

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C1311 – March 20, 2013 – Esther 5:1-14
Esther's First Banquet

If you'd turn with me to the Book of Esther. Esther is really not well understood by most students of the Bible. They get the sense that the book is about Esther and how godly a woman this is to step up and go to bat for her people. It's not about that. There is an act of bravery that we can commend but it's a far stretch to say this was a godly woman. I think the problem is that people aren't willing to face the text squarely and admit that this woman is not godly. The text says she married a pagan king, the text says she didn't care about the laws of God, the text says she didn't care about the feasts of God, the text says she didn't care about the covenant plan of God, the text says all these things but people don't want to see these things so they just gloss over the details. At the core of this glossing over is the fact that people want to believe that God only blesses people who are great and wonderful, people who obey Him and love Him. But that's not the total picture of God. Sure, it's true that God's ultimate blessing on Israel in the land will come upon an obedient nation. But there is another element that people don't look at, and that's the fact that God even blesses His people when they are in disobedience because of who He is, because He is faithful to Himself and so to get a full view of who and what God is you have to understand that even when we are in disobedience God is watching over us, God is working on our behalf and that's a truth people don't want to face. But once we do face it we realize this book is not about Esther but about the God who loves us and has mercy upon us even when we are in disobedience. I put it to one of my sons this way, if you disobeyed me and we were at odds with one another and I saw you about to get run over by a car, what would I do? I'd protect you, I'd rescue you. And that's the picture we have in the Book of Esther. These Jews aren't godly, they're ungodly, they don't really care about God or God's plan for their lives, they're living out of fellowship with God but God still cares

about them, God still has a plan for their lives and He's looking out for their best interest.

Now we are going to work through Esther 5 tonight but since this book is designed to be read in a single sitting it's important to review the many pieces already put in place by God's providential work. In chapter 1 He cleared the way for Esther to be queen by deposing Vashti. In chapter 2 He installed Esther as queen and set up the loyal act of Mordecai. In chapter 3 He decided the lot that was cast to be at the end of the calendar year for the destruction of the Jews. In chapter 4 He gave Mordecai eyes to see that He had been at work behind the scenes to establish Esther as queen for the very purpose of delivering the Jews. God was inviting them to act in history in a significant way for the deliverance of His people. So many, many pieces have been providentially put in place in a majestic, unfolding drama.

Tonight we come to Esther 5 and Esther 5 is the beginning of the climactic section of the book, chapters 5, 6 and 7. These three chapters span just two days so several things are going to happen in a very rapid sequence and so the suspense is going to escalate quickly. At this point the author wants us to be drawn into the human drama and biting our fingernails, as if we were reading this for the very first time. The problem is most of us have read this 50 times and we know what's going to happen. So what I'm challenging you to do is pretend that you don't know what is going to happen and put yourself in Esther's shoes, put yourself in Haman's shoes, role play these characters, get into their minds, into the way they think; that's the way you'll get the most out of this book. And if you'll allow yourself to do this in your imagination then that sense of suspense will be renewed and you'll come away with a heightened appreciation for God and how He's at work "behind the scenes" for His people in marvelous ways.

Last time we concluded Esther 4 with Esther's plan to fast for three days and nights, no mention of prayer but three days of fasting before going into the king. Constable says the fasting would have begun on the eve of Passover when they were supposed to eat the Passover lamb. But they didn't keep Passover, they weren't godly Jews, they weren't concerned with God and His laws but God was concerned with them. God loved them and God was looking out for them even when they were disobedient. So outside in the city Mordecai assembled all the Jews in the city of Susa and fasted and inside the

royal palace Esther and her maidens fasted in the same way. And after the three days, actually on the third day because any part of a day was considered a full day in Jewish thought, on the third day she planned to go in before the king resolved to perish if indeed she perished.

