

STUDIES IN ESTHER

[Ray C. Stedman](#) preached these nine messages (DP#32-40) from the Old Testament book of Esther in 1963 at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California. They are available in book form under the title, *The Queen and I*. Corrections and updates by Ben Whitney, January 26, 1997.

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A PAIR OF QUEENS

by Ray C. Stedman

Esther is one of the neglected books of the Bible. A number of people have said to me, "I don't think I've ever heard a sermon, or a series of sermons, on the book of Esther." I think that reflects something of the common attitude about this book. It is largely neglected as far as teaching from the pulpit is concerned, and oftentimes in private reading of the Scriptures as well.

Esther is a different kind of literature from anything you will find in the New Testament, and also from much that you will discover in the Old Testament; and because it is a different kind of literature, I think perhaps we are a bit frightened by it. Perhaps it's so different because it's about a woman. I have lived with six women, and I feel that I am somewhat of an authority in this field! There are three books in the Bible about women, all of which are of this particular type, so there may be more to that surmise than first appears. The book of Esther, the book of Ruth and the Song of Solomon are all about women. They are all delightful stories, but in each one it is a bit difficult to get below the surface and discover what is hidden there.

If you have read this book of Esther, I'm sure you have found it an intriguing and fascinating story. It's a delightful story of human love and palace intrigue. Anyone who begins it will find himself fascinated till he reaches the end. But, perhaps, when you read it, you will wonder why it is in the Bible. You might think, "It's an interesting story and I'd appreciate it if it appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, but I really don't see much reason for it to be here in the Bible." It doesn't mention the name of God even once. There is no reference in it to worship, or to faith. There is no prophecy of Christ. There is no mention of heaven or hell. In short, there is nothing very religious about this book. How then did it find its way into the pages of the Bible?

Most commentators on the book of Esther take it as revealing the strange providences of God; that is, how God works behind the scenes. This, I think, is a very true approach to the book of Esther. It is an amazing revelation of how God works through natural means and how he can bring about his will through the free-will choices of men who are unconscious of any coercion from God. And, yet, I don't think this, by any means, gets at the real teaching of this book.

The Apostle Paul, you remember, reminds us that all the things that happened to Israel happened as types or parables for us. This by no means indicates that these things did not really happen; they did happen. In some of the commentator's notes on books like Esther (and other books of the Bible) you will find suggestions at

times that perhaps these things didn't actually occur, that they are legends, or myths, that have been gathered up and fictionalized, somewhat like a historical novel, and are presented to teach a certain lesson. Some commentators take that position with regard to the book of Esther. I don't think this can be established. There is a great deal of confirmation from secular history that these things did indeed happen. This is authentic history; it's not merely legend or myth, but it is recorded in such a way as to form a living parable for us of something that is true in our own experience, or could be true for us. Thus it is a wonderfully lucid, informative illustration of some great truth God would have us grasp.

This is the way we are going to approach this -- as a parable -- just as we would approach any of the parables that our Lord spoke in the New Testament. This was our Lord's favorite method of teaching -- to tell a story that would illustrate a point. Now the word "parable" means to "lay alongside," to "cast down or throw down alongside of something". This is the purpose of a parable -- something you place alongside to make the meaning clear. The very first parable God ever gave was when he took a rib from the side of Adam and made a woman and laid her alongside of man. And, as man looked into woman's face, he saw a reflection of his own character and personality and makeup. That was a parable! Men have been trying to interpret that parable ever since, and have come up with some rather strange explanations of it.

A parable, then, is really something designed to help you see yourself. Some of you ladies may be working in the kitchen some morning, busy making pies or other interesting pastry items, and while you are working away, you hear the doorbell ring. You are put into immediate panic because you are afraid that you are not presentable, so you run into the bedroom and grab a mirror and hold it up to your face (bring it "alongside") and in that mirror you see yourself. That mirror is a parable to reveal to you what you look like at the moment. You hastily grab a towel and wipe off the smudge of flour that's on your nose and straighten your hair and then run to the door. The parable has helped you to see what you're like.

Now, that is what a parable is for, and that's what this story of Esther is -- so, as we approach this book, we will look for the story behind the story. As it unfolds, we will see that this story is really our story -- that we are in this parable -- that this is a drama revealing God at work in our lives, to do what he wants to do, and how he will do it. If we see this parable, then, in it's proper setting, we will understand a great deal more of what God is doing in our own affairs today. This is one of the most vital and marvelous illustrations found in the Old Testament, and I hope that you will approach it with a sense of quickening excitement.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Esther sets the stage for us, and introduces the action of the story. The title I have chosen for the study of these two chapters is, *A Pair of Queens*.

Now, if you think this reveals a misspent youth, wasting my time at a poker table, you're wrong! At least, you're wrong about what the Queen stands for. You may not be wrong about the poker! In poker, a pair of Queens can be topped by a pair of Kings, or a pair of Aces, but the figure of the Queen of Esther is more like the Queen in a chess game. The most powerful figure on the chess board, as any person who plays chess knows, is the Queen. She always is subject to the King and interested in his welfare, yet she is the most powerful of the two.

So this story of Esther centers around a queen. It's the story of a kingdom and it's king and queen. It opens with a report of the magnificence of that kingdom. Let me read just a few verses from the opening chapter:

In the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa the capital, in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and servants, the army chiefs of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces being before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, a hundred and eighty days. And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the capital, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings caught up with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was

lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to the law, no one was compelled; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as every man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus. {Est 1:1-9 RSV}

The name of this king is never given to us. Ahasuerus is not his name, it is his title, like the word "Czar" or "Shah" or "Pharaoh". There are several men identified in Scripture as Ahasuerus, not all the same man, because this is a common title. It means "The Venerable Father" and was an apt title for the king. Secular history identifies this man as possibly being Xerxes the Great, the one who attacked the power of Greece in the fourth century B.C., but it's much more likely, I think, that this man is Astyages, the son of Cyrus the First, who is the one called in the book of Daniel, "Darius the Mede", the man who took the kingdom from Belshazzar during the great drunken orgy in the city of Babylon on the night that Babylon fell. However, this is somewhat beside the point, for the fact that the name is never given to us here indicates that it is not too important.

If, as we read this story through, we hold it up as a mirror, we can see ourselves, because every person is just such a kingdom ruled by such a king as we have presented here. The body of man is his kingdom, and a marvelously intricate and complex kingdom it is. Any of you who have studied about the intricacies of the human body know that the government of the body is a marvelous thing, intricately designed and wonderfully efficient -- marvelously complex. And in control over all the life of the kingdom is the king, the soul of man, with the faculties of mind, emotion, and will. Whatever the king does affects the kingdom; whatever goes wrong with your soul -- in the realm of your mind, your emotions, or your will -- has an immediate effect on your body, the kingdom. You know that the body acts only upon responses which come from the mind, the emotions, and the will of man. Thus you can see how apt this allegory is.

But this is not all, for a king without a queen has no hope of a successor. When a king without a queen dies, the whole kingdom crumbles and perishes. If man were nothing more than a body and a soul, as communism tells us he is, then when man dies he would die like an animal. There would be nothing beyond death, no immortality -- nothing beyond. This is the philosophy which has captured the imagination of millions of people around the earth. The communists have built upon it to say that man is nothing more than an animal; therefore he can be bred like an animal -- he can be improved in strain like an animal -- he can be treated like an animal. There is no moral obligation to treat him any different way. But man is more than an animal. Man was also given a spirit, and that spirit is like a queen to a king. It's the spirit of man which makes man an immortal being. It's the spirit which does not perish, like his soul would if it were alone (like an animal's soul) but continues on eternally. It's in the realm of the spirit that man finds his comfort and refreshing and counsel from a Higher Being. It's to the queen that the king goes for comfort and refreshing counsel -- she is the place of his communion. You can see how beautifully this describes the most intimate, most essential activity of man's nature; that is, what takes place deep in the recesses of his spirit. The union of the soul and the spirit in man is the most intimate and delicate known. There is only one thing that can expose it -- the Bible says, "The Word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, making known the intents and purposes of the heart," {cf, Heb 4:12 KJV}. This is the only thing that can reveal those things that go on down in the very innermost recesses of our life at the deepest level of our conscious existence.

Chapter 1 in this story of Esther is the story, then, of a king who tried to degrade his own queen; and when he found that it was impossible to do so, by his own choice, he cut himself off from her fellowship forever. I think if you will lay that parable alongside the story of man, you will see immediately how it reveals what has happened. At the point the story opens, we find the kingdom lying at peace -- the king is holding a feast which lasts for a hundred and eighty days. That's the longest feast I've ever heard of -- about six months long. It reveals that there was no threat to this kingdom from the outside -- it was a time of peace and blessing, fullness and fruitfulness. The king was perfectly free to do nothing but to display the lavish glory of the riches of that kingdom. The whole point of this is given to us in Verse 4, where we read the king "showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, ..."

Now, man is a king, the Bible says -- but not by his own right. In the eighth Psalm, David sings about the nature of man. He says,

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him? {Psa 8:3-4 RSV}**

Then he answers his own question:

Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands. {Psa 8:6a RSV}

Man, as God intended him, was made to be a king. And in properly governing himself and the earth, which is his domain, he would be displaying the majesty and the glory and the power of the God who indwelt him. This is what man was intended to be, and this is what man has never forgotten. We wonder what it is that motivates men to climb to the top of Mount Everest. What is there on top of Mount Everest that people must organize expeditions, lay out small fortunes, and risk their lives in order to see it? Nothing! Just the other side of the mountain, as the old song says. Well, then, why do they go up there? Because man has never forgotten that he was given dominion over all the earth; he was told to master it's forces; he was told to discover all it's mysteries and secrets, and thus to display the majesty of the glory and might of the God who indwelt him. This is man's function -- man was made for the glory of God. So it was with Adam in the Garden of Eden -- he had nothing to do but to serve this one function: to display in terms of his own human personality all the majesty, all the glory, all the wisdom, all the might of the God who indwelt him.

As we read this story in Esther, we find that this king, however, was not content to display the authority that was properly his. For as the party goes on, he seems to feel that the glory and majesty was of his own making. He was lifted up with pride and weakened by his own indulgence. He foolishly tries to pervert his own nature, in a sense, to satisfy his own evil ambition, and he sends for the queen to come and display all her beauty and glory before this crowd.

Why is it that whenever a man is lifted up with pride, he invariably hurts the one he loves? In counseling with men and women, I have found this is the case -- when we begin to act in pride, the first thing we do is take it out on our loved ones. When we become offended by something that has taken place in the office, we go home and snap at our wives and children. Or in the case of the wife, if things haven't gone well in the home during the day, when the husband comes home at night, she scolds him as soon as he comes in the door. Why do we do this? Why is it we want to degrade the ones we really hold in highest esteem? Well, it's simply the nature of sin. This is the story of human life -- and this is what happened here. When this king was lifted up in pride, he began to fancy that the glory was really his -- that it was all his making and his doing, and then in his pride he sent for the one who ought to have been reserved for the intimate communion of his own private life to make mockery of her before all. But he found it could not be done.

Apply this, if you will, to the story of man as we trace it through the Scriptures. Answer this question: When did man fall? When did Adam fall? Was it when Eve ate the apple? Isn't it amazing that when we read the story of man's fall, so-called, in Genesis 3, it isn't man's fall that is recorded, it's Eve's -- it's the woman's fall. Did Adam fall then? No! Eve's fall is simply the way by which the tempter found his way into Adam's life. It was the channel by which he approached the man. Then when did Adam fall? He fell when he chose to assert the supremacy of his soul -- his mind, emotions, and his will -- over the revelation of truth which was available to him in the inner chambers of his spirit where he met God face to face. He tried to reverse the order of his own nature and to make his reason superior to revelation, and thus to downgrade and degrade the function of his spirit. He found it impossible to do; man cannot change his own nature. We are free to change the environment around us all we like; we can do whatever we like with all the chemical elements we discover and all the electronic forces we unveil, but to change our own nature is impossible.

In this account we find that, when the queen was summoned to appear before the king in this wrongful fashion, she refused to do so. As a result, in a fit of anger and pride, the king made a choice from which he could not retreat -- that he would no longer have anything to do with her. When Adam was approached by Eve with the fruit of disobedience, and he understood clearly what the issues were, he deliberately chose what his reason said over what God's revelation taught, and he ate of the fruit of disobedience and thus cut himself off from the glory of God in his own spirit. So he entered upon the lonely restlessness that has been characteristic

of fallen man ever since.

Now, we have a strange thing introduced at this point of the story. In Verse 13 it says:

Then the king said to the wise men who know the times -- for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, {Est 1:13 RSV}

And then the men's names are given:

"According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?" {Est 1:15 RSV}

What's to be done with this woman who refused to obey the king? What's to be done with this spirit which will not subject itself to the pride inherent in the soul? Then we read how he understood that this would have a very upsetting effect upon the whole kingdom, so in Verse 19 the sentence is passed:

"If it please the king, let a royal order go forth from him and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is to come no more before King Ahasuerus." {Est 1:19a RSV}

Here is a law which cannot be changed. Figuratively, it's what is referred to in the book of Romans as the law of sin and death -- unchangeable. We know it in secular life as the law of retribution, or the law of inevitable consequence; that is, we may have the right to make a choice, but we have no power to change the results of our choice when it is made. I may have before me two glasses of liquid, both looking like water. One is water -- one is a glass of poison, and I know that it is poison. Now, I have a choice I can make: I can choose to drink the water if I please, or I may drink the poison. If I choose to drink the poison, I have exercised my own free will in making that choice, but once I make it, I no longer have control over what the results will be. I have set in motion a law which can never be changed or altered -- the law of inevitable consequence. And when man chose, in the Garden {of Eden}, to give heed to the voice of his reason over the voice of revelation, when he elected to choose the desire of his own heart over that of the fellowship of God, he set in motion a string of circumstances which he was powerless to alter. He could not change it. It was the law of sin and death. So the human spirit became dark and unresponsive and no choice of man can alter that fact. Man became a soulish being, governed by his mind, his emotions, and his will -- his own ego sitting on the throne of his kingdom brooking no opposition. He began to look only to his own mind, his own emotions, and his own will for wisdom to make the decisions of life. We have here the explanation of all the folly, injustice, evil, sin, misery and darkness of human life.

Chapter 2 is the story of redeeming grace. It begins with the king vainly seeking to satisfy his restless soul with a fruitless search for someone to fill the vacuum of his life. Right here, you could write the entire story of human life without God. Man -- seeking, restless, dissatisfied -- never daring to be alone with his own thoughts, always demanding something to anesthetize the pain of his own loneliness, looking ever for some mad, giddy whirl of continual pleasure -- anything to keep him satisfied. This is the story of man. We read of that search in the opening verses of the chapter:

After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the capital, under custody of Hegai the king's eunuch who is in charge of the women; let their ointments be given them. And let the maiden who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so. {Est 2:1-4 RSV}

This is the account of the unending, restless search of man for something to satisfy the deep need of his heart.

Now, in Verses 5-7, we have introduced to us two of the most important characters of this story:

Now there was a Jew in Susa the capital whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. He had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother; the maiden was beautiful and lovely, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter. {Est 2:5-7 RSV}

Mordecai is perhaps the most important character in this story. He was a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin. We'll see something of the significance of that as the story develops later on. As a Jew, he was one of God's chosen agents by whom contact is made with all the race. This is the position of the Jew in human history. Mordecai's name means "Little Man", that is, humbled man, and that immediately suggests the One who humbled himself and became man, who laid aside his glory and entered human life, becoming one of us, and was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:5-8). As we trace the character of Mordecai through this story it is easy to recognize him as the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, whose task it is to exalt the One who came to redeem man, and whose specific work it is to restore man to the fellowship with God which he had lost. We'll find Mordecai fulfilling that function throughout this story.

Now the new queen (the new Spirit which is intended for the lonely soul of man) is Esther. Her name in Hebrew, Hadassah, means "Myrtle," the lowly shrub that was commonly regarded as the symbol of Israel. Her Persian name is usually taken to mean "Star," but Gesenius, one of the great Hebrew authorities, says that it is taken from the word "to hide." It means "hidden," which I think is beautifully descriptive of the spirit of man. Now, in this account, we read how Mordecai begins at once to bring Esther and the king together in a most natural and unaffected manner. He maneuvered to place Esther in the line of the king's search. I don't think I need to enlarge upon that as indicating how the Holy Spirit does this with man. The whole of the Bible is the account of God seeking man, yet man thinking that he is seeking God. How many times in the Scriptures do you not read some exhortation as, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found" {Isa 55:6}, and that "He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him," {Heb 11:6 KJV}. Yet, when our search is ended we are invariably astounded to discover that it wasn't we who were seeking -- it was God who found us! Just so, in this account of Esther, we have what may be the classic example of the old saying, "He pursued her until she captured him," for we read here of the king's search and yet, when it ends, Esther has come to the throne through maneuverers that he knows nothing about.

