Westlake Church Lausanne

Pride, Humility and the Gospel of God
Esther 5-6

The book of Esther tells the story of a young Jewish woman who becomes Queen of Persia at a critical moment in history. Right at the centre of Persian power is a man, Haman the Agagite, who embodies a hatred for the Jewish people, and he's persuaded the king to command the annihilation of all Jews everywhere.

And that threat happens at a time when the Jewish people in Persia are in danger of losing their identity, and being absorbed by the surrounding pagan culture.

But if that's the situation Esther finds herself in, it's also one we can find ourselves in. Because whilst there is no sentence of death, there is this pressure to privatise your faith and keep it out of the public square, combined with a pressure to think and live like everyone else – to be absorbed by the culture.

Today, we're going to look at chapters 5 and 6, and we're going to see two very different ways to live in such a culture, and the power that makes it possible to choose the right one.

Esther 5:1-8

The Power of Humility
Some years back, Archaeologists found a stone carving, a relief, of the King of Persia sitting on his throne. But standing behind the throne is a guard, holding an axe, ready to take out anyone who approaches the king uninvited.

And so, as Esther comes and stands, v1, 'In the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne' it is a seriously tense moment. She is, literally, standing on the threshold, on the line, between life and death. And not just hers, but the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews rest on this. And the king removed her predecessor, Vashti, for refusing to come when he called, so how will he respond when Esther comes uncalled?

But think, what is Esther doing there, standing on that threshold? Because up until now, this young woman has seemed content to enjoy the party life, and live as a beauty queen. So why is she now prepared to risk it all? And the answer, as we saw last week, is that she finally decides to identify with God and his people, and she realises that God has put her where she is, in this place of privilege, for just such a time as this. And if Esther is to win life for her people, then she must be willing to face death for herself. And that's true humility. You see, CS Lewis said that humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less. And as Esther puts the safety of her people before her own, she takes the path of true humility.

But look how she does it. Verse 1: 'On the third day Esther put on her royal robes…'. Now, why does she do that? Is this just to make her look beautiful, and catch the king's eye? Maybe – but previously the author went into great detail

about the beautifying treatments Esther went through, and here there's no mention of make-up and spa treatments. He simply says she put on her royal robes. In fact, what he actually says is she put on 'royalty.' And so Esther doesn't stand there as the king's sexual plaything, she stands there in all her dignity as Queen of Persia. It's as if she is finally claiming her true position. That as she finally identifies with God's covenant people, for the first time she begins to truly live up to her other identity: as Queen. And she's beginning to integrate the two.

And as she risks losing her life as Queen, Esther is directly addressed as *Queen* Esther for the very first time, as the king sees her and extends to her the golden sceptre, and says, v3, "What is it Queen Esther? What is your request?"

But notice how Esther handles him. You see, up until now she's just done as she's been told. But now, she's the one planning. And she doesn't blurt out her request, instead, v4, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king." Did you notice that 'I *have* prepared'? She's already prepared the feast – so how could he possibly refuse? And he's now probably sat there thinking – 'you've risked your life to invite me to dinner?!' So she's managed to send his interest and anticipation climbing. And so now, by inviting Haman as well, she has the two most powerful men in the empire, responding to her initiative.

And they come, and at the end of the feast the king asks Esther again, v6, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request?" Don't you think it was bugging him? 'Why would she risk death – surely it wasn't just for this.' But yet again, Esther keeps him hanging: v8, 'If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfil my request…' come to another feast – tomorrow. And so now he *wants* to know what she wants, but if he comes he's tacitly agreeing to give her whatever she asks.

And so, this young woman, who had previously hidden her Jewish identity, has stood up when she was needed, and she's now strategizing and working for the good of her people.

Which is great, except you can do all that, you can decide to stand up and be counted, and identify with God and his people, and be outspoken about your faith, or about truth, and risk everything, and do it all from wrong motives, can't you? It can all be just another form of pride. Because you're not going to be like one of those liberals who compromises and stays quiet – you're going to be different. Or you're not going to be like one of those harsh conservatives, you're going to show people that you're really warm and accepting. But at the base of both is human pride and how others see you.

And pride was Haman's problem.

Read: Esther 5:9-14

The Peril of Pride

I remember one of the first meetings I went to at the health authority. Around the table were the chief executives of three major hospitals, a number of public health officials and me. And I sat there as a young consultant, gobsmacked as one of the chief executives – a man – boasted about the size of his car and what that said about him.

And here is Haman, doing exactly the same: Verse 11, 'And Haman recounted to them the splendour of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honoured him, and how he had advanced him.' So whilst Esther is now looking outside of herself to the welfare and good of others, Haman's the opposite, isn't he. All Haman is interested in is how he's doing.

