Could it be because you are only asking to fulfil your own lusts (James 4:3)? Turn away from your sin before it is too late.

THOUGHT: Is God dealing with my sin through circumstances?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to discern and respond to Thy Hand in my life.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8

ESTHER 3:8

PROVERBS 6:16-19

*“1/2 truth = 1 lie
= abomination to God”*

DECEITFUL TRUTHS

Thinking that the “stars have aligned for him,” Haman bravely approached the king to present his plan. Firstly, he informed the king that in his empire there was a race of people which resided in every of his kingdom’s provinces. Secondly, Haman brought to the king’s attention that this group of people had their own unique laws, different from all other races. Thirdly, he asserted to the king that they did not observe Ahasuerus’ law. And finally, Haman concluded for the king that it would not benefit him to tolerate them.

The first fact is true but it is to set up a certain point — to paint in the king’s mind how widespread his problem was. The second point was true in a sense, but God’s law did not forbid paying honour to rulers. Such partial truths continued in his third point. Haman viciously gave the king the impression that the Jews across his empire did not keep his laws. The action of one single person, Mordecai, was exaggerated to the scale of a pandemic problem. Haman’s aim was to forward his own agenda through deceitful half-truths.

Exaggerations and half-truths are still lies. We must not break the Ninth Commandment no matter how tempting it is. We are most prone to deceitfully embellish statements and misleadingly present facts to fulfil our own purposes. Christians must be very honest in filling out forms, making declarations, paying taxes, and in any job, citizenship, or loan applications we make. To get people to side with us and support us, many present a skewed view and falsely represent others. We must guard our hearts first and watch our motives before we speak about situations and people. In all of life, especially in positions of influence and power, integrity is critical. What we say or do can have far-reaching consequences. We think we will get away with what we want or escape trouble, but God sees and will hold us responsible. We will see this later on.

THOUGHT: How careful am I in speaking the whole truth?

PRAYER: Help me to guard my heart so that my lips will be pure.

BE DISCERNING

Haman had tried to convince the king that it was not beneficial to have the Jews live in his kingdom. He cunningly requested King Ahasuerus to write a decree to have the Jews wiped out, even offering to sponsor ten thousand talents of silver to the king's coffers. This amount is estimated to be in many millions of dollars today. He was either very rich or intended to pay it through the booty from the Jews (Esther 3:13). Gullibly, the king gave Haman his ring, the royal seal. He even willingly turned down the silver for his treasuries and allowed Haman to use it directly for the work of killing all the Jews. After all it was supposedly for the kingdom's benefit. The king was fully convinced by Haman. He gave Haman a "blank cheque" to write whatever he wished and put the royal seal upon the dotted lines. Haman was surely persuasive with his presentation of "facts" and plausible reasoning of what was "beneficial" to the kingdom, coupled with his willingness to forego large sums of money. What a "loyal and selfless employee concerned for the well-being of his employer"! The king was hence totally taken in. But in reality, Haman was self-serving, uncaring, and wicked. He cared only for his own pride.

We need to have discernment. It is important to verify facts diligently and check the background of what is told to us before we jump to conclusions. We must not gullibly believe and simply act upon accusations, gossips or rumours. Statements, even apparently qualified ones, should still be carefully confirmed. Just remember that people who have an agenda or personal vendetta will creatively package information and even seem very committed. We all have the responsibility to be very certain before we approve or deal with something and making such serious decisions. Parents and people with leadership responsibilities at church or work must learn from this episode. Having scheming people around is dangerous. But undiscerning and careless leaders make it worse. Trust without discernment and judgment can be disastrous.

THOUGHT: What is the line between being trusting and gullible?

PRAYER: O Lord, help me not to be hasty in my conclusions.

UNEXPECTED TURNS IN LIFE

The lot was confirmed in the twelfth month, and by the thirteenth of the first month, Haman had finished writing his command, and had given it to various levels of government of every province in the empire, in every of their languages. With the king’s seal, the edict was irrevocable. These letters were dispatched by couriers to ensure that no province was missed out. The command was *“to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish”* (Esther 3:13) – to eradicate all Jews and take their possessions. The annihilation of the Jews was set for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. And while the express couriers were galloping with the death sentences for thousands upon thousands of innocent lives, Ahasuerus and Haman enjoyed themselves with some relaxing drinks. Such an unthinkable command threw even the capital city, Shushan, into confusion.

Imagine life as a Jew with such an empire-wide threat. Each day is a countdown to your certain death. You cannot hide, you cannot escape, you can only sit and await death. You wonder who will be killing your spouse, your little infant, or parent on that day... will it be a stranger, or your neighbour, or friend? In one day, your entire life would be changed beyond belief into unspeakable trauma. The Jews were enjoying a prosperous and peaceful life till the edict was sent out. Although some Jews had chosen to return to the Promised Land to rebuild the temple, many remained behind. Amidst the good life, they could not imagine they were living in chastisement as exiles from the Promised Land. But this event should awaken them to realize that their good life in enemy’s land could not be permanent. Their hearts needed to be turned back to God.

Whatever befalls us in life is directed by God. Sometimes, the troubles looming are but God’s way to bring us to realize that we need to repent and stop our senseless pursuit of our life of pleasure and leisure and without any interest in His Kingdom.

THOUGHT: How do I view unexpected events in life?

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to let my roots grow into this world.

WHO DO WE CRY TO?

Upon knowing the details of the decree that had gone out for the coming mass execution of the Jews and that none would be spared, Mordecai mourned greatly. He tore off his garments and replaced them with sackcloth and ashes. Such actions symbolized immense anguish and repentance. He did not do this privately but wept loudly and bitterly in public in the city. He was not allowed to enter in because of his mourning attire. And every place where the extermination edict was received, there was tremendous grief among the Jews. They cried bitterly and fasted. Many donned sackcloth and prostrated themselves in ashes.

The scene must be heart-wrenching. It is hard to imagine the distress, sorrow and terror that were going through the hearts and minds of the Jews. In moments like that, such emotional responses can certainly be understood. But to whom was Mordecai crying? He went into the city and the king's offices. Was it for man to hear and see? Was he seeking pity? Was he punishing himself? After all, the whole episode came upon the Jews because of his actions. His mourning at the king's gate was likely to get Queen Esther's attention. He knew that the edict was irreversible. Hence crying to the king's office was useless. But whatever the case, it would have been more important for Mordecai to first cry to God instead of running to everyone else. In his fasting, did he turn in agonizing prayer first to God?

We must learn always to first run to God and plead at His Throne of Grace, instead of crying on the phone or resorting to email, Whatsapp or Facebook to people in positions of power to get help. Calamities must drive us first to God. All too often when we face trouble, we run to find help and comfort from man rather than God.

THOUGHT: Is running to God or man my first instinct?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to pray to Thee without ceasing.

FASTING

The news of their pending annihilation caused a great mourning among the Jews. As a people, they fasted, wept, wailed, donned sackcloth and put ashes upon themselves.

Fasting is a topic seldom discussed in our days. Should Christians fast today? If so, why and how does one fast? It is known that the Old Testament Jews fasted. The Lord Jesus Himself did fast when He walked on earth as seen in Matthew 4:1-2, *“Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.”* And when questioned regarding why His disciples were not fasting, Jesus answered that *“the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast”* (Matt 9:15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35). That answer indicates to us that fasting is a practice for believers in our age in Christ’s absence. The New Testament believers did fast as noted in Acts 13:2-3 and 14:23.

We see various reasons for fasting in the Bible. It is called for when God’s help is much needed in difficult and overwhelming challenges (Josh 7:4-6; Judg 20:26-28). It is also done in the case of deep repentance (Neh 9:1-2; Jon 3:5-7; Acts 9:9-11), and making crucial decisions (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23). The attitude in fasting is found in Matthew 6:16-18. One must not be a hypocrite to show off one’s religiosity by looking sad and gloomy. In Scriptures, fasting is also often in conjunction with prayer. Fasting is not merely torturing the body to arm-twist God. It is not a hunger strike, nor just a reason to go on a diet at the same time. It is instead an expression of putting aside even the basic necessities of life to seek God, under whose Hand we must all be humbled to seek help.

THOUGHT: Have I been so self-reliant that I never felt the need to fast?

PRAYER: Help me, Lord, to realize man’s helplessness before Thee, the Almighty God.

FILIAL PIETY

Mordecai succeeded in getting the queen's attention. His public and bitter loud cryings before the king's gate was noticed by Esther's servants. This made Queen Esther "*exceedingly grieved*" (Esther 4:4). She tried to get Mordecai to change out of his sackcloth by sending him clothes, but Mordecai refused. Greatly concerned, Queen Esther sent her personal aide, Hatach, to him.

Esther's great concern for her cousin Mordecai is worth noting. The word "*grieved*" has the meaning of writhing in travailing anguish and distress. And she was exceedingly so. Sackcloth was not allowed in the king's courts. Though her cousin remained outside, it might still upset the king especially with his public hue and cry. She was concerned for his safety and deeply troubled by his distress. Esther was the queen of the Medo-Persian empire, yet she remained deeply caring and concerned for her cousin. His welfare was still much on her mind though she was living in luxury and success. She could ignore Mordecai especially since he had refused her help the first time. But she would not give up. Queen Esther did whatever she could to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why he was in such an awful mourning. Surrounded by servants and living a carefree life, she worried about Mordecai's state.

Many of us can learn from Esther's filial heart towards Mordecai. Often children today are disrespectful and ungrateful to parents. Does what our parents go through raise any thoughts of concern in us? Do we bother to do anything to cheer them, to help them? Often children ignore their parents as they begin to have friends, start working, and enjoy a comfortable life. Many are too busy enjoying their freedom and are only concerned about their own lives. Any inconveniences to help parents are seen as troublesome. May we not forget the Fifth Commandment, no matter what age and what stage of life we are in.

THOUGHT: Do I honour the parents that God has put over me?

PRAYER: Help me, Lord, to honour my parents while they are alive.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 14

ESTHER 4:6-8

ISAIAH 41:10-14

*"Fear not, thou worm Jacob...
I will help thee, saith the LORD."*

FIGHT OR FLIGHT?

Hatach met Mordecai as instructed by Queen Esther. Mordecai spilled his heart, telling Hatach about what was going on. He also told Hatach about the huge sum of money Haman promised the king for the destruction of the Jews. For proof, Mordecai provided a copy of the decree issued from the capital city itself. And he asked Hatach to make the decree known to Esther, and to command Esther to see the king to beg for favour from the king for her people.

The fact that Mordecai had in hand a copy of the edict would likely mean that he was of a relatively high rank in the kingdom (Esther 3:12). Moreover he had detailed knowledge about the money Haman was bribing the king with. Notice that he "*charged*" Esther the Queen. He was commanding her in his position as her guardian. He wanted Esther to plead for her Jewish counterparts. This time, he instructed her to reveal her identity although it could be detrimental to her. Mordecai understood the unique position he was in. Working for the palace, he had first hand critical information. Being the queen's cousin, he had access to the king indirectly through her. He used both of these advantages to get help for the Jews. It is laudable of Mordecai in this respect. He did not quietly flee for his own life although he had first-hand inside information. This time, Mordecai did not try to conceal Esther's identity. He would stand up and try to fight for his people and expected Esther to do so as well.

