

July 4, 2021 | Esther: Fractured People Flawless God

Week 6 | Esther 5:1-8 | “The Cunning of a Wise Woman”

Compared to the fast-paced action of the first four chapters, chapter 5 can feel as if it brings all the momentum we've built up so far to a standstill. And, in a way, that is true. But we should not skim over this chapter in favor of the more action-packed sections. The narrative slows for a significant reason. It deliberately decelerates to highlight how resourceful and cunning Esther is. She is no lame duck, nor is she some muted lamb, but Queen Esther is indeed a force to be reckoned with. As such, we must give her the proper space she needs to shine, and so we'll only cover the first half of this chapter today.

READ: Esther 5:1-5 (ESV)

¹On 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. ²And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. ³And the king said to her, “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.” ⁴And Esther said, “If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king.” ⁵Then the king said, “Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked.” So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared.

Now, it would be tempting to breeze past this introductory scene. However, it behooves us to pause for a moment and consider the elements already at work in this scene.

- First, notice how these first few sentences are charged with royal-like imagery (i.e., “royal robes,” “inner court of king’s palace,” “king’s quarters,” “royal throne,” “throne room,” “palace,” etc.). This is an extraordinary shift from the sackcloth, ashes, and fasting of the previous chapter. The danger throughout the commonwealth was palatable and easily recognizable. Here, the threat is no less accurate in this royal bubble, but it is draped in a thick layer of pomp and circumstance. It will take a genuinely cunning person to navigate such a tricky path and survive. One wonders if Esther is up to the task.
- Secondly, this scene is charged with suspense. As we read, we can’t help but wonder, “Will she survive?” “Will the king hold out his scepter to Esther?” So much rides on this *one* moment. And, in a rare show of acumen, the king must’ve assumed that only the

most pressing of needs would've motivated Esther to risk her life in this way. And while he may not have seen her in over a month, he would not allow the court to take her life before he finds out what prompted her to risk it all and come in the first place. Imagine his shock when she merely asked her husband to dinner. But, as I'll explain, this only made him all the more interested in what she wanted.

READ: Esther 5:6-8 (ESV)

⁶ And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." ⁷ Then Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: ⁸ If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

If Xerxes wasn't surprised when Esther asked him to dinner the first time, he must've been shocked when she asked him to come to yet another banquet! Now, to a western audience, this scene is probably the most confusing in all of Esther. We would be prone to think that Esther is delaying her request for no reason. Or, worse, we might be tempted to think she's simply procrastinating because of fear, as one might do when the task before them is particularly unpleasant. Here, in the good 'ole United States, we prize a straightforward approach to most things, and we can be put off by an overabundance of pleasantries. We don't particularly like it when someone hems and haws, but we'd rather the person speaking get straight to the point. However, as I've reminded you repeatedly, this story takes place in the deep orient and not in 21st century America. During the time of Esther, in that ancient and distant land, someone could be killed simply for breaking protocol and coming into the king's presence unannounced, even if that person was the queen herself. Propriety, decorum, etiquette, and custom are the four tent poles of middle-eastern culture. Anyone not aware of this fact will quickly lose their head.

What's more, this also explains why Esther did not make her request to save her kinsfolk at the first banquet but, instead, requests that the king and Haman come to another feast. And, even that request was not broached until after the initial festivities had ended, and the king was thoroughly drunk on wine. This layer upon layer of courtliness and window-dressing, combined with the fact that he is plastered, ensures that Xerxes is predisposed to grant anything that Esther requests.

We see this softening even in his parallel responses to Esther. Initially, while in his royal throne room, Xerxes says, “[What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.](#)” And then, after the dinner, we see him repeat this very thing, not once, but twice more: “[What is your wish? It shall be granted you.](#) [That’s one.] [And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.](#)” [And that’s two.] Before, in his royal court, the king’s response to Esther coming into his presence unannounced was a formality and one meant to save her life more than anything else. Esther knew this to be accurate and so bided her time until she could get into a more private setting, i.e., one where they weren’t surrounded by the many guards and attendants that would’ve been present in the royal court. Hence, we have a meal to ask the king if he’ll attend another banquet, which, on the surface, may appear to be an unnecessary redundancy but is actually very clever on Esther’s part.

