

**Esther 6:1-7:10**  
**Haman's World Collapses**  
**Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

If you were here last week you'll remember that we were focussing on the character of Haman in this story and looking at five symptoms in his life that demonstrated his hatred and rejection of the God of the Bible.

Well this week we continue to look at Haman and, especially, as you'll have gathered from our reading, at the rather nasty end to which he came.

But before we get to that, in case you've not been here so far in this brief series looking at the book of Esther, let me remind you briefly of the story so far...

Around 2,500 years ago God's people, the Jews, with whom God had made a solemn and binding covenant or promise, had been thrown out the land of Canaan because they had disobeyed all the things they had solemnly sworn to God they would do. Mercifully, however, God had permitted many Jews eventually to return to their homeland under the rule of the Persian empire.

Many Jews, however, remained scattered throughout the empire at the time of King Xerxes, then one of the most powerful rulers the world had ever known, and two of them, Mordecai, a senior civil servant in the Persian government, and his young cousin Esther, who has recently become Queen of Persia, are still living in the capital city, Susa. So here you have two Jews living in the middle of the pagan empire of King Xerxes.

The fourth main character in this drama is Haman. He's an attendant of the king who has managed, it is implied by devious means, to get himself promoted up the ranks to be, effectively, Prime Minister. His most significant act in this role has been to order the extermination, in a few months time, of all the Jews in the empire, all because Haman cannot stand the way that Mordecai won't bow to him. That, however is not sufficient for Haman and he has decided that even before the due extermination date he is going to have Mordecai hanged on a massive gallows...

What happens next? And what does it mean for us?

**1 Haman is obliged to honour Mordecai (6:1-11)**

Haman is lying in bed all excited because he's going to get the king to sign off on Mordecai's death warrant first thing in the morning.

Xerxes, however, is tossing and turning. He can't sleep. And, if the king can't sleep, that means the attendants don't get to sleep either!

What do you want when you can't sleep? Something to make you sleep! We tend to go for temazepam or a milky drink. What does Xerxes choose? Well he thinks to himself "what's the one thing in my palace most likely to induce sleep?" "Ah, ha – the record of my own reign." By setting it up in the way that he does the Jewish author of Esther, as with so much else in the book, is inviting us to have a little giggle at Xerxes and the Persian court.

And that does Xerxes find? Well it just so happens that he reads about the incident from years earlier when Mordecai reported an assassination plot and, literally, saved his life.

It dawns in him that Mordecai hasn't been quite as prominent as he might he thought since then and asks his attendant what recognition and honour Mordecai has received. "None", comes the reply.

Honouring loyal service was such an important part of the Persian court system that the king instantly forgets it's the middle of the night and decides he is going to act. "Who's about to consult with?" he asks.

It seems that in his excitement Haman has also been unable to sleep and has come over to the court early so he can get his "let's put Mordecai on the gallows" request as soon as the king has brushed his teeth. So Haman gets wheeled in to Xerxes, no doubt anticipating that his moment has come even sooner than expected.

And he's then totally floored by Xerxes question: "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?"

Well who else, in Haman's world, could that be but him? So he lists the greatest honours he can think of – dressed in royal robes, riding the royal horse. In other words he suggests that the man the king delights to honour should be treated just like the king himself is.

What a total devastation it must have been to Haman to hear Mordecai's next sentence... "do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew."

Just as it surprised us that after Mordecai's saving of the king's life in chapter 2 it was Haman who was honoured in chapter 3, so now it is Haman who gets a total shock to hear that his arch enemy who he has planned to kill is to be given the greatest honour in the empire.

And, worse, he is obliged to behave like Mordecai's servant, leading his horse, dressing him in royal robes and shouting about Mordecai's greatness to all the people of the city.

Did Xerxes know, when he invited Haman's opinion that Haman would think he was being invited to devise his own honours? I think he probably did. Xerxes might be laughable in some ways but he wasn't completely stupid; he must have known how self-centred and self-obsessed his Prime Minister was. And I suspect he probably rather enjoyed seeing Haman squirm as he led Mordecai's grand horse round like some ordinary stable boy.

## **2 Haman is told his quest is futile (6:12-14)**

Haman returned home, utterly devastated by the events of the day. But does he find comfort there? Not a chance.