Now, there is a sense in which he had no right to have this girl. She belonged to a special race, a race that was forbidden by law to marry with another race. She was a Jewess, and yet here she is in this foreign land, and, by the sovereign, overruling grace of God, is placed in the line of the king's search; and when he finds her he knows that this is the one for whom his heart longs. How beautifully representative this is of the fact that we have no right to a redeemed spirit. Someone has well said, "The only right man has is to be damned", and if we insist upon our rights, that's where we'll end. But God in grace overrules, and places in the line of our search that for which we are looking. When our spirits are made alive and new by faith in Jesus Christ, we discover that this is the one thing that our life has been yearning for -- that this is the One who satisfies the hunger of our souls.

So at last, as the story proceeds, Esther's turn came to be brought before the king:

When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus into his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king gave a great banquet to all his princes and servants; it was Esther's banquet. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal liberality. {Est 2:15-18 RSV}

We may call this, if you like, the conversion of King Ahasuerus. He recognized in this lovely girl the answer

to the empty restlessness of his life, and he set the sign of royalty upon her head, granted her authority in his kingdom, and thus found the beginning of a new life. Throughout the kingdom there is an immediate effect -- there is a lifting of the burdens of taxation and a distribution of royal gifts with liberality. Does this need interpreting? Isn't this exactly what the New Testament means when it says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" {cf, 2 Cor 5:17}? Life begins anew. There is a lifting of the burden and guilt of sin. There is a wonderfully refreshing quality about this life. We sing in the old hymn:

Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green,
Something lives in every hue,
Christless eyes have never seen.

Life begins anew!

The chapter closes with an account of how the entrance of Mordecai and Esther into the life of this king involved also deliverance from a plot which threatened the very life of the king:

When the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Now Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. 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, become angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And this come 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 the Chronicles in the presence of the king. {Est 2:19-23 RSV}

Here the life of the king is at stake -- here is the first hint of the existence of an evil force which is at work to destroy and to capture the mind, emotions, and will of man, to pervert these to it's own uses, and to oppose the glory of God's purpose in man's life. You know that force well. It is at work in your own kingdom, and the life of the king is at stake. The soul of man is the prize in this great warfare, carried on within the soul of each of us. The enemy tries to strike, but Mordecai (who is now sitting in the gate as a judge in the city for he has not yet full access to the palace) discovers the plot, and the adversaries are taken out and publicly "nailed to a tree". This is literally what it says, "hanged on the gallows" is an interpretation. The literal Hebrew is that they were "impaled, or nailed to a tree."

In Colossians we read:

"And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh [you who were men and women in whom the Spirit had fallen into disuse and unresponsiveness, who had nothing beyond the life of a soul], God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him [that is, in the cross]." {Col 2:13-15 RSV}.

"Triumphing over them in him" -- this is what we find represented in this graphic account in the Old Testament: that there is in our lives an evil force which threatens to overcome us. The end of the story is not yet -- but the enemy is known, and his doom is certain. All this, we are told, was recorded in a book that is available to the king. It was recorded in the Book of Chronicles of the Medes and Persians. The king does not yet realize all that it means. So God has recorded all that he has done for us in a book, and when we begin to understand what that book says about the deliverance that has been wrought for us, and realize what has been nailed to the tree and made a public example for us, we will begin to experience the deliverance that God intends for your life and mine.

Is this not where God has brought many of us today?

We are Christians. We have known the restlessness of living without God. We have been engaged in a great search for something to satisfy.

We have tried everything and have come at last to see that only in Jesus Christ is there satisfaction for the deep need of our hearts. We have received him and discovered that life began again. We look back with delight to that day and we look onward to the certain and sure promise that we shall be with him in glory.

Ah, but what about in between? Conversion is just the beginning of the story. Did you think this was all there was to a Christian life? To know Christ and to look on to heaven some day and try to struggle through the best you can till then? Oh, no! This is just the beginning of the story of Esther. These first chapters merely set the stage for the deliverance which God intends to work in the life of the king in this kingdom, just as he wants to work a similar deliverance in your life in the kingdom of your own heart.

He is now ready to begin his intended work, and, as we go on in the story of Esther, we will discover what God, the Holy Spirit, intends to do in the life of each one of us in whom Jesus Christ has found a throne. He will expose to us the hidden plot to our lives that continually keeps us under bondage to our own selfish ways, and then he will bring us out into the glorious liberty and freedom of the sons of God.

Prayer:

Our Father, we confess to thee that as we approach this book we do so with a sense of weakness. We know thou hast hidden things here that are deep and difficult for us to grasp, and yet we sense, Lord, something of expectation and hope in what is contained in these pages. Help us to see that here is a story, if we can but see it, of that which thou art about to do in our own lives. Make us to understand and grasp it. Help us to see these principles, to clearly understand the way into the beauty and glory of the life that thou hast planned for us -- here on this earth, right now! We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: A Pair of Queens
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Esther
Scripture: Esther 1 & 2
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 32
Date: February 24, 1963

THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER

by Ray C. Stedman

If you had a map of Iran, the ancient country of Persia, you would mark the capital of that country as a city called Teheran. If you were in Teheran and drove west on the great highway to Baghdad, about 65 miles from the city of Hamadan you would find, out on the plain, a great solitary rock rising up. It is called the Rock of Behistun and rises up about seventeen hundred feet above the plain. Five hundred feet above the level of the plain is a great area that has been cleared off and smoothed away, and on that rock are carved inscriptions placed there by Darius the Great, one of the ancient kings of Persia. In three different languages he tells us about his reign and the glory of his kingdom. He begins by giving his genealogy: He says that his father was named Cyrus, known to history as Cyrus the Great. Many of you will recognize that name. His grandfather was named Arsames, also known as Astyages and Cambyses in secular history. It is this Arsemas who is the king called Ahasuerus in the book of Esther in our Bible.

This rock, standing yet on the plain of Iran, is a living testimony to the authentic history of the book. Do I sound like I have been there? Well, I have traveled around the world many times by means of the *National*

Geographic Magazine, and there have been some very interesting pictures of this great rock and the inscriptions on it which have appeared there.

In the latter part of the reign of King Arsames or Astyages or Ahasuerus (as you have it in Esther), this man was privileged by God to be the one who issued the decree to build and restore the city of Jerusalem. The decree was given to a young man in his court who was his cupbearer, named Nehemiah, and it was Nehemiah who began the work of restoration.

In the book of Daniel we read of a certain Darius the Mede who besieged the city of Babylon in the days of Belshazzar, the king. On the fateful night when Belshazzar gave a great feast for all his nobles and they were celebrating in a drunken revelry within the banquet halls, a hand came out and wrote upon the wall, *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* -- "Numbered, Numbered, Weighed, and Wanting." Daniel interpreted that as the sentence of God to remove the kingdom from Belshazzar. That night, we read, Darius the Mede, otherwise known as Astyages, Arsames, or Ahasuerus, took the kingdom and became the king of Babylon. This man is very often in the pages of Scripture.

He was a young man of about eighteen years of age when the events of the book of Esther begin. Vashti was his queen, a woman of the Lydian line, and, as we read in the first chapter of Esther, he deposed his queen in a fit of anger and for three lonely years lived without a queen. But when he was twenty-one, by the grace of God, he found and married a young Jewess, named Esther, who had been one of the captives brought from the city of Jerusalem. Her cousin, Mordecai, became a judge in the city of Susa, the capital of Media and uncovered a plot against the king's life. This is the point to which we have traced the story of this book of Esther.

We have found this is not simply a story out of the dust of the long forgotten past, interesting as it may be.

Really, this is your life!

You are the king, which reaches out to influence all those who have contact with you. You have great influence in this empire. You are its king, and, if you are a Christian, you, too, have found a new queen when your spirit was made alive in Jesus Christ. In that place of new communion, you have sensed the influence of the Holy Spirit who has caused to be recorded in a book the whole story of the plot of the evil one against your life.

You can see how aptly this story of Esther retraces the story of your life.

We have reached the place in the book of Esther, at the close of the first two chapters, which represents all that most Christians know about the Christian life. They have accepted Christ so many years ago; they have been born again; they feel that they have been left here to struggle on the best they can until the Lord comes or they are called to be with him -- and they are trying to make the best of it until that time. This is all they know. Christianity, to them, is receiving Christ, being born again, and trying to do the best they can from there on.

Now, if this were all there were to the Christian experience, then the book of Esther would end at Chapter 2. But it doesn't. It goes on to teach some very important truths.

I talked recently with a woman, the wife of a Protestant minister, whose husband had faithfully preached throughout his ministry that Jesus Christ died to save men from sin and who had proclaimed the gospel invitation to receive him and life would begin anew; but he had never learned any more of the Christian life than that, and as a result of his ignorance of what the Word of God says about Christian life beyond conversion, his ministry was falling apart and his home was breaking up.

The rest of the book of Esther magnificently sets forth the unveiling of the process of evil in human life, and the way God works to deliver us from it.

We can pick up the story in Chapter 3 with *The Revelation of the Conflict Within* :

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance. Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was filled with fury. {Est 3:1-5 RSV}

Mordecai we know, but who is Haman? He's suddenly introduced into the record here. What is behind the immediate antagonism that we find between Mordecai and Haman in the story? We get a clue in the parentage that's given for this man. He was Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite. What is an Agagite? Here we will need to do a little detective work. If you haven't learned the extreme excitement of studying your Bible as though you were Perry Mason, you've missed a great deal of life. You need to do much detective work in studying the Bible. The man is an Agagite. That means he is a descendant of a man named Agag. Where do you find Agag in the Scriptures? In the fifteenth chapter of First Samuel, we have the account of how King Saul, the first king of Israel, was ordered by Samuel, the prophet of God, to mount an expedition against the Amalekites, and we read in Chapter 15:

And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore hearken to the words of the Lord: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'" {1 Sam 15:1-3 RSV}

And so Saul gathered the people and went down to battle, and we read in Verse 8:

And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword, but Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was goods and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed. {1 Sam 15:8-10 RSV}

Because of this failure Samuel was sent of God to tell Saul that the kingdom was to be taken from him and given to another since he had refused to obey the command of God to destroy Agag, the king of the Amalekites. If we trace further back, we discover that Amalek was the enemy of Israel when they came through the wilderness on the way from Egypt into Canaan.

In the seventeenth chapter of the book of Exodus we read concerning Amalek, these words:

Then came Amalek and fought with Israel at Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat upon it, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my Banner, saying, "A hand upon the banner of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." {Exod 17:8-16 RSV}

Going back even farther you will discover that Amalek was the grandson of Esau, that Esau of whom God said, "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated." All through the Bible, Amalek, Agag, and the descendants of Esau picture to us an enemy that oppose all that God would do. Now there's such a principle of evil at work in every human heart. In the kingdom over which you reign, there is a Haman who is an Agagite.

Just as the solar system is a vastly expanded duplicate of what goes on in the atom, so, in effect, the history of the world is a vastly expanded duplicate of what goes on in an individual human life. In every life there is this satanic principle at work. It is called in the New Testament, "the flesh". It lives for but one purpose, reflected here in the story of Esther -- in order to exalt itself. It never enjoys life more than when people are bowing and scraping in front of it. It is forever seeking status and position in the eyes of others.

You know well this feeling, don't you? It appears to us as a trusted friend, just as Haman appeared to King Ahasuerus as one he could trust. And yet Haman's true purpose was to advance himself and to see that everyone bowed low before him. So we treat this strange invader in our lives as though he were a friend -- we promote him and advance him. Isn't it interesting that we are not ashamed of our pride? We boast of it, we trust it, we regard it as an essential to life. We think that this principle which demands that we think of ourselves first is the very essence of living. If this were destroyed, we would lose all. Thus we may recognize the Haman in our lives.

Now within the Christian, Haman has an implacable enemy -- it is Mordecai, the Holy Spirit. The New Testament says, "The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh and these are contrary the one to the other," {Gal 5:17a KJV}. There never can be peace, for God has said he will make war against Amalek from generation to generation. He will never make peace with him. "The flesh cannot please God," {Rom 8:8b}. There is that within every man which is inherently displeasing to God, no matter how fine it may appear to us. It cannot please God for God has sworn eternal enmity against it. But, in the Christian heart, the Holy Spirit has landed and gained a bridgehead for one purpose only, that he might oppose this diabolical, satanic influence within us which so subtly and cleverly deceives us, deludes us, and destroys us. He has come in order that we might have deliverance from this traitorous friend. This is what we have pictured for us so clearly in the story of Haman, Mordecai, and Ahasuerus.

Now, the presence of the Spirit in the heart of man arouses the flesh to an explosion of fury. Have you discovered that? Have you found that when you became a Christian, you had more trouble than you ever had before? Before your conversion, life went along fairly smoothly, but the minute you became a Christian you found yourself in the center of a vast and swirling torment. You were seemingly torn in several directions at once. This is a result of the fury that is aroused in Haman when Mordecai refuses to bow before him -- "the flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh," {Gal 5:17a KJV}.

If this pride -- the flesh -- is not your friend but rather a subtle, crafty enemy as this book says, then the most important thing in your Christian life is to learn to recognize how he works, for you never can win the battle against him unless you know his tactics. There is no possibility of victory without this. Paul says, "We are not ignorant of his devices." We know how he works and we can thus call upon all the overpowering, conquering influence of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

So, in Verses 6-9 of this chapter, we have reviewed for us, *The Strategy of the Enemy*. Haman is determined now to gain full control of the king and yet he must do this without making the king suspicious of what he's up to. So his first tactic is to approach with great subtlety, and in Verse 6 we read:

But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. {Est 3:6 RSV}

As a Christian, how long would you entertain the thought of rejecting outright God's influence in your life? Supposing someone came to you and said "Look! I know you are a Christian, that you have acknowledged Christ as your Lord and Savior, but why don't you forget the whole thing and throw him overboard. Don't obey him any longer." How far would they get with you? How long would you entertain the suggestion that you tell the Holy Spirit to go to hell? That's what a Christian does when he denies the Holy Spirit in his life!

No, the Tempter never starts there, he never suggests this to us at first. He always starts out at the periphery of life, in the area of our attitudes rather than our convictions. He begins with Mordecai's people, not with Mordecai.

In the Bible, the story of the Jews is the story of God at work among men. The whole purpose of this strange nation is that, in their history, we might see unquestioned evidences of God at work. Therefore, these people represent that which gives evidence to the world of God at work. Now, what in your life gives evidence to the world that God is at work? You will find a list of such evidences in Galatians 5, Verses 22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... {Gal 5:22-23a RSV}

This is the way the world knows whether the Spirit of God is at work in your life, or not. They are not fooled by some outward manifestation of tongues or miracles or gifts. They look for the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit, that which is in accord with the character of God. These are "the people of Mordecai" in my life and yours.

The whole strategy of the flesh is to convince us that these attitudes which mark God at work in us are really not to our advantage, that we would get along much better without them, and that the opposite attitudes are the things that will really pay off for us. If we can be led to distrust and reject these godly attitudes we will thereby frustrate the work of the Holy Spirit in our life. Haman knows this so he goes after "the people of Mordecai."

To accomplish this aim he brings another weapon to bear -- it is *superstition* . Look at Verse 7:

In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is the lot, before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. {Est 3:7 RSV}

What a strange thing to interject here! This casting of lots to determine a lucky day on which to do something was a common practice in oriental kingdoms. It was similar to the practice today of shooting dice in order to determine an appropriate, propitious day. This account does not mean that for a whole year they shook dice in front of Haman. It means that every cast they made stood for a different day. They would cast the dice out and name the cast for a certain day of the calendar year. If it was a propitious number then that day was a lucky day. Thus they went through three hundred and sixty-five casts before this man -- a whole year's time before they found a lucky day, and when they found it, it was in the twelfth month which is the month of Adar.

This is nothing but the rankest superstition! All superstition is a form of fear, and fear is the enemy of faith. Fear is the opposite of faith. Superstition, then, is a sign of distrust of God. Why is it that whenever we acknowledge that our business has been good, or our health has been good, we like to knock on wood? We really do it to frighten away the jealous spirits which we think may take our prosperity away. We distrust the gods. It's strange, isn't it, how many Christians resort to these superstitious practices? They smile and joke when they do them, but down underneath there is a lingering suspicion that they had better do them or they might bring bad luck. This is simply fear of the jealousy of God. The tempter has planted in our hearts the feeling that God is not really interested in our welfare, that we must take care of all things ourselves. We have begun to distrust the goodness of God. Haman knows that if the king can be persuaded to heed this black magic, he has already succeeded in driving a wedge of distrust into his heart.

The third weapon with which he attacks the king is an apparent solicitude:

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them." {Est 3:8 RSV}

Now he's getting to the point.