Esther’s actions not only play into the orient’s obsession with formality but, cunningly, Esther essentially gets Xerxes to write a blank check.¹ Esther is given *carte blanche*! She could get whatever she wanted (cf. Mr. 6:21-23). You see, unlike the first meal, where the king attended simply to get to know what Esther’s request was, by observing the second meal, the king will commit himself to whatever Esther requests before he even knows what the request will be! Essentially, Esther’s request can be framed like this: “If it please the king...if I have found favor...come to another feast and I will tell you the request you have now thrice told me you’d give me whatever I requested, even if it be half the kingdom.” More importantly, this trap that Xerxes has fallen into will keep him from getting advice from his council before fulfilling Esther’s request, a habit of his and one which Haman would’ve used to get out of danger.² And, in a show of genuine brilliance, Esther has framed her yet-unknown-request in what the king has said, “as though it were she rather than he who was doing the favor.”³

Now, what kind of person, let alone a monarch, would allow themselves to be so easily manipulated and maneuvered in this way? Only the most self-absorbed and dull-witted. Nowhere in all of Esther is Xerxes ever truly the king; he is only ever the pawn. He is always under the influence of some outside force: wine, advisers, his own prime minister, and now his own queen.

But why invite Haman at all? Indeed Esther could’ve done this without risking exposing who she was (i.e., not only a Jew but the daughter to Mordecai) to the archnemesis to the Jews. But,

¹ Bush, Frederic, *Ruth-Esther*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 9, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1996), p. 407.

² Ibid.

³ Clines, David J. A., *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, (England; JSOT Press, 1984), p. 37.

again, I come back to the power that oriental ceremony had over the affairs in the court. It not only would've been perfectly natural and possibly even expected to invite the king's second-in-command to a banquet that is being held in the king's honor, but ingeniously, Esther has made it so that Haman is a powerful witness on her behalf! Who better to testify that the king had indeed promised his queen that he would fulfill her request (no matter what is, even if it be that she requests half the kingdom) than the Prime Minister himself? Far from that three-day fast dulling Esther's senses, her intellect and cleverness had been sharpened over that 72-hour period to a fine point, and she was now poised to strike her enemy when the timing is just right. Her courage and assurance of success are seen in no better place than in the fact that she had prepared that initial feast before she had even entered the king's presence (cf. vs. 4).

Now, at this point, we'd expect the narrator to move on quickly to the next day when the second feast is held, and Esther finally reveals who she is and what she wants. But life is not as cut and dry as some storybook tale. And Esther, while written with literary mastery, is a history, not a fiction about a real woman in a genuine-yes-this-really-happened-situation. So, rather than go straight to the next banquet, our focus is drawn to the relationship between Haman and Mordecai once again towards the end of chapter 5. In my opinion, as well as others, that scene is better attached to the chapter which follows.⁴ Hence, instead of diving into the remaining scene of chapter 5, I'll save it till next week where it is better connected to the context and events of chapter 6. I simply cannot leave our hero Esther without some comment or takeaway.

So, what's the takeaway?

Wisdom knows what to say and when to say it.

READ: Proverbs 14:29 (ESV)

Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.

READ: Proverbs 15:28 (ESV)

The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

READ: Proverbs 17:27 (ESV)

⁴ Ibid., p. 408

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

READ: Proverbs 25:11 (ESV)

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

The one who is hasty in his speech will garner only heartache for themselves. But the one who weighs their words before speaking will accomplish great things. The truism “think before you speak” is well-known but seldom observed.

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VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Esther: Fractured People Flawless God | Week 6 | “The Wisdom of a Cunning Woman”

TEXT: Esther 5

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: