

Esther: #4 “Hang ‘em High” – Esther 6 & 7

Dr. Matthew Cassidy – 5/6/2012

Good morning. I have a great story to tell you, a fabulous story. One author put it this way: “To say that the story of Esther is well told is an understatement. It is ‘by any standards a brilliantly written story, to be savored – even chuckled over.’”

And we have chuckled over the story of Esther. I am really looking forward to today’s time together because I am going to get a little Bible-nerdy on you; there are things in this story that are unseen, below the surface, behind the writings itself.

The reason we are going to do that is not just to show the beauty and complexity of this book but also I want you to see the way the author is communicating to his audience so that they get the message that he is sending.

Secondly, I want you to see that this book teaches us the way God works. This is the way God works most of the time in your life and in mine. At the end of today, I hope you will say that Esther, if it is not the favorite book in the Old Testament for you, is really close up there. This is some really fabulous material.

I want you to see what is happening behind the words. What is the author trying to communicate to us so that we understand the subliminal message?

Can you speak ‘Missionary’?

The first thing to understand is that you have to know how to speak ‘missionary’. Some of you receive letters or e-mails from missionaries and you know they speak a different language than the rest of us if they are trying to teach the Bible in cultures that are hostile towards the teachings of Jesus Christ. If they are in a part of the world where it is literally against the law to talk about Jesus or Christianity, then they use missionary speak. So they might say things like: ‘I wanted to inform you that tomorrow we are going to be sharing with our new neighbors the story of Aslan. We are really hungry because we haven’t eaten for three days. We would like for you to tell your boss about it sometime tomorrow, around 3 o’clock.’ – What they are really saying is that they are going to tell the story of Jesus Christ to their new neighbor tomorrow. They have fasted and prayed for three days and they would like for you to talk to God tomorrow at 3 o’clock because that is probably when it is going to happen.

The reason I tell you that is because Esther is written in missionary speak. It is written for people who know the language, who know what to listen for, to know what is behind the scenes, so that they can enjoy it better. God’s name is never used in the book of Esther – not just God like Elohim, a generic

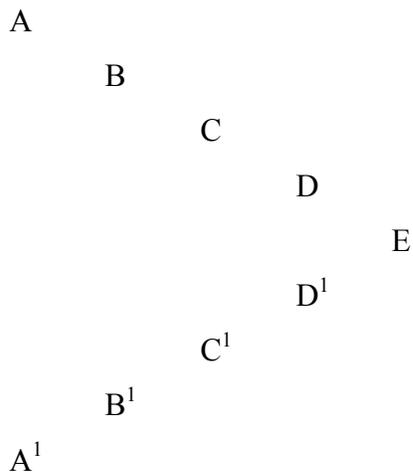
name, but His actual name Yahweh is never used. Spiritual words are not used in this book – like praying. But it is a spiritual book and His name is used. Four times in Esther, different sentences are written but the author is choosing words that start with the four letters in the formal name of God Yahweh. In one of those sentences, in the Hebrew they will literally capitalize just that first letter in each of those words so that the YHWH comes out boldly and vividly because this is where YHWH is working. That is one of the ways the author is trying to communicate to us that God is working; He is making himself known to the people; if you know how to listen and you know what to look for, He is there.

Can you think Hebrew?

Another way the author does this is to think Hebrew. Most of the Old Testament is written in a way not for you to read but rather for you to memorize – for you to hear and you learn differently through your ears. And it was made to memorize. The way they make it easier to memorize is they put the stories in symmetry so that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the mind of a Hebrew, they are thinking in outline. That outline is called a chiasmic structure. It makes it easier for me to remember the outline of the story, knowing that it is going to be in a mirrored image.

The second reason they put the story in chiasmic form, among others, is so that you know the point of the book. The point of the book is the point of the symmetry.

In this book we will see A and A¹, B and B¹, C and C¹, D and D¹ – but there is nothing to mirror or to echo E. So whatever E is on that outline, the author is trying to tell us that is the key to this story.



Every other point on this outline has a twin sister but not E. The Hebrew mind knows to look for it. They know there is not a complement to that E, so that must be the pivot point of this book. It is genius.

