

## Esther 4:10 – 5:3

### The Lessons from a Golden Sceptre

*...and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand – 5:2*

*Desperate times call for desperate measures* – The saying is credited to the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates who utilized the saying in a medical context so as to mean that *for extreme diseases, measures become acceptable that otherwise might not be*. Since that time the statement has become sort of a proverb that's been used for everything from war situations to athletic events.

It was certainly a proverb that was put into practice by Queen Esther. It was a desperate time. Such was the hatred of Haman, the King's Prime Minister not just for Mordecai, the Jew but for the entire Jewish race. Such was his anger and bitterness that it wouldn't do to simply put Mordecai to death, his entire race must be extinguished. So Mordecai appeals to Esther to bring the matter before the King and to use her position as Queen as leverage to appeal to the King for the Jews.

Esther explains to her uncle Mordecai that there's just one problem with that idea. And the problem is that no one has access to the King. No one was permitted to simply enter into his presence and make their plea. It didn't matter who the person was or how urgent the plea might be. Look at the explanation that Esther gives to Mordecai of this binding law. It's found in 4:10,11 *Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai; All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.*

From Esther's words we're able to gather that this was a well known law. It wasn't some secret precept buried deep in some extensive regulations manual. Everyone knew it – all the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces. It didn't matter how great or how insignificant a person might be. It didn't matter whether or not that person was a man or a woman. There was one law that applied to everyone and that law carried with it the death penalty.

You begin to see how fitting that ancient proverb would be to Esther's situation. Her people were doomed but for her to plead for her people would mean that she would very likely be doomed. But just as surely as desperate times call for desperate measures, Mordecai pleads with Esther that it was high time for desperate measures. Indeed he believed he saw the providence of God in making Esther queen designed for just such a desperate time as this. So we read in 4:14 the words of Mordecai: *For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*

And so Esther, now convinced by her uncle that desperate times call for desperate measures calls for a 3 day fast in which those fasting would undoubtedly be calling upon God for mercy. And Esther resolves that following those 3 days with no certain assurance of the outcome she would nevertheless approach the king and make her appeal for her people *and if I perish, I perish* she says in 4:16.

You do well when you read the story of Esther to try to feel her fear and trepidation as the time at last arrives for her to go forward in her deed. How scary she must have felt. Perhaps the king saw her shivering with fright the way someone would shiver from being outside on a cold day without a coat. And what a sense of relief and new found hope she must have felt when at that dramatic moment when the death law called for her execution, instead the king's golden scepter is held out to her. Drawing near and touching the top of that golden sceptre must have flooded her soul with a sense of love for mercy and from that moment on the tide would indeed turn for Esther and for her people.

I've always been struck by the irony in the book of Esther. Irony in the way that the very gallows that Haman would build for Mordecai would become the gallows upon which Haman himself would be hung. The book of Esther is one of those books that shows how clearly the providence of God can turn on a dime as it were. Keep in mind that as captivating a story as we find Esther to be, this story must be viewed in the larger context of God's redemption. The Jews were called into existence for the very purpose of bringing the Messiah into the world. Had Haman succeeded with his plot to exterminate them it would have meant much more than the elimination of a race of people. It would have meant the end of God's plan of redemption.

And God was pleased to allow His plan of the ages to come so near its end before turning the matter completely around and giving the victory to His people while dealing the enemy of His people a knockout punch. As a believer in Christ you do well to keep the book of Esther in mind when you find yourself in the midst of desperate circumstances. In such situations you do well to resort to the desperate measure of prayer and fasting and never forget how quickly and how completely God can turn desperate circumstances into times of praise and thanksgiving. It's interesting to note that by the time you come to the end of the book of Esther, you find a holiday established that sort of reminds one of Christmas.

*9:20ff And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far, 21 To stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, 22 As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.*

What I would like to do this morning is to narrow the focus of the book of Esther to Esther's approach to the king and to the lessons that can be drawn from that particular situation. I've given this message the title:

## Lessons from a Golden Sceptre

### I. Access to the King is not Automatic

The narrative makes it pretty clear, doesn't it, that a subject of the Persian empire in those days just couldn't enter the king's presence on a whim. It seems like a rather harsh law, doesn't it? I'm reminded of those two harlots that came before King Solomon in 1 Kings 3. They came shortly after Solomon ascended to the throne of David, his Father. In spite of their ill repute and in spite of all that Solomon had been through in putting down a recent rebellion from one of his brothers, yet somehow these two harlots apparently had fairly easy access to the king.