"If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten

thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." {Est 3:9 RSV}

He has distracted the king's attention from his true object, has driven a wedge of doubt into his heart, and now he moves in to polish him off. He openly suggests that Mordecai's people are really unprofitable to the king, but that he, Haman, is ready to make him gloriously rich. He will pay ten million dollars, a staggering sum, into the king's treasury. This is a very sensitive matter with the king. When you talk about a threat to a king's throne you are touching something that is very close to his heart. And when, in addition, you infer that you have a plan that will make him more wealthy than ever before, you interest him greatly. This is Haman's approach. He suggests that the people of Mordecai are really a threat to the king's liberty, and that if he will remove them and trust Haman, Haman will make him rich.

Has Haman been talking to you recently? Has he, for instance, suggested that keeping your temper and giving a soft answer to those around you never really gets you anywhere you work? That it is the fellows who tell everyone off who get the promotions? The ones who are willing to stand up for their rights and not let anyone walk over them, these are the men who get the advances!

Has he whispered to you that honesty is not really the best policy, at least when it comes to filling out your income tax? After all, what the government doesn't know won't hurt them, and you can save a lot of money by just a few shortcuts.

Has he suggested to you young people that you can't get good grades in school unless you do like everyone does and cheat a little bit, that it is the ones who are not too holy to fudge a bit that can pull down the grades?

Has he suggested that love is all right for sentimentalists but the only way to really defend the faith and the American way of life is to picket those who don't agree with you and hound them out of town?

Has he suggested that good manners and courteous words are needed for business and for strangers, but at home you can let your hair down and say what you like, especially to you?

Has he been talking to you? Does it sound pretty good? Does it sound like it will work, especially when he can show you from your horoscope that this is the day to throw your weight around?

Well, then, take a look at *The Program of Defeat*.

It begins with *decision* :

So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you." {Est 3:10-11 RSV}

Now this is a remarkably accurate revealing of what goes on in our lives when we yield to temptation. It begins with decision. Nothing can be done in your life without the consent of your will! You cannot pass the buck to anyone else. You have the final responsibility for what happens in your life, because nothing can be done, good or evil, apart from the consent of your will. Even though you may be perfectly sincere and confident that you are doing the right thing, as this king was, yet no evil enters your heart that you have not permitted to be there.

Here is another interesting thing revealed. When you make a decision you hand the authority to act to another! Man can do nothing by himself, the New Testament declares. We are not made to be activists; we are only made to be deciders. We can do nothing ourselves. We decide, as this king did, and then, either Haman acts or the Holy Spirit. Once the decision is made, the power to act passes to another.

There have been many demonstrations of this in our courts, where individuals commit terrible murders, and the jury gives them life imprisonment or a lesser sentence because they feel there is some justification to their

pleas that they did not know what they were doing, that they were in the grip of powers and forces greater than they could control. There is some sense in which this is true. But what the juries fail to take into consideration, I believe, is that there is a moment when a man must decide that he will commit himself to forces within him that will act beyond what he desires. After that decision is made he is indeed in the grip of forces that may go far beyond what he wishes, but the decision to permit them to act was his and his alone.

Now, the next step is a widespread involvement that follows:

Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the princes of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. The couriers went in haste by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the capital. {Est 3:12-15a RSV}

You do not act by yourself, in a corner. You can't! What you decide in the depths of your heart affects everyone who knows you. The decision made in secret in the very innermost part of your thinking, sooner or later touches the lives of everyone with whom you have to do. Such a decision reaches out to the uttermost limits of your empire. Your secret thoughts become evident sooner or later. You cannot give yourself to playing with thoughts in secret that do not sooner or later break out in open deeds. The whole of the kingdom is involved in all that the king does!

Then the final step here is one of *delusion* ; the last sentence:

And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was perplexed. {Est 3:15b RSV}

The king is quite confident that he has taken a wise step. He's deluded. He's deceived. He thinks he is acting in his own interest. He's grateful to Haman for his obvious concern for his welfare. So, he invites him in to celebrate with a glass of wine or two. But, outside in the city, there's nothing but confusion and perplexity. No one knows what to do. This strange edict has thrown them into confusion.

Have you ever had a drinking session with yourself to congratulate yourself for the clever way you solved a problem in your life? You've had to cut the corners a bit and maybe you've had to tell off a few people along the way, but you got what you wanted. It is a pretty good feeling, isn't it? You go home and pat yourself on the back and congratulate yourself. You and Haman have a drinking session together. But, when you get around to taking the next step you don't know what to do. You've lost, in some strange way, your sense of direction. You started out well, but before you know it somehow you've gotten distracted, and things are confused, and you don't know what to do next. The only hymn you can think of to sing is, "I'm Nervous in the Service of the King." You become perplexed, confused, distracted.

Like Martha, you remember? When the Lord came to dinner and poor Martha got confused over what to do next. She attempted a dozen different activities at once until she came bursting in and blamed the Lord for the whole thing. And he said to her, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things -- but one thing is needful..." {Luke 10:41b-42a KJV}.

Is this where you are living today? Are you, as a Christian, a victim of your own sense of dedication? You meant to do right, you tried to do right, you thought you were making the right choices on the basis of what would be the right thing to do, but it has turned out to be so confusing, so baffling! The Lord Jesus said, "If your eye be single, your whole body will be filled with light; but if the light which is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness," {cf, Matt 6:22b-23 KJV}.

What darkness many people live in! Christians live right here -- defeated, deluded, disappointed -- and they don't know why. But there is a way out. It's provided by the Holy Spirit; this is what he has come to do. When you begin to believe what he tells you about Haman, then you will begin to discover what that way out is!

Prayer:

Our Father, what a revelation this is to us. How we thank you for an objective light that shines into the darkness of our own confusion and helps us to see what we are and where we are going and what's happening to us. Thank you for the love that prompted it. You do not leave us to wander blindly about, but bring the light of truth in. You have said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Make us, then, willing to hear, willing to heed, willing to believe, willing to obey. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: The Struggle for Power
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Esther
Scripture: Esther 3
Message No: 2
Catalog No: 33
Date: March 3, 1963

GOOD GRIEF

by Ray C. Stedman

The story of Esther thus far concerns a king who is called here Ahasuerus, known also in history as Astyages, the grandfather of Cyrus the Great. He has married a young Jewish girl named Esther, a captive taken from the city of Jerusalem. Her cousin, Mordecai, became a judge in the city gates in Susa, the capital of Media-Persia. In the court of the king is an oily character whose name is Haman, who manages to pull the wool over the king's eyes and deceive him into signing a decree to destroy all the Jews in his kingdom. These people are called in this book, "the people of Mordecai". Now this is authentic history as confirmed by the celebration called "The Feast of Purim," named for the casting of Pur, recorded in the third chapter of Esther, when the lot (or Pur) was cast before Haman to fix the day upon which his planned destruction of the Jews was to take place. This feast is still celebrated today some 2500 years after these events.

But the startling thing we learn is that this is also a glimpse into our own hearts. Each of us is a king dwelling in a capital city (the body), and reigning over an empire which touches everyone we know. At the moment of your conversion, if you are a Christian, you gained a queen -- a spirit made alive in Jesus Christ to serve as a place of communion between you and the Holy Spirit of the living God who dwells in your heart, symbolized in this story in the person of Mordecai.

In Chapter 3 we watch the consummate ease with which the flesh, that is, this Haman within each of us, deceives the human will into making a decision that threatens to destroy the entire kingdom. This whole story is a picture of a Christian who sincerely sins. This is not the picture of those stubborn, deliberate oppositions that we sometimes make to God's will when we know we are wrong. At such times God frequently lets us go ahead and live out our folly because we know to start with that we are wrong. We can only learn to overcome our stubborn pride by experiencing something of the sad results that follow. But Esther is not that kind of a problem. The problem we face here in this book is a picture of those spur-of-the-moment decisions when we react out of our "human nature" and do the usual, commonly accepted thing -- a thing which all our worldly friends would say we were perfectly right and justified in doing, and most of our Christian friends would agree. And thus, sincerely, with the best of intentions, openly and honestly, we launch upon a course which threatens ultimately to destroy our peace, our joy, our patience, our kindness, and our self-control. When these

results occur we don't know what is wrong; we are confused and baffled.

I would like to suggest that right here is the major cause of weakness in the Christian life. There are times when each of us deliberately disobeys God and we know we are wrong. But these are not nearly as frequent as the times when, wanting to do right, and thinking we are doing right, we stumble into a circumstance, or a situation, or a reaction which ultimately proves very wrong and destroys the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. This is the picture we have here. It is not our deliberate disobedience that causes most of our problems, it's our ignorant folly. It's not our love of evil that defeats us, it's our *ignorance* of it. So frequently we are victims of spiritual naivety. We are tricked by our own sense of dedication and become pushovers for the flesh within us (Haman) to do what it desires.

Chapter 4 begins to unfold God's reaction to such folly and how God sets about to save us from our own mad choices. What a wonderful unveiling this is of the ground of God's deliverance for the believer. As we read this, can we really doubt what Paul says, that all these things happened as types and examples for us, that we might know the mind and purpose of God in our own lives.

We will pick up the story in Chapter 4. The first reaction of Mordecai to Haman's plot is a manifestation of what we may call here, *Divine Grief*:

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. {Est 4:1-3 RSV}

What a picture of painful grief! Lay this passage, this parable, alongside a passage from the New Testament:

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God in whom you were sealed till the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30 {RSV}).

This is the reaction of God to the folly of human choice, following the flesh. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. And what is it that grieves him? The next verse says,

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice," {Eph 4:31 RSV}

These are the things that grieve the Spirit -- these opposite attitudes to the fruit of the Spirit. What are the opposites of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control? They are malice, bitterness, envy, jealousy, anger, clamor, and strife. So the apostle says,

"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." {Eph 4:32 RSV}

When Mordecai learned the choice the king had made (which, though the king did not realize all that was involved, Mordecai knew would destroy, throughout the kingdom, the people of God), he was moved with deep sorrow, and he cried out in heaviness of heart -- a beautiful picture to us of the grief of the Holy Spirit. It is most remarkable to see that what grieves the heart of God is not the enmity of the sinner so much as the unthinking foolishness of the saint!

Let's take a closer look at the cause of this grief. Mordecai knew that the matter involved the unchangeable law of the Medes and the Persians and that the consequences of the king's decision were inevitable. Even the king could not change it now that it had been uttered, and though the ultimate salvation of the people of Mordecai might be worked out by other means, still there would be some suffering they would be unable to avoid. This is what caused him grief; for later on in this very chapter we hear this man declare that God would somehow work out a deliverance. He had no doubt that God would deliver his people, but he knew also that suffering would be involved due to the decision that had been made. Thus, though the Holy Spirit will work out a way

to bring us to an ultimate display of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, nevertheless, he knows that the process, because of the decisions that we make in our consummate folly, will be a painful one and certain consequences simply cannot be avoided.

Some time ago as I was talking with a young man about thirty years old, I remarked about all the white hair he had. He looked at me with a rather rueful smile and said, "Yes, the Lord saved me from my sin, but the marks of sin are still there." I thought immediately of that story of a father whose son had gotten into trouble and had come and asked forgiveness. His father had forgiven him, but the boy seemed to act as though all he needed to do was ask forgiveness and he could forget the whole matter. He didn't seem to realize that there was a great deal of suffering caused by his foolishness. So his father took him into the garage where he drove a nail into the wall. He handed his son a hammer and said, "Now, son, pull out the nail." The boy took the hammer and pulled the nail out and his father said, "That's like forgiveness, isn't it? When you do something wrong it's possible to pull out the nail by asking forgiveness." Then, handing the hammer back to his son he said, "Now, son, pull out the nail hole!" There are decisions which we make, the full consequences of which can never be avoided, because we are dealing with the law of inevitable consequence; the law of the Medes and Persians which can never be changed. Mordecai wept because of this.

Also, he wept out of sympathy for the king and the kingdom because of the sorrow they unwittingly brought upon themselves. Mordecai knew that the Jews were under special protection from God wherever they were. As a Jew he knew the history of his race. He knew that no nation laid its hand upon the Jew in anger or in punishment with impunity. This is the thing that Hitler forgot. Mordecai knew that if these people were destroyed, as the king in his innocent folly intended to do, it would react upon the kingdom to destroy instead, as every nation has been destroyed that has ever touched the Jew in anger.

So it is in the parable of our own lives -- the Spirit knows that when we unthinkingly permit our natural, human reaction to control us, we ultimately destroy ourselves in the process. This natural reaction creates in us tensions and pressures, neuroses and compulsions which tear us apart, causing us to come unglued in moments of pressure and creating depression of mind and spirit, so the Spirit weeps out of sympathy. "The wages of sin is death" {Rom 6:23a}, and so the Spirit grieves.

You see this spirit of grief in our Lord Jesus on the way to the tomb of Lazarus, as he leads that sorrowing, wailing company along the way. He knew that in a few moments he would speak the words that would bring that man, dead four days, back to life. All the grief and sorrow would be turned into joy; and yet we read that as he went to the tomb his spirit was moved deeply within him. The Greek is much stronger than the English. It says that he was torn inside and being torn, he wept. Thus we have that shortest verse in our English Bibles, "Jesus wept" {John 11:35}. The tears rolled down his face even in the expectation of that moment of triumph and deliverance because he knew the sorrow, heartache, and pain that inevitably results from human sin no matter what the ultimate outcome might be.

Thank God for the grieving of the Spirit. It is this grieving Spirit within us that is the guarantee that God will never leave us in that condition. It marks the unwillingness of God to let us go on stumbling into the full results of our own folly.

As we read this account, we realize that as yet neither the king nor the queen is aware of this grief.

The next section reveals the results in the human spirit when the grieving of the Holy Spirit is made known. It's a picture for us of *Spiritual Distress* .

The first step is an uneasy *realization* that something is wrong:

When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. {Est 4:4 RSV}

Have you ever sensed this? Not in your soul, not at the level of your conscious life, but deep in your subconscious, in the depths of your spirit, have you sensed that you are living with a grieved Spirit? You don't

know specifically yet what it is, but deep in your heart you feel there's something wrong. That is the reaction we see pictured here.

May I here put in a word of warning. We need to distinguish carefully between the condemning voice of Satan and the true grief of the Holy Spirit. The one is a vague, unspecific sense of guilt designed to trap us into some legality or some busy activity in the flesh. You know well that vague nagging feeling of guilt as though something is wrong but you hardly know what it is. If it continues that way, that's the voice of Satan. It's an attempt to get you so concerned with your inner self that you will do some legal penance or try to compensate in another direction, or get busy in a flurry of religious activity, or the like. Satan knows well that if he can get you operating out of the flesh you are utterly useless in the kingdom of God. But the other, the voice of the Spirit, is always specific and to the point, and continuously insistent. You refuse to allow the matter to come into your conscious thinking, but in the back of your mind you know there is something wrong and you know specifically what it is. You might not want to look at it. You may try to shove it out of your mind, but you can't escape the sense that the thing is wrong. Now, that is the voice of a grieved Spirit within and if it is of the Spirit it will lead further to a clear revelation:

Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. {Est 4:5-9 RSV}

Notice how clear and specific this is. Mordecai knew the whole story. He knew the exact sum of money that Haman, in secret, had told the king he would put into his treasuries, and he had a copy of the decree. He revealed the whole plan in specific, exact detail. We hardly need to interpret it, do we?

It's significant that the name of the servant who acted as an intermediary is Natach, which means "The Truth". When you know that something has come between you and the Lord, some shadow has come between you, some cloud has hidden his face, where do you go to find out what it is? How frequently you have found the answer in the Word of Truth! Perhaps while reading through your morning devotional time, or seeking light from the Scriptures, you found the Spirit of God illuminating a verse and making it speak right out to you, and you knew then the thing that was wrong. Or perhaps in prayer you realized that something was wrong and asked God to make it clear and there came into your mind an image of something that was out of line and you couldn't shake it off. Suddenly, out of the blue, there came the picture of that money that you took, or that word that you spoke, or that thing that you did, and you knew that this was it -- the truth! Or perhaps a word of counsel or reproof comes from someone else and you know as they speak that the thing they are saying is the truth. In some such way God undertakes to make the whole matter clear, as here it is set clearly before the queen.

Now, somewhat amazingly perhaps, we discover a certain *reluctance* on her part:

Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law; all alike are to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter that he may live. And I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days." And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. {Est 4:10-12 RSV}

What a remarkable picture this is of the inner workings of our hearts. The king, as we know, is the soul of man, our own soul -- our mind, emotions, and will. And in this portrayal we learn there is a definite danger in confronting it unexpectedly. The soul, you see, is such a creature of moods. Even our subconscious mind (if you want to put it in terms of psychology) -- our spirit is hesitant to catch us in a bad mood. It might upset the whole kingdom!

This is amazing, isn't it, that God, through the Spirit, orders his approach to catch us in the right mood. In our conscious mind we are very reluctant to allow things that are unpleasant to come before us for consideration. Perhaps this explains why in our dreams we sometimes are confronted with things that lie in our subconscious that we wouldn't allow when awake. Well, let's leave that problem for the psychologists. It is clear, at any rate, that there is some hesitation on Esther's part in going to the king. He needs to be handled with care because he is so subject to his own reasonings and emotions, and is a creature of moods.