Do you have the courage to stand up for others, even when you could have kept yourself out of trouble? Or would you secretly try to escape yourself? Christians must be ready to stand up for each other when there is a just and righteous need to. The Apostle Paul would risk his own life for others (Acts 19:29-30).

THOUGHT: Am I a soldier of Christ who will take a stand and fight His cause?

PRAYER: Make me to fear Thee, my Lord and my Redeemer.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Hatach returned to the palace and informed Esther what Mordecai had said to him. And Esther once again sent Hatach back to tell Mordecai her predicament in agreeing to the latter's charge for her to see and plead with the king. Hatach relayed the message from Esther about the well-known fact that no man or woman could enter the inner court of the palace uninvited. And unless the king extended his sceptre to the person, he would be put to death. And Esther told Mordecai through Hatach that the king had not called her to him for thirty days already. Hatach faithfully went back and forth at Esther's instructions, passing Esther's words on to Mordecai.

Hatach was not only faithful in doing Esther's bidding, he was trustworthy and loyal as well. With the king's edict to wipe out Esther's race, which would include her as well, Hatach was taking a big risk. He could have gone to the king, or gossiped about Esther being a Jew. Hatach could also have leaked information about what transpired between Mordecai and Esther. But he did not. He kept things confidential while diligently and truthfully doing and speaking as instructed by Esther as well as Mordecai. Both of them depended upon Hatach.

Devoted, trustworthy, and responsible workers are difficult to find these days. Christians must bear a good testimony at home, school, work, and among friends. We should be reliable, diligent, and unflinching in our duties. We must also know how to handle sensitive information when entrusted with it. Do people around you see you as such a person whom they can rely on to handle things? Have you been faithful and consistent in tasks assigned to you by your parents, teachers or bosses? We bring glory to God for being such a trustworthy person to others around us.

THOUGHT: Do people readily entrust me with tasks?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be a trustworthy person for Thy Glory.

GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN’S RESPONSIBILITY

Through Hatach, Mordecai responded strongly to Esther’s reply. He reminded Esther not to think that just because she was in the palace of the king, she would be spared when the time came for the Jews to be destroyed. He added that if she refused to speak to the king about this matter, relief and deliverance for the Jews would come from some other means nevertheless. But he warned her that she would be guilty and would deserve to die. With that, Mordecai made the statement to Esther: “*who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*” Since Hatach was simply carrying information from Esther to him, Mordecai probably could not tell if Esther was unwilling to act or just making a factual statement that no one could see the king without being called. But from Mordecai’s response, one thing was clear: he expected Esther not to be passive but to act. It appeared also that Mordecai had confidence that the Jews would have deliverance somehow and would not be annihilated. Though God was not mentioned, it seemed Mordecai understood that God would not allow His covenantal people to be destroyed. Mordecai’s statement about Esther becoming queen of Persia at this critical time seem to indicate strongly that he was intimating that the Sovereign God had been working out His Providence. To Mordecai’s credit, he also insisted that Esther do her part in God’s plan and not just keep silent and let things work out by themselves.

God’s Sovereignty does not negate man’s responsibility. Those words “*who knoweth*” appropriately reminds us that while man cannot fully know what has been ordered by Divine plans, it is still man’s responsibility to act. Man is expected to act responsibly and use means provided by God in His Sovereign plans. God’s Sovereignty does not mean “*que sera sera*” (i.e. whatever will be will be). It is not fatalistic fate. God can indeed work out His plans by many other means even if we refuse to be His instrument. There is no conflict between God’s Sovereignty and man’s responsibility at all.

THOUGHT: God’s Sovereignty is not an excuse for my passivity.

PRAYER: Lord, grant me courage and wisdom as Thy instrument.

UNITY THROUGH PERSECUTION

Esther returned her answer to Mordecai’s call for her to see the king. But she told Mordecai that he must bring together all the Jews in Shushan to fast specifically for her. They were not to eat or drink for three days and nights. And she would do so likewise. Moreover, she would also call her maidens to fast with them at the same time. After that, she would go and see the king, though uninvited, to seek help for the Jews’ predicament. Upon this answer, Mordecai went away and did exactly as commanded by Esther.

Mordecai reminded Esther that she was still very much a part of the Jewish people despite being the queen of Persia now. So she needed to have a concern for the crisis her people were facing. Esther rose to the occasion and decided to obey Mordecai to plead to the king on behalf of her people. Her first thought was to have the Jewish people in Shushan to be consolidated in fasting for her before she sought the king for them. These Jews that remained in Shushan were the ones who had not returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. They were living in luxury and were carefree, including Esther. They had probably forgotten their purpose as God’s people. This crisis served to awaken and unite them.

No one likes troubles and impending calamities. We often view them negatively. But God would at times use such events to rally us together in unity as a family, a church and among believers. United around a common cause in crisis time binds hearts and minds in purpose. Trivial things that used to matter are no longer important. We begin to be more understanding and supportive to encourage one another. Sometimes an extraordinary event (such as a severe sickness or a financial crisis) can bring family members together like nothing else could. Often when persecution arises from without, the church becomes stronger in unity. This is attested to in Acts and in Church history.

THOUGHT: How do trials cause me to set my eyes upon eternal things?

PRAYER: Lord, help us to be united for Thy cause.

IF I PERISH, I PERISH!

In her reply to Mordecai, Esther said that she would go and see the king uninvited. She reiterated that by doing so, she was breaking the king's law.

Esther knew that she was going against an already widely understood law of the king that none could approach the king unless being called first. The history of King Ahasuerus' temper at Vashti was well known. Moreover, Esther had not been asked to see the king for thirty days already. Esther really did not know the king's mood and how he would respond. She hardly knew the king, and most likely he must have been sleeping with his concubines. What if she had fallen out of grace with him? So, to barge into the inner palace without his invitation was really nerve-wrecking indeed. In fact it would be suicidal. Hence, one must not under-estimate the courage Esther had to muster in order to obey Mordecai to see the king under such conditions. Mordecai's statement to her was correct. She should think carefully why Providence had made her, a Jew, queen at this very time in the Persian kingdom. In fact Mordecai had the right theology: that even if Esther disobeyed God, God's Sovereign plan would still be accomplished by some other means.

Knowing something is right and doing it can be very different things, especially when there is much to lose. To her credit, Esther did respond rightly and without delay. She was willing to take the potentially severe consequences for doing what was needed. Though queen now, no one knew even at this point that she was a Jew. She had much to lose. But she was willing to risk it all and even to die for it. God sovereignly puts us in situations to fulfil His plans and to do what is right. It can be in school, at work, or in church. Nothing occurs by chance. No matter what position we are in, or how much we stand to lose, we must be willing to say “*If I perish, I perish,*” for the sake of God's kingdom.

THOUGHT: Am I willing to risk all I have achieved if needed?

PRAYER: Lord, make my life count for Thee.

KING’S HEART IN THE LORD’S HANDS

At the end of the three-day fast, Esther arrayed herself in her royal garments. She then positioned herself by standing in the inner court so that the king might notice her. On that day, the king did sit on his royal throne and he indeed looked out and saw her in the courtyard. And the sight of her pleased him. So he extended his golden sceptre, thus indicating to Esther she was allowed to approach him. Esther seized the opportunity, went up to him, and touched the head of the king’s sceptre respectfully and gratefully. King Ahasuerus asked Esther what she wanted to request for by coming to him. Offering “*half of the kingdom*” practically meant she got a blank check!

What were the “chances” that the king would be sitting on his throne at the end of Esther’s fast, and also notice her waiting in the court? Even more amazing was that instead of being angry at Esther, the king readily asked Esther to make her request. He would willingly grant her up to half his empire. What made the king take such favour towards Esther despite his disinterest in her for the last thirty days? God tells us that, “*The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will*” (Prov 21:1). Instead of anger, the king was kind. What appeared to be a potentially fatal risk turned out to be a highly favourable outcome.

Sometimes we imagine the worst possible result when we obey God. We panic and live in dread. We must learn to turn to God for help instead, even fast and pray, instead of being paralysed with fear. Things may seem hopeless, but the Sovereign God has absolute dominion and control over all things, all man, whether believer or unbeliever. Are you in a situation where you need an approval from a higher authority and it does not seem hopeful? If it be God’s will, know that He can and will be able to move man’s heart to fulfil His purposes. He is still the same God today as back then.

THOUGHT: Am I willing to obey God and leave the result to Him?

PRAYER: Help me to trust Thee more, O Lord.

WISDOM WHEN IN CRISIS

Instead of telling King Ahasuerus what she would request of him, Esther invited him and Haman to a banquet she had prepared. The king rushed Haman to get ready and attend this banquet. Greatly curious, the king asked Esther what her request was again. In fact, he repeated it twice in succession in this banquet. He promised Esther that whatever it was it would be granted. But Esther continued to delay revealing her petition. Once again, Esther invited them to a second banquet to be held the following day to disclose her request.

That Esther would not immediately make known her petition to the king time and again may seem perplexing at first glance. Why did she not jump at the first chance? Notice that she said she had already prepared a banquet. This would have occurred during her time of fasting. So it was not a last minute panic decision in front of the king. It was planned. And she also requested for Haman to come along. Esther was up against the king and his top aide. She was going to petition against an edict sent by the prime minister, and sealed by the king's ring. She had to be sure she would stand a chance. Esther wisely got the king so curious he would repeat his promise to grant her wish whatever it was. For added precaution, though risky, Esther further "tested the waters." This time she said that if the king truly would do what she would request, then let him and Haman come to the second banquet she would host for them the following day. If they turned up, she would disclose her request to him then and he would not be able to back out after making so many promises. But if he got fed up, he would not turn up. Her exclusive invitation to Haman would cause him to drop his guard and also allow her to pin-point him later in front of the king. It was a carefully calculated move both times. Having the fasting support and the opportunity to do her part to rescue her people, Esther must not fail. She exercised her human responsibility with much care. May God grant us such wisdom to discern what we need to do in challenging and delicate situations.

THOUGHT: Do I have godly wisdom to handle situations?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to depend upon Thee for discernment.

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

Haman went away from the first banquet merry and glad at heart. But when he saw that Mordecai did not bother to show him respect, Haman turned furious. Arriving home, Haman called for his wife, Zeresh, and some friends. He bragged to them about his great possessions, number of children, and his promotion above all else. He added to the list how the queen invited none other except him to be her guest with the king, not once, but twice. But Haman said that all these were useless to him as long as Mordecai existed.

