

VII. Mordecai's Triumph Over Haman (5:1-8:2)

Chapter five begins the second major section of the book. The first three chapters detail the emergence of the threat to the Jews, while chapters 5-9 chronicle their deliverance from it. For its part, the fourth chapter forms a hinge between the two larger sections, serving as the point of transition in moving the thematic emphasis from *certain destruction* to *final triumph*. The writer accomplishes this transition in the story by means of a dialogue between Mordecai and Esther that culminates with her agreement to go before the king on behalf of her people. These two primary characters take center stage in this chapter, but they are presented acting in solidarity with their countrymen, particularly with respect to their seeking, through corporate fasting, the mercy and deliverance of the unseen, unmentioned God of Israel (ref. 4:3, 16). This literary inclusio – with its own focal point in Mordecai's declaration of confident faith in 4:14a – is the key to chapter four and, as such, provides insight into how it is that the Jews will go from decreed, inescapable destruction to glorious triumph: *Deliverance and exaltation are certain to come because Israel's God never forgets or forsakes His promise.*

Regardless of perilous circumstance or obstacle, the long-promised Seed will come, and this means that the line of the seed of the woman will continue in each generation; however hopeless it may appear, the Hebrew nation will not be destroyed. The continuance and preservation of the covenant seed is the central theme that binds together the entire Old Testament narrative, and so it is in the book of Esther. This theme comes to the forefront in Esther in two distinct ways:

- The first is the most obvious, which is the deliverance of the Jewish people as a whole.
- The second expression of this theme is personal rather than national. It emerges in the form of a “story within the story” that serves to predict and promise the larger deliverance. It is the story of Mordecai's deliverance from and triumph over Haman. As Haman personifies the hostile human threat – and ultimately the satanic threat – to Abraham's covenant descendents, so Mordecai himself epitomizes the threatened covenant seed. In this way the triumphal outcome of Mordecai's personal conflict with Haman prefigures the Jews' later exaltation over their Gentile enemies.

And so it is that, in moving the storyline toward the climactic Jewish deliverance, the writer turns his attention first to the events leading up to Mordecai's triumph over Haman (5:1-8:2).

A. Esther's First Banquet (5:1-8)

The fourth chapter ends with all the Jews in Susa joining together in a three-day fast of prayer and petition as Esther prepared herself to go before Ahasuerus. Nothing more is disclosed about that period of preparation or what she intended to say to the king, but the first verses of chapter five show that during her fast Esther formulated a plan. She determined that, if the king extended the scepter to her, she would not broach the subject of the decree at that time. Ahasuerus would be seated on his throne with attendants around him, and Esther knew that confronting him there would put him in an awkward position and jeopardize a favorable response. Instead, she would request the king's presence at a banquet to be held later that day. Perhaps in that informal setting, and with Haman present to answer for his actions, the king would grant her petition (5:1-4).

1. When the time of fasting was completed, Esther went before Ahasuerus and, as hoped, he extended his scepter to her and allowed her to approach him on his throne. Knowing that only a great burden would lead her to risk her life by coming before him in this way, the king immediately asked her what was troubling her and pledged to honor her request (the expression, “*even to half of the kingdom,*” emphasizes the king’s willingness to give her whatever she desired). Esther responded that she desired his and Haman’s presence at a banquet to be held that evening in his honor. Ahasuerus agreed to her request and called for Haman to join him.
2. At the banquet Ahasuerus again expressed his intention to give Esther whatever it was she sought from him (5:6). Perhaps she had told him earlier that she would make her request known at that time, or maybe he simply discerned that she was still preoccupied. Either way, Ahasuerus knew that there was more on her mind than simply the banquet.
3. Esther’s response to the king was the same as before: She asked that he and Haman attend a second banquet to be held the following day. If they would honor this request, she promised she would, at that time, divulge to Ahasuerus the burden on her heart (5:8).
4. For his part, Haman left for home that day exulting in the sense of his own greatness and flooded with self-satisfaction. Of all the nobles and rulers in Ahasuerus’ vast kingdom, only he had been invited to spend the evening feasting with the king. Moreover, the king had not issued the invitation, *Esther* had. As if it were not enough that he had attained the place of preeminence with the great King Ahasuerus, he had also won over the affection of his queen. Who else in the whole of the kingdom could make that claim?

But Haman’s self-celebration was to be short-lived; no sooner did he leave the banquet than he was confronted once again with the insubordination of that troublesome “thorn” Mordecai. When Haman encountered him at the king’s gate his jubilation was instantly transformed into seething anger. How dare this despicable Jew insult him like this; did he have any idea who it was that he was spurning? Mordecai was not dishonoring just any nobleman, but Haman, the man second only to Ahasuerus himself; the man whom even the king and queen of Medo-Persia themselves recognized and honored (5:9).