In Esther 5:1 we come to the third day. **Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance to the palace.** Now you are in a palace, it is a grand scene, very luxurious and the **king...sitting on his royal throne** wearing His royal robes and the queen has entered the court wearing her **royal robes**, standing at some distance but visible to the **king**. She must have looked stunning. The Greek translation says she looked absolutely radiant in the prime of her beauty. Esther has done all that is humanly possible to win the king's favor upon entering and hopefully to see him extend his royal scepter. She has at this moment committed a capital offense, violating the law of the king. For anyone, man or woman to enter the king's inner court without being summoned the king had but one law - that he be put to death. She must have been afraid. She has for three days been contemplating this moment and that kind of expectancy only fosters fear. Further the king had not summoned her for more than 30 days so she didn't know if she was still in his favor or not. And finally she had never once entered the inner court without being summoned. So she is afraid and understandably so, but she is also quite brave. We need to understand that bravery is not the absence of fear but the acting in spite of it. So she is now standing before the king in great bravery but intense fear, knowing that her life was in the king's hands to do whatever he wished. Or was it? That is the question. Is her life in the hands of the king? That is what appears to be the case on the surface, but the surface is often only appearance and not the reality underneath. Scripture prompts us to think theologically and that is how we will try to think here in a few moments when we address the question, "Is her life resting in the king's hands or not?" But in any case she is now bravely standing before the king having committed a capital crime with the attitude, if I perish, I perish. Who is really in control of the situation?

Verse 2, **When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court she obtained favor in his sight; and the king extended to Esther the**

golden scepter which was in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter. Now the question again is who is in charge here, who is in control of the situation, whose hands are Esther's fate really in? When Vashti appeared she was not banished, when Esther appeared she was not banished. In light of God's providential workings in the book and the fact that this was an almost unheard of offense to appear in the royal courts uninvited, it becomes clear that, theologically speaking, God was the one who is looking out for Esther by shaping the thoughts of the king. In fact, there is perhaps no finer example of God's power over the hearts of men to shape them for the sake of His people than this one. The basic doctrine is stated in Proverbs 21:1 this way, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes." It is clear from this verse, and many passages that illustrate it, though many Christians protest, that God influences the thoughts of kings just as he influences the direction of a channel of water. He turns it wherever He wishes. God has total power and influence over the heart or mind of kings, the thinking center of man and indeed He has and exercises such power over the minds of all men.

Now Christians don't like this but that's because they don't like the God of the Bible. It's the problem Job had when he repented at the end of the book named after him. He had a problem with his understanding of God and he repented in dust and ashes. God is not who you make Him out to be or who I make Him out to be. God is who He is and we can either adjust and trust His sovereign control of our lives or we can reel and re-create God in our own image. Most Christians do the latter because they have, quote, "philosophical problems," That is to say, they can't understand it so they make a theory that is understandable. That way they have God under control and in a little box. God will defy your box. God doesn't live in your box. That's you trying to keep God under control and safe and that way you are in control and you are at liberty to let God out of the box whenever you want Him. And that my friend is sin. But that is what most Christians are doing, re-imagining God in their own image. The Bible won't have it as I'll show you. God indeed operates upon the mind of man to direct it wherever He wants.

Now if we think about this in terms of the constitution of man among other parts of man we know that man has a mind and man has a will. This verse says that God turns the mind not the will. The will is free to act, but, and this is the key, but the will acts in accordance with the mind. So God, in effect, by

influencing the human mind to think whatever He wishes thereby secures that the human will choose accordingly. Prov 21:1, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes." There are many examples of this in Scripture, notwithstanding this one. First, God turned the heart of King Xerxes to look favorably upon Esther and to thus extend the golden scepter which was in his hand. A second example is found in Gen 20:6 when Abraham had given Sarah to King Abimelech telling him that she was his sister. Now Abimelech did not come near Sarah, he did not touch her. Why? God said, "I kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her." God manipulated the king so that it was God who was ultimately protecting Sarah. A third example is found in Gen 39:4 when Joseph was bought by Potiphar and placed in his house. The Lord was with Joseph and made him successful in all that he did. When Potiphar observed how the Lord caused Joseph to prosper "he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge." In this case God turned the heart of Potiphar toward Joseph through making Joseph successful. God influenced Potiphar's mind for the benefit of Joseph. A fourth example is found in Gen 39:21 when Joseph was put in prison. The Lord was with Joseph and turned the heart of the chief jailer to favor him. "The Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer." Therefore, the chief jailer put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the jail. God influenced the mind of the chief jailer for Joseph's favor. A fifth example is found in 1 Kgs 12:15 when the people requested that Rehoboam lower the taxation. Rehoboam consulted with the older men who advised him to indeed lower the taxation but he also consulted with the younger men who advised him to raise the taxation. When all was said and done Rehoboam raised the taxes and spoke harshly to the people. The text says, "the king did not listen to the people; for it was a turn of events from the LORD, that He might establish His word, which the LORD spoke through Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat." These kinds of examples where God turns the mind of a person so that they exercise their will in a certain choice are found over and over and over in the Scripture. We could speak of Cyrus whom God raised up to give Israel the right of return or Judas Iscariot who betrayed the Christ or Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Jews and Gentiles who crucified the Christ. God turned their minds wherever He wished and yet every one of these people was only doing what they wanted to do and was thus responsible. And so the theological understanding of the king's favorable response to Esther's entry in verse 2 is ultimately due to the

fact that King Xerxes heart is like a channel of water in the hand of the LORD. God turned the heart of the king toward Esther.

