

## The Price of Survival

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Esther has gained a certain amount of fame as one of the two books in the Bible which does not contain the name of God. It seems strange that a religious book should never mention God. The book is a story of palace intrigue in the ancient kingdom of Persia, an historical incident taken out of the very distant past. We have, I believe, discovered the reason why God's name is omitted from this book. We are encouraged thereby to not look for direct teaching, but indirect teaching from the book. It is that we might not miss the allegorical nature of this book. God is very much in the book, but not in direct appearance. The book is a parable, an allegory about your life and mine. In each Christian the story of Esther is being acted out. This is what makes it so fascinating, so interesting to us.

We have seen that this story is the revelation of the terrible possibility of being a Christian and yet wasting one's life. It is the story of an empire which was almost wrecked by pride without realizing what was the cause. It is the story of the danger of intending to do right, and of wanting to do right, and of thinking we are doing right, but ending up realizing that we have been terribly and tragically wrong. As we go through the book we can recognize in our own lives the characters that are depicted here.

- In each of us there is a Haman, subtly suggesting to us that the way of Christian self-denial and of giving soft answers and of patience is never really going to work, but the way that will make us get ahead is to adopt the philosophy, "Watch out for number one," or "Me for me."
- In each Christian also, there is a Queen Esther, a regenerated spirit made alive in Jesus Christ. It is under the influence of the Holy Spirit, as Romans 8 tells us, "His Spirit bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" {cf, Rom 8:16}, just as Esther was under the influence of Mordecai in this story.
- Each of us, further, has a will expressing the decisions arrived at under the influence of our minds – our reason, our emotions, and will – and that will sits as a king in our lives determining the course of the whole kingdom.

If you have followed the story thus far, you will note that the most important factor developed is that the king does not realize the true character of Haman. He thinks he is his friend. In fact, he has made him the prime minister of the kingdom. Mordecai, who represents in our lives the Holy Spirit, knows what Haman is like, and Esther, the picture of our own human spirit, knows what Haman is like. But the king, that is, our conscious knowledgeable life, goes on in ignorance of the enemy within not knowing what his true character is. As we follow this story along, we discover that, guided by her cousin, Mordecai, Queen Esther has been preparing the king for the revelation of Haman's real nature. It is a very ticklish matter. It always is a delicate thing to reveal to someone the perfidy and treachery of some trusted friend. That is why Esther moves carefully and slowly. At this point in our story she has managed to awaken the king's curiosity and build up his sense of expectation, and at the same time she has tempted Haman to drop all his subtlety and boldly and openly to seek the destruction of Mordecai by nailing him to a gallows seventy-five feet high.

This is where we take up the story anew. It is a moment of suspense and of sinister possibilities. Chapter 6 opens with a **great discovery**:

**On that night the king could not sleep; and he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands upon King Ahasuerus. And the king said, "what honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." {Est 6:1-3 RSV}**

This chapter begins with a restless and sleepless king which seems a rather trivial incident. Yet it is amazing how often momentous events hang upon triviality.

Think back in your own life, and I am sure you will discover this is true. I remember a number of years back when a major airlines flight from Idlewild Airport in New York, crashed a few miles from the airport into Jamaica Bay. Ninety-five persons lost their lives in the crash of that plane. Through the months following, the Federal Aviation authorities searched carefully through the wreckage to discover what caused it, and found that a tiny wire, no more than six inches in length, malfunctioned and threw the whole rudder askew.

So, trivial things sometimes cause tremendous events. Here is a king who could not sleep – and because of that, an empire was saved!

A sleepless night is probably familiar to many of us. I can well imagine that the king lay down on this night expecting to go right off to sleep. But his mind began to go over the events of the day, and he was curious and perplexed about Esther's behavior. Why had she come to him with this strange request, asking him to come to dinner with Haman, the prime minister, the next day? And why, at the risk of her life, did she brave his disfavor to come? What is back of all this? His mind began to go over and over it. After awhile he tried to forget and put it out of his mind, but he found himself coming back to it, tossing and turning restlessly. In the

wee hours of the morning he decided to do what I often do when I can't sleep – he determined to read something to get his mind off his thoughts. So he sent for the chronicles of the kingdom.