At this point Mordecai acts with vigor and insistence. His own grief has produced an answering spiritual distress in Esther, and she is now ready for an act that we will call *Voluntary Death* .

And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to return answer to Esther, "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king; though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. {Est 4:12-17 RSV}

These words of Mordecai are the best known words from the book of Esther. He said to her, "Look, though you may not act, deliverance for the Jews will arise from another quarter"; that is, God has an infinite number of ways to accomplish his will. You and I may fail in the program that he gives us to do, but that doesn't stop the accomplishment of God's will. He will raise up another, or do it in some other way, or bring deliverance from another quarter. No, God is never hindered by man's failure. But we may miss out on the beauty of God's perfection for us -- we "suffer loss" {1 Cor 3:15}, as Paul puts it.

Mordecai also reminds Esther of these wonderful words, "Who knows whether thou art come to the kingdom for just such a time as this." As we have seen in this study together, the coming of Esther to the kingdom is a picture of conversion or regeneration. Our spirits were made alive in Christ Jesus fulfilling the picture of Esther's coming to the kingdom. What is the purpose of that conversion? What did God have in mind when he saved you? Is it only that he might take you to heaven some day? Is it that you might have glory in the sweet by-and-by? No! "Thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this." In entering your life and heart, as a believer in Jesus Christ, God's whole desire for you is that you might live in fruitfulness and victory right now, today, where you live, where you work, that there you might manifest the fullness of the character of God. Your conversion is but the point of beginning, and the main purpose of it is that you might learn to walk in victory over bitterness, resentment, malice, anger, lust, and every other manifestation of the flesh, right now! Thank God that is true. The very purpose for his coming into our lives is that we might experience the glory of his presence -- right now!

Now, Esther's reply to Mordecai is highly significant here. She says,

Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf [a fast, not a feast], and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day... {Est 4:16a RSV}

What she is saying, in application to us, is this: "Go and act out for me a reminder of the death of Jesus Christ on my behalf. Remind me of that death which held him in the grave, uneating, undrinking, dead, or three days and three nights; and with the memory of that death before me I am willing to die myself. With that unchangeable fact to rest my faith upon, I will go to the king -- and if I perish, I perish!"

If you laid the book of Romans alongside the book of Esther, you would now find that we are standing at the opening verse of Chapter 6 of Romans:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! {Rom 6:1-2a RSV}

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. {Rom 6:4 RSV}

This is the place where daily deliverance begins. How beautifully Esther's words picture this identification of the believer with the death of Jesus Christ. This is not yet the realm of the soul, the emotional life, the feelings which are subject to change, but rather we are talking about the realm of the spirit, the deepest part of man's nature. What this declares is that down at the very deepest level of your life a fact has taken place from which all deliverance will stem. It means that whether or not you feel like a Christian, you still are a Christian, if this has occurred. Christ's death for you and your death with him are unchangeable facts, and nothing you do or don't do affects them.

This is a truth we greatly need, for until we begin to believe what God says is true about what happened to us when Jesus Christ died, we never will have the confidence to accept the deliverance that he has based upon It. If you once died with him you are not the same -- you never will be the same again. Even though temporarily you do fall into sinful acts which are the same as those you committed before you were a Christian, still you are not the same -- you cannot be. You have been translated, the New Testament says, "out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of his love," {Col 1:13}. The evil one cannot lay his hands upon you any longer. You are not in bondage; you are a believer and your deliverance rests upon an unchangeable fact.

A number of years ago, I was talking with a young man who had been staying away from church for some time, and I asked him why. He said, "Well, I'll tell you. I hesitate to come any longer because when I'm at work I can't seem to live like I ought to. There is so much of failure in my life when I am working. I lose my temper and sometimes curse and say things that I shouldn't. This is why I don't want to come to church, because I feel like a hypocrite when I do." I said, "You know, a hypocrite is someone who acts like something he isn't. When do you act that way?" "Well," he said, "if I came to church after the way I live through the week, I'd be a hypocrite, wouldn't I?" I said, "Are you a Christian?" He said, "Yes, I am." "All right," I said, "if you are a Christian, then when is it that you do not act like one? In church or at work?" "Oh", he said, "I see what you mean. I'm being a hypocrite at work!" "Yes", I said, "when you come to church you're being what you really are for perhaps the first time during that week."

It is not hypocritical to come among the people of God in a sense of weakness and even failure. You belong there -- that's what Christians are. You may be a hypocrite at work, and, if you wish to avoid acting like a hypocrite, apply it there.

The point is this: You need not go on deluded and deceived because God has arranged a way out to the believer in Christ. "There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man, but God is faithful...", whether you are or not is beside the point. God's work never changes. The death of Jesus Christ is an unchangeable fact in your experience if you have received him. "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able, but will, with the temptation, make a way to escape that you may be able to bear it," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13 KJV}. He will bring you through if you rest upon the unchangeable fact of what he has already done in your life.

From this vantage point, the identification of the believer with the death of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is now ready to move into the realm of the conscious life, the soul (our emotions, reason, and will). It is necessary to bring to our conscious attention what is going on deep in our life before we can be delivered. And the power with which God works in our life will always be the power of a resurrected life.

Notice, in anticipation, the very first words of the fifth chapter: "On the third day, Esther put on her robes and went in to see the king," {cf, Est 5:1 RSV}. On the third day, the day of resurrection, Esther went in. This is your clue for Chapter 5!

Prayer:

Our Father, how much we may learn if we are ready to approach this book with simple, believing hearts; not trying to analyze it in order to challenge it, but rather to understand it and

believe it. Lord, we thank you for this revelation of your faithful work in our own lives, and we pray that we may act in the strength of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Good Grief
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Esther
Scripture: Esther 4
Message No: 3
Catalog No: 34
Date: March 10, 1963

SOUL AND SPIRIT

by Ray C. Stedman

We have come to a very dramatic moment in the story of Esther. The plot has moved rapidly. The story is that of a king in ancient Persia, an historical figure, who married a beautiful Jewish girl named Esther who had been raised by her cousin, Mordecai. The two were captives, taken from the city of Jerusalem and brought over into the kingdom of Persia. In the court of this king was a very slimy character named Haman who becomes the Prime Minister of the kingdom. An immediate antagonism develops between Haman and Mordecai, the cousin of Esther. Haman suggests to the king a very fiendish plan to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom, little dreaming that Esther, the queen, is herself a Jewess. Mordecai becomes aware of the plot and prevails upon Queen Esther to brave the disfavor of the king by going to him without invitation, to plead the cause of her people.

The whole story becomes of fascinating interest and meaning to us when we discover that this is not merely a story of the ancient past, but is also a divinely inspired, magnificently accurate portrayal of what is going on in our own lives at this very moment. You, as a living soul, are a king over a kingdom; the kingdom, the empire, is your life. If you are a Christian your spirit was made alive in Jesus Christ. This is the queen that has come into your life. Mordecai, in this story, is a figure of the Holy Spirit moving to preserve in your kingdom the fruit of the Spirit, the people of Mordecai. And slyly at work in your mind at this very moment is Haman -- that which the Bible calls the flesh -- the self-life, the ego; cunning, subtle, deceptive, tricking us into believing that the only way we will ever get what we want is by choosing our own way and ignoring the life of Jesus Christ within us.

This is the whole aim of the flesh in the life of a believer. The devil well knows that if he can get a Christian to operate out of the flesh, his total ministry is utterly worthless as far as God is concerned. This is the major struggle, the major battle of the Christian life, and it's going on right in our own lives at this very moment. How up-to-date this book of Esther is! You may act as religious as you like when the occasion requires, but if at home, or in business, or when you are on vacation, or when you are angry, you act from the choice of the flesh, you are rendered utterly useless to God. If the devil can get you to act on the principle upon which the world continually acts, "Me for me, and the devil take the hind-most," he has won his battle.

We left Esther standing outside the palace door wondering if she will be received by the king, afraid to enter. We pick up the story at the opening of Chapter 5 to read of *The King's Delight* :

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne inside the palace opposite the entrance to the palace; and when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she found favor in his sight and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter. And 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." {Est 5:1-3 RSV}

We must pause for a moment here to note the difference between the soul and the spirit of man, as pictured for us in the functions of the king and the queen in this story.

Most of us are not aware of any difference at all between the soul and spirit. We do not usually distinguish between the two. But the greatest mystery to man is man himself. We've solved some remarkable mysteries in this scientific age, but the greatest mystery of all is our own nature. We don't understand ourselves. All we really know is that somehow we, whoever we are, are living down inside of these bodies. We know someone is there. Even babies know this. I've often told of how my little three year old daughter climbed up on my chest while I was lying in bed one morning. She was trying to waken me, pinching me and poking me, but I refused to open my eyes. Finally, she sat on my chest, and reaching down, pried open one of my eyelids. She leaned over and said, "Are you in there, daddy?" I realized then that even a baby is conscious of the fact there is more to a man than a body.

What we may not know is that this inner being is divided into two parts. Psychology recognizes that we have a conscious part of our life, which the Bible calls the soul. It embraces the mind (our ability to reason, with all its marvelous possibilities), and the emotions (our ability to feel), and the will (our power to choose). The mind and emotions both continually operate upon the will to affect it. On this conscious level we spend most of our life. The soul, heading up in the will, is the king, before whom all options must appear and by whom all decisions are made.

We also have an unconscious part to our lives, the subconscious. In the Bible this is the spirit, a deeper, hidden part. In the non-Christian this area of life is darkened, confused, uncertain. The conscience is a function of the spirit, and yet conscience can be very wrong. I read of a cannibal who suffered from a very bad conscience because he had not killed as many people as his father had. Thus, conscience can be terribly misguided. When, as a non-Christian, we sought guidance from our inner life, the power within, the inner man, we found we were frequently misled, torn between confusing choices, left uncertain and bewildered. A modern song describes this condition very well -- *Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered* .

Into the darkened life of ours came the light of Jesus Christ. We received him as our Lord, and he began to assert the authority of his Lordship over our lives. We were born again. The spirit within us was made alive by the entrance of Jesus Christ. Read of this in Ephesians 2. Our spirit then became a place of glory and beauty, fully under the control of the Holy Spirit who dwelt within. The glory and light of God once again filled our vessel, and the guidance we then received from our human spirit, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, was true, realistic, morally upright and clear.

Thus made alive in resurrection power by the life of Jesus Christ, our human spirit becomes the means through which the Holy Spirit seeks to influence and repossess the soul -- our mind, emotions, and will. For this reason it becomes very difficult in certain Scripture passages to distinguish between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. The translators frequently have a problem to determine whether to spell the word "spirit" with a capital letter or a small letter. It really doesn't make much difference, because the renewed spirit of man is fully subject to the control of the Holy Spirit, so that the two are working together constantly.

This soul within us, the king, has the power to reject the pleadings of the Spirit if he chooses. How beautifully this is portrayed in Esther. She is reluctant to come before the king for he has the power to deny her if he pleases. So in our lives the will is supreme, and everything that ultimately becomes a part of us must pass the judgment of the soul, the will.

Again, it is interesting how even babies know this. I remember at the time when our daughter was at the toddler stage. She ruled as a queen in our household. If we approached her and held out our arms to suggest we would like to hold her to feed her or do something else for her, she looked at us with icy disdain for a moment. Then, if she decided she wanted what we offered, she regally held out one arm like a scepter and we knew we were accepted. But if she was not in the mood, she turned her head away, and there was nothing left for us to do but to slink off and wait for a more opportune moment. This is the power of the will and even babies know it and sense it. It was designed by God to this very end. Even God does not coerce the human will, but woos it and wins its consent.

When Esther comes before the king, he is greatly struck with her beauty. To use a modern expression, she "knocked his eye out!" Overwhelmed by her loveliness and moved by emotion, he is ready immediately to grant her desire. Note, she comes on the third day, dressed in royal robes of authority and power. Throughout Scripture the third day is always the day of resurrection. Esther had been for three days and three nights fasting as though dead, and now, on the third day, she appears before the king, a beautiful picture of the resurrection life of our Lord Jesus, and the fact that the Spirit of God always approaches us on the basis of a risen life. Have you discovered that when the Lord wants you to surrender your will on any particular point, he doesn't hound you, he doesn't punish you, he doesn't thunder at you. He simply comes in freshness and beauty and when you are melted by grace you are ready to say, "anything you want, Lord Jesus, anywhere you say, anyway you please."

A friend told me of driving down the highway one day, and before him he saw a large truck, a moving van, and on the rear of the truck was a sign which read, Any load, Any time, Any distance, Any place. He said, "You know, that struck me as exactly what my heart says when I see the beauty of Jesus Christ, and I sense the glory of his presence in my life. My heart responds, 'Lord Jesus, any load, any distance, any time, any place.'" So here, Esther has come in her beauty and glory and the king is ready immediately to grant her desire.

But now, very strangely, we read of *Esther's Delay* :

And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come this day to a dinner that I have prepared for the king." Then said the king, "Bring Haman quickly, that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman came to the dinner that Esther had prepared. And as they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." But Esther said, "My petition and my request is: If I have found favor in the sign of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the dinner which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said." {Est 5:4-8 RSV}

Why does Esther keep putting off telling the king her request? She has him right where she wants him and there seems no good reason for delay. He's in a good mood, eager to grant her anything she wants. She could have asked for a mink coat if she had wanted it. He is ready to yield on any point, ready to dedicate himself to the fullest degree possible. Why, then, this delay?

Have you ever experienced this in your relationship with the Lord? Have you ever come to the place where, captivated by the beauty of Christ and sensing something of the glory and joy he brings, you have, with complete sincerity and honesty, dedicated yourself anew to him. Perhaps you have gone forward in a meeting, or have raised your hand, or knelt in the secrecy of your own room and given yourself anew to Christ. Then you waited for God to act and nothing happened. He does nothing about it. Perhaps you dedicated yourself to go to the mission field, or to enter a new line of endeavor, and then nothing happens -- no doors open. You ask, "Why the delay? I've yielded, I'm ready, here am I, Lord, send me!" But nothing is done. How do you explain it?

There are two reasons suggested in this account. The first is, God is never content with a decision that is based on emotions alone. We need to recognize this. We have seen that Haman can move the king as easily as Esther can. If decisions are to be based on emotions only, they will continuously shift back and forth whichever way the wind blows. This is precisely the story of many Christians. But God is not content with this. So when a moment of surrender or dedication occurs, God frequently delays action in order to give us time to think the matter through and allow our understanding to catch up with our faith.

When I was still a young, growing Christian, I wanted to be a surgeon. Even as a little boy in the early grades of school I would sit at my desk and manipulate my fingers so my knuckles would be supple enough to tie knots. I haunted every hospital I could get to and read everything on medicine I could. I learned the parts of the body, the nerves and the muscles, while still in high school. Then quietly, I don't know quite how or when, I began to realize that God was moving in a different direction and that he was suggesting to me that I consider

entering the ministry. At first I resented this, and fought against it, resisting the insistent plea of the Spirit. But when the Spirit is after someone, he never gives up. Finally, in a moment of surrender and dedication, overwhelmed with the joy of what Christ meant to me, in my own room alone, I said to him, "All right, Lord, I'll be a minister, if that is what you want." But then, nothing happened! I expected an invitation the next day to preach at some prominent church, but it never came. I waited, and went on, doing the things that were before me to do. When I left the city of Chicago, I went to Denver, and, from there, after a year or so, I went out to Honolulu, after the war began. While the war was on, I was engaged in teaching Bible classes in bomb shelters, but still nothing was moving, no doors opened. It wasn't until the war ended, and I was discharged from the service, that the Lord opened the door for me to go to seminary and enter into training for the ministry. But I discovered that when I did go, when the door did open, I was much more ready for it. I realized so much more of what was involved in the ministry, and felt that I was able to appropriate much more of the value of seminary because I knew what the battle was about.

So God knows the king needs time to base his decision on more than the warmth of his love alone. He needs to understand certain facts, and in the next chapter we will see how those facts are made clear to him. This all points up the essential truth that all growth in grace requires that emotion must lead on to knowledge. Faith leads out first, but if our understanding doesn't catch up, faith soon begins to fail. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," {cf, John 8:32}.

I once heard a pastor, who had become involved in the movement which seeks a restoration of the gifts of the Spirit, tell how he had spoken in tongues. He was asked whether he understood what he was saying. His answer was, "Praise God! No!" And he seemed pleased that he did not understand what he had been saying in tongues. As I listened I thought of a verse in First Corinthians, Verse 14, where the Apostle Paul deals with this touchy subject of tongues. Paul says, "If any man speak in a tongue, let him pray that he may interpret," {cf, 1 Cor 14:13}. Why? "Because," he says, "if I pray in the Spirit my mind is unfruitful," {cf, 1 Cor 14:14}. What then? "I will pray with the Spirit but I will pray with the mind also," {cf, 1 Cor 14:15}. It is necessary for one to understand ultimately what God is doing. God often leads us out in a step of faith based upon emotion, but then our understanding must catch up with our faith or something has gone wrong.