But of course the bizarre thing is that he's bragging to people who already know what he has. I mean, I suspect that his wife already knows how many sons they have. But look at what he's boasting in: his wealth, his position, his progress, maybe even his sexual prowess. And Haman is saying, 'I'm someone', and it's all fixated on him.

But think about it, this self-regard, this self-obsession, is so 21st Century, isn't it? Author and sociologist Eric Klinenberg lists what he describes as 'our most sacred modern values: freedom, autonomy, control of one's time and space, and the search for individual fulfilment.'[1] It's the modern cult of the individual. Me at the centre of everything. But that's exactly what Haman's interested in.

And yet, despite being so ego-centric, that ego is incredibly fragile isn't it? Haman leaves Esther's first feast and he's giddy with pleasure: v9, 'Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart.' Not because he'd had a pleasant evening with friends, but because 'the king and queen respect me!' But one sight of Mordecai refusing to respect him brings it all crashing down.

You see, when your identity is built on what others think of you, it leaves you craving other's affirmation. And so you try and promote yourself, and you talk about yourself, and you slip stuff into conversations, or you post stuff on social media, that makes you look good, so that others tell you you're good. And so, whilst last week in chapter 4, we saw Esther now has a community who will pray for her when her life is under tension, Haman has no community. He just has an audience. But an audience, on-line or not, that simply echoes back how great you say you are, can never give you the protection of a community, when your identity is under pressure, can it?

[1] Quoted in Harrison 96

But as well as being incredibly unsure ground to build your life on, a sense of pride and self-worth that comes from what you have will always rob you of joy. Because when you can't have it, or when you lose *it*, whatever *it* is, your inner well-being collapses. Verse 13, 'Yet all this' – wealth, family, career, success – 'is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.' '*All this is worth nothing to me*. I get zero joy from all this. It's empty.' And the joy you should have in life, the joy of the small things, is taken from you, because you don't have this *other* thing. As one writer says, 'Idols always ask for more and more, but give less and less, until in the end they have everything and you have nothing.'[2] And Haman's idol was respect – it was what others thought of him.

But that's not all pride does. Haman's wife and friends suggest he execute Mordecai on a gallows 50 cubits high – that's 23m – it's enormous. And Haman thinks it's a great idea, because his ego is sky high. And he doesn't just want to execute Mordecai, he wants to humiliate him.

And so pride doesn't just destroy you from the inside out, it will also lead you to destroy others. I mean, when you want to be the centre, you can't have anyone else vie with you for that position can you? In his book *The Great Divorce*, CS Lewis pictures hell as a city of endless empty streets and houses, where everyone lives further and further apart – because when you want to be the centre, you can't tolerate anyone else living nearby, can you? You can't tolerate others failing to honour you as number one.

And yet, as Proverbs 16:18 says, 'Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.' And it's Haman's towering pride that eventually brings about his downfall.

Read 6:1-13

In her commentary on Esther, Karen Jobes says 'this is arguably the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible.' And on just the right night, v1, 'On that night…' the king's sleep fled from him. And he calls for the government records to be read to him. Maybe he thinks, 'this will put me to sleep – more effective even than listening to a sermon.' But as they're read he discovers that nothing's been done to reward Mordecai, who saved his life.

So, just as the king is planning to honour Mordecai, Haman enters, plotting to murder him. And the king asks, v6, "what should be done to the man whom the king delights to honour?" And when you're so focused on yourself, and so hungry for honour, it's all so obvious isn't it? Who would the king rather honour than me? And because pride goes before a fall, Haman trips over himself.

[2] Harrison 121.

And his suggestions as to what the king should do pour out of him: a robe the king has worn, a horse the king has ridden, a royal crown upon his head, and all this done by one of the king's most noble officials, and all done in public. In other words, make the man the king! If only for a few moments – let him glory in the people's adulation. Why? Because this is Haman's fantasy, isn't he? He wants to be made royalty.

So, whilst Esther now has a purpose to live for, even to die for, Haman's only purpose is the applause of the crowd – that they tell him, 'Haman, you really are someone'. And so when the king says, v10, "Do so to Mordecai the Jew" Haman's world comes crashing down.

And so in Esther and Haman we see two very different people, don't we? Esther is now willing to die to power and fame – and in a very real sense she humbles herself, even as she puts on royalty. Haman, so desperate for royalty and the applause of others, grasps for it and in the process falls ever further from it.