Perhaps you will say, "He certainly picked the right kind of book. If there is anything more dull and prosaic than the records of the kingdom, I don't know what it would be. That kind of reading ought to put anybody to sleep!" But these are not mere dull accounts. As we are told here, these were the records of memorable deeds – that is, true accounts of adventure and heroism, the fascinating records of costly and daring achievements. They are heroic accounts. As these records were read to the king, he heard for the first time the story that we have summarized in Chapter 2:

**And in those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the Book of Chronicles in the presence of the king. {Est 2:21-23 RSV}**

When the story was read to him early in the morning, the king did not treat it lightly. In a democracy, such as this, we hardly realize how rare it is to have a change of government by the peaceful processes of an election. Almost everywhere else in the world the usual process of changing governments, even today, is by assassination. Even in those ancient days, palace revolt was the scourge and fear of kings. So this king, Ahasuerus, is aware that this is a serious matter. The discovery of this forgotten act moves the king greatly – he knows that he owes his very life to Mordecai.

It is a sobering thing to know that you owe your life to another! A number of years ago when President Truman was lying in his upstairs bed in Blair House taking a nap one afternoon, a number of desperate men tried to break in and kill him. The Secret Service met them at the entrance and a gun battle ensued in which one of the Secret Service agents was slain. The next day President Tru-

man said, “You know, it is a strange thing to know that you are alive because another man has died. I will never forget what he has done for me.”

Do I need to draw the parallel in your life to this? As we meet here we hold in our hands a record of memorable deeds. This book is the story of One who risked his life for us. Our minds are called back often to those terrible dark hours of the cross when the Lord entered into a death-grapple with the powers of darkness that were arrayed against him. It was the most daring deed ever recorded in all human history! There is nothing like it anywhere else in the records of mankind, how one man, abandoned, alone, struggled there with the invisible, stupefying forces of evil and conquered them. There he died, we are told, not for himself but for us. The whole thing is a tragic, senseless mistake unless we realize what he himself declared is true, this is the Good Shepherd giving his life for the sheep. “He ... who knew no sin was made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him,” {2 Cor 5:21 KJV}.

This is the one thing, designed of God, which can break down the stubborn willfulness of our lives. When, by the Holy Spirit, we grasp what it was that Jesus Christ accomplished for us upon the cross and realize how completely our very lives, our peace, our hope, our joy, our everything, rests upon that, then we begin to understand how much we owe him. Without Christ we are also without hope in the world.

John Wesley, until the day of his death, preserved a picture that an artist had drawn for him of the fire in the old rectory where he had once lived, the fire from which, as a boy of six, he had been rescued in the very nick of time. Underneath that picture, in his own hand, he had written the words, “Is not this a brand plucked from the burning?” That is the story of our life as we view it in the light of the revelation of the Word of God – brands plucked from the burning! All that we are and all that we have is ours because of the death of One who gave his life for us.

“You are not your own, you are bought with a price,” {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. That is the place where God begins when he moves to convince us that the flesh is not our friend, as we think, but an enemy – that the One we can trust is the One to whom we owe our lives. It is no light thing to be a

Christian. It meant a price of blood and pain and tears and death. It is good that now and then we are called to remember that price, as we gather about the table of the Lord and recall what our Lord went through. There we discover anew the right that he has to our lives.

This is always the beginning of deliverance for us. Not some abstract acknowledgment that Christ died for us, I am not talking about that. Not some creed we recite that he is the Savior of the world. I am talking about some quiet realization, perhaps in a communion service, perhaps in your own home, perhaps when you are out alone, when you realize the truth, and it comes home to you in moving power, in staggering shattering force, that you truly are a brand plucked from the burning – that the Holy Spirit has the right to the day-by-day, moment-by-moment direction of your life – that you would not have that life if it were not for him. As you recognize that, you yield to the totalitarian sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. That is the beginning of deliverance! You discover who, indeed, is your friend:

What a friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear,  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer.