The queen’s personal and exclusive invitation inflated Haman’s sense of self-pomp. But, in an instant, his mood changed when he met Mordecai on his way back. It went from joyful and glad to a poisonous rage against Mordecai. To boost himself from this unpleasant encounter, he summoned others so that he could boost his self-importance by reciting to them his great fortune, virility, stratospheric career advancement, and how he was now in the queen’s most private and elite circle. But the very thought of Mordecai’s disrespect for him made all these of no meaning to him again. Haman’s mood depended upon whether he got what he wanted, no matter what he already had.

When we derive our joy from self-aggrandizement, we will have mood swings all the time, like Haman. What brings you joy? If it be position, power, admiration of men, being saluted, or a sense of being part of an elite club, then you too will be like Haman. There is never an end to such lust. For the believer, when our joy is based upon having Christ alone, we will not be easily swayed. But when we depend upon earthly things and man’s praises in order to be happy, we will never be satisfied because there is always one more thing, one more thousand dollars, or one more praise that we must have in order to be happy enough. As the hymn writer well reminds us: “Take the world but give me Jesus, all its joys are but a name.”

THOUGHT: Are spiritual things a necessity for my joy?

PRAYER: My Lord and my God, let me find my joy in Thee alone.

SECRET MEETINGS

Haman’s wife, Zeresh, and the friends he called to his home made a suggestion to him concerning Mordecai the Jew. They all advised Haman to first get people to immediately construct a gallows fifty cubits (i.e. about twenty-three metres) high. Then on the following day, he was to request the king to have Mordecai punished by hanging the latter on it. And the plan should be executed before he went to Esther’s second banquet. With that settled, Haman then happily went with the king to enjoy the private banquet.

This meeting against Mordecai in Haman’s home resulted in the plot to kill Mordecai even before the appointed time decreed for the mass massacre of the Jews. Zeresh and Haman’s friends thought of a way to solve Haman’s dented ego. But instead of advising Haman to ignore Mordecai and help him overcome this self-centeredness, his wife and friends instigated Haman to act wickedly. Behind closed doors, they devised a diabolical plot together. What they devised in secret was to strike as much fear as possible in public in order to vindicate Haman. Things were looking very bad for Mordecai and the Jews.

Such clandestine meetings in homes to plot against others are not uncommon today. But the fact that God is sovereign, knows all things and is constantly in charge is our comfort. God is Omniscient, so no matter how man would conspire secretly to seek to hurt the believer, God is in the know. God is Omnipotent and God can easily thwart covert plans. Are you troubled when you realize there are secret meetings at work, at home, and in even in church against you? Recall how Balaam and Balak plotted in secret against the children of Israel but could not succeed in the least. God is always watching over His people and He can foil their enemies’ plans every time no matter how they scheme. And while all these were happening, the children of Israel were oblivious. If God be for us, who can be against us?

THOUGHT: Am I worried because men secretly plot against me?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to trust in Thy Omniscient care.

MURDEROUS PRIDE

Zeresh and friends made the suggestion to Haman to build a twenty-three-metre-high hanging gallows. They told Haman that he should have it ready the following day so that he could ask the king for permission first thing in the morning to hang Mordecai. With that settled, it would enable him to enjoy his private banquet with the king and the queen. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, thus slighting him, had been a bane for Haman. All his bragging and boasting about his position and possession could not help him get over his wounded pride. It would be embarrassing for Haman to see how Mordecai had publicly spurned him. While all bowed, there would be Mordecai ramrod upright and unmovable. Mordecai's open and visible refusal to budge to show respect to Haman again outside the king's office was like the last straw that broke the camel's back for Haman. So, the plan to be rid of Mordecai delighted Haman tremendously.

Haman immediately got the plan underway for the construction of the gallows to hang Mordecai on. The sheer height of the gallows suggested to Haman was to ensure that all could see, even from afar. Mordecai must be made an example of in order for Haman to recover his pride. Under any circumstances, it would be most gross and appallingly ghastly a sight to see a human body hanging at such a height. But yet, it was something that brought pleasure to Haman and made him go gleefully along to his coming banquet appointment. This was simply because his pride needed to be recovered and appeased. Nothing less than killing the man who had slighted and offended Haman would do. Pride is a dangerous emotion. It eats a person up. It is insatiable. Because of that it can blind a person with unquenchable rage to commit acts that one would not normally even consider. And to get even, pride would want to see others who have slighted us be humiliated. We will character-assassinate others with gossip, do things to bring others down, and not rest till our pride is boosted again. Be very careful of this emotion. It can overtake you.

THOUGHT: Am I scheming to get even with someone?

PRAYER: O God, make me repent quickly of any pride within.

PROVIDENTIAL INSOMNIA

In the same night when Haman was plotting to hang Mordecai, King Ahasuerus had an insomnia attack. Unable to sleep, he commanded to have the national records read to him. From the annals, the record of Mordecai exposing the two chamberlains' plot to assassinate the king was read to him. These two doorkeepers, Bigthana and Teresh, would have had relatively easy access to the king. The king then asked what honour was bestowed upon Mordecai for his acts.

God is constantly working behind the scenes to deliver His people. This time it was to rescue Mordecai. It was certainly not by chance that the king could not sleep. Sleep comes from God. He can give it, He can withhold it also. The king's insomnia was just God keeping him awake to do His work. Among many things that the king could have done, why would he ask to have the national archives read to him? He could have asked for any of his many wives or royal musicians to lullaby him. Who put that thought in him? And among myriads of records, the very one picked for reading would be about Mordecai's act. You would think the last thing the servants dared remind a sleepless king was about an assassination plot against him. And instead of just moving on in relief, the king asked if any reward was given to Mordecai. God can work in the heart and mind of man at any time. In fact, the timing was crucial. Mordecai's life was in dire danger because on this same night the gallows for his neck would be completed. Man may want to sleep, but if God intends to use him, He will keep the person awake. Mordecai was protected by God (who never sleeps) even without him knowing it. And God can use unbelievers to do His will without them realising or being willing to. This is the Sovereign control of God over all. This is our great assurance as we tread this world. Our Heavenly Father watches over His own children and He can use anyone or anything at any time to deliver us. Do not fret. The believer can sleep well with this thought.

THOUGHT: Do I often stay awake worrying?

PRAYER: Help me to trust in Thy constant care, O Lord.

KEEPING RECORDS STRAIGHT

The records kept in the royal archives specifically minuted that it was Mordecai who made known those would-be assassins. His name was expressly penned in the national documents read to the king. How did Mordecai's name get into the national records? The answer is in Esther 2:22. Esther *“certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name.”* Though Esther could have taken credit for herself, she did not. Instead she distinctly mentioned that it was Mordecai who exposed the murderous plot against her king. It was this critical piece of information that would deliver Mordecai on the night before he would have been hung. God used the most ordinary thing as keeping good records to deliver His children. In fact, if Mordecai had allowed Esther to admit she was a Jew, could the genocide plan have been avoided? Haman may not be so bold against the queen's people.

We must be truthful, precise and careful when we provide information. Records must not be skewed or falsely given. There is always a tendency for us to either exaggerate or to play down information depending on what benefits us. Christians must always be honest and accurate when reporting. Whether it be in filling up applications, answering questions in interviews, filing tax returns or relaying information, we must not intentionally twist or leave out facts so that we would look good or not get into trouble. We never know how the information can impact something or someone. This also reminds us of the importance of keeping good records. We never know when God will use them and how they will come in to be of great help. Church records and documentation must be kept carefully. Session minutes can become legal documents when required by the law. Audit requirements need proper documentations to be kept. Keeping proper records does not mean there is no trust in the church. It is simply important to fulfil all righteousness and for certain things, it prevents unnecessary misunderstandings. In Esther 6, God delivered through a simple record.

THOUGHT: Do I have a tendency to withhold or add information?

PRAYER: Lord, help me always to be faithfully truthful and exact.

DIVINE TIMING

The king's servants present on the night of his insomnia answered the king that nothing had been done for Mordecai. King Ahasuerus wanted to know who was present at the court so that he could assign him a task. The king's servants informed him that Haman was standing in the outer court office. The king then gave instructions to allow Haman to come into his presence. The reason for Haman waiting outside was that he was hoping to seek the king's permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had built. But the king had a question for Haman: what could the king do to honour someone he was pleased with? Haman was only too pleased to enumerate the ways because he thought it was for himself. He even forgot to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai.

Mordecai's life was hanging on a thread. This was the day he would be hanged if Haman's request was submitted. But before Haman could ask anything, the king asked Haman's advice on what he could do if he wished to honour someone. God's timing was perfect, as always. Even the timing for honouring Mordecai was timed for now, and not earlier. It would be at this point, when Haman wanted to apply to the king to hang Mordecai, that God would put it in the king's heart to honour him. Do you wonder and fret at times about why God has not acted yet? Do you wonder if God has overlooked you while the wicked get ahead? But we can fully trust in Him. His plans for us are perfect in timing and have no mistakes. Do not be troubled in such times as we learn from here that not even the most powerful and malevolent man could outpace, outwit, or out-time God. Be patient. In time, God will deliver and exalt those who obey Him. The Psalmist rightly affirms in Psalm 31:15: *"My times are in thy hand: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me."* God's timing for all things is always perfect. He is never late, and never early. He will bring His works to pass with maximum effectiveness for His purposes, right on perfect time.

THOUGHT: Do I find it difficult to submit to God's timing?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to wait upon Thy perfect timing.

KEPT BY HIM WHO NEVER SLEEPS

This was an extremely eventful dusk till dawn. The sleepless and restless king seeking sleep became more awake listening to his national archives read to him. Perhaps he was too curious and anxious to find out what Esther would be requesting of him and so wanted to be up to date with his kingdom. In the meantime, Haman was making plans to get rid of Mordecai once and for all and to do it in the most ostentatious way possible. The king and his prime minister were both awake through the night and could not wait to act on their plans.

All these were happening while Mordecai was asleep. But two most powerful men were awake because of him. Haman probably supervised the building of the gallows himself and was in the king's outer court in the wee hours of the morning. And the king was trying to figure out how to repay Mordecai. One was plotting to kill Mordecai while the other was wondering how best to honour Mordecai. God permitted the murderous chamberlains to plot against the king's life earlier on for a reason: to use it to rescue Mordecai. No one can out-move God on the chessboard of life. God's omniscience means He knows all things, ahead of time even. Therefore His workings always pre-empt man's plans. Nothing catches Him by surprise. God's knowledge of the future is not dependent upon the acts of man. He already knows. This is contrary to Open Theism which teaches that God does not know everything about the future yet because of man's free will to act. God's omniscience is a most assuring doctrine.

You are kept by the One who never sleeps, and “*He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep*” (Ps 121:3-4).

THOUGHT: Do I trust my Heavenly Father to be always watching over me?

PRAYER: O Father, help me to trust Thee more.

FULL OF SELF

The Bible said that Haman *“thought in his heart,”* revealing to us what went on in his heart and mind. Haman could not imagine that there would be any other person whom the king would want to honour more than himself. After all the king chose to promote him above everyone else in the kingdom. “Who else can the king be thinking about to give tribute to now at this early hour? Who else is more important to the king? The king must surely be thinking of honouring me.”

Sometimes we can be truly full of self. We think that the world revolves around us. We imagine that others must be considering us all the time. And whatever is being discussed is to be about us and for us because “I am the most important person around” after all. We may even boldly “hint” to others what they should do for us. Have you met people who always turn the conversation to themselves? Whatever the topic, it will invariably be about how they know better, their opinions are better, and their likes and dislikes. You share about your experiences and they want to talk about theirs as well. It is as if they are thinking: “Who else could be more interesting, more important, and deserve more attention than me?”

It is unpleasant to deal with people who are full of self. Somehow, they need and expect to always be the centre of attention. Check ourselves and what goes on in our hearts. So, each time we want to cut into a conversation, we should learn to contain ourselves and not think that everyone else is and must be interested in us only.

Remember, pride was the first sin in the universe and continues to plague every human heart till today. What the world vaunts about self-esteem and ego is merely a sugar-coated picture of the first sin.

THOUGHT: Am I overbearingly full of self?

PRAYER: Lord, may I be careful about my thoughts about myself.

PRIDE BEFORE THE FALL

Haman readily made the detailed suggestions on how to honour the person whom the king delighted in. He proposed that the king’s own royal robes be put on that man, that he be put upon the king’s personal horse, and even put the king’s royal crown on his head. Then have the noblest prince of the kingdom hand-lead this royally arrayed person on the king’s horse through the city. In addition, this prince should announce to all around, as they went through the city, that this was how the king wished this person to be treated in order to honour him. At the end of Haman’s proposal, the king told Haman to immediately obtain the royal robes and horse, and to do to Mordecai everything he had suggested. He was to hurry to do so immediately. And Haman was commanded to make sure not a single thing he suggested was omitted for Mordecai. Being the highest ranking official, Haman would thus be the one to lead Mordecai through the city, and announce the very words he suggested himself.

Since Haman initially thought the king wanted to honour him, all he could think of when asked was to propose how he himself wanted to be maximally honoured. He wanted to be paraded in the greatest pomp through the city for all to see, sitting on a high horse. To ask the king for his royal attire, sit on his royal horse, and to wear the empire’s royal crown, it was practically to want to be the king of Persia himself! The fact that he could come up so quickly with the details betrayed the fact that these were thoughts he had been entertaining all the while in his own heart frequently. Moreover, there was no better way to get an added boost to his pride which had been wounded by Mordecai. But instead, Haman would be brought to a new low by Divine providence. Mordecai would be honoured while Haman would be abased. Whoever God elevates to high positions, He can also bring low very quickly.

THOUGHT: Am I proud and seeking man’s admiration?

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to fall into the sin of pride.

THE FALL HAS BEGUN

Haman had to immediately obtain the king's royal apparel and his horse, and put them on Mordecai, the Jew. After walking Mordecai through the city and proclaiming, in his own voice, what the king was doing for Mordecai in whom he delighted, Haman could not face the public anymore. While Mordecai went back to the king's gate, Haman covered his head and did not know where to hide his face. So he ran home and told his wife and his friends his woe.

"A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit" (Prov 29:23). For months, Haman's pride had been eating him up. His unsatisfied pride led him to plot to annihilate an entire race of people. To satisfy his sky-high pride, only a twenty-three-metre-high gallows for Mordecai would satisfy him. Haman had much time, opportunities and reasons to repent of his pride. Despite the great blessings and promotions in his life, Haman still could not tolerate having a single Jew not bowing to him. The fall would now begin. The more Haman did, the more he was sealing his fall. He wanted the king to publicly honour him. God turned it upon him. People already knew publicly that Mordecai would not bow to Haman. And now Haman had to eat more humble pie because he had to walk while Mordecai sat on the king's horse in the king's array. In addition, he had to announce in his own voice for all to know Mordecai's favoured status with the king. This can happen to us too when we want more and more to satisfy our insatiable pride. We are jealous as long as we are not number one in class, at work, in church. We plot and scheme to promote ourselves and fight to be admired above all. We want to show off and have people "kowtow" to us. But the more we do, the closer we get to the promised fall. God is not mocked. Few, if any, are exempt from sinful pride. Be watchful because pride is very subtle. Repent because the fall will be loud and clear.

THOUGHT: Humility, humility, humility.

PRAYER: More humility give me, O Lord.

SILENT BUT SURE PROVIDENCE

The publicly humiliated Haman retreated home and related all that had publicly happened to him. Hearing what had happened to Haman, these wise friends and his wife told him that if Mordecai the Jew had begun to overtake him, then Haman would not prevail over Mordecai whom he wanted to be rid of. Even his wise friends and wife could tell that Haman's fall had begun. In fact, they added that Haman would most definitely fall in the sight of Mordecai! And just as they were telling him this, the king sent orders for Haman to hurry up for Esther's banquet. Why were Zeresh and friends so sure that, since Mordecai was a Jew, Haman would not only fail against this Jew, but that he would surely fall in his attempt to do so?

It was likely that they had heard about what the God of the Jews had done for the Jews in the past. The miracles in Egypt against the Great Pharaoh, the parting of the Red Sea, the fall of the Jericho walls, were well known among the nations. We see that even their Persian kings spoke highly of Jehovah. Cyrus called Him *"The LORD God of heaven,"* attributing conquests of kingdoms of the earth to Him, and *"he is the God"* (Ezra 1:2-3); and Artaxerxes called Him *"the God of heaven"* (Ezra 7:21, 23). This same God had struck dread in them. Haman's friends were simply called friends but they were called *"wise men"* when they assessed what had happened. Even these were wise enough to notice that Divine Providence was at work for God's people. A key point of this Book of Esther is God's silent but sure working. There is no lightning and thunder, just ordinary daily lives of people and their actions recorded. God sees, knows and is working behind the scenes. This must assure the believer who may be going through troubles or persecutions. Do not panic when we see the wicked and very powerful people at work against us or His Church. Just wisely trust in Him even in the most extreme situations. His unseen Hand is sovereignly in perfect control of all and providentially still at work.

THOUGHT: Am I troubled and at a loss at the scheming of others?

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for Thou art surely working.

DID ESTHER SERVE WINE?

The king and Haman kept their appointment to come to Queen Esther’s second banquet the following day (Esther 5:8). Both banquets were referred to as a “*banquet of wine*” (Esther 5:6; 7:2). It was thrown by Esther so that she could present her request to the king.

We have covered the topic on wine in the Bible on October 6. It is clarified that the word “*wine*” in the Bible can refer to a range of beverages: pure juice of a fruit, fermented juice mixed with water, or fermented alcoholic drink. It was affirmed that God prohibits the kind of alcoholic drinks we have today. Hence social drinking of any of today’s wine is not for the believer. So did she serve intoxicating wine? If so, was it right for Esther to throw a wine party? Some use this passage to justify serving wine and drinking wine today. The wine served would likely have been intoxicating, given it was for the heathen king. If it were, then it was wrong for Esther, as God’s child, to do so. It does not matter if she were serving a heathen king or living among heathens in their environment. Just because an action or event is mentioned in Scriptures, it does not mean God sanctions it. If we were to use such records to justify serving and drinking wine, then one can say that the lifestyle of Samson is fine too, and so on. So it is wrong to use Esther’s behaviour to defend serving intoxicating wine at gatherings and weddings to unbelievers, and to be a bartender as long as we ourselves do not drink it. The Bible tells us that we must not break God’s teachings while living among unbelievers (1 Cor 9:21) and to refrain from all appearances of evil (1 Thess 5:22). Do understand that just because God used Esther to deliver the Jews does not mean everything she did was approved of God. The lesson in this Book is that God, in His sovereignty, can choose even the weak and backslidden ones like Mordecai and Esther to accomplish His will. It is not to encourage us to live like them but to motivate us to do otherwise.

THOUGHT: Am I twisting Scriptures to justify how I want to live?

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to rationalize my sins before Thee.

THE TIME HAS COME

At this second banquet, the king repeated his generous offer to Esther. He even addressed her as “*queen Esther*” this time. The question was whether Esther would really pluck up the courage to do what Mordecai called her to do. Mordecai made her think seriously because she could be in her position in this “*kingdom for such a time as this*” (Esther 4:14). Did she truly mean what she said (“*if I perish, I perish*”) when she considered this? This was the defining moment. The time had indeed come. Esther could have just asked for her own life to be spared with a new edict. To ask for the sparing of an entire people far and wide after an edict was passed could be denied. It would embarrass the king. Would it be less daunting and more feasible if she had only asked for her own life? It would also not offend Haman as much because he would be more understanding if just the queen was spared. Thank God Esther lived up to her calling and did not back down when God provided this golden opportunity. It was her finest moment.

When God puts us in a place, He intends to use us for a purpose. We are saved not to live our own lives for our pleasure and ambitions. It is not by chance that you are in a particular school, office, home, church, or circle of friends. In every event, in that place, you must be ready to stand up, speak up, and do what God has planned for you. Remember it is your privilege when God gives you the opportunity to stand up for Him. At least Mordecai’s theology was sound (Esther 4:14). God does not need you. He can accomplish His great plans without you. When He involves you, He is gracious to allow you to participate. Esther did and her name is forever linked to God’s deliverance of the Jews then.

THOUGHT: Will I stand for the truth if it requires self-sacrifice?

PRAYER: O Lord, when I am tested, may I not fail to be true to Thee.

HUMBLE APPROACH

Queen Esther appealed to the king to *"let my life be given me at my petition"* and to spare also the lives of *"my people at my request."* She explained that she and her people had been sold *"to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish."* The queen added that she would not have complained and troubled the king if they had been sold for other reasons such as to be slaves. Moreover, the money given could not compensate for the great loss of an entire race of people to his kingdom. The king then asked Esther the queen who would dare even to imagine doing such a thing.

Notice that the *"queen"* title was tied to Esther each time her name was mentioned in verses 1 to 5. Though it was the queen speaking, yet she was very measured and careful with her words. She made no demands. She ensured that the king knew she was only hoping for his favour and that it was dependent upon his pleasure to grant her requests. Though she was his queen, she would not have dreamed of troubling him even if she and her people were sold into slavery. What humble words compared to queen Vashti's attitude towards King Ahasuerus. Notice the king's response to her words. Her humble approach made his heart open to help her.

As queen, Esther could have pulled rank against Haman. But she threw herself at the king's mercy instead. Her words of appeal were all true. Like Vashti, she was just a war slave who was given a great privilege. But unlike Vashti, Esther knew her place. We may be successful or have arrived in life, but, like Esther, we must be humble and remember our beginnings and origin. Do not be haughty, else it affects our attitude and how we act or respond to people. A humble approach, even when we have been wronged or taken advantage of, often helps us to deal with situations and people effectively. Esther was focused, not on her position, but on solving the issue. Anyone in any form of leadership position can learn much from this.