With that in mind, what I would like to do now is just tell you the story again, going by the outline. If you have been with us these three prior weeks, you just bite your lip and I will try to summarize briefly.

A – Opening and Background (Esther 1)

In the opening, we learned the characters names and their temperaments. I will tell you two things about each character.

There is a **King Xerxes** who rules all of Persia. There are a couple of things you need to know about him; he is crazy and he is a drunk – but he is king. Every time you see this guy in this book, he is going to have a glass of wine in his hand. In his introduction, he is having a seven-day drinking binge.

Xerxes is married to a queen. Two things you need to know about **Queen Esther** is that she is an orphaned little Jewish girl, and no one knows that she is Jewish. It is a secret.

The third person is **Mordecai** who raised Esther as a child. They are cousins but apparently Mordecai is significantly older. He is like a godfather to her. Here is something that is interesting about Mordecai; he saved the king's life but no one ever gave him honor or reward for that. That is good to know for this story.

Finally, the last person in the story who you need to know is **Haman**. When you hear the word Haman, you boo / hiss because he is really the bad guy. The two things you need to know about him is one he was born and bred to hate and to kill as many Jews as possible and he does that. He hates and kills as many Jews as he possibly can. The second thing to know about Haman is that he is honored by law, by the king's decree; he is the most honored person in all of Persia and certainly the palace city of Susa. Whenever he would come into a quarter or open section outside the palace walls or, of course, inside the palace walls, everyone would have to bow down and bow their heads. Others would have to get on their knees and worship him and beg that he would let them live. --- Everyone did this except Mordecai, the Jewish person, the cousin and godfather of the queen – the queen who no one knows that she is Jewish. Mordecai did this refusal to honor Haman day after day after day and Haman becomes incensed. Haman tricks the king because he has the king's ear.

B – The King's First Decree (Esther 2 & 3)

Haman is able to present a decree, the King's First Decree, which is that every Jew in all of Persia would be killed, destroyed, and annihilated, old and young, women and little children. [Esther 3:13] They have about eleven months before this day starts and they are counting down. The timer is going and it is

like a time bomb about to go off. This leaves the Jewish people in Susa and in all of Persia weeping and mourning and crying, while the king is having a glass of wine with Haman. That is how that chapter ends with the king's decree.

C – Haman and Mordecai Clash (Esther 4)

Mordecai and Haman have this clash going on with Mordecai now in a state of absolute grief because he can obviously see that he is responsible for this decree going out. In his mourning, Mordecai realizes maybe there is a shot at doing something about this.

So he sends messages to his [functional] daughter, Queen Esther, and says: You have to go and show yourself to the king, tell him you are Jewish, and beg for mercy.

Esther says: Look, no one can go to the king uninvited or else they will die. There is this one little loophole and that is if the king extends his scepter to me and I touch it, then I will be safe. So this can't be done and let's look for something else.

Mordecai answers back and he is very persuasive. He says: My daughter, my cousin, (1) you will not survive this. It will be found out that you are Jewish and you will die with the rest of us. (2) If you remain silent, there will be some other way the Jewish people will be saved but not your family. They will die. (3) Who knows but that you have taken this royal position for such a time as this? So you need to see that there is something else going on here and you need to get involved in this.

Like that, somehow, for some reason, Queen Esther becomes like born again; she becomes courageous and unfolds from a little caterpillar. She is a butterfly and she is taking wing.

Esther's first decree as a queen is: [Esther 4:15-17] Go and gather everyone to fast for three days, night and day, food and water.

What does *fast* mean in missionary speak? – Fast and pray. So everyone does what Queen Esther tells them to do. They are fasting and praying and it says at the end of three days, she stands up, puts on her royal robes and goes to see the king.

Last week, we took that as our application. Did you have some fun stories about maybe a day of fasting and praying? I have heard some great ones. Did anyone have something weird happen, like peace and harmony broke out in your house? That actually happened more often.

After Queen Esther's three days of fasting and prayer, [Esther 5:1-3] she puts on her royal robe, she sees the king and he sees her – uninvited. Then he extends that scepter and she walks that extremely long hallway, touches the scepter, and he says: What do you want, queen? Half my kingdom is yours.