B. Haman’s Conspiracy and Humiliation (5:9-6:14)

Haman was infuriated, but he managed to contain himself and proceed on his way home. After all, it was only a matter of time before his problem would be no more. Within the year Mordecai would pay for his insubordination along with the rest of the Jews.

1. Haman had controlled himself in his encounter with Mordecai, but he was deeply agitated in his spirit. Like all men who are obsessed with themselves, it was vitally important to Haman that everyone recognize and acknowledge the greatness he saw in himself. Mordecai not only insulted and dishonored him, he had “rained on his parade” and Haman was eager to reaffirm his eminence, both in his own mind and in the esteem of others. And so as soon as he arrived home, Haman called together his wife and friends in order to rehearse with them all of his excellencies and great accomplishments (vv.11-12).

2. Haman was wealthy, successful, and incredibly powerful. He had secured for himself a place of singular authority in the kingdom; he was answerable only to Ahasuerus himself. Even Queen Esther recognized and celebrated his greatness. Furthermore, his greatness would endure beyond him; he had been blessed with numerous sons to carry on his legacy after his death. And yet, for all that, Haman was still dissatisfied. In spite of all that he had, he still lacked something: There was a man out there in the street who refused to give him the recognition and reverence he was due, and it was tormenting him.

To Haman's pained confession his wife and friends gave a reasonable response: Why would you subject yourself to this sort of frustration? You are Haman, second only to the king, and Mordecai is nothing – he is a lowly, contemptible Jew. There's absolutely no reason for you to be pained by having to endure such defiance and disrespect. You have Ahasuerus' favor and need not wait for the appointed day of destruction. There is an immediate remedy: Have a gallows built overnight and, after obtaining the king's permission in the morning, hang Mordecai on it in the sight of all the people. That will take care of this problem and insure that no one will follow Mordecai's example. Then you can go with an unburdened heart to Esther's second banquet. This advice pleased Haman and he immediately commissioned the construction of the gallows (5:14).

3. At this point the writer makes an immediate scene shift from Haman's home to the king's bedchamber. While Haman and his wife and guests were toasting their plan, and workmen were busy gathering materials and constructing the gallows upon which Mordecai was to be hanged, Ahasuerus was restless in his bed. Unable to sleep, he decided that perhaps some reading from the Book of the Chronicles of Medo-Persia would help settle his mind, and so called for his servants to get the book and read to him.

In the process of recounting to Ahasuerus the exploits of his reign, the reader came upon the record of the conspiracy against his life and the fact that a man named Mordecai had revealed the plot and thereby averted the assassination (ref. 2:21-23). At this the king asked his servants whether this man's deed had been properly recognized and rewarded, and they responded that nothing had been done for him (6:1-3).

4. By that time morning had dawned and, even as the king was discussing Mordecai and the best way to reward his loyalty, Haman was entering the palace for the purpose of seeking permission to hang Mordecai (6:4). In this way this master storyteller has marvelously brought his story to a highpoint of ironic tension: *The two most powerful men in the Medo-Persian Empire are poised to engage each other regarding the same individual, but with diametrically opposed agendas entirely unknown to the other.* Ahasuerus is committed to honoring and exalting Mordecai; Haman is bent on murdering him.

What is crucial to note is that natural providence has brought the storyline to this point. No supernatural activity has been involved; the unmentioned God has played no discernible role in the events leading up to this encounter. Simple, everyday – and apparently *chance* – occurrences have brought Mordecai's situation to this crossroad. And as the writer has him personifying the Jewish people, so his moment of crisis is theirs. The outcome that will result for him implicates the entire covenant nation.

5. The narrator has ingeniously crafted his story in such a way that it clearly emphasizes the operation of divine providence while never mentioning it or giving any direct indication that God is at work. In this particular context he converges two separate “streams” of providential circumstances, each having an expected outcome that contradicts the other, leaving the reader wondering which stream (if either) will bear its respective fruit.

With comedic flair, the writer draws upon Ahasuerus’ and Haman’s unawareness of each other’s agenda to bring the tension to its first point of resolution. The vehicle for that resolution is the king’s question to Haman: “*What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?*” Being the megalomaniac that he was, Haman immediately concluded that Ahasuerus was referring to him (6:6). And since he was to be the object of this honor, Haman naturally called for a grandiose reward: Ahasuerus should display the man’s greatness by clothing him in royal attire, leading him through the square on a horse bearing the royal crest, and proclaiming his privileged status to all onlookers (vv. 7-9).