There is a second reason for this delay which appears in this last section which we'll call *Haman's Delusion*.

And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. Nevertheless Haman restrained himself, and went home; and he sent and fetched his friends and his wife Zeresh. And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and the servants of the king. And Haman added, "Even Queen Esther let no one come with the king to the banquet she prepared but myself. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this does me no good, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it; then go merrily with the king to the dinner." This counsel pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made. {Est 5:9-14 RSV}

God's delay, we see here, gives opportunity for the flesh to grow puffed up with a sense of its own importance and thus to drop its subtlety and act in such an open and arrogant way that it even surprises and shocks us and we see how rotten, how subtle, how evil the flesh is. Then we begin to judge it as an enemy. Proverbs says, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall," {Prov 16:18 KJV}. What amazing skill the Holy Spirit displays in tricking our sinful hearts into some open display that shocks us, catches us up short, and makes us realize what is going on in our hearts. This is a very hopeful moment for us because, of course, the problem has been there all along.

Haman goes out walking on air after this experience with the queen. It looks to him as though he has won the king and the queen both to his side. As he comes out his spirit is jubilant. The only thing that sticks in his craw is that outside the gate he sees Mordecai who will not bow and scrape before him. "The flesh lusts against the

spirit" {cf, Gal 5:17 KJV}, and the only relief Haman can find is to indulge in an orgy of self-praise.

Nevertheless Haman restrained himself, and went home; and he sent and fetched his friends and his wife Zeresh. And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and the servants of the king.

There is nothing that soothes our wounded egos more than sympathetic listeners to the tale of our own prowess. Have you discovered that? You know -- "I said to him...and he said to me...and I said back to him...and I really told him..." and so on. And it is really amazing what we get proud over. Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches and the number of his sons (of all things), and the promotions with which the king had honored him. Listen to two men discussing their automobiles. One of them will say, "Man! I've got a hot number! That car of mine can go 80 miles an hour in 30 seconds from a dead stop, and I can outrun anything on the road." The other fellow comes back in kind, and both seem very personally involved. Why is this? What we do is to secretly, subconsciously, appropriate the virtues of our automobiles to ourselves. We identify with them. We like speedy, powerful, fast cars because it gives us a sense of power. Oddly enough, when anything goes wrong it is always the automobile or the manufacturer that is at fault. We have a lemon! We promptly dissociate ourselves from it. What a revelation of the human heart!

Just here is revealed one of the basic weaknesses of evil. This is why there is no reason for a believer to ever grow fearful over the presence of evil in the world. Jesus Christ says, "When these things begin to come to pass (the world seems to be falling apart, men's hearts are failing them for fear), lift up your heads and rejoice," {cf, Luke 21:28}. This is why communism will never conquer the earth. It is already destroying itself. The seeds of self-destruction are built into every process of evil in the world today. This is why,

Though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.

All that comes from our human nature, this Haman nature within us, is self-centered and feeds on pride, and pride always blinds. And when men become blind they are helpless, and stumble into folly. When I give way to pride, when I allow Haman to rule my life, I become blind and stumble on into some stupid, foolish action to my own detriment. When I'm tricked into some egotistic action or word, I become vain, arrogant, swaggering -- and vulnerable! When explosions come in our lives we try to justify them as caused by our circumstances. We want to point to some outward thing that is to blame, not anything in us.

A friend told me of a nurse who was working in a hospital and something that occurred in her round of duties when angered her, and she exploded and poured out abuse upon a patient. Her supervisor happened to hear her and called her in and said, "I didn't realize you were this kind of a person." "Oh!" she said, "this wasn't really me. It was simply that I was under pressure for the moment and what he said to me triggered my reaction, but I'm not really like this." And the supervisor said, "Look, if you were carrying a glass full of water down the hall and I bumped your arm, what would slop out?" "Why", she said, "whatever is in the glass -- water." He said, "Exactly, the bump only can reveal what is in the glass already!"

That is what the Lord Jesus meant when he said, "It is not that which goes into a man which defiles him, it is that which comes out; for out of the heart proceeds murders, adulteries, fornications, etc." {cf, Matt 15:11}. These hateful things are down inside, and as long as we refuse to admit their presence (our Haman) there is no possibility of victory in our lives. The kindest thing God can do is to allow us to be in some circumstance which so puffs us up in pride that we act in some way that shocks us. Then we begin to see what is really inside, and can deal with it according to the program he had designed.

In the gospel accounts the Lord Jesus is continually stripping the false pretenses from men and showing them exactly as they are. Read the stories of his dealing with the Pharisees and you see this is a repeated pattern all the way through. Those r<

So it is with Haman here. "'Yet all this does me no good', he says, 'so long as I see Mordecai, the Jew, sitting at the king's gate.' And then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, 'Let a gallows fifty cubits high be

made." As we have seen, this is not a gallows to hang men on; this is a misinterpretation of the word. It is really a tall pole erected to nail a man on, he is to be impaled upon this stick. "And in the morning, tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it, and then go merrily with the king to dinner." This counsel pleased Haman and he had the gallows made.

This is God's revelation to us that there is that in each of us which would very willingly put Jesus Christ to death again if we could. Have you found that true? Our most hopeful moment comes when we recognize it is there, stop defending it, and begin to treat it as God would direct. Have you learned to recognize Haman within? Even when he comes smiling and bowing and dripping with solicitude for you?

When you have been relieved from all jobs in which you think you are indispensable and no one even notices that you are not working anymore, what do you do? How do you feel? What does Haman say to you then, when you have been slighted, and self-pity comes and you want to go aside and lick your wounds and feel sorry for yourself? What do you call that? That's Haman! When your patience wears thin and your temper inevitably explodes and you say something you wish you hadn't -- that's Haman!

This is the thing that put Jesus Christ on the cross and that would do it again if it had the chance. This is our enemy. God, in grace, drives us to the place where we learn what we are like. When we begin to see it in realistic, honest terms, recognizing it for what it is, then he has a proposal and a plan for taking care of it. Our plan will never work. His will.

In Chapter 6 that plan is revealed to us.

Prayer:

Our Father, we do pray that what was shown us about our own hearts we may honestly recognize and that we may not seek then to solve the problem ourselves, but begin to appropriate all that marvelous plan of deliverance which you have made available to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Lord, we thank you for him this morning, for him who offers to, and is quite capable of defeating this Haman within us and setting us free from the bondage of ourselves. We pray for understanding hearts and a willingness to walk in obedience to you and your revealed Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Soul and Spirit
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Esther
Scripture: Esther 5
Message No: 4
Catalog No: 35
Date: March 17, 1963

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 Truman 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 come 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." 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." {Est 6:13b RSV}

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.

Title: The Price of Survival
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Esther
Scripture: Esther 6
Message No: 5
Catalog No: 36
Date: March 24, 1963

HAMAN'S LAST SUPPER

by Ray C. Stedman

Before the death of ex-President Truman, I went to visit the Harry S. Truman Memorial Library in Independence, Missouri, where Mr. Truman had erected a building to preserve the momentos of his office. On exhibit were many papers and objects he collected during his time as president which recall momentous events of world importance occurring during his time. We went through the library with a great deal of interest, hoping that perhaps we might run onto Mr. Truman, himself. After we finished our tour I said to the guard, "Has Mr. Truman been here today?" And he said, "Yes, he was out this morning and he said something that was very characteristic. He had forgotten something, and he said to me, 'Why, in blankety, blank, does a man forget so much when he's past seventy?'"

As I heard that, I thought it rather significant, for here was a man who couldn't remember, and a building which was erected so the world would never forget. It reminded me of that strange urge for timelessness which we human beings so frequently manifest. There is an instinctive hunger to be remembered in the human heart. To be so alone that no one remembers us or cares about us is an agony the human spirit can scarcely sustain. Yet, in all history only one timeless, eternal event has ever occurred -- the cross of Jesus Christ. Nothing will ever survive the wreckage of human civilization which does not in some way link up with that cross. That is what the Bible declares and what history confirms.

The cross of Christ is the crisis of history and the judgment of every individual life. It not only occurred in time nineteen hundred years ago outside the city of Jerusalem, but it is something which also takes place daily in every Christian's experience. This is why we speak of the cross as a timeless event. The cross of Jesus Christ has been affecting human history long before it occurred in time, even back into the dim reaches of the past in the early dawn of history or, after the cross, through running centuries from our Lord's day unto our own, because it is a timeless event. It also must take place daily in every Christian's experience, perhaps many times a day. This daily manifestation is what is portrayed for us in this seventh chapter of Esther.

The chapter opens with an intimate supper in a private banqueting room where Queen Esther, the king, and Haman, the evil prime minister, are gathered, and it closes with a man nailed, screaming, to a tree until he is dead. Here is one of those frequent timeless foreshadowings of the cross of the Old Testament. Here is a king who is ignorant of what is going on in his kingdom, He is troubled, perplexed, concerned, deluded, and unknowing. It is a picture of your human soul with its power of will and choice, but also its blindness and ignorance of the true nature of events in your life And here is a queen who has been informed by her wise cousin, Mordecai, exactly what is happening. She knows what is going on and is moving to avert disaster. This, as we have seen, is a picture of the regenerate human spirit which, indwelt and taught by the Holy Spirit, is able to recognize the true nature of evil and is the base from which God moves in our lives to prevent disaster. Here is Haman, a descendent of Agag, the Amalekite, the sworn enemy of God, who is plotting to destroy the people of God from the kingdom of Ahasuerus and to exalt himself. What a picture this is of the principle of self in each of us -- that deadly ego which has as its central purpose the exaltation of self and which hates the control of God in our lives.

Centuries after this supper, another supper was held in a private banqueting room upstairs in a building in Jerusalem. A similar occasion occurs. Three forces are represented there. Here are eleven disciples who do not

know what is going on. Their hearts are troubled. They are concerned and perplexed. They are full of questions. They are ignorant and unknowing. Here is Jesus Christ, their Lord, their master, the perfect Son of man, indwelt by the Father, filled with the Spirit, aware of everything, fully awake to the danger of the hour and moving to avert the world's greatest disaster. And here, also, is Judas, the traitor, intent only on fulfilling his own desires, ready to destroy everything if by hypocrisy and pretense he can get what he wants, unconcerned for the terrible results that will follow his deed because he is intent only upon the fulfillment of his own desire, his own will. That supper, too, ended with a man hanging upon a tree, nailed, skewered to a gallows.

"Well", you say, "it wasn't Judas, it was Jesus." No, you are wrong, for in the record of the Scriptures we read that Judas went out and hanged himself just as, in Esther, Haman, for all practical purposes, hangs himself. And wherever there is cross in Scripture it is always for one purpose only, to put an evil man to death. That is what it will do in your life. And that is what the cross of Jesus was. It was an instrument on which an evil man met death! Does that shock you? One of the most amazing sentences in all Scripture is that word from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where he says, "He who knew no sin was made sin for us," {cf, 2 Cor 5:21}.

That is, on the cross, Jesus became Haman. Jesus was made selfish, cruel, grasping, proud, cunning, slimy, and evil. And the only answer that God has to that is to nail it to a cross. Put it to death! And that is the end of Haman. That is what the Bible says took place on the cross of our Lord Jesus; he became sin, and God put him to death.

Now what is true of a timeless event becomes part of our experience when we reenact it in our own lives. This is why the cross of Jesus Christ, with all its possibilities of salvation and deliverance, can be an utterly useless thing as far as you are concerned if it finds no translation into your own experience. When we believe and act, (that is what belief is, acting on the principles set forth in that cross) then it becomes true in our experience. This is what we have in Chapter 7. The action of this chapter is a picture of the only way a Christian can find real victory over the subtle, crafty, self-loving, self-pleasing, self-pitying, self-defending, self-asserting urges that arise within.

There are three steps here which I will take briefly. In these we come to the climax of the story of Esther. How is the king at last delivered from the chicanery, subtlety, and casuistry of this man Haman? How, at last, does he finally learn the truth? There are three steps. First of all we have, *The Revelation of Evil*:

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. And on the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Then Queen Esther answered "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king." Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, that would presume to do this?" And Esther said, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" {Est 7:1-6a RSV}

This is the moment in your life when, in a flash of insight, you see yourself as you really are. Do you remember those moments of truth that have come when you suddenly catch a glimpse of the way you look to others and you are horrified by what you see? You see in a flash that the problem that has been distressing you is not in others, but is within you. God permits some circumstance to open your eyes and you see that some evil attitude which you have been treating like a friend, defending, protecting, building little fences about, making excuses for, you now see in its true light. And you are horrified by what you find.

You discover that it is not others' thoughtlessness that is the problem -- it is your selfishness. It is not their malice, as you have been accusing them of -- it is your lovelessness. They are simply reacting to what you are doing to them. You don't like their reactions but now you see that the problem is really you. It is not others' coldness that bothers you -- the real trouble is your own self-pity that makes people avoid you because you are

so unpleasant to be with. It is not others' weakness as you have imagined, but it is your relentless nagging that drives people to react the way they do. It is not their fickleness -- it is your jealousy. So there comes from the Spirit of God these tremendous, helpful moments of insight when we see ourselves. What a shattering time it is! Haman, the friend, is revealed as Haman, the traitor, the enemy, the double-dealing foe!

And when we see this it is almost always followed by *A Conflict Within*:

And the king rose from the feast in wrath and sent into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king. {Est 7:7 RSV}

Why does the king leave now that he knows whom the real enemy is? Now that he knows the whole evil plot why doesn't he simply shout, "Off with his head", like the queen in Alice in Wonderland? But now, he rises and goes off into the garden alone. You can see him pacing up and down, struggling with himself. He is angry at Haman, quite properly so, and Haman knows this bodes no good for him. But the king is uncertain what to do, for after all, Haman is the prime minister. He has deeply entrenched himself in the affairs of the kingdom and the king knows that if he does anything to Haman it will upset the whole kingdom. It is a radical step to execute a prime minister. It must necessarily involve a great deal of distress throughout the kingdom and change the whole pattern of life of that empire.

How do you feel when you finally see yourself in the wrong, perhaps after years of justifying and excusing yourself, and suddenly you see that the principle you have been living by has been the problem? How do you feel? You know that if you admit it and renounce it, it will mean a deep and radical adjustment on your part. Perhaps a deep-seated habit of life must be eradicated and a whole life needs to be changed. What do you do then? Aren't you tempted to compromise? Don't you struggle with yourself and feel a strong urge to smooth it over if you can and go on, perhaps improve conditions a bit and try harder to control yourself? You are tempted to compromise. Well, that is the trouble there.

To this day I remember the deep struggle in my own life when it dawned upon me one day that the problem of touchiness which had so affected and bothered me, which continually caused me agony of soul so I would go aside for long hours of licking my wounds and wallowing in a morass of self-pity, was not others' fault, it was mine. It was my own selfishness and self-centeredness that caused it. I remember how I struggled with that awareness, and how I tried to temporize by resolving to control it better. I didn't want to admit that it was self-centeredness. The conflict raged in my own heart whether to face this for what it was and treat it as selfishness, or simply to try and repress it a bit longer and subdue it if I could. After an hour or more of deep struggle over this, I came to the place where I was able to say, "God has shown me the truth and this is the way that I must view it."

When the rich young ruler came to the Lord Jesus, in a few sentences the Lord revealed that young man's heart and showed him how his love for what money could give him possessed and owned his life. Then Jesus said to him, "Go and sell all that thou hast and give to the poor and come and follow me," {cf, Matt 19:21}. We read that he went away sorrowfully, filled with a struggle, not willing yet to call that thing the enemy that it was and cut it off sharply and completely. And the Lord, looking after him, was grieved because he loved him.

There is only one way out. The only possible escape from Haman's tyranny, the only real deliverance, is to pronounce *The Sentence of Death*:

And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was; and the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then said Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, "Moreover, the gallows which Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing in Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. {Est 7:8-10 RSV}

What a picture! When the king returns from the garden, he sees Haman half fallen on the queen's couch,

clawing at her, cravenly pleading for mercy, down on his knees, seeking to move the queen if he can. The sight of it revolts and disgusts the king. Sarcastically he says, "Why, is he even trying to attack her in my very presence?" And at that moment a courtier reminds him, "You know sir, there are the gallows in the house of Haman which he built for Mordecai, the man who saved your life." Thus, reminded of Haman's true character and conscious of the evil plot against his friend, the king pronounces Haman's doom, "Hang him on that tree!"

Note that it is not until the king says this that Haman's evil is ended. And it is not until you agree with God that these evil things have no longer a right to live in your life that you will find deliverance from their power. In the language of Romans 6,

Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. {Rom 6:11 RSV}

"Hang it on that tree" -- that is the sentence that brings victory. No other way will work. It needs to be said every time Haman arises, for while we are here in the body we are never delivered from the attempts of the flesh to influence us. But Haman never need be victorious for if we believe that what has been revealed to us about this evil thing that has arisen -- jealousy, resentment, bitterness, malice, lust, whatever it may be -- and recalling that this is what put Jesus Christ to death, this is what made Judas do what he did, this is what Jesus became when he took our place on that tree, say, "Yes, Lord, hang it on that tree."