D – Esther's First Banquet (Esther 5)

She says: Well, what I would like is for you to come to a banquet. But I want you to bring Haman with you.

The passage reads: [Esther 5:5-7] King Xerxes ordered Haman to come and the two of them obeyed the queen's command and are having wine (always the wine) with the queen. The king says: What is your petition that I might grant it to you? What is your request that I would give you half of my kingdom?

Esther says: This is my request and this is my petition ----- (silence) (5:7) Could we, could you, could Haman, could we have a banquet tomorrow? If we could have a banquet tomorrow, then good King, then I will tell you my petition. Then I will tell you my request.

King Xerxes: Sure, we will come back tomorrow. Right, Haman?

Haman: Oh yeah, we will come back tomorrow.

Something very strange happened. Esther was hearing the Spirit of God tell her that things looked perfect but they were not. It looked like things were working just according to plan but there was something missing. So, Esther, instead of pleading the case for the Jews, says: If you could just come back tomorrow.

That changed everything. After that banquet, it says that [Esther 5:9-14] Haman was happy and high in spirits as he is walking out of the palace because he had a private lunch with the king and the queen. As he is going out, kind of skipping, he sees that everyone is going down on their knees – because they are honoring Haman – and Mordecai stands up and looks up. The passage says that Haman went away incensed with rage.

When Haman got home, he gathered his whole family around and said: [Esther 5:11-14] I want to tell you about me. I want to tell you how wealthy I am and how many sons that I have and how I am honored above all men in all of Persia. And you probably don't know this but I went to a private banquet with the queen and the king today. Tomorrow, I will be doing the same thing, just the three of us, because I am me. – There is this one thing though. I can't be happy. I can't rest. I can't sleep at night because here is the thing, this Mordecai the Jew. There are still eight months left before we can kill him. He will not show me honor.

So the wife and friends say: This is simple. Why don't you make an example out of him? Why don't you have the carpenters build a 75 foot impaling pole right outside the gate so that everyone will know what happens to the man who does not honor Haman. You can go tomorrow morning and ask the

king's permission and you can put his corpse on that stake and everyone will know, as far as can be seen, that you give Haman honor or you die, a shamefully, ugly death.

That seemed like a great idea to Haman and so he goes to bed that night. That is how the day of Esther's first banquet ends. But that is not how the story ends.

E – "On that night the king could not sleep" (Esther 6:1)

Turn to Esther 6 and I want to show you that E, the pivot point of this story, is Esther 6:1.

Esther 6:1 That night the king could not sleep;

So he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. :2 It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed ... two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

Before we go into the details there, I want you to see our chiastic, our outline. The tip (E) is the point and the point is the point of the outline is a sleepless night. The Hebrew mind sees that. When they think of the story of Esther, they are thinking of the symmetry and where it leads. It leads to a sleepless night of the king.

The author wants you and I to understand something – that the bragging rights or the important part of this story is not that Esther was born again and realized that she had a part to play by being courageous. She is not the hero.

The hero is not Mordecai who is shrewd and able to figure out the best way to save the Jews.

The point is the point, God kept King Xerxes awake. It is as though the king could not sleep because he was being pestered. It was as though Someone was stirring him. Because of that, the chronicles are read and the page that is opened is a three-year old story of Mordecai saving the king's life.

The king says: Has this man received honor? (Esther 6:3)

The attendants say: No.

The fate of a nation rested on a lumpy pillow, not on a person. This is the way that God works – very subtly, a slight of hand, without flamboyance. That is what the author wants us to know. This is God's story. He leaves light fingerprints when He works.

The king says: I don't know what to do here. Can somebody advise me?

Just then Haman is coming in so that he might ask permission to kill Mordecai.

The king asks Haman: (Esther 6:6) What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?

You know Haman by now, right? He is only thinking that Haman is the person that the king would delight to honor. So Haman gives the king this absolute fantasy wish list that he has always wanted to experience – being exalted in front of the entire city of Susa. So Haman says: Do this. You get a king’s robe that the king has already worn, and a king’s horse that King Xerxes has already ridden, one with the little seal of the king right there on the forehead. You do that and have one of the prince’s actually robe this person in front of everyone and say this: ‘This is what happens to the man whom the king delights to honor.’ Then have the prince parade him all through Susa, yelling that at the top of his lungs.

Here is the best part of it.

The king says: That is a great idea. Go and do not neglect anything that you have recommended to Mordecai the Jew who is sitting at the gate right now. [Esther 6:10, 11]

Haman is going: Wait --- What!

Boy, I would pay money to see what happened when Mordecai and Haman’s eyes met, with Haman towing a horse and robe, and everyone else standing at attention, and Mordecai is remaining seated.

Haman: Mordecai, I have something to say to you.

Mordecai: What?

Haman: This is what happens to the man whom the king delights to honor. Could you come here so I could put this robe on you? Could you just kind of step up on my back and shoulder to mount the horse that the king has ridden, so that I can drag you around Susa and shout ‘This is what happens to the man whom the king delights to honor.’

Come back tomorrow for a banquet. What a difference a day makes! That is what the theme of last week’s sermon was. But there is so much more to this story because at the end of this parade, Haman goes back home. Mordecai goes back to the city gates where people are wondering – Oh, wow, there you go. You are very special.

When Haman goes back home, he tells everyone what happened to him. Right in the middle of telling that story, he hears a knock on the door. It is a eunuch saying: Hey, Haman, you need to go to Esther’s second banquet. That is where Chapter 7 picks up.

D¹ – Esther’s Second Banquet (Esther 7)

They are drinking wine again because that is what they do. They are always drinking wine.

The king says: Esther, my queen. What is your petition that I might give it to you? What is your request that I might give you half of my kingdom?

The queen looks around and she hears the voice of God and she says: This is my petition. This is my request.

Esther 7:3 Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life – this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold ... for destruction and slaughter and annihilation.”

No one knows she is Jewish until right then.

The king says and this is very quick.

Esther 7:5 Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?

:6 Esther said, “The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.”

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The king got up in a rage, and left his wine and went out into the palace gardens.

Can you imagine if you were shooting this scene in a movie? You would have this glass of wine sitting all by itself with a bead sliding down the side. The king left his wine! Oh, Haman knows he is going to die now. He left his wine; it says that in the Bible. He left his wine.

Esther: This is my petition. This is my request – spare us and our lives.

Xerxes: Who? Where?

Esther: Him - there, Haman.

Haman: What?

Here is the best part of this. Haman is absolutely trapped. He can't go anywhere. The king just ran out to the palace garden and you don't want to be with a mad king. So he can't follow the king out. It is illegal for him to stay and be in the presence of the queen. A man cannot be in the presence of the queen alone; the eunuchs could but you can ask your mom and dad what a eunuch is. So the eunuchs can stay with the queen; Haman can't. So Haman has nowhere to go. He can't go out to see the king and so he does what desperate people do.

Esther 7:8 Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.

The king exclaimed, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?”

Just then, some guy puts a hood over Haman's head and says: You know what, king? I am thinking what you are thinking but somebody just built a gallows. There is this giant 75-foot impaling pole just outside the city walls. It is right in front of Haman's house and it says ‘Reserved for Mordecai, the Jew who saved the king's life.’

:9 The king said, “Hang him on it!”

We will tell you how that ends next week. It is a good story.

How God Works

I don't just want to tell you it is a great story because it is a great story; I want you to see that there is more to this story. I want you to see that this is how God works.

First, I want you to see God is not parting seas and talking through donkeys and raising people through the dead. There is an attribute of God that is way over looked and it is His humility. He is modest and he doesn't show off. If you look into telescopes and microscopes you might think He does but in the way that He deals with His creation, it doesn't seem that He likes a lot of flamboyance. So, it is like the Butterfly Effect in physics or science fiction – the story that if you crushed a butterfly in the past then that manipulates all of the futures that could have happened. Because the simple flap of butterfly wings could cause a stir in the atmosphere that could produce a hurricane. So it is these little things, these little breaths, just zephyrs, just puffs from God that changes all of human history. That is how God works, sneaking His name in here and there. People with trained eyes and ears to the ground who know what to listen for, they can see what God is doing and see what He is up to. God is working among us. He just is not noisy. He is not a braggart. You have to have faith in that.

