

How to Deal with People in Power, Courtesy of Esther

The Book of Esther is peculiar because God is not mentioned by name.

Yet, like a toddler who has gotten hold of a tub of chocolate spread, God's fingerprints are everywhere.

And the book is controversial because it is a narrative about slavery, racism and power in which what has been portrayed as a beauty contest is held to find a tyrant king a new wife, and Esther - a young Jewish woman who was in Persia against her will - was selected.

Was it a beauty contest when Esther didn't have any choice, or was it something far more sinister?

The main plot in the narrative is that the prime minister, Haman, decides to carry out what amounts to genocide against the Jews who were in exile in Persia.

Esther's cousin, Mordecai, hears of the plot and persuades Esther to intervene with the king. It's a bit like a soap opera as there is intrigue, suspense and feuding.

Recently, I was asked to preach on Esther 5, which is one of the key chapters in the narrative where Esther makes the first approach to the king.

I'd encourage you to read the whole book so that you get the context (it's not very

long).

Here are some of my reflections from that sermon:

Esther was gentle, looking to see how she could be used where she was rather than seeking status. We can even say she was close to God because she fasted for three days before going to see the king.

She was wise, recognizing that if she jumped right in with a complaint against the prime minister when she was in a vulnerable position (unsure if the king would want to see her), then she may not succeed in saving her people.

She offered to serve the king (inviting him and Haman to a banquet) rather than demanding her rights.

And she was patient, withholding her main request to the king until she knew that the time was right and asking him to attend another banquet.

We all have people in our lives who hold power over us. Of course, there are politicians who can make decisions that will affect our lives, but there are also officials whose decisions affect us, perhaps when we are seeking benefits.

We are subject to the authority of the police and law enforcement agencies.

And what about those who are above us at work? Or even those to whom we have given authority in our homes like a landlord?

Power dynamics also exist within local churches. In Baptist churches, because we

say that everyone is a minister, sometimes people seem to have made a virtue out of disrespecting and tearing down those whom God has appointed to lead us.

Esther's example is not a blueprint for how we should relate to those in power, but I think we can learn that deference and respect, patience and wisdom are important and can bear fruit.

On the other hand, Haman offers an example of how not to exercise power over others. He was self-centered, focused on his own wealth and importance, and he saw power as something to be used to benefit only himself.

Haman was indignant when Mordecai did not give him honor that he felt he deserved. He didn't realize that honor is not something to be demanded - that is bullying and fear - it is something you earn.

He was willing to misuse his power for his own ends, seen most clearly in his decision to impale Mordecai on a big spike (some versions say it was a gallows, but that's not quite right) was his way of trying to make himself feel better.

Haman did not value others. He just wanted people to look up to him. I wonder about his petulant response to Mordecai; it's almost the actions of a playground bully. Mordecai's nonreaction made Haman feel small, so he decided to act big to make up for it.

This story raises important questions regarding how we use the power we have and how we assess the character and fitness of those holding positions of power in society.

How important is it how other people regard us? How far are we willing to go to obtain the respect?

Are there lines we won't cross, or does anything go in our desire for power? Do we ever look for a leadership role to elevate our status rather than lead by serving?

And at the risk of getting all political, consider when you look at the current candidates for political office: Are they more like Esther or Haman?

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