THOUGHT: Do I always exert positional power to get my way?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be humble whatever position I am in.

A TASTE OF ONE’S OWN MEDICINE

Upon hearing Queen Esther’s account of the plot against her and her race, King Ahasuerus asked who would dare presume in his heart to plot to kill his beautiful queen, and where this enemy of hers was at that time. Esther did not hesitate to point out that the particular man who hated her and was against her was none other than wicked Haman who was before the king. Haman was petrified now in the king’s and queen’s presence.

Queen Esther had dropped the hint about an enemy and a financial plan to have her and her people obliterated. She did not mention that the king’s decree sealed their end. This made the king ask *“who is he, and where is he”* who dared cook up such a diabolical plan against her. The king’s mind needed to be steered towards *“who,”* instead of being clouded by *“what.”* Her aim was to direct the king towards Haman. Unless this was achieved, inviting Haman along would be of no avail. Haman earlier appealed to the king in Esther 3:8-11 to eradicate the Jews. The difference was that Haman lied while Esther spoke only the truth. Since the edict, the Jews everywhere had been living in fear and sorrow. Haman would taste what the Jews were going through. The word *“afraid”* means *“startled and overtaken with sudden terror.”*

Haman now had a taste of his own medicine. Be careful of what we wish upon others and try to do to them. *“And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise”* (Luke 6:31). Consider what we put others through by what we do. To satisfy one’s personal agendas, sometimes we ignore what it would do to others. We can put someone through much trouble and even trauma. Spare a thought for others on the receiving end. Some people act terribly towards others just because they are in a position where others cannot but just accept it. You see this at the office, in shopping centres, even in schools. Such arrogant behaviours will be reciprocated upon us some day.

THOUGHT: How do I treat people who are under me?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to treat others as I wish to be treated.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 6

ESTHER 7:7-9

1 TIMOTHY 6:17-19

*"Take the world,
but give me Jesus..."*

NOTHING IN THE WORLD CAN HELP

King Ahasuerus stormed out of the banquet room into the palace garden. He was furious at what Esther had revealed to him. Sensing that the king was upset with him and would do something to him, Haman practically threw himself toward Esther the queen to beg her for his life. And when the king returned to the banquet room, he saw Haman upon the bed which Esther was on herself. He asked if Haman had become even more brazen by taking such liberties with his queen when he was around. Just as he was speaking these words, his guards sprang into action. They covered Haman's face, probably with some hood.

Moments ago, Haman was the second most powerful man in a world superpower. But now he was but a common criminal, in custody and hooded by the imperial guards. This was likely how the Persian guards arrested and brought criminals into custody. Haman bragged and boasted about his powerful and superior rank above all princes around him. His position gave him direct access to the king himself. Everyone in the capital city bowed to his authority. He craved and obtained all these. But none of these could save him. All his supremacy and power were useless now with the king angry with him. His sins have caught up with him. The king reacted immediately. There was nothing anyone could do. The guards knew what and how serious the king's words were, and responded immediately against Haman. This shows how fleeting and flimsy power, possessions and prestige are in this world. Why do you pursue these as if they were dependable and everything in this world to you? Dear reader, realize that one day you will face the God of Heaven. He is the King of kings who will judge. Rich and poor, powerful and weak, all will stand before Him. The only possession that matters then is whether you have Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour. Turn to Him now and be sure that Jesus is your Lord and Saviour!

THOUGHT: Am I trusting in power, prestige and possessions?

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, all I need is Thee in this life, and beyond.

DIG A PIT, FALL INTO IT

Harbonah, one of the king's chamberlains, called to the king's notice that at Haman's house was a twenty-three-metre-high gallows which Haman had built to hang Mordecai. He added that this was the Mordecai who had spoken to expose the assassination plot which saved the king. Then the king simply said three words concerning Haman: “*Hang him thereon.*”

Imagine, an ultra high gallows in your garden to hang your enemy upon. But only to be hanged on it yourself. “*He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him*” (Eccles 10:8). This was exactly what happened to Haman. None of this happened by chance. As Haman was scheming against God's people, God was working silently to turn his plot upon himself instead. Haman built the gallows, God hanged him on it in judgment. “*God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day. If he turn not, he will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready. He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death; he ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors*” (Ps 7:11-13). God will turn the evil devices of wicked men against His people to nought and return it upon them. Haman picked the wrong group of people to find trouble with. He thought that with his authority and his proximity and influence over the king as prime minister, he could not fail in his war against the Jews. He had the king on his side, the decree was sent far and wide, and he had the finances to back his genocide project. But he could not be more wrong. God would never forget His covenant with His people. The Jews could and would never be eradicated. Likewise, God will protect His believers today.

Do you have any Hamans in your life? Leave God to deal with them. Vengeance belongs to God. We just need to ensure that we are on God's side, doing His will and doing the right thing. When they dig a pit for you, they will fall into it.

THOUGHT: If the Lord is with me, who can be against me?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to walk on Thy side always.

CHECKMATE!

As commanded by the king, they hanged Haman on the very gallows Haman built for Mordecai. With that, the fury of the king abated.

The life of the proud, plotting and scheming Haman was over. Just like that. It would be quite a shock to the world then to hear that the king had executed his prime minister. And the king hanged him on a twenty-three-metre-high gallows. What could have happened? Like clockwork, each event rapidly followed one after the other to this culmination in two days and one night. From the first banquet by Esther, Haman building the gallows at night, the king's insomnia and discovery that nothing was done for Mordecai for rescuing the king, Haman being publicly humiliated then whisked off to the second banquet, Esther's exposing Haman's wickedness, to Haman further exasperating the king by his actions upon the queen. Moreover, Harbonah's presence, just when the king was exasperated and wondering what to do with Haman, was no random occurrence of coincidence as well. He knew about the gallows Haman built, he knew the records of Mordecai's good deed to the king, and he simply mentioned the two things to let the king get the hint on what the king could do with Haman. With that, the rich and powerful Haman's life ended unceremoniously and suddenly.

Was it Mordecai's persuasiveness, or Esther's courage, or her wise handling of the king in presenting the case, or the king's insomnia and national records that saved the day? God was not mentioned anywhere in all these events. Although God was silent, He certainly was not sleeping. He was actively moving behind the scenes as the Master chess mover working in timing events, placing right people in the right boxes, and controlling and moving hearts. Mordecai and Esther were instruments simply doing their part assigned by God. And King Ahasuerus was too, whether he knew it or not. God's silence speaks louder than words when the events unfold eventually.

THOUGHT: God is always steps ahead of His enemies.

PRAYER: Lord, I praise Thee for Thou art the All-Wise God.

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

On the day Haman was executed by hanging, King Ahasuerus transferred all that Haman possessed to Esther the queen. Mordecai was said to then come before the king. This meant that he apparently was able to access the king quite freely at this point. Esther now revealed that Mordecai was her cousin. Upon hearing this, the king removed the royal signet ring and gave it to Mordecai. Ahasuerus had earlier given this to Haman, but obviously had taken it back before executing Haman. With that, Esther also appointed Mordecai to rule over Haman’s house.

This meant Mordecai took over complete ownership of all that Haman had amassed and worked for, including his power and position. How ironical that this Haman who clamoured to have all and be all would lose all to the very Jew whom he hated to the bones. Up till this chapter, things were looking very bleak for the Jews. Esther was not sure how the king would react to her request. Before the second banquet, the gallows was reared high for all to see that Mordecai the Jew was going to be hanged. Humanly speaking, Esther and Mordecai were the Jews’ only hope. And their enemy, Haman, was buddy with the king. Yet things changed overnight, literally. The night turned to day! It turned out beyond Esther’s and Mordecai’s expectations. They did not ask to take over Haman’s possessions and position. Once again God delivered without thunder and lightning but through down-to-earth events.

Sometimes we may go through a prolonged time of trials and troubles. We wonder how we will ever get out of it. Things look dire and there is no light at the end of the tunnel of challenges we are in. In those times, remember that God is working still. We must remain patient and not give up hope. God’s deliverance shines brightest after the darkest night.

THOUGHT: Am I down and distressed because of some situation?

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that Thou art working things out behind the dark clouds of trouble.

NOT OUT OF THE WOODS YET

Despite the happy moment for Esther and Mordecai, Esther did not leave the king's presence. In fact, she wept before Ahasuerus. In tears, she pleaded at the king's feet to remove the coming evil upon her people, the Jews, because of Haman's wicked plan. She knelt before him until the king extended his royal sceptre to her. It was his sign to her that he was pleased to consider her request. Only then did she arise to stand before him.

Esther and Mordecai had just scored a great victory over Haman their enemy. Esther had been fasting for three days, organizing two high-tensioned banquets, and had to expose the prime minister before the king. It would have been a great relief to some, but to Esther, she knew that the Jews were not out of the woods yet. The edict to have every single one of them killed till the race was completely wiped out from the earth was still in force. She pressed on to their goal which had not been achieved yet. The job was not done yet. Risking the king's displeasure after giving her *"half of the kingdom,"* she pleaded for one more thing from the king.

Do you persevere till a difficult task is completely done? Or are you happy enough when completing a big milestone for yourself, while the final goal is not achieved yet? Sometimes in order to press on, we may incur the unhappiness of others for being "troublesome" or "pestering." Other times we fail to finish the job because we are complacent and settle for "good enough." Do not leave critical problems unresolved because of the fear of man or laziness on our part. If Esther stopped short now, then her people, the Jews, would perish, though she herself may escape. This was another fine moment in the life of Esther. It behooves us to persist in doing good and not give up.

THOUGHT: Do I typically give up easily and fail to finish what needs to be done?

PRAYER: Lord, give me perseverance in what I do.

PLEADING FOR OTHERS

Queen Esther only dared to arise at the feet of the king when he held out the sceptre towards her. She then pleaded for the life of the Jews, seeking the king to reverse the death edict on them. The queen presented her request through three humble statements. The first, if she had his favour; the second, if the request pleased him; and the third, if she pleased him. Then she implored him by baring her heartfelt pain that it would be unbearable for her to see her kindred people annihilated.

Once again Esther risked her life to speak to the king for her people. The king had already done a lot for her and Mordecai by hanging Haman, giving all that Haman owned to Esther, and transferring all of Haman's position and authority to Mordecai. But Esther was still genuinely concerned for her people. Despite her newly added personal riches and firmly established position with the king, Esther had not forgotten her people. Asking a Persian king to reverse his edict was to ask him to embarrass himself before his kingdom! Yet Esther was importunate in pleading for the Jews.

It is common for many to neglect and disregard others when promoted or having gained riches. Risking life, jeopardizing position and possessions to plead for the good and welfare of others do not come naturally to many. Do we spare a thought for others when our lives are comfortable and secure? How far would we go to help those who are in difficulties? We must be willing to use what we have to help others instead of being afraid of suffering loss ourselves because of helping. Even more importantly, how much concern do we have for the eternal state of the souls of people around us? Are we so engrossed in our own pleasures and revelling in our relaxations that we are not willing to go for evangelism? Do we plead for unsaved souls? Do we plead at the Throne of Grace for other believers who are facing distresses and challenges in life?