Not so with king Ahasuerus of Persia. One can only wonder why any earthly king would make himself so inaccessible. Perhaps his law was enacted following what he deemed to be so many frivolous attempts to bring trivial matters to him. Or maybe he was so determined to set his own agenda day by day that he absolutely would not allow his plans to be disrupted. JFB provide some insight into this law. Apparently it didn't originate with the Persians but with the Medes.

— The Persian kings surrounded themselves with an almost impassable circle of forms. The law alluded to was first enacted by Deioces, king of Media, and afterwards, when the empires were united, adopted by the Persians, that all business should be transacted and petitions transmitted to the king through his ministers. Although the restriction was not intended, of course, to apply to the queen, yet from the strict and inflexible character of the Persian laws and the extreme desire to exalt the majesty of the sovereign, even his favorite wife had not the privilege of entrance, except by special favor and indulgence. Esther was suffering from the severity of this law; and as, from not being admitted for a whole month to the king's presence, she had reason to fear that the royal affections had become alienated from her, she had little hope of serving her country's cause in this awful emergency.

Evidently this kind of inaccessibility was not uncommon among the Persians and Medes. Even in our day I suppose the same kind of rule would apply in the case of brutal dictators who may feel themselves threatened by the people they brutally rule. And even in our own country not a one of us could expect to enter the White House and casually stroll to the Oval office. Presidents are busy men with full schedules that are planned much in advance.

Whatever the case would have been with king Ahasuerus, there was no doubt, as I pointed out in my introduction, that this law was in effect. Everyone knew that the king was inaccessible. You simply didn't approach him unless you were invited or unless he showed you mercy on your attempted approach.

And by such a law we're reminded of something that I think is largely overlooked in the world today even by many Christians. And that something is this – access to God is not automatic. And especially is this the case since man has fallen into sin. There can be little doubt based on Genesis 3 that it was man's privilege to walk with God in the garden in the

cool of the day in his original creation. There's no doubt that in his original creation God intended for man to have access into His presence. But the fall of man into sin changed all that. When man was expelled from the garden of Eden and flaming swords were put in place to bar the way back to the garden and to the tree of life, man's accessibility to God was denied, certainly denied in the way it had once been.

Listen to what Paul writes to Timothy in 1Tim. 6:16 *I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; 14 That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: 15 Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; 16 Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.*

This is the God we worship and serve and whose we are. This is the God that has enacted and enforced the death penalty that's reflected in the law of a Persian king. Today, through these elements that remind us of His body and blood we do have access into His presence and we are allowed to commune with Him and we're even invited to come boldly before His throne of grace. This is a privilege, I fear, that we're prone to take for granted. And it's a privilege that sinful Christ-rejecters in their pride and arrogance would claim for themselves.

The mentality is all too common that God owes man something and that in order to be God He must order His universe the way we think he should. Sinners and Christ-rejecters only demonstrate how defective their theology is who think and act like that. As Christians, however, we should never lose sight of what a gracious privilege has been afforded to us in providing access into the very throne room of heaven. And we should never lose sight of how costly a privilege this is. It cost God His only Begotten Son to give us that privilege and it cost Christ His life's blood in order to give us that privilege. Let's never lose sight, therefore, of what a gracious and costly privilege has been given to us by our gaining access into the presence of Christ our King.

But not only do we learn the lesson from the golden sceptre that access to the king is not automatic but we also learn the lesson that:

## II Mercy is a Matter of Sovereign Prerogative

That was certainly the case with king Ahasuerus. Listen to the way Esther states the law again in 4:11 *All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live.*

The law made it pretty clear, didn't it, that whether or not a person who attempted to approach the king lived or died was a wholly a matter of the king's discretion. He wasn't obligated to extend that golden sceptre to anyone. And Esther had the good sense to

recognize that the fact that she had not been summoned to the king's presence for some 30 days made the whole affair a matter of grave doubt for her – *but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days* she goes on to say in 4:11. Perhaps she remembered that her predecessor, queen Vashti had been banished by this king so the king was not above such courses of action. And who could know what matters would be occupying the king's time and attention in those days. Was he preparing for war? Was he anticipating an uprising by some of his subjects? His empire, after all, was vast. Would he appreciate being interrupted from his affairs of state by his queen? One thing was for sure – it would be completely up to him whether or not he would hold out that golden sceptre.