So what about us? What can give you the courage to stand up and speak out for God and his people, and his purposes, like Esther, but with the humility and self-denial of Esther? What can give you a boldness to do the right thing whilst killing the pride that wants to make a name for yourself?

Perceiving the Hand of God

Now one of the things that makes this book stand out in the Bible is that God never gets mentioned. And yet…

The king can't sleep. But why can't he sleep? He orders the government records be read to him, and the page that's turned to tells of Mordecai saving the king's life. Why that passage? And Mordecai was never rewarded all those years ago. Why not? And all this happens on the same night that Haman wants to kill Mordecai. Why? So, sure, God never gets mentioned, but whose hand is behind all these coincidences? Who's really working to save his people?

You see, as we'll see when we get to the end, on the surface this book is about the feast of Purim – that celebrates the deliverance of the Jews. And throughout the book this theme of feasting keeps on recurring. In fact, there are 8 feasts in total, and they mirror one another.

And the book opens with the king holding a feast for the nobles of the empire, followed by a feast just for the men of Susa. But the book ends with the feast of Purim for all Jews throughout the empire, followed by the feast of Purim just for the Jews in Susa. Then there's Esther's coronation feast – and mirroring that is the feast celebrating Mordecai's promotion – his coronation feast. And then there is Esther's first feast for the king and Haman, which is followed and mirrored by her second feast.

And what you see is that the centre of the literary structure that the author has written into this book, the pivot point, the thing around which all the action turns, and the Jewish people go from disaster to rescue, the event that turns the tables, lies between Esther's first and second feasts.

But what happens between Esther's first and second feasts? What great courageous act by one of these players brings about this incredible turn around in the fortunes of God's people? What miraculous, dramatic, divine intervention is there. And the answer? There isn't one. It's the king's sleepless night.

And so this seemingly insignificant event, the king unable to sleep, is *the* central event around which the deliverance of God's people pivots. This is where the tables are turned. And it's not because of Esther, or Mordecai – it's because God, unmentioned and unseen, keeps the king awake. So, if you pick up a novel about Esther, or watch a film, it'll probably be called something like, 'One Night with the King': that in one night, when Esther first went into the harem she worked her godly charm on the king, and somehow converted him. But that's not the story of Esther. It's not Esther's one night with the king – it's God's.

And when you know that it's God at work, here, and in your own life – it will humble you and it will make you bold. Because Esther and Mordecai don't save themselves, do they? Yes, they face the choice of who they will identify with. But ultimately, it's God's unseen hand, using seemingly mundane means – like sleepless night and government records, and delayed rewards, that brings about this turning of the tables and the salvation of his people. And though Esther must stand up and play her part, ultimately God's the hero of the story.

And the gospel tells you the same. It tells you that we can never save ourselves, but in his grace, God intervenes, and Jesus comes and identifies with us. And here Esther puts on royalty to save her people, but Jesus took off his royalty, and humbled himself. And here the king holds the power of life and death, and Esther stands on the threshold. But there is a far greater king who holds ultimate power of life and death, and Jesus didn't just stand on the threshold, he crossed it for us.

And here the king faces a sleepless night as he realises he hasn't rewarded a man who deserved it, but Jesus endured the sleepless night of Gethsemane, that we who deserve nothing but wrath might receive his reward. And so if the king's sleepless night is the pivot point of God's deliverance through Esther, so the cross becomes our pivot point, where the tables are turned for us.

And here, Mordecai is clothed in the king's robe, and paraded about, v11: "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour." And you, and me? We get clothed in the king's robe of righteousness. And we're honoured with the

honour that only Jesus deserves. And it's all because of him, and nothing because of us.

And when you know that it humbles you. And you cannot stay like Haman, promoting yourself, or wanting to draw attention to yourself, when you know it's all about Jesus. But neither do you need to. Because when you know you're loved by the only one whose opinion really matters, your ego won't be fragile. You'll know a confidence and a security that will make you bold. But it will be a humble boldness. Because the cross of Jesus humbles you to the earth – before lifting you to the skies.

Get that, and you'll be bold to act, and risk, and speak up, and step out in faith. Get that and you'll do it with a deep, abiding humility.

And Esther's transformation from party girl and beauty queen to the real Queen is a wonderful reminder that our past failures, our faithlessness and our pride, don't need to define us. You see, you might look at yourself and compare yourself to someone like Daniel and think, 'I'm no Daniel'. Well, neither was Esther – to begin with. But Esther was transformed as she claimed her true identity as a child of God, and a member of his covenant people, and as she came into the dignity of her position, which she exercised on behalf of others. And as you and I ground our identity in Christ and what he has done for us, so our fruitfulness will grow. And we'll be humble, and courageous as it does.