THOUGHT: Am I a selfish and self-centred person?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to help others and pray for their souls.

RAISED FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

King Ahasuerus responded to Esther’s pleading for the lives of her people, the Jews. The king told Esther and Mordecai that because Haman had laid his hand upon the Jews, he had therefore given Haman’s possessions to Esther and hanged Haman. And on top of that, he gave them full permission to write whatever they wished for the sake of the Jews, and then seal what was written as an edict with his signet ring so that no man could change what they commanded. This was a blank cheque given to Queen Esther and the new Prime Minister Mordecai. How did all these come about? It was because Mordecai challenged Esther when she was afraid to seek help from the king. The question that spurred her on was in Esther 4:14: “...*who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*” That was when Esther answered: “...*if I perish, I perish.*” God’s sovereign plan was to use Esther in His Providence. Esther fulfilled her human responsibility. She participated in God’s work to save the Jews. In the unfolding drama of God’s Providence in putting out Queen Vashti, crowning Esther, Ahasuerus’ insomnia and granting Esther the wisdom to speak and expose Haman’s plot at the critical moment, we come to the culmination of His sovereign plan. The Jews would be saved from being wiped out from the face of the earth, in order that the Saviour of the world, the Lord Jesus, would come through Israel. This Sovereign Providence saved us too!

It is no coincidence that God brings to our notice some people who need help. It is also not by accident that God puts us in the position and gives us the resources and abilities to help others. You are placed in your home, your school, your office and your church by God’s choice. It may be that God has put you there to speak up for His plans. Esther did not say, “God is sovereign, let’s see what He will do.” She did what God placed her there to do. We may initially have fear, but we must overcome as Esther did. Pray for wisdom and courage to act when God places us in positions of responsibility.

THOUGHT: Am I afraid to speak up when God’s work is at stake?

PRAYER: Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13

ESTHER 8:9-10

PSALM 42

*“... for I shall yet praise him
for the help of his countenance.”*

THE TABLES WERE TURNED

On the third month, the king’s scribes were at Mordecai’s disposal and they wrote whatever Mordecai commanded. This edict was to be sent out from Shushan to the Jews and to all the rulers and governors across the 127 provinces. It would be translated into every language for every people. Mordecai wrote it in the king’s name, sealed it with the king’s signet and delivered it by riders on horses, mules and camels to make sure every part of the empire was reached.

Notice how the description for the delivery of this edict to the Jews paralleled almost identically to that which was for their destruction in Esther 3:12-15. How the tables had turned! The Jews were living in the shadow of death and in much sorrow but with this new edict, it was those who hated them and planned to kill them that would live in fear and trembling for the showdown in the following nine months. Haman had viciously issued the command to kill and plunder the Jews. But this was all reversed now.

We see how God can amazingly turn the circumstances of disadvantage to advantage. There may be some Haman who is cunning, powerful and seem to have his way against you. But learn from this incident: our sovereign God can effortlessly defeat them and turn the situation around. Did not the situation look bleak and hopeless for months for the Jews? Did not the enemy Haman seem undefeatable? Was not the king in full support of Haman? But though the edict sent out with the king’s seal was irreversible, yet God would use Mordecai to issue a new edict to circumvent the old one. The Infinite Wisdom of God in thwarting man’s “water tight” plots is displayed here. Never fear, only trust Him!

THOUGHT: Am I doubting God’s ability to turn things around?

PRAYER: Lord, let me not be cast down but to trust Thee patiently.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14

ESTHER 8:11-14

PSALM 139:22-24

*“... he that doeth wrong shall receive
for the wrong which he hath done...”*

THE RIGHT TO DEFEND

Though Mordecai gave the command to the scribes, yet it was as good as the king granting the Jews everywhere the decree, because the rulers and governors had to recognize the authority of the king’s seal. The royal edict sanctioned the Jews to stand up for their lives. They could kill and eradicate people in the provinces. It did not matter if it were women or even children who had made themselves enemies to them. And the Jews could kill and take over the properties of anyone who would harm them — all on that twelfth month which Haman’s edict had previously set for their annihilation. This edict was for the Jews to prepare themselves for that day and authorized them to act and defend themselves.

Some say that Mordecai was just as wicked as Haman in crafting such a gruesome decree against others. He seemed to have just “cut and pasted” Haman’s wicked plans. But this was not true at all. Unlike Haman’s decree, note that this new decree was not a permission to kill indiscriminately. It was only to kill when attacked. It was for self-defence when their lives were endangered by someone who had the intent to kill them. It was hence also a strong signal to deter and prevent the others from thinking of attacking the Jews on the twelfth month. It served as a warning to them of the consequences. And it was fairly announced to all, nine months ahead. Mordecai and Esther continued to be at their best, even when they could have acted vengefully now. It is important that believers learn to react rightly when they are allowed to respond. After being delivered and given the opportunity to rectify a situation, we must take action but with godly principles. Having the right and especially the power to take action can become a temptation. We may want to exact maximum personal revenge, eg. get someone fired, make someone fail, or cause others to be injured. Our responses must be tempered and only for our own protection, not to hurt others. Check our motives carefully and seek God’s wisdom.

THOUGHT: Am I a vengeful person?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to defend justly without vengeance.

PROMOTION AND RETENTION

When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was clothed in royal apparel. The fine attire's colours described were blue, white and purple signifying royalty and princely status. And Mordecai was wearing a great crown of gold. It was unmistakably clear to all that Mordecai the Jew had been promoted by the king to great height and honour. The sight of Mordecai and his promotion caused even the city of Shushan to rejoice. They must have much preferred Mordecai.

Mordecai was distant and virtually unknown to King Ahasuerus up till when the royal annals were read to him. He was but another foreign captive employee in the king's administration office. In fact, until recently, Mordecai was dressed in sackcloth and forbidden to enter the royal office areas. It was Haman who had been prominent, close to and trusted by the king, and well connected. Could Mordecai in his wildest imagination ever think while in sackcloth that one day he would walk out from the palace dressed in such high honour? Once again, we learn that true promotion comes from the Lord. By all appearances and circumstances, Mordecai was truly an unlikely candidate for promotion, especially being a Jew who had been condemned to die in more ways than one. The other lesson is that while Haman strove endlessly and politicked to attain his position, he could not retain it. We are also reminded: “*But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another*” (Ps 75:7). Are you yearning and fighting for promotion and honour in school, at work, in society? If it be not God's will, it will not happen. But if it be God's plan for you, you do not need to politick, depend upon connections, or be from certain society background. As you seek God's kingdom first, He will bring His will to pass. Conversely, if it be not His will, you cannot keep your position even if you plot and scheme to retain it. God sets up and puts down according to His will. Focus on serving Him rather than on promoting ourselves.

THOUGHT: Am I apt to resort to carnal means to promote myself?

PRAYER: Help me, Lord, to be content in whatsoever state Thou has put me in.

DARKNESS TO GLADNESS

Esther 8:16 tells us the Jews had four things: light, gladness, joy and honour. This was so in every single province and city that received the new edict and there were celebrations with a feast. Many of the people of the land chose to become Jews themselves. This was because the fear of the Jews came upon the inhabitants of the lands.

This was indeed a good day for the Jews. Darkness had turned to gladness and joy. They had light at the end of the tunnel of doom and gloom. Imagine just passing each day knowing that your neighbour may come over and kill you and your family when the time comes. It must be most oppressive to live under the shadow of impending slaughter without any apparent chance of delivery. What a helpless feeling it must be. But God will never allow the Jews to be destroyed because of His covenant. He will remain faithful even while chastising them for their disobedience. In fact, the threat to their lives, which God allowed, woke them up from their complacency in their rich and comfortable lives in the foreign land. God’s deliverance will never be appreciated with so much gladness until we have experienced the seriousness of things. Sometimes God allows persecution to rouse us back to Himself. And He may even allow troubles to drag for a period so that when He delivers, we will not take it for granted. It will teach us to be deeply grateful and remember it. It will drive us back to Him in humility and dependence upon Him. As a result of this amazing turn of events and God lifting up His people, it put fear in the hearts of many non-Jews. Who would dare to attack a people whom God protected? Perhaps some became Jews out of fear of being killed by them, while others truly wanted to belong to such a people. Only God knows the individual’s motives. There is a great impending judgment coming upon your soul if you die in your sins. Cry to God for salvation today and you will experience an even greater gladness.

THOUGHT: Am I truly a born again believer?

PRAYER: Lord, may I rejoice in knowing that I am delivered from the darkness of sin.

WHAT DO YOU FEAR?

The showdown of reckoning on the twelfth month finally arrived. It was the day the enemies of the Jews were waiting with the hope to wield authority over the Jews. These hated the Jews. But all across the empire, the Jews also assembled to strike back against those who would hurt them. It is recorded that fear of the Jews came upon all the people. Moreover, even the rulers, governors and officers doing the king’s work were fearful of Mordecai the Jew who had since become powerful and famous everywhere. As a result, they helped the Jews.

This day was the result of Haman casting lots. He thought it was their “lucky” day to wipe out the Jews. But the tables were turned. They hoped to rule over, kill and plunder the Jews. Instead, “*no man could withstand*” the Jews. In addition, the Jews had the assistance and support of the rulers of all provinces. The reason given for this change of circumstances was fear: the fear of the Jews and Mordecai who had grown more and more powerful.

This fear God put into the hearts of these men was far more potent than any military force they could hope to raise themselves. It effectively multiplied their resources and protection. It could spread across borders instantly. This fear turned men to render help to the Jews. What do you fear? We learn here that all we need to fear is God. He can turn things against or for us in a way that no power, weapon or means on this earth can bring about. The great mourning and fasting by the Jews nine months ago would have been known by those around them. The helpers of the Jews knew the Jews had turned to their God, and they feared them. These wisely feared and were spared. But the haters of Jews did not fear the LORD of the Jews. They were destroyed instead. Proverbs 3:7 reminds us, “*Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.*”

THOUGHT: Fearing the LORD must cause me to depart from evil.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to fear only Thee, and I will fear nothing else.

VISITING THE SIN OF THE FATHERS ON THE CHILDREN

According to the new edict, the Jews defended their lives and killed those who hated and attacked them. Just in Shushan the palace alone, the Jews killed five hundred men. The ten sons of Haman (*"the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews"*) were killed also and named specifically. The Jews did not take any of their properties.

That Hammedatha was an Agagite, hence an Amalekite, and enemy of the Jews was mentioned in Esther 3:10 and 9:10. Haman sinned and his children were slain and highlighted by name. Does God punish the children for their father's sins? In Exodus 34:7, God said that He *"will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."* What does this mean? We need also to read Ezekiel 18:20: *"The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him."* Hence, the answer is clear that God does not punish children for their parents' sins. Exodus 34:7 warns parents that their sinful ways will influence their children. As a result, when their children sin, then God will also have to judge them. Parents must not take sinning lightly because their ways have far and long reaching impact upon those who take them as living examples. Children will unconsciously learn your behaviours and adopt your character too. Haman's hatred for Mordecai was likely exacerbated by his father being an Amalekite who hated the Jews. Haman's children would have been killed only because they were among those who took action against Jewish life. They picked up their father's hatred for the people of God. Parents must watch what they say, do and value. If you love and serve the world instead of God, your children will fall into the same sins too. Do not let your children be among the roll call of sinners because of your failure to be a godly example to them.

THOUGHT: God is perfect in His lovingkindness and in His justice.

PRAYER: Help me to be a good testimony for Thee, O Lord.

UNREPENTANT

The number of people killed by the Jews at the capital city was submitted to King Ahasuerus. The king presented the information to Esther, that five hundred people and the ten sons of Haman had been killed. He then asked about the rest of the provinces on this appointed day. Most amazingly, the king asked Esther if she had any further request of him and promised to do what she asked for. Esther then requested for two more things. Firstly, that the Jews have an extension of one more day to do what was allowed in his decree. Secondly, that the dead sons of Haman be hanged upon the gallows. Both were granted and done as commanded by the king. So the Jews in Shushan continued to stand for their lives on the fourteenth day of Adar and killed another three hundred men. The total enemies killed in the provinces were seventy-five thousand.

Esther's request for another day and the hanging of the dead bodies of Haman's sons was not out of hatred and vengeance. It was not unbridled desire to extend mayhem upon the enemies. The fact that so many rose up against the Jews in Shushan and more the next day indicated that their hatred was rife and was still unabated. Esther made a wise request. She was not just a pretty face. The hanging of the Haman's sons was a public and explicit warning to stop those who still desired to kill the Jews. Sadly it did not stop them. More still attacked them and had to be killed. This only showed how unrepentant these people were.

God in His mercy extends His patience and longsuffering to man. When He does so, it is to cause man to repent. Sometimes He gives grave warning signs to cause us to repent. Do not take these for granted. God will deal with the ungodly and haters of God and His people. Have you been rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ and hating all that is godly? Repent today.

THOUGHT: Is God showing me clear indications to stop sinning?

PRAYER: Lord, give me a sensitive and repentant heart.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20

ESTHER 9:12-14

HEBREWS 10:38

“... nothing is more contrary to
faith than this drawing back...” (Calvin)

GROWTH IN COURAGE

The king received news about the death toll. In his capital city alone, five hundred of his people were killed plus the ten sons of his former prime minister. Surely the number from all the 127 provinces would total up to be far greater. Yet the king asked Esther if it was satisfactory to her and whether she had any more requests. Esther did make further requests as we saw earlier. She asked for an extension of a day for self-defence killing, and for the bodies of Haman’s sons to be hanged in public.

Imagine having the king tell Esther that his capital city has just lost five hundred people, his former prime minister’s sons have been killed, and who knows how many more deaths in his empire — all killed at Esther’s and Mordecai’s request. There was havoc across the empire because of just one race, the Jews, her people. Considering how unwilling, timid and fearful Esther was earlier in approaching the king some nine months back, she was truly brave now in asking for more. Most people would feel really bad already and would thank the king, instead of asking for even bolder things. After asking for the people to fast, and fasting herself too, and experiencing the gracious reception by the king instead of a death sentence for approaching without being invited, Esther’s courage grew. She asked for the king to issue a reversal edict after Haman was hanged. This was tantamount to asking the king to admit to the entire empire that his previous edict was wrong. Both then and now, Esther knew that if she did not ask for more, the existence of her people would continue to be at risk. Courage grows as we experience God’s help. We may be full of fear the first time when we are faced with a big challenge. If Esther recoiled and gave in to fear the first time, she would not have experienced what God could do through her. When we obey God’s Word, we must learn to step out in faith after much prayer. If we retreat and shrink from duty, our faith and courage will not grow.

THOUGHT: Am I timid and do I give up easily?

PRAYER: Lord, give me more faith to act, so I may grow in courage.

A GOOD TESTIMONY

It was specifically stated that after killing their enemies, the Jews “*laid they not their hand*” on the properties of those killed in Shushan (Esther 9:10). It was again highlighted that they “*laid not their hands*” to plunder the prey of the seventy-five thousand in the other provinces (Esther 9:16). This was despite the decree issued by Mordecai in the king’s name which did allow Jews to confiscate the properties of those who were killed for attacking them (Esther 8:11).

It was no small number of people killed in both Shushan and the provinces. If the Jews took their properties, they would have had a windfall. There would not have been anything wrong, after all it was in the new decree. The rulers and governors would not have protested should the Jews take possession of all those properties. But in both instances the Jews did not touch any possessions of their enemies. This would truly testify of their integrity — that they did not kill to get rich but purely to defend themselves. If they took their properties, their intentions would then be questioned, though it was permitted. What a careful testimony by the Jews. What made them behave so? Could it not be because of the testimony of their leaders Queen Esther and Prime Minister Mordecai? The decree they delivered sent a clear message. The Jews were to kill only those who attacked them, not indiscriminately or arbitrarily. This was consistent with the law of their God concerning protecting life. Their reaction reflected their God’s character throughout the empire. What a day for the glory of God in these foreign provinces. A good testimony is critical. As long as God continues to leave us in this world, it is for the purpose that we shine forth for Him. We are to be Christ-like. Our behaviours and our reactions represent our God. Moreover, our testimony sends a strong signal and encouragement to others to behave in a godly way too. If we were greedy and grabbing, we put God’s Name to shame. Even if we are allowed to do something, and just because we can, we should carefully consider how it reflects on God.

THOUGHT: Will I forgo personal gain for testimony’s sake?

PRAYER: May I always be mindful of upholding Thy light, O Lord.

FROM OPPRESSION TO GLADNESS

The Jews in the provinces killed their attacking enemies on the thirteenth day and rested on the fourteenth of the twelfth month. The Jews at Shushan killed on the thirteenth and fourteenth day and rested on the fifteenth. On the rest day, they celebrated with feasting and gladness. Those in the villages sent presents to each other.

This thirteenth day was supposed to be a day of plundering the Jews by their enemies. Recall the great mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing of many Jews who laid in sackcloth and ashes. And this was so in every province because of the royal permission to kill, loot and exterminate the Jews. How the scene changed: from an oppressed people facing sure death to a good day of gladness. Gladness and feasting were repeated in verses 17 to 19. One cannot but almost experience the great relief and joy. It must be realized that the old edict was still in place on the thirteenth day of Adar. The new edict could not cancel it since it was passed. The Jews knew they could still suffer great casualties on this day. So, though the new edict was passed, these nine months were not easy to bear. But we are told that “*no one could withstand them*” (Esther 9:2) and the Jews had a resounding victory over their malicious enemies. What a day!

Very often, sitting and waiting for the outcome of something can be a most difficult thing to bear. Especially when there is nothing you can do during the time leading up to it. You may keep guessing what it would be like or what the results would be when the time eventually comes. Or perhaps there are people who are just waiting for the moment to attack you at work, in school, even in church. Such a situation may even last for months. It can be very oppressive. In such a time, remember that worrying does not help. Do not fret. Remember this lesson in the Book of Esther. If you are doing right and walking in His will, deliverance will come in time. Be patient. Do not sin. Have faith in God. Then gladness will fill your heart.

THOUGHT: Am I feeling helpless while waiting for something?

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to trust in Thy deliverance.

GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE

Mordecai wrote and sent letters to all the Jews dwelling across the entire empire of King Ahasuerus. These letters ordained that the Jews should observe the fourteenth and fifteenth day of the twelfth month of Adar every year. These days were to be set aside and kept as special days because in them the Jews rested from their enemies and their oppressive sorrow was turned to joy. What was to have been a day of mourning for them became a good day. And it was to be a time wherein they would celebrate with feasting and joy, send rations to one another, and give gifts to the poor.

After such a marvellous rescue and change of situation, Mordecai did not simply move on to enjoy his new status and safety. He also wanted to make sure that all the Jews would not forget their liberation from their ruthless enemies and eventual reprieve from them. So he made a point to pen letters to keep a remembrance of the month and days of their relief and joy of deliverance. And he made sure they did so deliberately yearly from then onwards. He even included that they should make it a time of celebrations with feasting, gifts, and not to leave out the poor. All Jews from then on would remember the goodness they experienced. Man tends to be forgetful creatures. After coming out of a stressful or painful situation, we often just heave a sigh of relief and move on to enjoy the new situation. Students pray fervently to God for help during exam times, those who are ill and in bodily pain cry to God moment by moment for recovery, parents plead earnestly for family and children problems, and jobless ones beseech importunately for a job. But soon after God has helped us out of the difficult situation or calamity, we forget what it was like and what a great deliverance we experienced from God. This ought not be so. We must not behave like the nine ungrateful lepers in Luke 17:11-19. It is especially important that we do not forget the great deliverance from darkness to light, hell to heaven, and from the bondage of sin.

THOUGHT: Have I forgotten to give thanks to God for deliverance?

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for Thy help when I cried to Thee.

NOT SEEKING GLORY

Haman's background as the son of Hammedatha the Agagite was brought up again. Being an Amalekite, his animosity towards all the Jews was highlighted here. The reminder was of how he had plotted and sought to destroy, consume and ultimately to annihilate the Jews. But when Esther approached the king, the king commanded by royal edict that what Haman plotted wickedly against the Jews be reciprocated upon Haman himself. Moreover, the king also had Haman's sons publicly hanged as a result.

Here is a recollection and reminder by Mordecai, through his letters to all the Jews, of what led to the deliverance of the Jews. Esther 9:26 tells us that “*for all the words of this letter;*” they ordained celebrations. It is interesting to note in all the words, Mordecai did not seem to mention himself at all. He highlighted to the Jews that they were about to be annihilated by their powerful and influential arch enemy “*when Esther came before the king.*” The name “*Esther*” was not in the original. But the verb “*came*” is in the third person feminine singular, meaning “she came,” which definitely refers to Esther. Mordecai did not elaborate on how he was instrumental in moving Esther and, if not for him, she would not have gone to see the king because she was afraid at that time. Neither did Mordecai's words in the letter say that it was he who wrote the new edict himself and sent it out in the king's name. He simply said that it was the king who commanded by letters. Some believe that Mordecai was a self-serving man who manipulated Esther for himself. But this ending shows otherwise. He could have bragged about his important involvement that led to such a great salvation to become a national hero. But he did not. He gave credit to Esther instead for her bravery. It is little wonder that God would make Mordecai greater and greater (Esther 9:4). The temptation to take glory upon ourselves is always great. It behooves us to know that it was God who used us, gave us abilities and helped us. It is the only way to be humble, and not brag.

THOUGHT: Am I secretly seeking my own glory?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to watch my proud heart.