His wise men, no friends these, and even his wife say something like: "Jewish? You didn't say Mordecai was Jewish (even though he did actually!). Well you don't have a snowballs' chance in hell then Haman."

The very people from whom he ought to expect loyalty, or at least some degree of comfort, in the face of his trauma, are totally and utterly unhelpful and unsympathetic. Then, even as they pour out their cold comfort the King's eunuch's and hurry him away to Esther's banquet – a beautiful meal that will now, no doubt, taste like ashes in his mouth.

It's worth noticing as we read that that Haman and Esther have completely reversed role. At the beginning of the story she was the passive one – the pawn in the games of others, submitting to their will and carted this way and that at the behest of greater powers.

Whereas Haman was the plotter, the schemer, the prince of darkness, manipulating and planning to bring about his purposes – glory and honour for himself.

Now Haman is "hurried away" to a banquet he has no desire to go to which has been organised and set-up by Queen Esther to achieve her purpose – justice and liberation for her people

## **3 Haman is outwitted by Esther (7:1-7)**

Esther has been keeping the king guessing for ages about what exactly it is that she wants.

We know, of course, that she is going to try and reverse the edict about the annihilation of the Jews. But even we don't know how she's going to go about it. So the scene is filled with dramatic tension for us as much as for Xerxes.

Esther, it turns out, plays it brilliantly. She is humble. She says that she would not have bothered the king for anything less than the lives of her people. She aligns herself with the king's interest and omits to mention that it was, in fact, the king who signed off this order, albeit at Haman's request.

And the king ends up right where she wants him. "Who is it?" he cries out in anger. "Who would do such a terrible thing?"

"That man over there." Esther replies. Haman. It's Haman.

The king is so angry that he actually stops drinking and goes into the garden. And, as you'll know if you've read the rest of the book so far, it takes an awful lot to get this king to stop drinking!

Esther has completely outplayed Haman. She has managed to portray him as the total villain of the piece without implicating the king and, in one dinner party, take him from being the most trusted advisor of the world's most powerful man to being public enemy number one, from a Peter Mandelson to an Osama bin Laden in 10 minutes.

## **4 Haman is removed from the scene (7:8-10)**

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The last part of the story moves from tragedy almost into farce as Haman, literally, throws himself on Esther's mercy, radically contradicting court conventions that men other than the king should not come within seven paces of the Queen.

Just at that moment Xerxes walks in, totally misinterprets the situation (or at the very least pretends to in order to provide an easy way to get rid of Haman) and the gallows that Haman had built only the day before for Mordecai is tested first on its architect.

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Well it's a sad and sorry tale, though, of course, also a wonderful case of appropriate or poetic justice. Haman is, as we say, hoist by his own petard. Lifted up on his own gallows

But so much for the events of these chapters. What can we learn from them? Is there anything more to see here than a sad and occasionally comic tale of a man who died 2,500 years ago?

Well I think there is. Because the life of Haman presents us with one of the most extended, and certainly one of the most dramatic, explorations of the problem of pride in an individual that you will find anywhere in the Bible.

Pride, of course, is a major Bible theme. You'll remember, if you were here last year, how we encountered pride writ large in the nation of Israel in the book of Hosea and how God judged their pride by destroying the two things they were most proud of – their military strength and their religious idolatry.

But in the life of Haman we see pride demonstrated and analysed in the life of a single person – to terrible effect.

So let's think together, for the rest of our time, about what this story might have to teach us.

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### **a) Encountering Haman's essence: what is pride?**

I tend not to like quoting extensively from other people's sermons or essays when I'm speaking – it seems to me to be a bit lazy.

But in all the reading I've ever done as a Christian I don't think anybody outside the scriptures has tackled the subject of pride with as much insight and clarity as C S Lewis.

Here's what he has to say:

*There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more*

*unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.*

*The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit. We have come to the centre. According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.*

*Does this seem to you exaggerated? If so, think it over. I pointed out a moment ago that the more pride one had, the more one disliked pride in others. In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, 'How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronise me, or show off?' The point is that each person's pride is in competition with every one else's pride. It is because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am so annoyed at someone else being the big noise.*

Pride is the state that places me at the centre. Pride, if you like, is sin, or at least it is the sin that stands behind all other sins. It is the determination to force the universe to run the way you want it to – or at least to control enough of the universe to make you comfortable.