So with Esther safe in the hands of the LORD, end of verse 2, she **came near and touched the top of the scepter**. Verse 3, **Then the king said to her, “What is troubling you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you.”** Now it is obvious that the king sensed she was troubled by something. We’re not told how he detected that she was troubled. There are two possibilities. One, he could have concluded this simply from the fact that she risked her life to come before him. Such a risk must mean a serious issue has arisen that needs immediate attention. Two, because of her fear her body language might have communicated that she was troubled about something. So one or both of those probably played into the equation, and the king could tell that something was bothering her. But the fact that the king referred to her as **Queen** must have lightened her trouble for it confirmed that indeed she still held the office of queen, unlike Vashti, who when she refused to appear breaking the king’s command, was banished from the office.

So the king asks her two questions, first, **What is troubling you?** and second, **what is your request?** You must want something to risk coming in before me contrary to the law. And he is very generous toward her, **Even to half of the kingdom, it shall be given to you**. Hyperbole, to be sure, but not a frivolous offer; the expression meant “I will grant even a large request.” She is in excellent favor with him. It is the same offer made by Herod “the Fox” in Mark 6:22-23 when he was so pleased by the dance performed by the daughter of Herodias that he said, “Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you.” And “whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom.” And what did she end up asking of the king? “I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” A request that he regretfully fulfilled. Such reveals the dangers of making such an offer but that is the offer he is making, **Even to half of the kingdom, it shall be given to you**.

Now Esther avoids the first question altogether, she never tells the king **what is troubling** her. As for the second question, **what is your request?** **Esther said, “if it pleases the king, may the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him.”** Now that answer is ominous no doubt since it revealed no trouble and it is obvious no

doubt that this was not her real request. The banquet was just a side issue, the place where the real request would be made known. Now the request that Haman come to the banquet with the king is very strange, particularly when we realize that Persian officials were very protective of their wives. From Haman's point of view this unusual request from the queen would have been an entirely unique and honorable invite.

Now why would she invite **Haman**? It's not necessary for Haman to be there for her to reveal to the king that he has plotted evil against her and her people. What advantage would this give her? Why have Haman present? I suggest several possibilities. First, it may be that Esther is on an intelligence gathering mission. She wants to gather some intel on Haman's plans to destroy the Jews. Second, it may be to gather intel on how close Haman and the King are; how close they are so she can weigh her probability of success and whether or not she should accuse Haman. Third, if she concludes that her probability of success is high she will want to see Haman's facial response when the accusation is made since it will be the final clincher in proving his conviction. So the invitation extended to Haman seems to be in the main an intelligence gathering mission to ensure her success.

Let's watch and see what happens. Notice the banquet was to be held that day, that **the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him**. The banquet was already prepared. She had prepared it before she even went in before the king. So it leaves us wondering what would have happened if the king had not extended the scepter and had her executed when the king later realized she had prepared a banquet for him. But that was not to be the case and so **The king said, "Bring Haman quickly that we may do as Esther desires."** So the king and Haman came to the banquet which Esther had prepared.

Verse 6, **As they drank their wine at the banquet**, for Persians were very fond of wine, **the king said to Esther, "What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done."** Now the moment of truth comes and Esther has been gathering intel throughout the banquet as to whether or not she should reveal her request at this time. And you can see from her request in vv 7-8 that she is not sure she can ensure a conviction so she's going to have to delay. She says, **My petition and my request is: if I have found favor in**

the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king says.” Another banquet. If you ask me this is fishy. It doesn't seem right to put off the king on two successive occasions and this was a risky move from the human standpoint. It is conceivable that he would forgive her once but to refuse to answer him a second time is a highly questionable matter. King's expected people to be forthright with them and to give them information he needed when he asked for it. So the very fact that she refused to answer a second time was a very risky play. The king could well become exasperated with her and reject her second offer of a banquet. And even if he granted a second banquet this would give Haman more time to become suspicious and through palace intrigue discover her identity as a Jew. Even worse Haman could learn that Esther was a relative of Mordecai and begin to make arrangements to back out of the situation. Any or all of these would have put her plan at risk of failing.