When jealousy burns within you, hang it on that tree! When self-pity comes moaning along and tempts you to feel sorry for yourself, hang it on the tree. Put it in the place of death. When self-will rises up and says, "I am going to have my way, I don't care what", hang it on the tree! When resentment flames because you have been ignored or mistreated, hang it on the tree. When a critical spirit whispers to you to destroy a reputation or harm someone, hang it on the tree. Say it, pray it! Say, "Lord Jesus, because I see this through your eyes as the evil thing that it is, then, standing here in the light of your Cross, I put my will along side yours, Lord, and I agree, 'Hang it on that tree! Put it in the place of death where it belongs. Hang it there.'"

This is the way of victory, the only possible way.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for these times of self-humiliation, when we do not see ourselves as the cause of all our problems, and we stop blaming others and stop blaming our circumstances, and come to grips with this thing and put it in the place of death where you put it, and recognize that it has no right to live any longer, for when it was brought out in the light, in the cross of Jesus Christ, you condemned it, sentenced it, executed it, and put it to death in him. Lord, grant us faith to believe, and willingness to act upon your sentence of death and treat these things as an enemy, a Judas, a traitor within, which with a kiss would betray us. To do as you have bade us in this story -- to hang it on the cross, on that tree. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Haman's Last Supper

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Esther

Scripture: Esther 7

Message No: 6

Catalog No: 37

Date: April 7, 1963

THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Esther is the most up-to-date book in the Bible. The story comes to us out of the dusty, long distant past, but it finds a modern counterpart in each of our lives, for every Christian is a walking book of Esther. The same characters are involved, the same struggle goes on, the same defeat threatens, the same victory is possible. This is the story of your life. As such it becomes of fascinating, perennial interest to us.

Perhaps the most pitiable figure that appears in the book is King Ahasuerus. He is so powerful in the kingdom that nothing is done without his consent, but he is so naive and ingenuous as far as knowing what is going on is concerned. He is so easily trapped by the cunning Haman into a decision which threatens to wreck his kingdom. As we have seen, this king is you -- your will which rules over the capital city of your body and influences an empire of broad expanse touching all those who are close to you. The will, the emotions, and the mind make up the human soul and this is the king in the book of Esther.

Haman, the evil prime minister, is the flesh, the Adamic principle of evil which, apart from the revelation of the Bible, we would never know exists. We find this Adamic principle continually deluding us, deceiving us (as Haman deceived the king), into self effort, self-praise, self-pity, self-admiration, self-centeredness of every kind. Deliverance can come to us only by the reintroduction into man of a new spirit portrayed by Esther the queen, who in turn is under the control of the Holy Spirit, the person of Mordecai in the book of Esther.

We have traced this story of deliverance to the point where the king's eyes have at last been opened. He now sees the true nature of Haman and the deception which Haman sought to perpetrate upon him has now been unveiled. The king sees now that his enemy is the one he once thought to be his friend. He struggles with what is necessary, but eventually he resolves to treat Haman exactly as he deserves. He determines to hang Haman upon the very gallows that Haman had erected for Mordecai.

This recognition of the true nature of Haman is the first step toward freeing the kingdom from that which threatens its ultimate destruction, just as the first step in achieving victory in my life comes the moment I stop justifying and excusing my faults and failures and stop shutting my eyes to them and passing them off as something else and resolve to hang them on the Tree where God put them when Jesus Christ died. That is the beginning of victory in my life and yours.

In Chapter 8 of Esther we trace the steps that follow this decision. It opens with a transfer of power, and, therefore, **A New Authority**,

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai come before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her; and the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. {Est 8:1-2 RSV}

This is the magic moment, full of possibilities. In your life, this is the moment when, consciously and deliberately, you reject the authority of self-interest in your affairs and yield to the Holy Spirit the right to sovereign direction of your life and all your concerns. Since the task of the Holy Spirit is to make real in our lives the person of Jesus Christ, this could also be called the moment we first, consciously and with permanent intent, yield to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. You may have been a Christian for many years and yet have never seen clearly before that he has the right to total authority over every area of your life. Most Christians begin their Christian life intending to yield the major decisions to the control of God, or perhaps certain special areas which are obviously the concern of all, but there are private areas we reserve to ourselves, in which we will tolerate no intrusion on the part of God. But strangely enough, those are the very areas he wants to intrude into and to talk to us about. The reality of this is translated into our experience the moment we become ready to reject the flesh, self-interest, as the controlling factor of our life and become ready to give the Spirit of God his rightful position as the prime minister of our kingdom.

This is often called, in terms of human experience, a second work of grace or perhaps it is given the term full sanctification, or the baptism of the Holy Spirit or some other such term indicating a new beginning, a new advance in life. This has given rise to much confusion and misunderstanding in the apprehension of spiritual life truth. We look at this as though it were a new thing, a new and formerly unknown principle, as though the Spirit of God were only now entering the life. But you can see that Mordecai has been in the book right from

the beginning. It is only at this moment that he is brought before the king, the soul becomes conscious now of the need for submission to the authority of the Holy Spirit. But Mordecai has been there all along. He is not brought into the kingdom, he is brought before the king.

This is not, then, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. That takes place at the beginning the Christian life, is never repeated, and is continually the basis from which God works in our lives. But this is what the New Testament calls the filling of the Spirit, that is, the moment when the Spirit is granted his rightful authority in the life. It may need to be repeated many times over in many areas of the life that is not yet submitted. We fail to realize how much of our life is still unsubmitted to the control of God and it is the grace of God to bring us into experiences that reveal to us these unsubmitted areas. When that occurs we may have another experience like this, so it is possible to have hundreds of fillings of the Spirit. Each time there is an advance in the total surrender of the life to the control of the Spirit of God.

Now, notice also that though Haman, the old prime minister, slimy, cunning, and cruel is now gone (that is, the old man has been put to death on the tree) the "house of Haman" is still around: "On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of among the enemy of the Jews," {Est 8:1a RSV}. These are the sons of Haman and his family. The king gives the right to handle them to Esther who immediately turns it over to Mordecai as the only one with the wisdom and the knowledge to handle such a thorny matter properly.

You can recognize this in your own experience, if you are a Christian. You may come to the place where you know the truth about the flesh and believe that Christ's death has judged it within you; nevertheless, you discover evidence of the flesh still affecting you. Though the old man indeed has been hanged upon the tree, yet he still has, through the house of Haman, the ability to influence you, distract you, tempt you, and even defeat you. The answer to this is not to try to repress these influences by your will power. The king here makes no effort to try to overcome the house of Haman. He says, "It is your problem, Esther." And she, in turn, says to the Holy Spirit, "It is your problem. You handle this matter." This is exactly what the New Testament tells us to do. We are to realize that our defense against the intrusion of the flesh into our thinking is not our will power, our determination not to permit these things, but it is rather a quiet resting back upon the power of the Holy Spirit to meet this whenever it appears and a dependence upon him to do so.

Not only is the house of Haman still around, but there is that pesky edict that tricked the king into signing which still threatens the kingdom. What is to be about this? That is the problem before us in this second section, where we see *An Old Threat*:

Then Esther spoke again to the king; she fell at his feet and besought him with tears to avert the evil design of Haman the Agagite and the plot which he had devised against the Jews. And the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I endure to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he would lay hands on the Jews. And you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." {Est 8:3-8 RSV}

Here is the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be altered, mentioned earlier in the book. In terms of your experience and mine, this is what in Romans is called the law of sin and death. It cannot be altered nor revoked. It is this that baffles the Apostle Paul as he describes his experience in Romans 7, "I do not understand my own action for I do not do what I want and I do the very thing that I hate. I can will what is right but I cannot do it." {cf, Rom 7:18-20}.

Have you experienced this? Have you come to the place in your Christian growth where you have known this baffling, mocking defeat even after you thought you had learned the cause of your problem? You have learned

the evil of the flesh. You no longer try to protect it in your life. You know and you gladly admit that temper, impatience, resentment, self-righteousness, and pride are from the flesh. You know they are your enemy and not your friend, and you have stopped defending them and justifying them. You know now they are dear old Haman, a traitor, an enemy. Now you really want to do the right thing. You hang the flesh from which they come on the cross. You recognize it for what it is and reject it. You expect now to be free from its effects and to do the right thing, but you find you can't, The harder you try, the oftener you fail. You consecrate yourself, commit yourself anew. Perhaps there is a service at the church when you go forward or raise your hand or bow your head as you resolve anew to do better, You know what the problem is, you want to do right, but still nothing seems to go right. There is nothing wrong with your will, but you are still helpless.

This is the problem of Romans 7. When you have experienced it you have found what Esther describes here and what the Apostle Paul describes: "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members," {Rom 7:23 RSV}. Here is the law of the Medes and Persians which altereth not. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" {Rom 7:24 RSV}. That is the cry of Esther as she comes before the king the second time. "Oh, wretched woman that I am, who will deliver me and my people from this law of sin and death that has once been uttered in the king's name and cannot be revoked?"

The king is helpless! He can only reply to her, "I can do nothing. The matter is in your hands and Mordecai's. What has been written by the king's hand and sealed by the king's seal cannot be revoked." In Galatians we read, "He that sows to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption," {cf, Gal 6:8}. This is an inevitable and irrevocable law. There is no way to escape the results of decisions made under the rule of self. They bear unavoidable consequences. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth he shall also reap. If you sow to the flesh, you shall of the flesh reap corruption," {cf, Gal 6:7}. The law of the Medes and the Persians which altereth not! We all know the tragic harvest of it in terms of habits that cannot be broken and circumstances that cannot be avoided.

What can be done? The answer follows in this next section, *A New Law*:

The king's secretaries were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and on edict was written according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews to the satraps and the governors and the princes of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and their language. The writing was in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring, and letters were sent by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud. By these the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods, upon one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, and by proclamation to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to avenge themselves upon their enemies. So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out in haste, urged by the king's command; and the decree was issued in Susa the capital. {Est 8:9-14 RSV}

What is Mordecai's answer to this problem, this threat that hangs like the sword of Damocles over the kingdom? He cannot cancel out the old law. This is impossible. But there is one thing he can do. He can issue a new law which, with the king's consent, would affect the farthest bounds of the kingdom and would turn the threatened defeat into victory. And this is exactly what our Mordecai, the Holy Spirit, has done!

Paul says in the opening words of the eighth chapter of Romans, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death," {Rom 8:2 RSV}. A new law, a new edict, has gone into effect. "It is no longer I that live," he says, "but Christ liveth in me," {cf, Gal 2:20a KJV}. The law of his life in me is able to counteract the effects of sin and death. It is no longer I that work, but it is he who works through me and so I live his life. It is still I who live it, but "I live it by the faith of the Son of God, who loved

me and gave himself for me," {Gal 2:20b KJV}. And when I count on his indwelling life to work through me step by step, he turns even my failures into victories! That is what he is saying.

"Your sorrow shall be turned into joy" {John 16:20}, the Lord Jesus said to his disciples before he went to the cross. Notice he did not say, "Your sorrows shall be replaced by joy." He said that the thing that causes you sorrow shall itself be translated, transmuted, turned into joy. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus turns adversity into adventure and affliction into praise. It does not always change the circumstances. But it uses them, overpowers them, reverses their effect. The strange thing is that it works best in weakness and in defeat.

This is what Paul discovered when that thorn in the flesh, that raw, grinding, nerve-destroying thing kept eating away at him. We don't know what it was -- something in the flesh that bothered him like a thorn continually pricking him in the side. He prayed three times that it might be taken away, but the answer came, "My strength is made perfect in weakness, my grace is sufficient for thee," {cf, 2 Cor 12:9 KJV}. So the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets you free from the law of sin and death. There need be no defeat for your spirit. There need be no discouragement, no terrible crushing sense of despair even though the circumstances remain unchanged, his indwelling life in you is sufficient to meet everything that comes.

The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, working in a shepherd lad named David, took hold of the very situation that was causing despair and pessimism in the camp of Israel and turned the very threat itself, Goliath the giant, into triumph for Israel. David's faith in an indwelling, all-adequate God was the only new factor added to that situation. Gloom and despair had spread like a cancer throughout the whole camp of Israel and one man, a mighty man of towering stature and strength, was holding the entire army of God immobile and helpless. Then David came along saying, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that dares defy the armies of the living God?" {cf, 1 Sam 17:26}. Though his sight, like the others, is fixed upon Goliath, his faith was fastened upon a living God who was able to meet every circumstance no matter what it was, when it came, or how it occurred. And he said, "In the face of those resources, who is this?" That quiet faith worked the miracle by which the very one who threatened became the ground of victory, triumph, and blessing.

Some time back a friend who is also a surgeon told of how he went out with an associate of his, a non-Christian, to visit an old man who was living in a trailer by himself and who was in a pitiful condition. This doctor said he knew this man would not live much longer for he was riddled with cancer. It was all over his body, knobs of it breaking out on his scalp, his tissues riddled with disease. The two doctors came into the wretched trailer and found him asleep. They woke him and said, "How is it going?" The old man looked up, and with a smile he said, "All is well." As they left the trailer, the non-Christian associate said to my friend, "What does he mean, all is well? How could he say that? Doesn't he know he is dying with cancer? Doesn't he know there is no hope at all for him?" And my friend said, "Yes, he knows." And he explained to him the reason for his cheerful spirit. There is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, overcoming the law of sin and death which brings despair and defeat.

It is similar to the way the law of aerodynamics uses the law of gravity to make a plane fly. During my travels by plane, and before I board the jet, I do not go to my wife and say, "Look dear, I am going aboard this airplane, but I promise you that all the way to my destination I will try my best to hold that plane up and see that it flies. I will sit in the seat and hold onto the arms and give my whole attention to this problem. All the way there I will struggle to keep the plane flying." No, if I said that, she wouldn't let me go!

I know that the law of gravity continually pulls on a plane and I have never become so confident in the dynamics of flight that I have made the mistake of thinking that it has stopped working. I have never, in the middle of a flight, gone to the door and said, "I am tired of riding, I think I will get out and walk." If I did, I would have discovered that the law of gravity is still in effect. I would have demonstrated it very conclusively. But a plane operates by a higher law which opposes and yet uses the law of gravity. If it were not for the law of gravity, the law of aerodynamics would not work. So if it were not for the law of sin and death, there could be no victory in our Christian experience. If we were not continually beset by this temptation to yield to the flesh within or to despair of circumstances without, there would be nothing to be victorious over, there could be no operation of the law that causes us to move in triumph and victory in the midst of depression and unhappy circumstances.

We will see more of this in Chapter 9, but even before the event comes off things begin to get better. There is immediately *A New Outlook*:

Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the people of the country declared themselves Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them. {Est 8:15-17}

Even before the deliverance actually comes, even before the life is really changed, there is a tremendous joy in the realization that victory is possible. When it breaks upon our defeated hearts that God has made a way out and it works, we know instant joy. Oh, what joy in Susa, Mordecai is honored. The city shouts with gladness.

Compare Chapter 8 with Chapter 3 of this book. There it was Haman who sat in the prime minister's seat. It was he who signed the edict that the king sent out and the result was a city in confusion and bewilderment. But now Mordecai is in control and the result is joy and gladness throughout the whole kingdom. I tell you it is a great relief when the truth breaks upon our hearts, our wretched, despairing hearts, that God has made a way out, not a way out of the circumstances necessarily, but a way out of defeat from the circumstances.

I remember well an incident during World War II when I was in the United States Navy serving in Pearl Harbor, and it came my turn to take a watch at night. I was working in the Ships Service Department, the department store for the Navy, and a watch was posted all night long. Four hours on duty. We could read, we could write letters, we could do other things, but we had to be awake and we had to be there. I had the watch from two o'clock to six o'clock during those wee hours when nothing else was happening. I had brought along a couple of books to read. One was "Romans, Verse by Verse" by William R. Newell, and in my reading I came across the verse,

"Sin shall not have dominion over you for you are not under law but under grace." {Rom 6: 14 KJV}

I had read that verse many, many times before, but this time it seemed to strike me as though it were a trip hammer. It leaped at me out of the pages. It took life and came thundering at me. "Sin shall not have dominion over you." I had been wrestling with problems in my life over which I had known no victory, and I was almost on the point of despair. It seemed like I could not find a way out, but that sentence came like a blaring trumpet into my heart, filling me with great joy. I did not know how it would work out yet. I did not understand the process by which victory would come into being, but I remember how my faith laid hold of that word. Sin shall not -- shall not -- shall not -- shall not have dominion over you! I walked the floor with my heart overflowing with victorious joy. Here was the pronouncement of the king that those things which made for defeat in my life would utterly be broken, would lie at last in pieces at my feet and I would be free. Through the ensuing years the Lord has fulfilled that promise and those things which held me from victory, held me in bondage and thralldom, are broken and defeated.

