

From Gall to Gallows

Esther

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Bible Text: Esther 5; Matthew 10:26-33

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I'd like us this morning to continue our study in the book of Esther and reflect upon the 5th chapter in its entirety but if there were one verse which I would, as it were, write upon the fleshy tables of your heart, it would be the first verse and that may come as something of a surprise to you but I hope by the time we conclude our reflection upon God's word you could see why the first verse of all the verses in this particular chapter are set there for our encouragement that we might gain a blessing even by the very first verse of the fifth chapter of Esther.

"On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood 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 inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace."

If that's rather a long verse for you to commit instantly to memory, let me just reduce it to these words taken from that first verse: Esther put on her royal robes. Esther put on her royal robes. So much of what we have considered in the book of Esther stands before us as a contrast between godliness and ungodliness and this chapter is no different than what we have considered in the past. Haman, of course, stands before us as one who is systematically opposed to the people of God and as we have considered Haman's background as being an Amalekite, his people were historically the enemies of God's people and so we find it not as any great surprise to hear that Haman has hatched a plot in order to destroy the entirety of God's people. Yet as we look at this particular chapter from the book of Esther with the eyes of faith, we'd see that everything that Haman has is but smoke and mirrors. It seems to have the appearance of great reality, it is the fulfillment of so many of his own personal aspirations and yet for all that, what does he really have at the end of the day?

If we are reading the Scriptures in conjunction with the whole word of God, of course, we are no strangers to the idea that what this world is is passing and therefore although it seems to have great solidity about it, it seems to be the reality after which all men would strive, if we have read and understood what the word of God is telling us, it is not the reality, it is a passing truth, if you like. When the writer of the Hebrews is talking about the work of Jesus Christ, he talks about the temple which no longer exists but even that temple was but a shadow of the real temple. It was a picture set before the people of God.

This still remain for us, the Wailing Wall, which was something of the restraining wall on the Mount of Zion in Jerusalem and you can, if you have that opportunity or that privilege I might say to go to Jerusalem, you can stand by the Wailing Wall and there you will see these huge blocks of stone but the temple itself is long since gone more than, almost I should say, 2,000 years ago when the armies of Rome destroyed it. But it's not merely because the ancient building is no longer there that we say, "Well, that is but a passing reality." It's not just that it has not stood the test of our history but it was only and ever intended to be a shadow of the ultimate reality so that the work of Christ is done in the real temple and he entered into the real temple of which the temple in Jerusalem for all its huge stones was but a shadow and there is something of a depiction of this transient nature of all that this world has to offer presented to us in the story of Esther and, in particular, with regard to Haman. What he possesses is not the ultimate reality but something that will quickly pass.

We read through the chapter and I want to deal with Haman, first of all, because I want to deal with Esther as we examine that. As it were, we have an understanding of the contrast so we have Haman set before us and then we will see something in bolder relief of what's going on with Esther. So although the chapter in telling the story in its sequence, I want to deal with it out of sequence so that when we go back and consider together the life of Esther, that we are able to see the lessons which God is setting before us.

Haman is invited to a feast and only the king and the queen are present. You could almost imagine the sort of excitement in his step as he can't wait to share this news with his friends and family and perhaps we have had something of a similar experience when some particular good fortune, as the world would describe it, when God's providence has blessed us in a particular way. Perhaps some promotion at work and unexpectedly we come home and say, "You will not guess what happened to me at work," and then we we're only too quick to share the good news. "This is great news and I want to share it with somebody else."

As we know something about the nature and the character of Haman, we see here is a man of great vanity and therefore when he has received any blessing, he's only to quick, of course, to share it with family and friends. This is no exception. He goes back to his family and friends and he gathers them together and he has his own sort of supper party there for his wife and family. Then he starts to list out, you see the vanity of the man, he lists out the splendor of his riches. Of course, we think back into previous chapters and we saw how he was willing to give, and I'm using a rough figure, something like \$200 million worth of silver basically to bribe the king to destroy the Jews. So when he's recounting the splendors of his riches, you can understand that when he was giving away \$200 million, that wasn't the sum and substance of his wealth, he had much more beside and so he gathered his friends and he said, "Do you have any idea just how rich I am? Well, let me tell you." I'm not sure that I would have been just terribly enthralled to hear a man tell me at this supper party just how great and how rich he is. It's only exciting for the man that's telling it, in all honesty. For those that have to suffer such things, it's something of an ordeal, however, that's not going to hold him back as he declares to his family and to his friends just how splendidly wealthy he is.