Pride is what you see in the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve took the fruit God had told them not to eat and ate it. They didn't eat it because they were hungry. They didn't eat it because they thought it tasted better than all the other fruits. They didn't even eat it because the devil made them – although he clearly had a hand in their downfall. They ate the fruit because they believed their own judgment was better than God's advice.

They ate because they wanted to know everything there was to be known even if God said they couldn't do that and be truly human. They were proud.

And that's what Haman was like too, isn't it? He doesn't have Mordecai hanged because he is any sort of threat to his physical safety or financial wealth. He wants him hanged, and his people destroyed, because he is an affront to his pride. Mordecai reminds Haman that he is not the centre of the universe every time he refuses to bow to him.

Haman has no significance in his own world if he is not the centre of honour and attention.

And isn't that true of us too? We find it very hard to live without the attention and honour of others. Now of course we don't all express that in the same way. Some of us love to be up at the front, all eyes on us, preaching away. Some of us prefer to be anonymous when it comes to serious matters but we delight in being the life and soul of the party. And some of us shrink away in the background – but heaven help others if they don't notice us shrinking away in the background.

What is pride? It's the sin of sins. It's the desire to be right in the middle of our own universe, to make the rules and justify ourselves. It is relentless, self-obsession.

### **b) Exploring Haman's life: what happens to the proud?**

Pride is, essentially, about competition. Which is why it is such a God-hating thing – because we know in our hearts we cannot compete with God.

Here's C S Lewis again: *Pride is competitive by its very nature - while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.*

*That is why I say that Pride is essentially competitive in a way the other vices are not. The sexual impulse may drive two men into competition if they both want the same girl. But that is only by accident; they might just as likely have wanted two different girls. But a proud man will take your girl from you, not because he wants her, but just to prove to himself that he is a better man than you. Greed may drive men into competition if there is not enough to go round; but the proud man, even when he has got more than he can possibly want, will try to get still more just to assert his power. Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of Pride.*

That is exactly what you see in Haman's life isn't it?

We saw last week that by the middle of chapter 5 you would think that Haman would be happy. He is the Prime Minister of the greatest empire on earth. He has successfully issued orders that every Jewish

person, including his arch-rival Mordecai, will be slaughtered. The king has told him he can keep his share of the plunder, and the stunningly beautiful Queen has honoured him with a personal invitation to a banquet.

But it's not enough. Haman doesn't just want more than most people. He doesn't just want more success. He wants to feel that there is nobody in the world who looks down on him. And he knows, because he will not bow, that Mordecai does not respect him. He has to get rid of Mordecai, and quickly, to prove to everybody that he will tolerate nobody who opposes him in any way.

Pride shows itself in Haman's life in rage and hatred of Mordecai, simply because Mordecai hold a mirror up to Haman's life and shows him he is not the person he likes to imagine himself as.

We are often the same aren't we? Pride shows itself in our life in the rejection and despising of those we find threatening to us in any way.

- The proud football supporter isn't happy for his team to win a trophy – he is only happy if they win more trophies than their arch-rival club.
- The proud businessman isn't happy for his business to be successful and make money – he is only happy when they take over rivals and crush competition and come out on top.
- The proud church leader isn't happy merely to see people becoming Christians – he is only happy when their church is growing faster than all the other churches.
- The proud parent isn't happy to see her children mature and grow – she is only happy when they beat other kids into the best schools and pass their music grades ahead of the other kids in the class.

But if we are proud we are absolutely at a loss when it comes to God. Because as soon as we are confronted with the God of the Bible we meet a person who is a real person but who is in every possible way infinitely better than we are. Unless we are conscious that we are, really, nothings compared to God, the God we believe in isn't the God of the Bible at all. And that means that inasmuch as we are proud it is not possible for us to know God.

What happens to the proud? They do not know God. They are destined to be rejected by God just as they

reject him. Or, as the Bible puts it, Pride comes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

What happens to the proud? When we are proud we are never satisfied, endlessly competitive, cannot know God and are destined for destruction.

That's Haman's life isn't it? And that, of course, is my life and your life. Because we are all proud. And one of the surest signs that's true for you is if you are sitting here this morning thinking how great it is that you're not like that. Hello!!! Proud of your humility? Still proud.