But another result is evident, too. Not only joy, but convicting power:

And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them. {Est 8:17b RSV}

That is, Gentiles became Jews, adopting the principles of the people of God, giving up their paganism and turning unto the only true God. What answers to this in your life? You know it. When your life becomes perceptibly different, when your reactions to the trials that afflict Christian and non-Christian alike become quite opposite to what the situation seems called for, others are going to be struck by this change and become Christians. When your life can no longer be explained simply in terms of your human personality, when your reaction to a situation is quite contrary to what people have been led to expect by their knowledge of your nature, the question is raised, "What makes him do this? How can he do this? What makes him react this way?" A conviction of truth follows, and this makes for powerful Christian witness.

A man said to me not long ago, "Meeting some of the folks from your church has transformed my conviction of what Christianity is. There is something about them that I can't put my finger upon, but they are obviously different from any other Christians I have ever met." I was encouraged and delighted to hear this. When there is exhibited in our lives something of the outflowing of the indwelling IÅ

Prayer:

Our Father, with what amazing insight this ancient book has led us along the path of our own life to see ourselves in new light such as we have never seen before. We thank you, Lord, for this way by which the Spirit of God puts his finger upon the very things that have been wrong in our own lives, afflicting us, enslaving us, bringing us into bondage, and for the glad news that runs through this book as its constant theme that it is the glory and the delight of our living God to set us free. We pray that our intelligence may grasp this, that our faith may lay hold of this, that we may begin to walk in the glorious freedom and liberty of the children of God, set free from ourselves. We thank you for the love that made it possible and the truth that shines from these pages. In Christ's name, Amen.

Title: The Law of the Spirit
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Esther
Scripture: Esther 8
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 38
Date: April 21, 1963

THE SWEET TASTE OF VICTORY

by Ray C. Stedman

Out of the second letter of Paul to Corinth there comes a verse that is perhaps the most characteristically Christian verse in all the Bible. Paul says,

"Thanks be unto God who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere." {cf, 2 Cor 2:14}

That seems to me to sum up beautifully what a Christian life is. This verse comes but a few verses after those which tell us how Paul went through a terrible experience in Asia when he was utterly, unbearably crushed so that he despaired of life itself. Out of that time of terrible pressure that came upon him, that awful sense of conflict that was his, he writes these marvelous words.

The verse spotlights the truth that victory is the normal life for a believer. We have reminded you from time to time of the definition of a Christian as one who is continually cheerful, completely fearless, and constantly in trouble. Trouble is a continual experience as the Christian goes through life, but in every time and place of conflict God's will and God's provision for us is victory. That is what the book of Esther sets before us in pictorial fashion.

This is the marvelous story of God's process of delivering his people. We have seen how Haman plots the destruction of the people of God, (a picture for us of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives) and issues an edict with the authority of the king by which the kingdom will ultimately be destroyed if it is carried out. Then we saw how Mordecai moves to prevent this, and, through Esther, brings about an awareness on the part of the king of what is going on. At last the folly of Haman is exposed, and the king hangs him on the gallows that was prepared for Mordecai. Then we have the issuing of a new edict, an edict which permits the Jews to defend themselves when the enemy comes against them. This is a beautiful picture of the seventh chapter of Romans,

and the new law, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, which sets us free from the law of sin and death.

Perhaps you are not familiar with this kind of pictorial presentation of theological truths, but this is what makes the Old Testament live. If you learn to read your Old Testament as a kind of visual aid to understanding the New Testament, you will discover that it is a beautiful and living book constantly teaching marvelous, delivering truth.

Chapter 9 of Esther brings us to the actual moment of victory. It may help to point out that the account of the actual victory is limited to half a chapter, but the action of the whole book is necessary to bring this about. As an iceberg hides three-quarters of its bulk beneath the surface of the waves and all that is seen is the one-quarter on the top, so the moment of victory and deliverance in your life is really a very small part of the work that God has been doing to bring you to that place.

Chapter 9 begins with a reminder of *An Appointed Time*:

Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to get the mastery over them, but which had been changed to be a day when the Jews should get the mastery over their foes, the Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on such as sought their hurt. {Est 9:1-2a RSV}

The day has finally come, the day which the unchangeable law of the Medes and the Persians had established, the day on which the conflict would actually occur. These two unchangeable laws are destined to come to a head-on clash on exactly the same day, one law which permitted the enemies of the Jews to rise up against them and destroy them, and the other which permitted the Jews to rise up and destroy the enemy.

In your life this pictures the truth that God never teaches you something without having appointed a time when you will be put to the test. It is easy to come to a church service or a Bible class and open the Bible and learn marvelous truth which thrills you. I often rejoice at seeing truth break suddenly upon people's hearts and their faces light up as the truth of God comes home and they rejoice in the knowledge of it, but head knowledge is one thing, and heart experience is quite another. The wonderful thing about God's dealings with us is that he never lets us learn a thing that he doesn't test us on in our own life. In other words, he has appointed a day when what we learn out of the pages of the Word will be put to the test in the place of pressure, our daily experience.

God is forever conducting examinations. Have you discovered that? He is forever bringing us to the place of actual combat for life is certainly more than a Boy Scout picnic. The learning of truth is not simply mental acrobatics, but is designed to be tested in the hurly-burly of life, in the mud and blood of our daily experience.

The Lord Jesus once took the disciples down to the coast of the Sea of Galilee and said, "Let's get into the boat and go to the other side," {cf, Mark 4:35}. It was evening time, and as the little boat made its way across the sea, a great storm suddenly engulfed the sea and waves began to rise high around the boat, and soon the ship was in great danger of sinking. We are told that Jesus was asleep in the hinder part of the boat, and finally the disciples came to him and shook him awake and said to him, "Lord, don't you care that we are perishing?" {cf, Mark 4:38b}. The Greek is very strong here. What they really said was, "Lord, don't you care that we are now in the process of sinking? We are going down!"

These were men who were used to the sea and used to the storms that came on it. But this was a storm greater than they could handle, and they knew they were in actual danger of sinking. Remember how, with majestic splendor, he arose and spoke to the waves saying, "Peace be still," {Mark 4:39}. Immediately there came a great calm and the Lord turned to the disciples and said, "Oh, ye of little faith, why did you doubt?" {cf, Mark 4:40}.

What is going on here? Well, if you read the context you will discover that he had been preaching all day on the other side of the sea, and the theme of his message was faith. He had been teaching what faith was, and

how faith operates and what it can accomplish in life. Now they are taking the examination and the result was, they flunked! He had said to them, "Let's go over to the other side." He had not said, "Let's go out in the middle and drown." But they had no faith in what he had said, for they had forgotten who he was. The examination came suddenly upon them to test how much they had really learned of trust as they heard those marvelous words that day.

Have you found this true in your own life? As you read the words of Scripture, God speaks to your heart and you say, "Oh, this is wonderful. I see this as I have never seen it before." Then be very sure that in a short time something will occur that will put that to the test in your life. There is an appointed day for the testing of faith, as we see here.

Following this, we read of *The Pattern of Victory*:

And no one could make a stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples. All the princes of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal officials also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them. For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. So the Jews smote all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. In Susa the capital itself the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men, and also slew Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews; but they laid no hand on the plunder. {Est 9:2b-10 RSV}

In these few verses we have condensed the actual story of victory, the climax towards which this book has been building all along. Notice the stages of it. First, there is the fact set forth that the new edict which had come from the king has now given them freedom to fight. The first edict that had come from Haman, the old prime minister, was to the effect that the enemies of the Jews were permitted by the law of the land to do whatever they like to the Jews on that day. They could kill them. They could destroy them. They could take their property. But now another edict has gone forth, written by Mordecai, which declared that on that same day the Jews are now, by law, permitted to defend themselves. Under the first law, the natural reaction of the Jews would have been to defend themselves on the day their enemies came against them, but if they had, they would have been outlaws and rebels against the law of the land. The very law of the land was against them to keep them from even defending themselves. They could do nothing in their own defense without incurring the stigma of being outlaws and rebels against the authority and law of the land. But now a new law has come into being which permits them to fight, sets them free, allows them to defend themselves with the full authority and approval of the king himself.

Do you see what this is picturing for us? What a wonderful light this throws upon that troublesome question raised in the letter to the Romans about the place of the law in a believer's experience. What relationship does a Christian have to the Ten Commandments after he has become a Christian? There are two verses in Romans 7 that have been largely misunderstood, which are beautifully explained by this passage in Esther. In the fifth and sixth verses, Paul speaks about this matter of the Law and he says,

While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. {Rom 7:5 RSV}

That is what we have pictured in Esther, The first law permitted the enemies of the Jews (in fact ordered them, aroused them) to attack the Jews on this particular day and thus bring death throughout the country. So Paul says, "While we were living in the flesh," that is, in our own struggle to be good and obey the law, our sinful passions were aroused by that very law. Have you not felt that? Someone tells you not to do something -- how do you feel? You want to do that very thing! Your sinful passions are aroused by the prohibition of the law. So the law works to bring forth fruit unto death. But Paul goes on to say,

But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive [that law no longer affects us] so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of

the Spirit. {Rom 7:6 RSV}

A new law has gone forth, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, which has set us free from the condemnation of the old so we are free now to fight in the name of God and thus to overcome.

Notice also that "all the princes of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal officials" help the Jews. This is remarkable, isn't it? The very people who, if there had not been a second law, would have been opposed to them and would have been against them, are now fighting on their side, helping them by pointing out their enemies and showing them the ones they were to attack. This unexpected help is a result, of course, of the new edict. We have the revelation here that even those circumstances that seemed to be against us, that we thought were holding us in bondage, have now become our helpers in this battle.

I think of the experience of Joseph when his brethren sold him into slavery and years later he had risen to the highest seat in the kingdom short of Pharaoh himself. His brethren come and he reveals himself to them and they are afraid and trembling for their lives. Then he says these wonderful words, "You meant all these things for evil, but God meant them for good," {cf, Gen 50:20}. The very circumstances that we think are defeating us and bringing us into bondage through our own passions within, are oftentimes the very things that are used of God to bring us into the light and help us along the way. I have often wondered, when I read the book of Acts, what those Christians at Damascus must have thought when someone came leading into the city by the hand that poor, blinded Saul of Tarsus who had come there breathing out threatenings and slaughter against them and from whom they were now hiding in fear of their lives. But now he comes to be on their side. God has arrested the arrester and brought him a captive to them. Of course they were afraid and couldn't trust him at first, but gradually they saw that by the might of glory and grace God had transformed their greatest enemy into their greatest defender. What a picture this is of what happens in the life of one who understands the victory that God has planned.

There is another thing revealed here in Verse 4. Not only did they have freedom to fight, but they have power to fight: "For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful." They were fighting now in the consciousness that the man of power was on their side, that right up to the very throne itself they had not only the authority to fight, but they fought in dependence on his power. Throughout this book Mordecai is a picture of the Holy Spirit at work in your life and mine. Not long ago I saw in a magazine a picture of a straw that had been picked up by a tornado and driven through a telephone pole. Also, there was a picture of an iron fire hydrant that had been pierced with several slivers of wood. How could this happen? If I gave you a straw and said to you, "Would you kindly go out and drive this through a telephone pole", you would say it is impossible. But here is a picture of it! How did it happen? The only answer is that the straw, weak as it is, has been caught up in the power of the tornado, and in the power of that mighty wind it is able to do that which it could never do itself. It is rather remarkable, isn't it, that throughout the Scriptures the Spirit of God is referred to as the wind, the breath of God. This is a continual figure of his ministry in our midst.

As we realize that God has now set us free from the Law by a new life within, the life of Jesus Christ, we learn that in the power of that new life, ministered to us continually by the Holy Spirit, it is quite possible to do everything that needs to be done. It won't always be to put straws through telephone poles. The Holy Spirit will never be like a tornado if all you need is a gentle breeze, but if you need a tornado, that is what he is. He can move mountains, change circumstances, set aside kingdoms, or overthrow thrones if necessary, for whatever is necessary, the man of power has power to do it. That is what we see here. So they fought in the realization that the man behind the throne is the one from whom power comes.

Not only did they have freedom to fight and power to fight, but the point is, they actually fought! We read here, "So the Jews smote all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them." {Est 9:5 RSV}.

Right here is one of the areas where there is much failure in the application of truth to experience. I know people who ask, "Well, what are we to do when we come right up to the actual time of temptation?" Perhaps the spirit of impatience is throbbing away wanting to break out again, or we feel pressured to break out in resentment or jealousy against another, or ambition comes rushing up setting our blood on fire and urging us

to lay hold of some circumstance to gain a position of prominence or favor. What do we do then? Is it enough to say, "Just look to the Lord and go on"? No, I don't think so. I know there are those who say that all one need do is let go and let God do it. But God does it through us! engaging our total personality in the process. There is an actual battle involved, as here and in many other accounts throughout Scripture. The battle is not aggressive action so much as simply standing on the promise God has given and a refusal to be moved from that position.

That is what Paul says in Ephesians: "We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principality, and powers and rulers of the world's darkness," {Eph 6:12a KJV}. And what are we to do? "Having done all, stand!" {cf, Eph 6:13b}. Take the place of victory that God has given us in Jesus Christ. If you question this thesis, I suggest you read again the gospel accounts of our Lord in the agony of Gethsemane's garden. There was a battle going on and it wasn't simply a matter of looking to the Lord and immediately there came release and freedom from struggle. There was a struggle. There was a terrible conflict. There was a dark pressure that caused drops of blood to be pressed out through his veins in the anguish of that moment, but he would not budge, he would not move back, he would not forsake the place he had taken in faith, so the enemy was defeated.

James says to us,

Submit yourself unto God and resist the devil and he will flee. {cf, Jas 4:7 RSV}

Both are necessary! There are those who submit themselves unto God, but they don't bother to resist the devil, and sooner or later defeat comes. And there are those who try to resist the devil, but they have never submitted themselves unto God, and defeat comes. Both are necessary. Though we have all the power and all the authority to do all that needs to be done to defeat these passions within that keep us in bondage, we will never win the day until we take our stand and fight in the strength of God, refusing to budge or retreat or go back from our position of faith.

This intensely personal character of victory is pictured clearly in the fact that the ten sons of Haman were put to death, I found that in the Hebrew the names of the ten sons are given in a very peculiar fashion, To each one of these names the Hebrew word "self" is attached. The names are written in a parallel column and on the opposite column the word self is repeated after each name. I tried to discover the meaning of these names -- for this is always worthwhile with Hebrew names -- and I was able to find eight of them, though two of them I could never trace down fully. But let me give you the names of the eight, in relationship to this word self:

- Parshandatha means curious -- self, that is nosiness, a desire to pry into other people's matters.
- Dalphon means weeping-self, self-pity, in other words.
- Aspatha I could not find.
- Poratha means generous-self, or in the bad sense intended here, spend-thriftiness.
- Adalia I could not find.
- Aridatha means strong-self, i.e. assertiveness.
- Parsashta means preeminent-self, ambition.
- Arisai means bold-self, which would be impudence.
- Aridai is dignified-self, that is pride. And
- Vaizatha means pure-self, pure while everyone else is polluted.

Now in this interesting account all these were put to death, or in terms of Romans 7, they were put in the place of death. Victory meant that all these manifestations of self turned awry, distorted, were put in the place where God puts them, the place of death and refused any right to live. Anything less than this is defeat!

Immediately following the pattern of victory we find *The Marks of Genuine Victory*:

There is a great temptation to imitate victory. We screw on a smile and pretend we are living in triumph over our circumstances, or we repress our impatience and act as though we are very patient when inwardly we are seething with impatience. Or, perhaps, we talk about our humility and our lack of desire for preeminence when all the time ambition surges within us and we are desperately proud. Now this is a sham, a facade, an attempt

to imitate victory. But there are certain signs of genuine victory which cannot be imitated and which invariably indicate God's victory manifest in the life. These signs are set forth in Verses 11-16:

That very day the number of those slain in Susa the capital was reported to the king. And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the capital the Jews have slain five hundred men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled. "And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to be according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows." So the king commended this to be done; a decree was issued in Susa and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they slew three hundred men in Susa; but they laid no hands on the plunder. {Est 9:11-15 RSV}

There are three things here that mark a genuine victory:

First, there was a double victory in the capital city. The day of victory was extended in the capital to cover another day. The empire is a picture for us of the circle of our influence but the capital city is our own life, our own body, and in the capital there was a double victory. That is, more happens in your own life in terms of deliverance than the public ever finds out about and it means at least twice as much to you as it does to anyone else. Many of you have begun already to experience release from jealousy, impatience, and other manifestations of the flesh, and the result is you are much easier to live with. You are nicer to have around. But you well know that nice as it is for them it is much more wonderful to you! You realize far more of the place of release and victory than is ever manifest outside the capital city of your own heart.

Secondly, Esther requested that the ten sons of Haman, who had been killed the day before, now be publicly hanged, impaled upon a gallows, nailed up for all to see. Here is another unmistakable sign of victory, a believer sharing in some public way the victory God has given him. At a men's conference recently a number of us gathered informally to talk about God's work in our lives, and one man after another began to tell about their experience. One man opened his heart and told about his struggle with impatience and how God had brought him to victory over this. Another told how ambition had been the passion of his life and how, at last, he was set free from this strange fire. Another spoke of jealousy and lust and others told of other things. They were publicly hanging the dead sons of Haman, as an encouragement to others. This is always a sign of true victory.

The third and last mark is three times mentioned in this account. "They slew their enemies, but laid no hand on the plunder." That is, they did not enrich themselves by this. There was no attempt to gain self-advancement. This is always an unmistakable mark of genuine spiritual victory. There are always some who want to be set free from certain driving passions in their life simply because it will mean a better chance for advancement in employment, or it would solve a difficult problem in their home, or perhaps they hope to get along better with their mother-in-law. They seek to overcome their bad disposition because essentially they want to get a share of the plunder. They are looking for some advantage to themselves. But the mark of genuine victory is that you don't care a whit what happens to you. You don't care whether you are advanced by this at all. You want victory simply because this is God's desire for you. You want to be free so that you may fulfill all the desire of his heart in you. When I see this attitude I know the Holy Spirit has genuinely done a work of grace in that person's life.

In the Billy Graham magazine, *Decision*, Marie Lochner wrote, "Such a short time ago I was afraid of doing wrong because it might hurt me. Now I am beginning to feel that it is more important not to hurt my Father." This is victory for Christ's sake.

I remember the story of a young man from Mexico, who told how it was not until his little girl became sick, and was lying at the point of death, that he finally woke up to what God wanted of his life. In moving tones, he told how he struggled until he came to the place where he was ready to face the claims of Christ in his life. I was struck by the way he put it: "I did not say to the Lord, 'If you will make my little girl well, I will serve you.' I didn't say that," he said. "I said to him, 'Regardless of whether you make her well or not, I will serve

you." That is real victory. That is a mark of genuineness.

Have you been there? Have you found this? Has God set you free at last from those things that have enslaved and bound you all your Christian experience? Those manifestations of the flesh such as bitterness, resentment, jealousy, pride, lust and all the rest? Well, the signs of it will be that you do not care about gaining advantage for yourself, and it will mean far more to you than will ever be visible to anybody else, and you will be willing to make known what has been before a private secret of your own, a skeleton that you have kept hidden in a closet.

I close this message with the verse with which we began. Remember it was not written in some quiet academic moment when the Apostle Paul was seated in a garden enjoying the beauty of the scene and writing out of the pleasure of the moment. It comes to us out of the grind and tussle and bustle of life, out of the pressures and confusions and tensions and frustrations of daily living. Out of that moment the apostle says, "Thanks be unto God who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere," {cf, 2 Cor 2:14 RSV}.

Prayer:

Our Father, we simply ask that these words may be translated into experience, that we do not look at this as some academic study, some lesson that we mentally appropriate but that these may prove to be words which, striking, cutting deeply into the very center of our being, set us free from the law of sin and death. Make it real in our experience. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: The Sweet Taste of Victory

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Esther

Scripture: Esther 9:1-16

Message No: 8

Catalog No: 39

Date: April 28, 1963

A DAY TO REMEMBER

by Ray C. Stedman

This closing study in Esther may seem an anticlimax to many, for the exciting part of the story is over. Our last study together unfolded the mighty victory that came to the king of Persia when Mordecai, now installed as prime minister of the kingdom, accomplished the deliverance of the Jews and thus saved the kingdom from destruction. But the last section of the book serves a very important purpose. It is designed to teach us the need to remember.

Even today the Jews celebrate this story of Esther in the Feast of Purim. They set aside two days for holiday, feasting, gladness and merrymaking. On the first evening they read through the story of Esther. This is the day when all Jewish children come into their own. They bring noise makers, little drums and horns to the service, and whenever the name of Haman is mentioned, they blow the horns and pound on the drums, booing and hissing through the reading of the book wherever Haman is mentioned. It is a most interesting service to attend! The second day is set aside for feasting and merrymaking, and for exchanging of gifts, very much as we would celebrate Christmas. All of this is in remembrance of the deliverance accomplished by Esther and Mordecai in the days of the Persian Empire, some 500 years before Christ. It is celebrated to this day because God wants the Jewish people never to forget this deliverance. It is to be forever a very important day in their history.

This is also true in the spiritual application of the story. The lessons of this book, once learned, mark the day of the beginning of deliverance in a Christian's experience and it is never to be forgotten.

There are four things in this latter part that God wants us to remember. The first of them is *The Fruits of Victory*:

This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the open towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting and holiday-making, and a day on which they send choice portions to one another.

And Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending choice portions to one another and gifts to the poor. {Est 9:17-22 RSV}

Let your eye run back over that and note how frequently you find emphasized the character of the celebration of this day. It was to be a day of feasting and gladness and this is mentioned in Verses 17, 18, 19, and twice again in Verse 22. It was to be a day of rest. It was to be a day of holiday making, of enjoying what was accomplished. It was a day in which they obtained relief from their enemies. It was a day of showing generosity and deep concern for others, of sending gifts to the poor. All this indicates the results of the victory that was accomplished.

To you who have been following with us in this book it should be evident that this is the enjoyment of the fruit of the Spirit. We have been drawing a continual parallel between the conflict of this book and the problem in the Christian's life to gain victory over the evidences and manifestations of the flesh. That which we all long to come to is the freedom to enjoy what the New Testament calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faithfulness, self-control, the virtues of a truly Christian experience. Such freedom is a result of victory gained along the lines set forth in this book. This is what God wants us to remember. You can't have the fruits without the process and as we learn the process we come to the actual experience of these wonderful truths.

As we come to the end of this book ask yourself, "How much did the kingdom of Persia experience of these blessings while Haman was in the prime minister's seat?" He is the picture of the rule of the flesh, the self-life, the ego, the uncrucified self, in a believer. How much did they experience of joy and feasting and gladness and holiday while Haman was in power? None whatever! When Haman ruled, the result in the kingdom was confusion, mourning, weeping, dejection, and despair. How aptly this describes the experience of a Christian who is struggling to do his best for God, earnestly, sincerely trying to do so, but has never yet learned what God wants to teach him in terms of a rest and dependence upon the indwelling life of the Lord Jesus to work through him. Until we learn this, Haman is in control and our experience is one of confusion, bewilderment and boredom, an up and down experience. There is much of dejection and despair and sometimes awful depression of spirit.

Care needs to be exercised at this point for we are so used to looking to our circumstances as the source of happy feelings that when we hear that we can experience rest, gladness, and concern for others continually, we instinctively feel that somehow we will have happy circumstances all the time. We must be careful to understand exactly what is offered. The promised supply of peace, victory, joy and a continual out-flowing river of love does not mean that there will be a change in the Christian's circumstances for these things do not come from circumstances. That is what we need to learn. Victory does not mean freedom from weariness, sickness, sorrow, heartache, pressure, defeat, or danger in the Christian's experience. Rather, in the midst of these things we shall, at the same time, experience an inner quietness of joy, of gladness, of peace, and rest. It

is an experience going on right at the same time that outward circumstances are troubling and making it difficult.

Now that needs to be made clear for many Christians are confused and expect to be set free from all unhappy circumstances. By no means. The Lord warned, "In this world ye shall have tribulation but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." There is a place of relief and release despite the circumstances. Deliverance comes not by a change of our conditions, but by another principle, the continual imparting to us by the Holy Spirit of the indwelling life of the risen Lord whose adequate resources maintain our spirits in strength, rest, and peace despite the circumstances.

The next point to remember is, *The Elements Of Victory*:

So the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written to them. For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to crush and destroy them, but when Esther come before the king, he gave orders in writing that his wicked plot which he had devised against the Jews should come upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. {Est 9:23-25 RSV}

It is important to give attention to the how of victory. Every Christian who knows Jesus Christ as an indwelling life within stumbles occasionally into victory. The Spirit of God puts us in circumstances where we are overwhelmed and in the moment of desperation we cry out to God for help. Inevitably when we do that we experience deliverance, victory. But we regard this as emergency help, available only when we get our backs up against the wall. But this is really the normal condition of a believer. We are meant always to be in this condition, always experiencing in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus that the power of Christ may rest upon us. When we learn to walk in the consistent knowledge that this is our true condition then we become consistent in our deliverance, in our experience of victory.

Now these are the steps to such knowledge. We have them outlined briefly in the summary of this book:

The first thing was the exposure of Haman. His name is given to us in full, Haman the Agagite. Remember, Agag was the king of the Amalekites, against whom God has pronounced eternal enmity, for Agag was opposed to all God wanted to do. Here is Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, and his perfidy, treachery, and subtlety is now fully exposed. As we have seen, Haman is a picture of that enemy within, the ego, the self-life, the desire for preeminence and prominence. The first step in deliverance is to learn to recognize it. But this is far more difficult than it sounds. We justify the things that are destroying us and make excuses for them, calling them sweet sounding names and thus putting honey and syrup labels on bottles of poison. That makes them all the more deadly, doesn't it? No wonder it is difficult to recognize the voice of the devil in our experience.

There was a time when Jesus said to his disciples, "Whom do men say that I am?" Peter, moved by the Holy Spirit, said, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God," {Matt 16:15-16 KJV}. And Jesus said, "You are right and you did not learn this by yourself. The Father has just spoken through you. When you said, 'Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God', it was the Father who taught you that," {cf, Matt 16:17}. Then he began to tell them that he must go up to Jerusalem, and he would be taken by the chief priests and the scribes and would be beaten and put to death upon a cross, and on the third day would rise again. Peter did not like this. Peter said to him, in effect, "By your own admission I have just spoken to you by the voice of the Father and now I have some other advice to give you. Don't talk like this. Spare thyself, Lord. This must never happen to you. You are too valuable to throw yourself away like this, to waste your life in such a manner. This must never happen to you." "Thank you", said Jesus to Peter, "for that sincere, well-intended, honest expression of what you think I should do, but I know that voice. I have heard it before. Get thee behind me Satan, you are an offense unto me for you do not look at things from God's viewpoint but from man's," {cf, Matt 16:22-23}. That is the way to recognize Haman even though he comes disguised as unselfishly concerned for our best interests. We must learn by the Word to recognize the voice of the flesh. That is the first step in victory.

The second one is the knowledge of a new decree that has been issued. We read of it here,

But when Esther came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his wicked plot, which he had devised against the Jews should come upon his [Haman's] own head, {Est 9:25a RSV}

The new decree meant that the Jews were set free from the law of the old decree. What a picture this is for us of that law of a new life in Jesus Christ, dwelling within us, which sets us free from the law of sin and death in our experience. Christ is in us and here, therefore, becomes our resources. It is no longer up to us to try to do our best. It is up to us now to trust him to do his best through us. What a difference that is. It means the difference between trying to show the world how much we can do for Christ and letting him show the world what he can do through us. It isn't a struggle now to try to be good but by depending upon the One who is good, who dwells within us, we step forward to do what needs to be done, and his life becomes manifest in terms of our activity. The knowledge of this is the second step to victory.

And then the third thing is the hanging of Haman and his sons on the gallows. The amazing thing is that until we are willing to put the old life with its manifestations in the place of death where God put it in Jesus Christ, we never can lay hold of that indwelling life. When we try to make both Haman and Christ live at the same time, keeping a portion of the ego as a pet area from which we exclude God, we find we cannot lay hold of his life in us. Victory comes when we are content to have our egos overlooked and humiliated if need be, that the life of Jesus may be manifested and expressed through us -- that his self-giving may replace our self-seeking. When we are content to have it that way, not only in terms of words, but in terms of experience, then there is an immediate experience of his risen life flowing through us, working everything out. That is victory.

The third point God wants us to remember is *The Duration Of Victory*:

Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. And therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had befallen them, the Jews ordained and took it upon themselves and their descendants and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. letters were sent to all the Jews, to the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther enjoined upon the Jews, and as they had laid down for themselves and for their descendants, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. The command of Queen Esther fixed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing. {Est 9:26-32 RSV}

All of that to say over and over again that this must go on continuously, that to be set free from the domain of self by a recognition of what God has done in Jesus Christ on the cross must now continue to be a process throughout the entire length of our life. This initial deliverance was intended to precipitate a process that goes on and on.

Interestingly enough there is a tradition among the Jews that the Feast of Purim is the only feast that will be observed after the Messiah comes. The feasts of Tabernacles and Passover and all others will cease, they say, when the Messiah comes. But the Feast of Purim will go on even in the days of the kingdom. This reflects the truth that to walk in the Spirit is normal for both time and eternity. We must teach it to our descendants as well, that our children may see what it means to walk in victory over resentment, jealousy, impatience, envy, lust, self-love, self-seeking, pride, self-pity, and all other experiences of the self-life. When they do, there will be a recognition of the reality of deliverance in that home that will make those children sit up and take notice that here indeed is a life worth living.

Is this the reason, perhaps, why so many of our children grow up in Christian homes and yet go out bewildered, bored, frustrated, unhappy, not enjoying what they have because we who are parents have not learned to walk in the Spirit? It is a walk, a continual process of taking the same steps over and over every time conflict comes until there is a manifestation of continual victory.

That is what Enoch learned. We are told that Enoch lived 65 years before he learned to walk with God. I wonder if it will take some of us that long. After he learned to walk, he walked 300 years with God and one day he walked along until, as a little girl said, "God just said to him, 'Come on, Enoch, come on home with me. It is too far to go back.'" So he was not, because God took him. He walked on into glory. That is the picture of what God would have for the believer in Christ.

The book closes on the fourth point God would have us remember, *The Secret Of Victory*:

King Ahasuerus laid tribute on the land end on the coastlands of the sea. And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people. {Est 10:1-3 RSV}

This book began with King Ahasuerus as the prominent figure and it told of the story of the display of his power and might. But as we read on we learn of a hidden cancer at work within that kingdom, eating away, certain to destroy all this power and manifestation of might. Had the story not taken the course we have recorded here, that would have been the inevitable end. But the book ends with the king prominent again and the story of the display of his power and might, but we now realize there is a power behind the throne which is now publicly recognized. That power, Mordecai, is always subject to the will of the king, for he never forces the king to do his will.

In your life this is true, too. Your will is supreme in the final decision of what takes place in the kingdom, but there is a power behind the throne and through the will of the king, the Holy Spirit works to bring power and peace to the kingdom. What a picture this is of the Spirit-filled life. This is the open secret of every successful Christian: His will is still dominant. He can still do wrong if he chooses. Ah, but he has learned a lesson. He has learned that it is only through the yielding of that will in a continual sense of dependence upon the One who dwells within that there can come any manifestation of power or peace in his kingdom. And when he learns to walk in such dependence, he becomes a man under authority, under power, who brings about in his kingdom peace and joy and all that is longed for.

We learn to reckon this. This is what makes a Christian able, figuratively, to fall in a cesspool and come up smelling like a rose. Every circumstance works for good. This is the explanation of Romans 8:28 -- "All things work together for good", no matter how evil and difficult they appear at first. This is why, to a Christian, his disappointments make him better, not bitter. His heartaches become sources of joy. The hard circumstances of his life produce in him the choicest of virtues, the very things that he longs to have manifest in his character. The weaker he feels, the more impact his life has on others. He becomes sweeter, mellow, filled with an inner beauty, driven to this by the very unpleasantness he goes through.

This is the secret. This is the Spirit-filled life. A human instrument counting on an indwelling Spirit to meet every demand with wholly adequate resources, therefore there is no tension because tension comes from living out of adequacy. There is nothing more complicated about it than that. It is that simple and yet that profound.

The problem all along was how to end the old life without killing the man. This problem was met on the cross. As we come to the Lord's table, all the glory of the Spirit-filled life flows from this experience of the victory of our Lord upon the cross. As we celebrate this marvelous mystery, we recognize anew that it was in this manner that his life became our life, that in this way the old life, permeated with defeat, came to an end and his new life became our new life. We are joined to the Lord, we become him, in a sense. We become him! Think of that. This is made possible by the marvelous mystery of his death. We can then say with Paul,

**I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live;
yet not I, but Christ liveth in me:
and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God,
who loved me, and gave himself for me. {Gal 2:20 KJV}**

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we cannot really begin to comprehend these marvelous truths, but we sense them. We know they are true. We know there is deliverance in them, power for us and glory for you. We pray that your Spirit may enlighten our understanding to lay hold of this so that we who have walked in defeat, barrenness, bitterness, resentment, and all the frustration of the flesh may in this quiet moment of acceptance of his life in us, rise up to walk in victory and fulfillment. In his name, Amen.

Title: A Day to Remember
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Esther
Scripture: Esther 9:17-10:3
Message No: 9
Catalog No: 40
Date: May 12, 1963

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