CHRISTIAN CELEBRATIONS

The Jews named the days of celebration of their deliverance from their enemies in the empire as Purim. It means lots. The reminder letter Mordecai sent, as well as what the Jews themselves witnessed, caused them to establish for themselves days of remembrance. These appointed days of Purim would be observed throughout all generations, by every Jewish family, in every place, and they would not be neglected. They were to be a permanent memorial for all generations to keep and celebrate.

The name Purim would remind the Jews of how Haman's lot casting (Esther 3:7) for the best day to exterminate them turned into the day of total deliverance for them. Unlike some memorials in the Bible, these days of remembrance for the Jews were set up by themselves without explicit command from God. Neither do we read that God disapproves of it. Their motives were to gratefully remind themselves and all future generations of their great deliverance.

Some think that it is wrong for Christians to celebrate festivals like Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, etc because they have pagan origins. Well, a pagan casted lot to destroy God's people. But it became appointed as a day of celebration for the Jews. Just like the Purim had its pure motives, the days of Christian celebrations were appointed for special remembrances of the Lord Jesus who came into this world, suffered and died to save sinners, and rose again on the third day for our justification. The believer is once again reminded of these momentous events in history that wrought the infinite deliverance to his soul from eternal loss. Of course the celebrations must not be mixed with pagan concepts and ungodly revelling. The focus is the spiritual significance, grateful reflection and reverent commemoration of what God has done for us. These occasions are also prime opportunities for the Gospel message to be preached as we invite unsaved ones to the church during these seasons.

THOUGHT: What does Christmas mean to me?

PRAYER: Lord, renew my love for Thee this Christmas season.

WORDS OF PEACE AND TRUTH

After Mordecai’s letters to the Jews to keep the Purim, another letter to affirm it was despatched. But this time it was written in conjunction with Esther. It was hence with the full authority of Esther the queen and Mordecai, jointly sent to all the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus. This letter contained *“words of peace and truth.”*

For this second follow-up letter, it is difficult to tell how soon or how long it was after Mordecai’s first letter. Some think it was a year later. But a second follow-up letter to affirm the need to keep the Purim could be seen as stirring up strife again in the empire. After all, keeping the Purim is to remember how the Jews were delivered from those who hated and oppressed them. Would it goad old wounds and anger against those who had the intention to exterminate and plunder them? Moreover, this letter was jointly sent by the Queen and the Prime Minister, who were both Jews, and directed to all of Ahasuerus’ kingdom. How would this be viewed? Hence it was very prudent that the letters were *“words of peace and truth”* to make sure that their message was not misconstrued. It showed that it was not the intention of Esther and Mordecai to send out incendiary notes. To be at peace, and no longer fearful, was comforting. But peace with their neighbors was important too.

Truth was told objectively and they must also remember that the truth of their deliverance was divine. Wisdom to achieve peace and ensure truth is precious wisdom when dealing with situations at home, school and church alike. Peace and unity are precious and can be lost easily because of words. Put some thought into what you write or intend to say. It can go a long way in preventing misunderstandings and unnecessary strife. We must always search our motives even for the best of objectives. We will have words of peace and truth when our intentions are genuine. But peace must never be at the expense of truth. That is why we need wisdom from God.

THOUGHT: Am I careful with my words or do I stir up strife?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be careful to speak peace and truth.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 27

ESTHER 9:31-32

1 CORINTHIANS 1:27-29

*“But God hath chosen the foolish things
of the world to confound the wise...”*

WEAK INSTRUMENTS IN GOD’S HAND

The joint letter sent out by Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen (the daughter of Abihail) confirmed to the Jews that the fourteenth and fifteenth day of the twelfth month would be set aside for Purim. The people made it a decree for themselves and their future generations. Purim would remind them of their fasting and crying in sackcloth in the days of their distress and how they were delivered on the days of Purim itself. This decree of Esther confirmed what Purim must be remembered for and the keeping of it, and it was penned in records.

God used Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen to confirm the remembrance of their great escape from sure death. Their enemy Haman was formidable, well connected to the king, and unrelenting. The word “*enjoined*” in Esther 9:31 is the same word as “*confirm*” in Esther 9:31-32. God used these two Jews to bring about deliverance for His people. He raised them and put them in their respective roles to fulfil His purpose. In addition they would then establish and affirm the remembrance of deliverance. In the initial chapters, we saw how Mordecai failed to protect Esther and how he told Esther to conceal her Jewish identity. We also saw how Esther took part in the beauty pageant to marry a heathen king. She probably also served alcoholic wine to the king at the feasts she held. But yet we see God using them. This is indeed a very humbling reminder. God in His sovereignty chose to work through weak and frail instruments that were flawed. This is not to encourage us to sin, but to realize that when we are used by God, it is not because of any good in us or because we are more capable than others. God chose as He wished. For the believer, this reminds us that it is truly a great privilege to be used of God and to be part of His great plan and purpose. Moreover, Mordecai and Esther changed along the way and bore a good testimony. It must stir us even more to be clean vessels through the Lord Jesus Christ to be fit for our Master’s use.

THOUGHT: Do I think I am used because I am better than others?

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for using me.

GOD IS THE KEY FIGURE

King Ahasuerus imposed taxes upon his empire, both in the continent and the islands. All his powerful acts and the might of his rule, as well as the proclamation of Mordecai’s great political dignity and promotions by the king, were recorded in the book of the archives of the kings of Media and Persia.

Esther 10:1-2 may seem out of place at first glance. It would seem more fitting that this book ended at chapter nine with the great celebrative mood of deliverance and what Queen Esther and Prime Minister Mordecai decreed. What was the point of these two verses? This book ends with simply stating some mundane facts and that king Ahasuerus’ accomplishments, though great, were recorded in a separate book that was for chronicling the kings of Media and Persia. It is as if to say that the Book of Esther was not meant to highlight these kings.

In addition, even Mordecai’s amazing prominence from here on and his promotions were also not to be detailed here. Does not such an ending make these characters just fade away? It is as if to say the purpose of the Book of Esther was not meant to chronicle the acts of man, no matter how great or accomplished. As a result, the real key character of the Book of Esther is God Himself. Though never mentioned explicitly, He is now revealed and takes the centre stage.

If the book had ended simply at the deliverance joy and closed with more details of man’s accomplishments, then men would have been the key characters and players in this drama. One must not miss the hidden Divine Hand and Character of God in bringing to close a crucial part of the history of His people.

THOUGHT: Am I able to discern the working Hand of God?

PRAYER: Lord, may I not miss the wonders of Thy quiet workings.

POWER IN DIFFERENT HANDS

Mordecai the Jew was now second only to King Ahasuerus in power and position in the Medo-Persian empire. And he was highly regarded and well accepted among the great number of his own people, the Jews in the kingdom. As he ruled, Mordecai looked after the welfare of his people and ensured peace for them and their children. Notice how different Mordecai was from Haman when great power was put in the hands of each man. Mordecai cared for the well-being of others, seeking their best interests and even ensuring stability and safety for them. He cared for the preservation of lives. He humbly served them, and what worked towards a peaceful nation. In all these, he thought long term for their future generations too.

Haman on the other hand was self-serving. He only wanted the position of power so that man would “kowtow” to him. His pride and self was the consideration, not the nation. He would kill indiscriminately just to satisfy his ego. And he would readily kill and plunder a people without regard to what unrest it would wreak in the empire. He would lie to the king to get his evil way approved. And while the nation was in great unrest, he would happily feast and drink. Instead of spending his time and using the power to serve and bring good to the people, he spent it on politicking to forward his personal agendas. One must not underestimate the power of being the Prime Minister of the most powerful empire on the face of the earth at that time. And to have such absolute trust of the monarch and hence freedom to do as one pleases. It can be dizzying at such a height of power. Few can handle it. “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Mordecai proved this saying wrong. By the grace of God, believers must never allow power and position to go to their heads. Many start off humble and genuine. But as they taste greatness and authority, they begin to change and eventually even friends can no longer recognize them. May we use our power to serve God, not self.

THOUGHT: Have I changed since I gained position and power?

PRAYER: Lord, keep me humbly grounded even if I get promoted.

GOD’S PROVIDENCE

It is useful to review the book of Esther as we close off. One of the key phrases central to this book is: “*who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*” God’s Name was never once mentioned in this book. Mundane, domestic and political events were described. A boastful king’s unhappiness with a disobedient queen resulted in the search for a new queen. Then a naturally beautiful Jewish girl Esther stole the king’s heart at the empire-wide royal beauty pageant. Strings of “coincidences” then occurred. Her guardian Mordecai overheard and exposed the plot to assassinate the king. And just the night before the day Haman requested to hang Mordecai (who refused to bow to him), the king had insomnia. And of all the pages of the royal chronicles to be read to the sleepless king, it would be the one about Mordecai’s good deed. Haman ended up eating humble pie publicly because the king used him to reward Mordecai. When exposed for wanting to kill Esther’s people, Haman pleaded for mercy on her bed, and the king stormed in to witness him on his queen’s bed! The upset king commanded Haman to be hanged on the freshly prepared gallows Haman had built for Mordecai!

The Westminster Confession of Faith well describes Providence as, “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.” These were not coincidences. The unseen Hand of God was directing and governing even seemingly trivial and irrelevant actions of man and events. He works and anticipates perfectly because of His precise foreknowledge of all things. And He chooses what, how and when according to His own will. The outcome always fulfils His purposes and is to His glory.

THOUGHT: God’s Providence, though unnoticed, is always there.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to remember that Thou art always actively working.

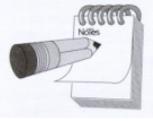
GOD’S ETERNAL DECREE

The Westminster Confession of faith summarizes the Eternal Decree of God as, “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”

The outcome of the situation for the Jews was already unchangeably ordained by God. This means that He is in absolute control. This control extends to both believers and unbelievers, the Jews and the rest of the world. He is ruler over all. That includes your teacher at school, bosses at work, unbelievers, and is regardless of status and power. Their hearts and will are in His Hand. Yet God is not author of their sin, but He can turn their own sinful will even to fulfil His purposes. God’s plan cannot be thwarted. We may not understand fully how He works at times, but His ways are infinitely wiser and holier than ours. God achieves His sovereign will through His Providence. The doctrines of God’s sovereignty and providence are most comforting and strengthening for our lives on earth. This must drive us to trust Him absolutely. Though His Divine Hand may not be seen, and though at times things look very bleak and hopeless, yet this Book of Esther must teach us that God is very much present and working. Man may be plotting against us and we may feel helpless against formidable and influential people. But God is in the know and infinitely able to circumvent them. Sometimes we think it is too late, but God is never a second too early or too late. His timing is perfect. This book best parallels our normal life in reality. There were no miracles like how God worked in Egypt for Moses. But His silent but sure working was in effect in the background through normal daily occurrences, using everyday imperfect people, rich and influential, ordinary and superpowers. This is no less amazing than having thunder and lightning. May this book strengthen our faith!

THOUGHT: God is always on His Throne and in absolute control.

PRAYER: Lord, may I learn to trust Thee totally.



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