6. This counsel pleased Ahasuerus and he immediately commissioned Haman to do on behalf of *Mordecai* all that he had recommended. The man who had come before the king in smug confidence that this day would see the end of Mordecai was now commanded to dress him in the king’s own garments, lead him on the king’s horse through the public square, and personally proclaim his praises on the king’s behalf! Haman had fully expected to put Mordecai on display in Susa that day, but in writhing agony at the end of a rope. Never could he have imagined that *he* would be at the end of the rope, putting Mordecai on display by leading him through the city in triumphal procession.

If Haman was distraught the night before, he was now absolutely dejected. Not only had his own words brought him personal humiliation as he was required to assume the posture of a lowly servant in the sight of the people of Susa, his service was in the cause of Mordecai’s exaltation. Haman had been compelled to publicly extol the one man he hated above all others, and that in the name of the king himself. There was now no possibility that his plan to have Mordecai hanged would come to fruition.

7. The writer wanted his readers to perceive that the tide of circumstance was beginning to turn: Haman’s preeminence had been eclipsed and Mordecai’s esteem with the king and his subjects was on the rise. Mordecai had not simply escaped the hangman’s noose; providence was moving him toward triumph over Haman himself. Notably, the narrator doesn’t make this observation; he let Haman’s own wife and close friends – whom he here purposely designates as “wise men” – make it for him (6:13). Furthermore, he uses the total reversal in their counsel to highlight the shift in providence (cf. 5:14).

- a. Haman’s wife and friends perceived that he had begun to fall before Mordecai, and, most importantly, *they attributed this remarkable turn of events to the fact that Mordecai was of “the seed of the Jews.”* Although some versions give the impression that they were unsure of Mordecai’s Jewish identity – “*If Mordecai is of Jewish origin...*” (NASB), the text shows they were fully aware that he was a Jew (ref. 5:11-14). Their counsel is better rendered: “*Inasmuch as Mordecai is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him...*”

Only the day before, Haman's wife and counselors had seen a powerless Jew and so advised him to simply put an end to this man. Now, having witnessed a stunning reversal, they warned Haman that powerful providential forces were on Mordecai's side, and so there would be no halting or reversing this trend. Haman would not be able to prevail against this Jew; rather, in the end, he would find himself cast down before Mordecai.

- b. When it is recalled that the personal conflict between Haman and Mordecai serves in the story as a picture, first of the larger conflict between the Jews and their human enemies, and beyond that of the perpetual, ordained struggle between the serpent and his seed and Eve and her seed, the insight of Haman's wife and wise men is profoundly significant.
 - 1) Unseen and unidentified forces had clearly expressed that, because Mordecai was of the "seed of the Jews," he could not be destroyed.
 - 2) And if, due to his Jewish origin, this power was preventing Mordecai's destruction and, at the same time, working purposefully and effectually toward his exaltation, didn't it follow that all of his Jewish countrymen would enjoy the same providential protection and care?

By means of this simple observation – made by Haman's wife and friends as a startling turnaround in their counsel, the writer has ingeniously accomplished two things:

- First, he has certified the impending outcome (both for Mordecai and the Jewish people) by making it the conviction, not of a biased Jewish historian reading a self-serving, nationalistic interpretation into a natural course of events, but a handful of Gentiles committed to the Jews' destruction. Despite the fact that these pagan counselors had previously sought and earnestly desired a different outcome, they were now resolute about what the future held for Mordecai.
- Secondly, this prophetic statement serves to link Mordecai's personal vindication and impending exaltation to that of the whole Jewish nation. It does so by assigning his Jewishness as the reason for his triumph. If Mordecai were destined to prevail because he was a Jew, then the same victory also awaited his Hebrew brethren. This is exactly what the story will disclose in the coming chapters.

In weaving his story together, the writer has traced out numerous providential circumstances that, though fully independent of one another, nonetheless work together to bring about this ironic outcome. Among those circumstances, Esther's decision at the first banquet to withhold her petition from the king until the following day made a critically important contribution (ref. again 5:8). The writer provides no explanation for her delay for the simple reason that it is irrelevant to the story. What he wants his reader to take note of is the amazing fact that, had she disclosed her request to Ahasuerus at the first banquet, the key events of 5:9-6:12 would not have occurred. Most importantly, there would almost certainly have been a different outcome since the king would not have yet been made aware of Mordecai's unrewarded loyalty (ref. 6:1-3).