But this delay is very important. If she had at this time revealed Haman's evil plot it would not be the right time. Every piece was not in place, yet. There is still a key event to come in chapter 6. But of course Esther doesn't know that every piece is not in place. Esther only knows what she can perceive as a human in the situation and this is not the right time. But God knows that there is another crucial piece to put in place and so God is working in and through the situation to bring about the perfect timing for her to reveal Haman's evil plot. So the plot thickens.

Now Haman, we see in verse 9 from Haman's point of view. What did he think of the banquet? **When Haman went out that day glad and pleased of heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate and that he did not stand up or tremble before him, Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai.** Now this is the second major lesson tonight. The first is that God is the one who turns the mind of men whatever way He wishes, the second concerns the pagan flesh and how deceitful and wicked the flesh really is. And we can't get on a high horse here just because we are believers because believers still share the flesh. The flesh is positionally crucified at the moment of faith but it's not experientially eradicated until the resurrection. So we can still live by the flesh or of the Spirit and Haman shows us the terribly ugly picture of the flesh.

Understand that Haman is a man who has virtually everything going for him. What did he have going for him? First, he was the second highest power in the kingdom. In Esther 3 the king exalted him even above the seven highest princes who were typically the highest rulers next to the king. So the king has created a unique governmental post for him such that he is second only to the king, a very high and very powerful office in Persia. Second, he was extremely rich. He had so much money he could put 10,000 talents of silver in the royal treasury, an amount that was the equivalent of 2/3 of the annual income of Persia. Third, he had been successful in enacting a decree against the people he hated the most, a people that had a centuries long animosity toward the Agagites, the Jews. So his ethnic cleansing policy has been implemented and is in the works. Fourth, he had the rare privilege of being invited by the queen to a banquet with the king. Haman was very successful, very prosperous, had everything going for him; except one thing. What's the one thing in verse 9 that Haman didn't have going for him? Mordecai's respect. And this gives you some insight into the pagan flesh and Haman's character for the flesh can never be satisfied, it lusts and lusts and lusts and if you satisfy one lust it will hunger another one. The flesh has an insatiable hunger. As far as his character is concerned, he has an impoverished character because a person of good character can overlook slights against himself, it's not that big a deal if someone doesn't like you or respect you, you just brush them off because there will always be people like that. But a person of inferior character is bothered by slightest against himself or herself, they just can't deal with it until they have put that person in their place. So to put Mordecai in his place he gets vindictive. Haman is a man of the flesh, he can't be satisfied by all that he has and he's a man of poor character, he can't let it go. So notice, **Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai.** This means he was brimful of anger; there was no part of Haman that was not angry, he was overcome by anger.

But, notice verse 10, he controlled himself and the way he controlled himself was to go vent his anger by getting together with his friends and his wife and talking about himself, having a great big boasting session and trying to get a sympathy vote. Observe, **Haman controlled himself, however, went to his house and sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh. Then Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, and the number of his sons, and every instance where the king had magnified him and how he**

had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king. Haman also said, “Even Esther the queen let no one but me come with the king to the banquet which she had prepared; and tomorrow also I am invited by her with the king. Now I see this as one big bragimony session. It probably went on for hours when you calculate in all the details. Haman just went on and on about himself. First, in verse 11 **He recounted his wealth.** We noted that he was extremely wealthy. He put 10,000 talents of silver into the royal treasury and although that was a large sum it wasn’t his life savings. He also had all the perks of a government official. Second, also in verse 11, he **recounted...the number of his sons.** Haman had ten sons according to Esther 9:7-10. And this was a matter worth bragging about because in Persia the number of sons you had was an indicator of how much of a man you were. As Herodotus says, “After valor in battle it is accounted noble to father the greatest number of sons: the king sends gifts yearly to him who gets most. Strength, they believe, is in numbers.” So next to heroic exploits in war came the greatest number of sons, that was the measure of a man and Haman had ten sons so he boasted in that. Third, also in verse 11, he **recounted every instance where the king had magnified him and how he had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king.** And I’m sure this took several hours. He had to explain every little instance when the king bumped him up the ladder and all the good things the king said about him and how he was the top dog over the seven princes and all the servants. He just goes on and on about himself. It’s one big bragimony session but it’s important to see this bragimony session because it’s a setup for what’s coming. Fourth, verse 12, oh, and look at me, I was the only one invited by the queen to her special banquet with the king and look at me, I got invited to another banquet by the queen. Aren’t I special? And **yet, verse 13, all this does not satisfy me every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate.** That’s one of the most insightful comments on the flesh at the end of verse 13, it’s never satisfied. Regardless of all he has it’s not having the respect of this one lousy Jew that eludes him. And so he could be the richest man in the world, the most powerful man in the world and it wouldn’t matter until he has the one thing he doesn’t have, Mordecai’s respect. And if you get bothered by minor slights against you by someone like this you’re no better than Haman. You can’t let that stuff bother you, what do you care whether you get the respect of some human being. Who cares? As long as God is satisfied with you what