Then he goes on from that to talk about his sons, just how many sons that he's got. What is he doing? He's basically saying, "Not only am I blessed with great wealth, the gods look upon me favorably as well otherwise why would I have so many sons?" If you're sitting at table with this man, you're thinking, "Isn't he ever going to stop talking? Now he has moved on from his bank account and his gold and his silver and now he's telling us how wonderfully blessed he is by the gods and he just is full of himself." But no, this tiresome conversation continues.

Now he lists out the honors that he has received by this time in the story. He is effectively Prime Minister to the King of Persia so he has risen to the place of being basically number 2 in the kingdom. So he's quite willing to tell about all the honors that he has received and no doubt listed in amongst those other particular favors that he has received, that he is dining with the king and queen. I don't know if you've ever seen pictures of state functions or a state dinner but when I have seen pictures of that, one of the things that has struck me is just how many people are usually sitting at that table. It's not like there's just 3 or 4 of you like around a restaurant table, it's like 50 or 60 people. The only way that you know that you are at a state dinner in the presence at the same table is that somebody has told you about that because you can't actually see him. He's so far away.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of having tea with the Queen. As far as it goes, you might say, "That sounds really impressive." Well, you're not invited, you are commanded to the garden party. There are a series of garden parties that take place in Buckingham Palace and I got an invite along with 2,000 other people. I never met the Queen but I can say that I had tea with the Queen. Yeah, me and 2,000 other people. But not for Haman. It's just the 3 of them: the king and the queen and Haman. How cozy is that?

So Haman is full of all the things that he had whether it's his wealth or the way in which the gods have blessed him or his decorations or his honors. The place that he holds in the political sphere being number 2 in the kingdom. The intimate relationship that he has with the king and the queen so that he's the only one that is invited to dinner with them. Well, a moment ago I said that this was kind of just all smoke and mirrors. It didn't really have any substance. Do you see the way in which Haman reports this? He has listed out all these things for us and in God's word in a remarkable economy of words which we see so often in Scripture, he lists out all these things that, "Wow, this man has it made." Wealth, power, position, family, you name it, intimacy with the king and queen but what is it that Haman reports concerning himself? "Yet all this is worth nothing to me." All this is worth nothing to him. He has it all and yet in his own estimation, "Yet all this is worth nothing to me so long as the Jew, Mordecai, continues, actually doesn't show me any respect."

Now he's thought to reflect upon just how transient things are in this world. We've already observed how easy it is for us to fall into worrying about things. Why does God tell us 365 times, "Do not be afraid"? Because we basically need to hear it every day because so often we are anxious, afraid, we're concerned about things over which we have no control. But there's something else here in the word of God, surely. Not only do

we need to be reminded day-by-day to trust in God and not be afraid, we need to see how false the lies of the enemy of our soul are. We hear, we imagine to ourselves, "If only I had this, I would be content." If I were to press you individually and say, "What would it take to be content?" You'd say, "Well, I've got 2 or 3 things. Perhaps it is that promotion at work, perhaps that increase in salary or the business just doing a bit better so that we wouldn't need to be concerned and I would have some sort of job security for the future. Or perhaps all I need to be content is for this member of my family to make a profession of faith. Or that this person who is a member of our family to get better." It could be something, just one particular thing, maybe 2, maybe 3, but then everything would be fine. That's never the case. If you stopped worrying about X today, you would start worrying about Y tomorrow and so the word of God needs to be proclaimed to you again tomorrow, "Do not be afraid. Don't be concerned about those things."