The same thing holds true for God today even though sinners and I'm afraid some Christians in their ignorance think to the contrary. Paul shows the unity between the Old and New Testaments on this matter when he draws from the Lord's word to Moses. Listen to what he writes in Rom. 9:14 *What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. 15 For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 16 So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.*

Paul even goes so far as to strengthen his case and make his point a point of emphasis when he says further in Rom. 9:17 *For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. 18 Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.*

Truth like this that shows so clearly that mercy is a matter of Divine prerogative smites our pride and at first makes us feel helpless and that's not a bad thing. We are kept from glorying in anything we've done and are taught the lesson that Jonah confessed from the belly of the whale that salvation is of the Lord. And the question that can and should naturally arise is this one – Am I a recipient of mercy? Has God extended the golden sceptre to me? If, as the scripture says He has mercy on whom He has mercy then can I know that He's had mercy on me?

It's a good question to ask but it's not a difficult question to answer. Indeed the elements of this communion feast go a long way in answering that question for you. Are you trusting in Christ? Do you believe in His broken body and shed blood? Are you desirous in this worship service to confess your faith in Him by partaking of these elements? If that is your desire then you have a good basis for assurance.

In His mercy and in His power He's done a work of grace on your heart. Had the work of grace not been done you would be repulsed by the elements of this communion table. Like the multitudes in John 6 who followed Him for a time you would turn from Him like they did, having been repulsed by the notion that His body is meat indeed and His blood is drink indeed. But because you've seen your sin and you've seen the provision He's made for your in His broken body and shed blood you show proof that you've gained a saving interest in Him. That saving interest didn't come to you naturally, it came to you

supernaturally through the Holy Spirit by the mercy of God. And the question we as Christians humbly ponder is why me? Why have I gained such an interest in Christ? This spirit of humility is expressed in the second stanza of a hymn that we often sing in connection with communion. How Sweet and Awful Is the Place.

While all our hearts and all our songs Join to admire the feast, Each of us cries, with thankful tongues, “Lord, why was I a guest?”

Why indeed? And the answer is found in the Sovereign prerogative of God to extend mercy to whom He shows mercy. Let us keep that in mind as we humbly and gratefully partake of these communion elements this morning.

So we’ve seen two lessons from the golden sceptre – access to the king’s presence is not automatic and mercy is a matter of sovereign prerogative. It remains for us to consider finally the lesson that:

### III. Mercy Brings with It Great Blessings

The golden sceptre was held out to Esther which meant that she wouldn’t die. That one law which called for certain death would not apply to her. She would live. What a great mercy she gained and what great mercy Christians gain by becoming exempt from the law of death. How precious are the words of Christ to Martha in Jn. 11 when He says to her *I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26 And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?*

But not only would Esther live but she would be invited by the king to make her request and that invitation would bring with it the promise that he would hear and answer. So we read in v. 3 *Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.*

Is there not in these words the pre-echo of what Christ Himself would promise in Joh 15:7 *If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.* And in Jn. 16:23,24 *...Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. 24 Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.*

The promise to Esther went to half of the kingdom of king Ahasuerus. The promise of Christ to His followers goes so far as to make us heirs and even joint-heirs with Christ. Rom. 8:15,16 *For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. 16 The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.*

Just as surely as Esther had been married to the king so have we been married to Christ. And just as surely as she was clothed in royal apparel (5:1) so have we been clothed with the royal apparel of Christ’s righteousness. And just as surely as she gained the king’s favor and had the king’s ear, so to speak, so have we gained God’s favor and have gained

His ear. And the blessings we've gained spiritually exceed the blessings that Esther gained materially. Esther, you see, would go through this same harrowing process again. In 8:3 *And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. 4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king,*

Unlike Esther, you and I have full assurance that the golden sceptre of God's mercy is continually held out to us. The assurance of that mercy comes through recognizing that Christ's body was broken for us and Christ's blood was shed for us. On account of these things Paul could write in Rom. 8:31,32 *What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? 32 He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?*

What wonderful lessons we have before us, then, in this narrative of Esther. Let's keep those lessons in mind as we partake of these elements – the lesson that access into the presence of God is not automatic – the lesson that Divine mercy is bestowed as a matter of Divine prerogative and the lesson that God's mercy carries with it blessings untold.