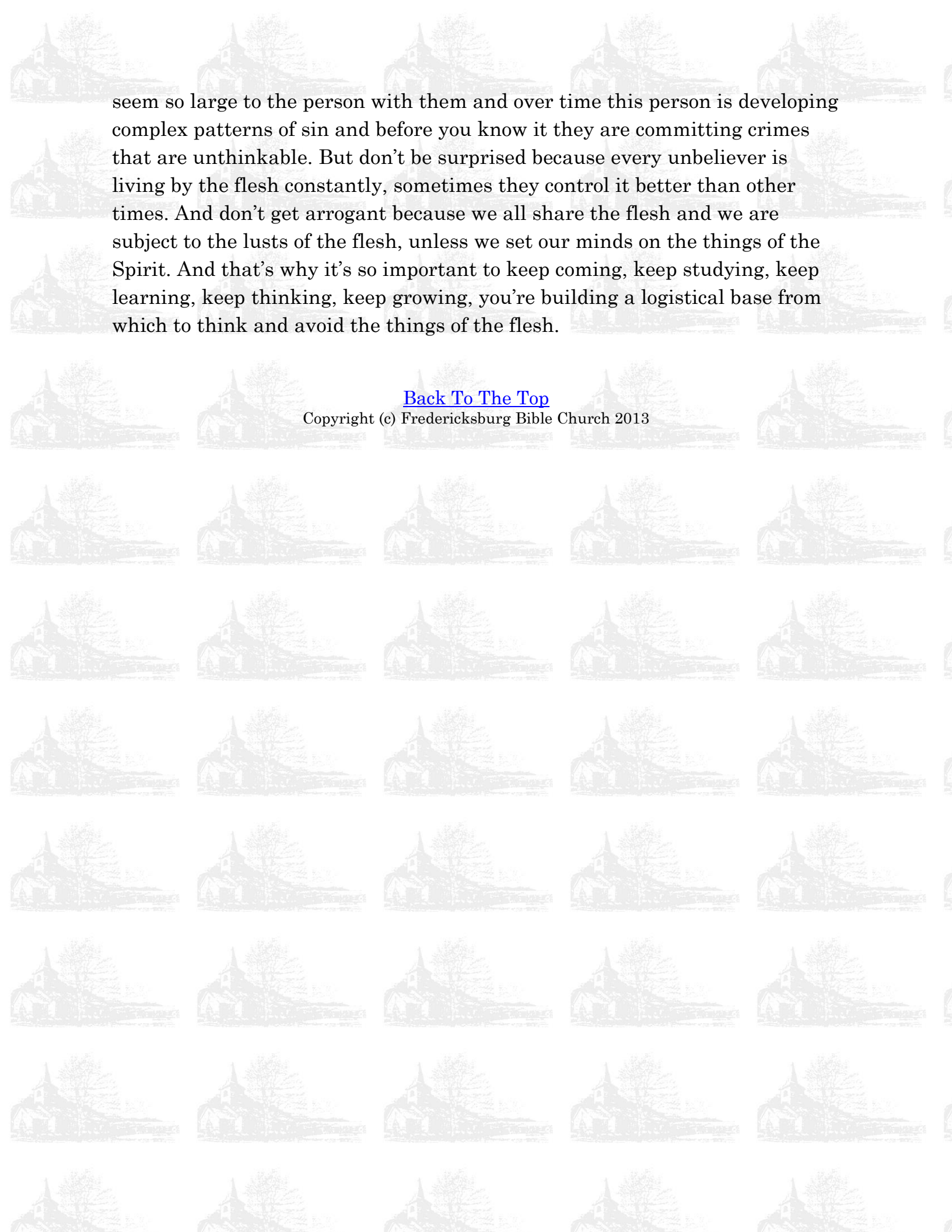
do you care what someone else thinks about you? You can't worry about that, you ought to kiss them off and move on.