When we discover this, then we are ready for the next step in our story, which is the expression of **the king's delight**:

**And the king said, “Who is in the court?” Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. So the king's servants told him, “Haman is there, standing in the court.” And the king said, “let him come in.” So Haman came in, and the king said to him, “what shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?” And Haman said to himself, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” And Haman said to the king, “For the man who the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set; and let the robes and the horse**

**be handed over to one of the king's most noble princes; let him array the man whom the king delights to honor, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." {Est 6:4-11 RSV}**

Four times in this account we have the phrase "the man whom the king delights to honor." Out of the king's discovery comes this delight. Even though it is early in the morning, he hastens to display the gratitude he feels. He asks, "Who is on duty in the court?" By a strange twist of fate, one of those coincidences which are never coincidence, Haman is entering at that very moment to propose his bloody plan to the king, when the king greets him with these words, "What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" Haman has no doubt who that man is. There is only one whom he thinks can fit the requirements – himself!

How beautifully characteristic this is of *the flesh* in us. When things go well with us, how do we explain it? "Oh," we say, "at last we are getting the breaks we deserve. Fortune is beginning to smile on us now." We leave the clear impression that sooner or later our superior qualities were bound to be recognized.

But the interesting thing here is that Haman well knows what true honor is. Immediately, without hesitation, he replies, "Do this and this and this." What do we do when we want to honor someone? We give them a gold watch, or a testimonial dinner, or a plaque to hang on the wall. But there is something better than that. Haman says, "Look, if you want to really honor this man, give him your kingly clothes to wear, your horse to ride, give him a crown to wear – give him yourself, publicly!" This is true honor.

Jesus says, "If any man will serve me, him will my Father honor," {cf, John 12:26}. And the honor that God gives is himself! God gives us his own clothing, his horse, his crown, all that he is, he gives to us. This is what honor is!

Now let me ask you this question, as I ask myself, recognizing that I owe my life to Jesus Christ, my hope, my happiness, my everything: Do I honestly desire to honor him, this One to whom I owe my very life?

Then the only way I can do it is to give him the very clothes I wear, give him my horse to ride, give him my crown to wear, publicly and openly to give him these things! Isn't this what the New Testament is saying?

- "Yield ye your members unto God." {Rom 6:13 KJV}.
- "Present your bodies a living sacrifice unto him," {Rom 12:1 KJV}.
- "Ye are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your bodies and in your spirit which are his," {cf, 1 Cor 6:20 KJV}.

Grant him authority in your life! Give him your crown to wear! Grant him the right to be Lord of every area, every detail, every aspect of your life! This is true honor.

Is it your delight to do this? Well, if not, then you have forgotten that this is One to whom you owe your life!

Now when the king delights to honor Mordecai, let's see what happens to Haman. This last picture is one of **desperation**:

**Then the king said to Haman, "Make haste, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he arrayed Mordecai and made him ride through the open square of the city proclaiming, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."**

**Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had befallen him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him."**

**While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and brought Haman in haste to the banquet that Esther had prepared. {Est 6:10-14 RSV}**

What a scene this is! Can you imagine it? What a picture of bitter humiliation as Haman, in a blinding rage, walks through the streets of this city leading the horse of Mordecai who is clad in the royal garments of the king and wearing a crown upon his head. Can you imagine what goes through Haman's heart? All his plans of glory fallen through. All his proud ambitions threatened by this galling thing that he must do! Outwardly, he is praising Mordecai, "This is the man whom the king delights to honor." Inwardly, he is grinding his teeth and awaiting a time for revenge.

But the point is, he does this! He will do anything as the price of survival!

Have you found this in your own life? Have you discovered that when you get in earnest about serving Christ and honoring him that at first, out of the depth of your love for him, you really do serve him and honor him. But before long:

- You catch on that it is quite possible to look like you are serving him, but actually not do so.
- You can get by saying the right things, or going the right places with the right people, but inside you are still very much determined to have your own way and to run your own life.
- You quarrel with someone and you know that the Christian thing is to apologize and forgive, so you go through the motions, you say the words, but inside you vow that you will never forget. This is the flesh, Haman, bowing to the demands of the king, but only because it is the price of survival to be a respectable Christian.

Left to itself, the flesh is openly arrogant, overbearing, boastful, lustful, cynical, proud. We have it described in Ephesians 5. But when it is driven by the Spirit into a corner it can assume a garb of righteousness and become pious, religious, scrupulous about morals, zealous in church work, indignant over wrongs, provokingly evangelical!

