

Surprise in Susa

Esther 7

The second banquet arrives, the big confrontation. Haman, Xerxes, and Esther know different parts of the story, and everyone will be completely surprised by what happens next. Esther entrusts herself completely to the goodness of God, the only safe place.

Esther's Ask

This scene has been a long time coming. Xerxes was thin-skinned and temperamental, on one occasion executing a man's son when his father asked for him to be spared from military service. This is the third time Xerxes asks Esther what she wants from him, up to half his kingdom (v2; cf. 5:3, 6). She has been wisely patient and deliberate to gain his favor, knowing he has empowered Haman and sealed the decree of destruction she seeks to overturn. Esther probably does know about Mordecai's honor just as she didn't know about the decree against the Jews nor their public mourning until eunuchs came and told her (4:1-4). Even if she does know about it, it's a terrifying long shot that the king will turn against his right-hand man and lose the revenue from his plan. Her approach is respectful as before, seeking his favor and pleasure for two petitions: her life and the life of her people (v3). She leads with the thing she can control, which she has been giving to the king—her own life. But connected to it is the life of her people, God's people. If they go, so does she: "we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated" (v4). Esther didn't have to reveal herself as a Jew, nor did she have to connect her life to theirs. She is brilliant, beautiful and self-sacrificial. She respects and unrespectable man, and thwarts a murderer. Her argument is both personal and objective: had it just been slavery, she wouldn't bother him, though the enemy couldn't make up for the king's loss. This is the first time he has heard of her faith, his first surprise, followed by the second: the adversary and enemy is wicked Haman (v6).

Xerxes' Response

The king goes into the palace garden because he is furious and needs to think (v7). How can he punish the man who delivered his own decree? How can his highest advisor be so treacherous against his wife, and so reckless against his kingdom? Esther's argument about the value of the Jews is true, and he has experience to know it, at least from Mordecai and now from her. Had he not decided already what to do with Haman, the course became clear when he saw him fallen on the couch near Esther (v8). Contrary to an Aramaic Targum that has the angel Gabriel shoving him onto the couch, this betrayed Haman's foolishness. No one but the king was allowed alone with his wife, so Haman should have left when the king did. This explains why his head is immediately covered when the king confronts his brazen act. Haman's flop contrasts with Mordecai's self-controlled mourning when he learned of the Jew's impending slaughter, and the way Esther handled herself in the king's presence (4:2; 5:4). The man who wanted to kill all the Jews because one wouldn't bow before him will now be

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executed because he fell before a Jew. This literally fulfills the wise men and Zeresh's prediction that he would fall (6:13). Xerxes has done a foolish thing in trusting Haman and ignoring his wife. Now he chooses not to automatically live by the unchangeable law of the Medes and Persians. Sometimes we need to turn away from foolish oaths and commitments (cf. 1 Sam. 14:24-46).

Hanging Haman

The eunuch Harbonah points out the pole Haman made for Mordecai, the king's protector, standing 75' high in Haman's yard (v9). The king commands Haman to be hung on it, and unlike Haman's anger, the king's wrath subsided (v10). Haman who served the king selfishly, but Mordecai's work in the king's gate and won the favor of others, including Harbonah. He had a good testimony with non-Jews (cf. 1 Tim. 3:7). Some have thought Esther should have tried to persuade the king to show Haman mercy, and that the king was wrong to execute Haman. But Haman was murderous against Mordecai and the Jews, and therefore a threat to the empire (cf. Gen. 12:3ff). If anything, this judgment is overdue. He could have changed his course when the king honored Mordecai, after he heard wise counsel from his wife and friends, or at this very feast. But he's not "sorry" until he feels the king's anger (v7). Being alone with the queen and then falling her couch seals Haman's fate. In this scene, Xerxes is a good example of a magistrate who Paul says, "does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4-5). God is love, but He is not only love. He also does justice, and those who will not seek His mercy meet His wrath. Haman had become so consumed by his selfish desires and hatred that he could not stop himself. He dug the pit that he fell into (Prov. 26:27). This is how we are apart from God's mercy. We are entirely committed to our pride and perspective: "All of us . . . were by nature object of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Haman hung on a tree because he deserved it. Jesus hung on a tree because we deserved it. Esther identified with her people and gave millions of people a longer life. Jesus identified with His people and died in order to give life to the world, billions and billions of people. The gospel is the greatest surprise the world has ever know, and it's still good news.