The second thing I want you to see is that this style of work is, I believe, His favorite suit in His deck. He loves paradoxes; He loves poetic justice; He loves irony. His best work is ironic. It is paradoxical. There is poetic justice built into it. That is His fingerprint; it is light. It is traceable and this is what it looks like. It is slippery; it is sneaky. If you look for it, you will see where God is working.

Here is why I am telling you this – not just to enjoy it but to live by it. If this is what God likes to do, if this is His favorite hand that He likes to play, then play with Him.

Cliff Knechtle

Years ago, there was a gentleman named Cliff Knechtle who comes to Austin just about every year in November. Cliff is a pastor up in the Connecticut area. He travels around the country and goes to five campuses that are most hostile to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The University of Texas in Austin is one of those hostile campuses. He comes for five days or so. He starts off with a little five-minute talk and then he opens the floor to questions and answers. This is outside on the West Mall, right at the base of the main building, if you are familiar with the University of Texas. He has a couple of speakers set up and a

microphone on his lapel. He just fields questions back and forth, whatever you can imagine. He is quite good at it. He is very well trained. He has a couple of books on the tough questions that people ask.

One year I was down there just watching. He is somewhat of an acquaintance. There was a student, a young man, who was Muslim and he was angry. He was terribly upset because of what Cliff was saying. They were going back and forth every day. He really was not asking legitimate questions; he was mostly becoming a heckler. By the last day, it came to a point.

The student was yelling at Cliff saying: You are just a bully. You have a microphone; I don't. People listen to you because they can hear you. They can't hear me. If I had a microphone, if we were equal, if we were on an even playing field, I would win this debate.

So Cliff said: Okay. Come on up here and you can use my microphone.

I'm sitting just off to the side thinking: Cliff, you are crazy. I would not let that guy near me. [He looked a little scary first of all.] But why would you give him a microphone?

So the student makes his way through the crowd. It was Cliff's lapel microphone so Cliff is doing this [having to lean in to share the mic with the student].

The Muslim student does this. Did I tell you he was angry? *Listen! Everyone listen to me. I want to tell you something.* [Right there with all the kids going back and forth between classes, because of the tone of his voice and the fact that he was yelling through a sound system, everybody stopped, dead in their tracks.] He said: *Listen to me. I want to tell you something. This guy is telling all of you people out there that the Bible says that Jesus Christ is the absolute only way to have eternal life because Jesus is the one who died for your sins. He is the only one who has been raised from the dead. So you have to trust Him or else you will have to suffer the consequences.* – He gives the microphone back to Cliff.

Cliff said: Yep.

Then the guy just stormed off.

Let him build his own gallows. Let him.

Listen, the last time that I can think of where someone published a decree to kill, destroy, and annihilate all the Jews, old and young, women and little children was in a book called *Mein Kampf*. The reason there is a sovereign state of Israel today – it is complicated and I know there are other factors involved and it is at least confusing – but I will tell you this, if it were not for the atrocities and the motivation of Adolf Hitler, there would not be a sovereign state of Israel today. The thing he wanted to do more than anything else was to kill, destroy, and annihilate all the Jews, women and little children, and now they own their own real estate, after 2000 years of roaming the earth as nomads.

Let them build their own gallows.

Look at Haman. This is what happens to the man whom the king delights to honor. God is honoring Haman.

Haman is bragging about going to a banquet and at the banquet, he will get his death sentence.

Haman builds a 75-foot impaling rod so that he might be impaled on it. – Let him build his own gallows.

The thing that incited a riot in Haman's mind was that a Jew would not bow down and beg him for his life. What was the last volitional act that Haman did? He bowed down, bent his knees to a *female* Jew and begged that his life might be spared. – Let them build their own gallows.

That is what God does.

Have you ever seen God up against the wall, tripping backwards, a little bit overwhelmed and outnumbered, looking like He is not the one in control - like the cavalry is coming a little bit late this time?