Have you ever met Haman like this – walking through the streets of the city openly proclaiming, "This is the man whom the king delights to honor" – inwardly seething, hating? Willing to do anything that looks good as long as it can survive?

The righteousness of the flesh is always counterfeit righteousness. It is centered in self, and therefore it is always self-righteousness. Haman can seemingly honor Mordecai, but he never really does. The flesh can seemingly please God, but it never does! Romans declares, "They that are in the flesh cannot please God," {Rom 8:8 KJV}.

- The flesh can memorize Scripture.
- The flesh can teach Sunday school.
- The flesh can distribute tracts,
  - give large gifts of money,
  - give a stirring testimony,
  - teach a Bible class,
  - sing solos, or
  - preach a sermon.
- It can even apologize (after a fashion),
- and repent (to some extent),
- or suffer (with a martyred air),

but there is one thing that it will never do. It will do anything to survive, but one thing: It will never give in,

- it will never surrender,
- it will never change,
- it will never give up,
- – never!

It is a slippery, elusive thing; and, when we back it into a corner, it simply takes on a different disguise and appears in a different form, but it is the same old, deadly, evil flesh. When driven into a corner it would rather wreck your life than give in.

Have you found this to be true?

Some time ago I was inquiring about a pastor friend who is suffering from a difficulty with his vocal cords. I was told that he has a growth on his vocal cords, but the doctor had told him that because he is a non-smoker the chance that this will not be malignant is nine to one in favor. But if he had been a heavy smoker, the chances would be exactly reversed, nine to one that it would be malignant. The amazing phenomenon of our day is that in the face of increasingly overwhelming evidence that smoking is extremely injurious to health and is one of the major causes of cancer, people still insist upon smoking, and tobacco companies

still insist upon peddling this product. It confirms something I have suspected for a long time, that smoking is not merely physical desire, but it is also a psychological symbol. It is a mark of seeming independence. This is what makes a boy or girl want to smoke.

I have watched many teenage boys and almost invariably the thing that drives them to smoke is not a love for tobacco, but simply a desire to be identified as a man – this is what makes a man! And even though you tell them this, they still go right ahead, driven by the need to demonstrate independence of spirit. I am convinced this is one of the major reasons why the tobacco habit is so hard to break. Please don't misunderstand me. I am in no sense attempting to launch a campaign against smoking or smokers. This is simply an illustration of what the flesh, that spirit of independence, will do. It can take many other forms.

Take pride. Men will often destroy their families, their homes, their friends, their business, rather than yield on a point of pride. I have seen it happen. I know a man who has, one by one, driven his children from his house because he refuses to acknowledge that his philosophy of raising them is wrong. He would far rather see them go than bend his will, bend his pride. I have seen pride wreck homes, destroy marriages, blast and ruin and wreck lives. It is doing it now. It will do it again. Men would give up anything rather than to yield on this point.

This is the picture of it. Haman will do anything. He will even be religious if he has to! Anything, as long as he can survive. There is only one thing to which he will yield. There is only one place where he can overcome – that is the cross of Christ. The flesh cannot change, therefore it must die, but when the flesh gets religious and moral its end may be very near. Haman has a premonition of

this: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him."

But one step remains to bring about Haman's defeat. We will look at that in our next study.

But let me say this: This is the very purpose for which Jesus Christ has entered your life. It was not merely to give you a ticket for heaven, and an insurance policy against going to hell. It was to lay hold in your life of the devilish, satanic thing that rears itself against the authority of God, and tear it out, and deliver you from its power!

And the glory of the gospel is that this has already been done – the power of evil has been broken. It is now up to us to appropriate it, to live in the glorious liberty of the children of God.

### Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you again for the clear, bright glow of the light of your truth which illuminates the dark recesses of our own hearts so that we see ourselves exactly as we are. What a frightening, horrible thing and yet, thank God, we need not continue to look at that, but there is One to whom we can turn, One who has come into this world for this very purpose, that he might destroy the works of the devil, and who has done it. Turning to him we can appropriate all the glory of his life, all the splendor of his character, all the wonder of his person. We thank you for this. We pray that every day, all the day, all through the moments of our lives, we may learn this process of drawing from him all that he is to destroy the Haman within us. For we pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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