Which leads us to our final question: can pride be cured?

### **c) Escaping Haman's destiny: can pride be cured?**

Lots of people imagine that what we need to cure pride is a good dose of morality. But, when you think about it, that's not true at all. Let's say that you are a serial adulterer because you cannot bear to think that there is any man who can resist your feminine charms. And someone convinces you that such an attitude is contemptible and beneath you and that a much healthier self-image would be to not give yourself to such men because actually that shows you to be weak not strong. How different would your pride be then? No different at all! You would simply be proud and chaste instead of proud and promiscuous.

In fact, as I think we all know from experience, there is no pride like a religious pride. Think of the proudest people in the world. The ones who absolutely cannot bear to be slighted or questioned or have their goodness challenged. Who are they?

Fundamentalist Muslim clerics and respectable middle-class churchgoers. The most closed, dogmatic, self-righteous people there are very often, not exclusively but often, religious people. Religion provides a wonderful cloak for pride. It covers it up.

Religion disguises despising others as pity, rejecting others as purity and self-centredness as worshipping God.

C S Lewis suggests a test for pride in the religious – and, if you're here this morning, that is pretty much, be definition, what you are: *"Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good - above all, that we are better than someone else - I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil."*

So you can't cure pride with religion. How can you cure it then?

Well to work that out we need to look at Haman again. What was Haman's fundamental problem? I guess, reading the story, some might say that he was concerned only with what other people thought of him. Others might say that the only thing that mattered to Haman was what he thought of himself.

But I think both of those analyses are wrong. I think, that, read carefully, the problem Haman has is that he is only bothered what the king thinks of him.

Everything in Haman's world revolves around what Xerxes thinks of him. The most galling prospect in the world for Haman is that somebody within the palace, within the orbit of the king, should not respect him. His whole life is centred around the idea that there is nobody the king would rather honour than him.

And what's wrong with that? Well the problem for Haman is that he's seeking the approval of the wrong king.

Haman becomes like the king whose approval he wants. He becomes like Xerxes – bad tempered, vindictive, unable to control his emotions and, ultimately, utterly self-centred. We become like that we worship.

The only solution to pride is not to be more moral. Not to be a better person. Not to try harder – all of those will only make your condition worse than it was before. The only solution to pride is to seek the right king.

King Jesus, the true king, approves us not on the basis of our past acts. Not on the basis of our impressiveness. Not because we have done something to attract his attention.

King Jesus approves us simply because of who he is. It is something in him that makes us acceptable not something in us.

That, of course, is the opposite of religion. It is why Christianity is an anti-religion. It is the heart of the good news of Jesus – we are accepted not because of who we are but because of who he is.

And it is the ultimate cure for pride. The only cure for pride.

When we worship and honour king Jesus, instead of the other kings and gods of this world, we find a king

who approves us not because we are worthy, but because he is worthy.

And when we worship a king like that we become like him. When you seek the approval of a king who approves you because of what he is you are totally liberated to become like he is – centred not on yourself but on other. Serving not yourself but others. Glorifying not yourself but God.

The trouble is, of course, that we all start out proud. And we all need to be turned, unbelievably, miraculously, to seek the approval of King Jesus rather than the approval of our spouse, our boss, our colleagues or our mates which are the things that naturally drive us.

Because all the other people whose approval we might think are utterly self-centred too by nature we will only destroy ourselves, as Haman did, if we seek their approval. Only if we seek the approval of the right king, a king who loves us and gives himself to us, can we ever get off the terrible treadmill of pride.

Haman's story is a terrible and tragic one. It is an awful fate. Not simply because Haman lost his life. But because he lost his soul. And, whether we face an untimely death in this life or not, pride can cause any of us to lose our soul. Please, please don't go there. Don't suffer Haman's fate. Don't seek the approval of the wrong king. It doesn't matter which king or god it is. If it's not the perfect king, Jesus Christ, you will end up like Haman; a terrible and tragic imitation of the thing you worship.

What should you do? What should I do? Recognise the symptoms of the pride we have looked at this morning and throw yourself on the mercy of Jesus. Repent. Say sorry. Be sorry. And embrace the wonderful and perfect king who, alone, can show you your rightful place in the universe and cure your pride.

*Andrew Evans, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008*

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