And here is Haman who stands before us as the very example of a man who had it made, that in his own estimation as he considered this, "I've got the wealth. I've got the family. I've got the influence politically. I've got even intimacy as well as power. Yet all this is as nothing to me so long as the Jew, Mordecai, continues." Interesting how just one small item can sweep away everything else that it is in his thinking. But we're told in Scripture that godliness with contentment is great gain, that the exact opposite of it we might also say is true: ungodliness with discontent is great pain. And Haman, for all that he had, didn't have that which would make him happy.

So we see that the lie of the enemy of Haman's soul in spite of giving him everything that he could possibly want in this world, he was still not content. Still not content, even when he had everything. But as we consider this particular portion of God's word, we also see the transient nature. We read through Scripture and, dare I say, part of the difficulty of preaching the word of God is often that the hearers know what happens in the end. You've read the book of Esther. Many of you have engaged in a Bible study of the book of Esther. It's not like I can bring you a surprising ending. You already know what happens in the end so I'm not going to pretend that you don't know what happens. We know that Haman is does not survive. So as Haman goes home on that day, when he's just all kinds of excited and exhilarated from having had a feast on intimate terms with the king and the queen and he can't wait to get home and tell his wife, Zeresh, and gather his friends around and little does he know that when he lays his head upon the pillow that night that that will be the last sleep that he ever has. That will be the last time he ever enjoys the things of this world. You can have it all but it can all be taken away from you in an instant.

Now, as we're reading through the word of God, that is, as it were, that is set behind the story of Esther. That's the backdrop against which we then are able to see, "Well, what is God telling us about the life of Esther and how might we gain an understanding not only of the story of Esther but how might we, as it were, turn it into the coin of the realm so that we can grow ourselves in faith and trust?" and hear those words which are spoken apparently so often, "Do not be afraid."

When we left Esther last week as we read through the fourth chapter of Esther was that she was afraid: afraid to go into the presence of the king. Why? Because to do so unbidden risked death itself. She doesn't make a strong statement of how her confidence is that God will see her through, really, there is more of an air of resignation about Esther as she concludes chapter 4. "I will go to the king and if I perish, I perish." But as she speaks to Mordecai through her officials, she asks the people of God to come together and fast for 3 days and the way in which this particular chapter opens up is not coincidental that "on the 3rd day," it's the 3rd day of the people fasting for her. They are gathered together, Mordecai has got the believing community together, and they have been fasting with her and for her.

As we have remarked in the past, the book of Esther does not contain any reference to God directly. The name of God does not appear in these chapters and even though we're talking about fasting, you might almost say, "I would have expected something in the passage which would have said, 'Go call the people together to fast and pray.'" But you look in your Bibles and there's not even a reference to prayer. Is that something that has been forgotten about, missed out by accident? No, I think the omission itself is significant because what we have here in the story of Esther is about what is appearing on the outside but we are meant, as it were, to pull back the veil and look underneath for ourselves. So fasting is mentioned but prayer is not. But can there be any doubt in your mind that when Esther was saying, "Get the people of God together for fasting," that that also included prayer even though it was not actually mentioned? And even though God himself is not mentioned by name in this entire story? And yet who can read Esther without saying that God is at work even when he does not announce himself so that our confidence day-by-day is that even when God does not, as it were, announce himself in our circumstances, he is still there. Even though only fasting is only mentioned, pull back that word fasting and we find prayer, the prayer of God's people.

Well, what would they have been praying for? I trust it's no distortion of the word of God to say, "It's obvious what they were praying for." Esther has admitted to the concern that she has that as she enters into the presence of the king she might be put to death. They might think that she's some sort of security risk. Better by far to act now and ask questions later if it saves the life of the king. She is taking quite literally her life into her hands in order to meet with the king, "And if I perish, I perish." The people of God gathered together and they fast and pray to protect Esther. "May no harm befall her. Give her wisdom to know how to approach the king." It wouldn't have been that long before that Vashti was deposed from being the queen because in the estimation of the king at least, she had acted inappropriately. "Open the king's heart to receive the queen. Give her courage. Give her a plan. How was she to approach the king?" Well that was only part of it, actually speaking, "What was it that she would say and how would she go about it?" At the end of the 3 days, the people of God had been fasting and praying. Esther herself had been fasting and praying, beseeching God that God would give her courage, give her wisdom, give her an understanding, give her discernment, all the things that she stood in need of so that she might approach the king. She would not have had the privileges which we have of the New Testament Scriptures to know that, "If any man lack wisdom, let him

inquire of God, ask of God, and God who gives to all men generously will give what we desire."

Well, God is at work in the heart of the king evidently. She takes her life in her hands. She steps close to the king and by the grace of God, he extends the scepter so that her life is spared. What is it the king next says to her, "What do you want? What is your request? You have come here for a reason. What is your request?" And then in that sort of overflowing gushiness of a Middle Eastern potentate, he says, "And I will give it to you even up to half of my kingdom." Perhaps we're more inclined to be literalistic, I don't know if that's a factor of being either Dutch or Scottish, but if somebody says something, we take it at face value, don't we?

So the king says, "Up to half of my kingdom." Wow. That's generous. He had no intention, boys and girls, of ever giving up half of his kingdom. That was just an expression that he used. He was not being sincere when he said it. But it did indicate that the king was open to the request. So wouldn't this have been a great time for Esther to say, "Quite simply, you offered me half the kingdom, all I'm asking is the life of the Jewish people." The door was wide open and yet she didn't walk through it. Why not? Because God had given her discernment and answered her prayers and she was seeing God's hand at work in the very circumstance. She had her plan, as it were, and she was going to see through the plan that God had given her. So rather than just blurting out what she wants, she says, "Well, I'm inviting you for a feast. Please come and bring Haman with you." The king is in a good mood, "Okay Esther, here we are. We have enjoyed a fantastic meal. What is it that you want? Tell me what your request is and I will give it," he says once more, "even up to half of my kingdom." Great opportunity, Esther, don't let it pass. "Come again tomorrow," she says. "Come again tomorrow, I have a feast and then I will tell you." God had given her all that she stood in need of including the wisdom to know when to ask and when not to ask.

Now, what does that tell us about what's going through the heart and mind of Esther? You see that Esther is content to wait upon the Lord and doesn't rush on ahead, as it were, because she thinks things are working out her way that she'll, in a sense, short circuit the plans of God. Let's just rush to the bottom line. Let's see what God is going to do. No, she has her plan before she starts off and she waits upon the Lord, content to do so. Well, I hope you're thinking, meditating upon these things and you're seeing something of the contrast therefore that is set before us between Haman, the man who had everything and still wasn't content, and Esther who only had one thing but was content to wait upon the Lord and to trust in him that when she was fearful, had heard that message which says, "Do not be afraid. Place your trust. God is working out his sovereign plans and purposes."

Well, that's the story of chapter 5 but, of course, I want to make some kind of application so that we see more than just an event that happened long, long ago as though we were reading the word of God and just seeing it as being just one illustration of a truth after another. You say, "Well, what are the lessons that we can take and apply?" At the beginning of our time examining this portion of God's word together, I said that there was

one particular verse that I would focus attention upon and that would be the first verse, and particularly not the whole of the verse even, just a particular aspect: Esther put on her royal robes. We could read that as so often in all honesty we tend to do and we're reading through a portion of God's word, a chapter we might have read through this or find it in our devotions or in our family devotions. We read through it and we're reading it and we go on to verse 2 and then on to verse 3 and by the time we get to the end of the chapter, we've forgotten the first verse that talks about Esther putting on her royal robes. But putting on the royal robes was appropriate for her when she entered into the presence of the king. Here's where I would lay a further question: what are the appropriate robes for you to put on when you enter into the presence of the King of kings? As I reflect on this, if this is given to us for our instruction, there is a contrast here between Haman and Esther, the godly queen. How am I to look at Esther and say, "This tells me how I should enter into the presence of the King of kings."

Well, there was no presumption on the part of Esther. That much is surely made clear to us. It wasn't the arrogance of thinking, "Well, God has surely got to listen to me for all the good deeds that I have done or the works of charity I have performed." When Esther enters into the presence of the king, there is an evident humility of spirit about her. She does not presume that all she has to do is barge into the throne room and demand that the king does whatever she asks but it is in meekness and resolve to ask that which is in her heart but do so in a way which is pleasing. And how should we enter into the presence of our King? I suspect that if we examine our hearts when we enter into the presence of God in prayer, that almost always we are dressed inappropriately. For the unbeliever, it may be dressing inappropriately because they come clothed in their own righteousness and they expect to be heard. "Why? Why shouldn't they be heard, after all? The boasting is all about what I have done or what I might yet do but it's basically my confidence rests in myself and myself alone. God has got to look upon me with favor. Well, why should he not look upon me with favor?" The Christian is aghast at such an attitude. You can't possibly enter into the presence of God dressed in your own righteousness. "Why not?" Because your gracious righteousness is as filthy rags.

But you as a believer, how do you enter into the presence of God? Do we not often as believers enter into the presence of God like beggars? We know it's all of grace and we enter in as though we needed to persuade God to do us good and that's why I truly do think the most significant verse in this chapter is this one: Esther put on her royal robes. So that when we enter into the presence of God we're not as those who come thinking that, "I have a right to be here." No! Of course not. But nor do we enter in as beggars who have no right at all to be there. We enter in in our royal robes and which of us lives up to our high calling and says, "I am here as a son of the Most High God and I take the privileges of being a son of God seriously? I do not need to persuade my Father to do me good. He loves me immeasurably. He blesses me beyond what I had which to tell and I will not enter into the presence of my Father as though I were a beggar but into the presence of my Father." Isn't that what Jesus had to say? "Do not be afraid. O Esther, do not be afraid of the one who can kill the body. Your Father in heaven knows when a sparrow falls to the ground. He knows the hairs on your head. He is giving you the reasons in those few verses why you should not be afraid." Oh, that we would write upon

our hearts this simple excerpt but from one verse of the book of Esther: Esther put on her royal robes, that when you and I enter into the presence of our God and King, we also put on our royal robes because we are sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. Jesus says, "Do not fear those who can only kill the body." Did Esther fear the king? I think so. Did Mordecai fear Haman? Probably.

But here is the Gospel message: "What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world but lose his soul?" Yet everything that Haman had that he listed out for his wife, Zeresh, and for his friends, "Just look at what I have. I have almost limitless wealth. I can't even spend it all. I can give away \$200 million and still I have enough and to spare. I have a wonderful family. I have political power. I have the ear of the most important man in the kingdom. Yet all of this is as nothing to me so long as Mordecai lives," because his heart was ultimately filled with malice. Haman had risen to the top but it did not satisfy and whatever the enemy of your souls will try to persuade you that you need to have in order to have contentment, it will not suffice. It is but passing. But ultimately what mattered to Esther was not the royal robes that she wore to enter into the presence of the King of Persia but what she wore when she entered into the presence of the King of kings. And this is the Gospel message.

One day everyone will stand before that throne. The entirety of humanity, all that are here present, all that are not present here this morning, all that have lived, all who ever will live until the Lord return and there will be that great division: those who will seek to enter in in their own righteousness and those who are in Christ. The Gospel message is that you need not appear before the King of kings as a beggar or in your own righteousness but that clothed in Christ today I can enter into the presence of my King and of my Father that I might begin, as it were, to live up to my high privilege, that those words which are so familiar to us may not be some mere formula of words but the recognition of our status, "Our Father, which art in heaven." Esther put on her royal robes. Let us put on our royal robes as we turn to our God and King in prayer.

Let's pray together.

Our gracious God and our heavenly Father, how quick we are to grow fearful. We pray that thy word may be written upon our hearts this day that we may live up to that which thou hast granted to us, to receive that blessing not only in our heads but in our hearts that we are sons and daughters of the King of kings and as such, entering into thy presence we would put on our royal robes, the robe of the righteousness of thy Son, Jesus Christ. Bless, O God, thy word to our hearts not only as we would meditate upon it this morning but later as we draw aside to seek thy face in prayer. By thy grace, enable us to put on our royal robes. Hear us we pray in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.