So after about five hours of listening to Haman go on and on about himself and this one tiny bothersome point **Zeresh his wife and all his friends** who were probably sick and tired of hearing it and just wanted him to shut up, gave him some advice to solve his problem. But the advice they give him goes too far. He'd already crossed the line making a decree against the Jews but this plan against Mordecai was too much. And of course what you're really seeing is Satan because Satan is behind Haman and his friends. And it's important to catch this because one of the patterns you observe in history is that Satan always pushes things but he often pushes too far. And God will let him push for a while and Satan thinks, hmm, if I can push this far maybe I can push a little further, that's a strategy of the flesh, to always be pushing the envelope by seeing how much you can get by with, and from an outsider's perspective you can see it coming. You can see from a mile away this person is going to try to do something utterly outlandish and when you see that get ready, things are about to go down. We don't see them go down in this chapter, that's next chapter, but this move Haman is about to make is too much and the whole thing is going to backfire in his face. And that's just the brilliance of our God, that's the genius of the sovereign plan of God working out in history. Satan makes a move here, makes a move there, pushes here, pushes there and then he gets bold and crosses the line and then God counters the move, the tables are turned and Satan is defeated.

One thing you can take away from this is the fact that while Satan is strong, don't ever get the idea that Satan and unbelief are winning. God will allow Satan and unbelief to look like they are winning and that's what we're seeing right now in our country. But one of the encouraging things in watching the world and especially our country is that all this mess, all this political turmoil, all this government tyranny, all this economic corruption, all of the immorality is just storing up wrath for the day of destruction. They're not getting away with anything, Don't worry, a day of justice is coming. Read 2 Thess 1, God is going to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well. So what do we do in the meantime? We persevere, we endure. We don't give up hope. We're the only people who have any hope.

So verse 14 you see the advice that goes one step too far, **Have a gallows fifty cubits high made** they say. It was actually an impaling stake, just a long pole and they'd impale you from the you know what up and leave you hanging on it to send a message. Now this one was **fifty cubits high** which is about 75 feet, so it's going to tower above the city walls with Mordecai impaled on it. Why? To warn everyone that if you get in Haman's way, if you disrespect him, if you don't give him what he wants, you're next, he'll impale your body on the stake and leave you out in the hot sun towering above the city until you stink. That's how the flesh of Haman operates. And notice how they say, do this to Mordecai the next **morning**, that way you can **go joyfully with the king to the banquet**. That way you can have a good time, after you've got this Mordecai out of your way by executing him. That's how the flesh thinks, that's how Haman thought; he could execute him and then totally forget about him and go off and have a party. Now that's corruption, that's not just simple corruption that's complex corruption. If you can have someone knocked off and ten minutes later go enjoy a party you are a really messed up person, you have defiled your conscience over and over and over, you have no sense of justice, no sense of mercy, it's all about you and what you can do to exercise your power and create your own reality.

So that's the state of affairs at the end of chapter 5. The suspense has reached the climax; Esther has not yet revealed Haman's plot to destroy the Jews to the king and gallows have been built for the impalement of Mordecai's body. Things look like they could not get worse. There is just one more day. What can happen to change the course of events in such a little space of time? What had God already providentially moved into place to head off Haman's plans? What? We'll discover next week but re-read chapter 2 to find out. In the meantime, what can we take away from this lesson. Two things decisively. First, God influences the mind of king's, directs them to think a certain way so the will of the person will choose a certain way. The Lord turned the heart of Xerxes to look with favor upon Esther and we see this pattern evinced over and over in Scripture. God was the one looking out for Esther in her hour of bravery. Second, the human flesh is unsatisfied and unsatisfiable. If you start feeding your flesh by living by the flesh you will rapidly spiral downward. You will get to the point that committing horrible atrocities are standard operating procedure. People don't just wake up one day and go commit horrible atrocities. Those come about by daily fulfilling little lusts of the flesh and gradually the little lusts grow larger but they don't



seem so large to the person with them and over time this person is developing complex patterns of sin and before you know it they are committing crimes that are unthinkable. But don't be surprised because every unbeliever is living by the flesh constantly, sometimes they control it better than other times. And don't get arrogant because we all share the flesh and we are subject to the lusts of the flesh, unless we set our minds on the things of the Spirit. And that's why it's so important to keep coming, keep studying, keep learning, keep thinking, keep growing, you're building a logistical base from which to think and avoid the things of the flesh.

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