Good Friday

Can you think of that troublesome night? We know that night. It is a Friday and we call it Good Friday because the devil had run wild. He had arranged for people to lie in their testimony to have cowardly politicians do the wrong thing and corrupt priests who could be bought off. He orchestrated all these things so that everyone would do what they are told and dance to his notes. All along, the notes being played were from God the Father in heaven above. It was the devil who was doing the dancing. It was the devil who was playing his part in the trap. Let him build his own gallows. So he put Christ on a cross and it was on that cross that Christ destroyed death. Think of the poetic justice in this, the irony. Guilty men convict an innocent man and put him to death so that guilty men would be declared innocent and never have to die. That is what God does. That is how we know He is out there. That is what He does best.

Do you see that in your own life? Maybe in the lives of other people?

Esther is not a story. It is a template. It is how God works. It is what He does. It is Him having fun. That attribute of God may be His sense of humor.

So, it should affect the way you view life. It should affect the way you pray. Pray this and this is fun when you start seeing this. Pray this: *Let him build his own gallows, God. I can't do anything else.*

When you are encountering something at work, at school, at home, even with your own children – and pride absolutely blinds and deafens a person to reason. Sometimes you just say: *Lord, let them build their own gallows. Maybe then they will see.*

We had a situation where some friends of mine were trying to reach this guy and he was just overwhelmingly proud. We wanted to put a mirror up to him so he could see that. We tried everything. We had a couple of people meet with him once a week and that wasn't working. We were trying to reason with him this way or come around that way; it was not working. We just rolled up our sleeves and threw our hands up and said: *God, let him build his own gallows. Make it famous.* –

You have to wait. There is the problem with this model. You have to step back and quit playing and manipulating and being God. You have to just pray: *Let him build his own gallows.* – And just wait.

In a spectacular way, the guy impaled himself in front of a lot of people. I would love to be able to tell you --- and then he realized he was off the chart proud and he humbled himself and could be reasoned with. That is not what happened. He just moved on.

But sometimes it works.

So a couple of things:

1. Pray that sometimes, when you are stuck and somebody is not listening, just say: *Lord, let him build his own gallows. I am going to be at peace and at rest and watch.*
2. The second thing is a little bit scary. Do you have a hammer in your hand, building your own gallows? Have people quit talking to you about certain things because you just can't listen any more? Has it gotten to 75 feet yet – because that is how He works.

Most of our biggest failures are self-inflicted gallows-building experiences, but we refuse to look at it from that point of view.

Now that we see that Esther is a template for how God works, maybe those promises of – You reap what you sow – were promises. When you plant one seed, you harvest a whole crop.

So, think of your life. Shortly, we are going to close our eyes and ask God to remind us of people in our lives where He has allowed us to watch someone else build their own gallows, a friend or a family member or a co-worker or a boss. But then we will turn it on ourselves and I want you to ask yourself sincerely: Are you right now building a gallows? Have you before hung yourself, impaled yourself? Maybe it is not everyone else out there trying to get you but maybe it is God trying to get you to wake up.

Let's reflect back, now that we know how to speak 'missionary' and now that we know how to listen for the deeper things in the way God works. Let's see if it works in our lives.

Lord,

We are asking your Spirit to recall to us the many pictures that you have passed before us, where you are working in plain sight by allowing someone to build a trap for themselves. I ask that you give us new understanding of what that looks like. We do that so that we would see you in this gentleness and be pleased by your sovereign hand; that we would trust that you are doing things, you just are not a show off. Lord would you remind us to pray: *Let them build their own gallows* – so that we could play the hand you are dealing and enjoy that part of it.

Now, Lord, let's talk about us. Could you remind us, play back in our minds, some humiliation or failure that was not other people's fault but it was our fault. It was a gallows you allowed us to build for ourselves to be impaled upon.

Lord, there are people right now with hammers in their hands and nails in their teeth and they are trying to build something right now that would be their undoing. Could you help them see that and help them to see there is an easier way which is to humble themselves in front of you and let you exalt them. Let us do that. Let us be people of wisdom.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen