

# Lessons on Esther and Ruth

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Taken from the Old Testament.

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Cover: Sebastiani Ricci, *Esther Before the Persian King, Ahaseurus*.

*Dedication*

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to “pass  
it on.”

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## A Wife's Submission - Esther 1

On no topic is the evangelical church in America in more cordial agreement with the American left wing than this: a woman owes no obedience or submission to her husband. The evangelical church preaches that women need merely respect their husbands – nothing more. We have ceased to preach against adultery; we speak against fornication only to the young. Those who are in adult classes or services seldom hear about it. Divorce? It is now a commonplace in the church. As one woman in our church said, "It's our job to stay around and pick up the pieces after the divorce." The thought that divorce might be sinful or harmful is discreetly shoved into the closet.

How far away we are, then, from the events shown here. Please observe how it used to be:

Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which *was* at the citadel in Susa, in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army *officers* of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his presence. And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days. When these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. *There were hangings of* fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, *and* couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty. The drinking was *done* according to the law, there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with *her* royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him. Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times--for it was the custom of the king so *to speak* before all who knew law and justice and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom-- "According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus *delivered* by the eunuchs?" In the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but *also* all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. "For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.' "This day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in *the same way* to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger. "If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. "When the king's edict which he will make is heard

throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small." *This* word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

(Est 1:1-22 NASB)

### The Nature of Authority

If we are to understand this passage, we need to cast our minds back to a time where disobedience was not honored but punished. Protestors in the time of Xerxes would not have been praised as noble heroes – if they ever got out of prison. As is clear in this passage, Xerxes pretty much made it a point that the husband – from king down to peasant – was to rule his house. Women's liberation is not under consideration here. We have not the space to pursue all the concept of authority has to teach us, but we will note these three points:

- ✚ All legitimate authority descends from Christ.
- ✚ Such authority is given for our own good and the good of the church.
- ✚ Authority is often mutual. It is not uncommon to see two in authority over each other.

### Legitimate authority

All legitimate authority stems from Jesus Christ.

- ✚ It was prophesied in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>
- ✚ It was proclaimed in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>
- ✚ It is prophesied for the future.<sup>3</sup>

Christ in particular is the head of the church.<sup>4</sup> We may conclude two things from this: in general, authority comes from Him; in particular, all authority over the church is His. This latter point, as we shall see, is no longer proclaimed in the church.

### For our own good

One of the essentials of true authority is that it is appointed for our own benefit. This gives us all the more reason to be obedient to whatever authority is over us.

- ✚ We are to be subject to the civil authorities.<sup>5</sup>
- ✚ We are to have rulers over us in the church.<sup>6</sup>
- ✚ Fathers have authority over their children.<sup>7</sup>

The civil authorities include the fire department. Those over us in the church follow Christ's example, and are servants to us. A father's authority over his children is essential to children as they

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 7:13-14

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:18

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:9-11

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:15-18

<sup>5</sup> Romans 13:1-5

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 6:4

grow up. Authority, properly used, benefits those in submission to it. This does not say they'll like it; just benefit.

### Mutual authority

It frequently happens that two people have authority over each other. This is not a confusion; authority comes from responsibility, and it's entirely possible for you to have a certain responsibility over me and vice versa. For example:

- ✚ My body is not my own, but it belongs to my wife.<sup>8</sup> I may not have sex with whom I please because of her authority over my body.
- ✚ We see much the same thing in the mutual accountability in the church.<sup>9</sup>
- ✚ Indeed, we are told that those who desire authority in the church are actually asking for a lot of work.<sup>10</sup>
- ✚ Finally, Paul tells us that we are to be in submission to each other.<sup>11</sup>

So the matter of a husband's authority over his wife is not simply one of dominance, but of service. To say that a husband has authority over his wife is to say he has responsibility for and toward her. That authority is to be exercised for her good. In certain situations, the wife has authority over the husband. But the teaching of the church for the first 1900 years has been that the husband is in charge of the marriage and the home.

Of course, since that's what "they" thought, it must be wrong. Or so argue the feminists among us.

### A wife's submission

Since approximately 1950 there has been a major change in the teaching of the church. We have abandoned a wife's submission to her husband and instead teach that marriage is a partnership, 50-50. This has caused some difficulties.

- ✚ If there is no senior partner in charge, the first time an argument reaches the point of no compromise, a divorce (now favored, of course) is the only solution.
- ✚ In Scripture the husband's responsibility is for the spiritual welfare of his wife. We no longer teach this, either, with the result that Christianity today has any number of wives single on Sunday, praying for their husbands return to church.
- ✚ With spiritual authority abandoned, the Christian family has produced children who go astray in the same numbers as the rest of the world.

How did this happen?

### The Debate

There are two sides in this question. The first side, by far the overwhelming majority, holds that all the verses cited by the opposition are merely "cultural." That means that they applied in that time

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:4

<sup>9</sup> James 5:16

<sup>10</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 5:21

and place, but not ours. It is quite true that our culture is very different from that of the Medes and the Persians. So, quoting Ephesians 5:33, they argue that submission simply means “respect.”

Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband.

(Eph 5:33 NASB)

No submission in that verse, is there? How about examining the verses preceding it?

and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church, because we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband.

(Eph 5:21-33 NASB)

There is the argument of most Christians deceased. The wife has her responsibility to be in submission; the husband, his to love her as Christ loves the church. See again the basic principles of authority:

- ✚ It descends from Christ (in this instance via the Scripture).
- ✚ It is for the benefit of the wife.
- ✚ It is a relationship that admits of mutual authority.

### The impact on the Church

It is quite clear that the “Respect Only” faction has achieved victory. No Bible teacher in our congregation (except guess who?) would dare teach a wife’s submission. But I submit to you that this change in doctrine has had effects not intended by its enthusiasts: If the wife is no longer in submission to her husband, then the church is no longer in submission to Christ. Do we see any evidence of this?

- ✚ The Scriptures are cut and pasted at convenience. We have proclaimed that the message Paul gave in 1 Corinthians 6:19 (your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit) means that we should all join a health club and exercise.<sup>12</sup>
- ✚ We have ignored the strict injunction about homosexuality and appointed such as priests and bishops.
- ✚ When was the last time you can remember a sermon calling for obedience to the one you call Lord?

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<sup>12</sup> What to do with the context, 1 Corinthians 6:5-20, which clearly argues not for a health club but for men to shun sex with prostitutes, is just another cultural thing, I suppose.

## Marriage is a dance

Marriage, like other forms of authority, is composed of responsibility and the right reaction to that authority. If my wife were an excellent ballroom dancer, and I still the clod I am, when we get on the dance floor I would lead. That's the nature of dance. Much the same may be said of marriage. Often enough she's the brains of the outfit. No matter; he must lead.

What about the tyrant?

Of course, this all presumes that the husband is not an arbitrary tyrant – as Xerxes certainly was. What should a woman do in that instance? I submit to you three answers:

## Submission as evangelism

If your husband is not a Christian, the door is open to witness evangelism.<sup>13</sup> Impress your husband with what a difference Christ makes. Indeed, Peter tells us that this can be done even without words.<sup>14</sup> But in this regard I submit two questions:

- ✚ Are Christians today really “different?” If they are not, what's to impress him?
- ✚ If they are, is the difference attractive or repulsive?

This applies to the non-Christian husband. What about the Christian husband?

## Church Discipline

If your husband is a Christian, the matter is different. You are to take the steps of church discipline<sup>15</sup>; which, by the way, is authority the wife has over her husband.

You are to talk to him privately first. (Much do I owe to my wife's habit of closing the door and explaining something.)

If that fails, bring two or three others into it. Then, if necessary, go to the church. Go to the church, praying that she will do anything about it.

## Suffering for righteousness

Sometimes you can't see the solution at all. You find no choice but to suffer. This has its points as well:

- ✚ We know that suffering for what is right finds favor with God.<sup>16</sup> Have the faith to know He will be your recompense.
- ✚ If the matter is sufficiently bad, you are permitted to separate from him. Separate, not divorce.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes you suffer for doing right, and you don't see the benefit of it. This passage has an interesting history of interpretation. Most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and later commentators will tell you that she was being asked to appear in royal finery to impress the king's buddies. Her punishment for her disobedience is therefore appropriate. But if you go back in history, you will find that the Jewish

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:10-16

<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 3:1-2

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 18:15-17

<sup>16</sup> 1 Peter 2:18-20

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

commentators (in the Targums) add one little note: Vashti was to appear wearing her crown – and nothing else. It would be like your husband wanting you to prance naked at half time. She said no. She suffered for it. But not unnoticed by God.

## Providence - Esther 2

The book of Esther has no mention of the name of God; it proclaims no miracles – and yet it exhibits like no other book the concept of the providence of God. For those who expect God to work in nothing but a miraculous way, it is a wholesome corrective.

After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. "Let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to the citadel of Susa, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given *them*. "Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king, and he did accordingly. *Now* there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled. He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to the citadel of Susa into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women. Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him. So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem. Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make *them* known. Every day Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared. Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus, after the end of her twelve months under the regulations for the women--for the days of their beautification were completed as follows: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics for women-- the young lady would go in to the king in this way: anything that she desired was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go in and in the morning she would return to the second harem, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not again go in to the king unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name. Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai who had taken her as his daughter, came to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the women, advised. And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her. So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace in the tenth month which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him 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, Esther's banquet, for all his princes and his servants; he also made a holiday for the provinces and gave gifts according to the king's bounty. When the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Esther had not yet made known her kindred or her people, even as Mordecai had commanded her; for Esther did what Mordecai told her as she had done when under his care. In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded

the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. But the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. Now when the plot was investigated and found *to be so*, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

(Est 2:1-23 NASB)

In this passage we see three concepts which may be taken as guideposts for the typical Christian:

- ✚ The need for watchfulness
- ✚ Living in humility and modesty
- ✚ The providence of God.

### Watchfulness

Often is the Christian told to be watchful. We are not told the future; therefore we are not privileged to wait for it in idleness. There are three examples in this passage:

- ✚ Mordecai takes in his cousin, Esther. It is the diligence of ordinary holiness, a kindness to the family and obedience to the law of God. No great insight is required; simply obedience to God's command whenever such a circumstance might arrive.
- ✚ Mordecai sits at the gate – or paces in front of the wall of the harem. His care for Esther is such that he wants to know what is happening in her life. This is a man of duty, of watchfulness. This is why he's in the right place at the right time – because he's always in the right place.
- ✚ When the plot to murder Xerxes is revealed, Mordecai doesn't decide to sit still. Nor does he join it; rather, he does what a citizen duty-bound should do – he reports it. No thought of reward, no big deal – just a man doing what he should be doing.

### Commanded to the Christian

Is watchfulness commanded to the Christian? You better believe it!

- ✚ Over and again, Christ tells us to watch for His return.<sup>18</sup>
- ✚ We are taught to watch ourselves, lest we fall to temptation.<sup>19</sup>
- ✚ Indeed, watchfulness is so important that our Lord tells us to examine ourselves before Communion.<sup>20</sup>

### Reward

Watchfulness seems so dull. One veteran pilot in World War II bomber raids described combat as “hours and hours of sheer boredom, interrupted by minutes of sheer terror.” Such boredom needs motivation, and our Lord provides this in the rewards he promises us:

- ✚ He promises us full reward for such faithfulness at His return.<sup>21</sup>
- ✚ He also promises us blessing in this life as well.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., Matthew 25:13

<sup>19</sup> For example, greed. See Luke 12:15

<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:28

<sup>21</sup> 2 John 1:8

<sup>22</sup> Proverbs 8:34-36

But there is a pitfall here too: we need to watch our watchfulness – so that we do not become proud of how humble we are.<sup>23</sup>

## Modesty

Webster’s dictionary gives us these definitions of the word “modesty”:

That lowly temper which accompanies a moderate estimate of one's own worth and importance. This temper when natural, springs in some measure from timidity, and in young and inexperienced persons, is allied to bashfulness and diffidence. In persons who have seen the world, and lost their natural timidity, modesty springs no less from principle than from feeling, and is manifested by retiring, unobtrusive manners, assuming less to itself than others are willing to yield, and conceding to others all due honor and respect, or even more than they expect or require.

And, particularly relevant to women, Webster tells us this:

In females, modesty has the like character as in males; but the word is used also as synonymous with chastity, or purity of manners. In this sense, modesty results from purity of mind, or from the fear of disgrace and ignominy fortified by education and principle. Unaffected modesty is the sweetest charm of female excellence, the richest gem in the diadem of their honor.

May we extract from this a few principles?

- ✚ Modesty means that we are to claim for ourselves less honor than others would willingly concede.
- ✚ It also means that we would concede to others more honor and respect that would be expected.
- ✚ In women, modesty also means a purity of mind and manners.

It goes without saying that modesty is no longer fashionable for men or women; we must, therefore, seek our examples from the Scripture:

- ✚ See the modesty of Esther; she does not reveal her people, at the command of Mordecai. The man is in place of her father; she honors him by complying with his advice.
- ✚ She also honors the eunuch by taking his advice, instead of relying on her own wisdom in dealing with the king. The social status of a eunuch is not all that great – particularly in a harem full of young girls.

Note the result of this: she “found favor” – the phrase occurs three times in this chapter – with all around her.

Do you wonder why? Look at the concept of modesty in the New Testament:

- ✚ Paul tells Christian women<sup>24</sup> to dress modestly – in good works, not in fancy hair-do.
- ✚ Peter tells women that the “hidden person of the heart” – what a phrase! – should be adorned with a “gentle and quiet spirit.”<sup>25</sup>

The Christian who lives the watchful and modest life soon discovers that God’s work is not displayed in miracles alone – but in His providence.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Matthew 6:1

<sup>24</sup> 1 Timothy 2:9-10

<sup>25</sup> 1 Peter 3:4

## Providence

The word itself comes from the word “provide” – which itself comes from two Latin words:

- ✚ Pro – meaning before
- ✚ Video – meaning to see

So it is that God’s providence is God looking ahead of us, and acting for our good. Noah Webster defines it this way:

In theology, the care and superintendence which God exercises over his creatures. He that acknowledges a creation and denies a providence, involves himself in a palpable contradiction; for the same power which caused a thing to exist is necessary to continue its existence. Some persons admit a general providence, but deny a particular providence, not considering that a general providence consists of particulars. A belief in divine providence, is a source of great consolation to good men. By divine providence is often understood God himself.

We have two examples of that providence here. The act of reporting the murder plot sets the stage for a providence of God we will see later; the other providence is seen, surprisingly enough, in the genealogy of Mordecai and Esther. Both, it turns out, are descendants of Shimei. Shimei is a relative of King Saul, and when David flees Absalom, Shimei greets him along the way with stones and curses.<sup>26</sup> David eventually prevails, and Shimei begs for (and receives) mercy<sup>27</sup>. But as he dies, David gives Solomon instruction to see that Shimei dies no natural death.<sup>28</sup> The providence? Shimei lives long enough to raise his children, and dies violently in his old age – after providing the children whose descendants will include Esther and Mordecai – by whom the entire Jewish nation will be saved.

The providence of God is indeed a mysterious thing; it is not always apparent that God is providing. Indeed, we are taught that His ways are higher than our ways. One of the ways God provides is, paradoxically, through the wicked.

- ✚ God tells us that wicked simply will not understand at the time what they are doing for God.<sup>29</sup>
- ✚ Indeed, He will use the evil of man for His providence – and they never will “get it.”
- ✚ One powerful way we know this: His habit of bringing a greater good out of an evil.

Think about that last one. Why is it that God tolerates evil in this world? It will not always be so, but as long as it is, we need to know why God permits it. The answer is simply this: he permits no evil out of which He cannot bring a greater good.

This is great comfort to the wise. As Paul puts it,

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

(Rom 8:28 NASB)

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<sup>26</sup> 2 Samuel 16:5-13

<sup>27</sup> 2 Samuel 19:16-23

<sup>28</sup> 1 Kings 2:36-46

<sup>29</sup> Daniel 12:10

Does this apply to great saints only? No, it applies to all who love God – the ordinary, day-to-day Christian who watches and prays and walks humbly before His God.

## Persecution - Esther 3

Have you ever wondered just what kind of person it takes to persecute Christians? We are introduced to him in this chapter. He is named Haman, and his character will show quickly in his actions.

After these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who *were* with him. All the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage. Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why are you transgressing the king's command?" Now it was when they had spoken daily to him and he would not listen to them, that they told Haman to see whether Mordecai's reason would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him *who* the people of Mordecai *were*; therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, who *were* throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, Pur, that is the lot, was cast before Haman from day to day and from month *to month*, until the twelfth month, that is the month Adar. Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from *those* of all *other* people and they do not observe the king's laws, so it is not in the king's interest to let them remain. "If it is pleasing to 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 carry on the *king's* business, to put into the king's treasuries." Then the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, "The silver is yours, and the people *also*, to do with them as you please." Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and it was written just as Haman commanded to the king's satraps, to the governors who were over each province and to the princes of each people, each province according to its script, each people according to its language, being written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth *day* of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder. A copy of the edict to be issued as law in every province was published to all the peoples so that they should be ready for this day. The couriers went out impelled by the king's command while the decree was issued at the citadel in Susa; and while the king and Haman sat down to drink, the city of Susa was in confusion.

(Est 3:1-15 NASB)

### Persecuting the Different

Have you ever wondered how the other side views persecution? In particular, just what they might want next?

#### Step 1: The Clear Command

Persecution usually starts by finding a test case. Here's what you're looking for:

- ✚ First, what they want you to do is absolutely clear-cut. It's bow down to Haman; it's don't carry a Bible in school. It is designed to force a clear cut choice.

- ✦ Next, such an action must be symbolic rather than hugely affecting most people. Carrying a Bible on campus is such an action. In and of itself it is of very limited usefulness; it is not a magic talisman. But carrying one speaks volumes.
- ✦ The action itself must appear innocuous to those outside. What difference does it make whether or not you have a Bible in your locker? It's no big thing, is it? Aren't you people being rather fanatic about this?

Permit me a contemporary example. Very shortly after he assumed the presidency, Bill Clinton issued an executive order. It stated simply that abortions were to be performed on military posts; all gynecologists were to perform these on demand, without notifying parents. It's clear cut; it's largely symbolic, as abortion on demand is available practically anywhere. It's an order from the President telling you to do something that is "safe, legal and rare." It appears quite innocuous on the outside, just a slight change in hospital admittance procedures.<sup>30</sup>

### Step 2: Objection presented

The intent, of course, is to threaten and bully the man of God. Therefore, if possible, men like Haman ignore what Mordecai puts forward as his reason. The word used here implies worship by prostrating yourself on the ground – which the Jew reserved for God alone. In short, Mordecai presents his objection to the procedure entirely.

The objection is presented in context. Since the man of God knows that governments are ordained by God, the implicit argument is this: you know that we are loyal to our government. That can be established as fact. And when a loyal citizen presents such an objection, it should be heard and at least considered.

A similar argument happened in World War II. Many World War I veterans were rounded up with other Jews and sent to concentration camps. Often, these men would come wearing the jacket of their old uniform, medals jangling from the chest. How much more loyalty do you need?

This action now presents two options for the Christian: we can "bow down in the house of Rimmon" or we can refuse to cooperate. It is in the interests of Satan that the decision be presented as one wild-eyed fanatic against the loyal, noble magistrates of a tolerant country.

### Step 3: Hearts Harden

"Are we going to let these people get away with it?" The choice is always presented to the public as being one which is trivial for the people of God vs. a point of honor for the state. Millions of Christians died in the early days because they would not burn a pinch of incense over a fire and state, "Caesar is Lord." Everyone else (who had many gods) saw this as nothing but political loyalty. Their view was stated as, "This is a major thing, seeking loyalty to Caesar. It's so trivial to you; why don't you be reasonable?" By doing this the state affirms that there can be no doubt as to the politically correct answer.

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<sup>30</sup> The order was later withdrawn – but not because Bill got the message. The government of Spain, where we have a large airbase in Rota, threatened to eject the Americans from that base if they carried this out. The order was largely viewed in Europe as yet another instance of American arrogance.

Which brings up the question: Do I bow down in the House of Rimmon? Do I accept abortion casually because, after all, it is legal – and I work in a public school? Do I go about my class work with posters proclaiming “Lesbian hero of the week?” Do I hand out business cards for the local abortion mill?

Persecution – from the top

There is one key indicator you may look for in the governing class which tells you that persecution is imminent. It is the angry rage of those who will want the persecution done. Things done in anger today must be justified peacefully tomorrow<sup>31</sup>.

There is more to it. Anger does not wish to be alone. Anger entices its hearers. If one side is screaming for blood, and the other for sweet reasonableness, it's the former that tends to bring in recruits. One of the reasons we see so many police brutality incidents is that anger entices the sinner.<sup>32</sup>

A word of warning, therefore: do not do this. Anger is one of the seven deadly sins, and it deserves its reputation. It is a great feast – and you're the main course.

Pride

It's not hard to see Haman's pride in this. What does pride do?

- ✚ Pride hardens the heart of the proud – and squeezes out the possibility of compromise.
- ✚ Pride makes it personal – there is now a specific person (or kind of person) who is so reprehensible as to disagree with you. It demonizes your opponent.
- ✚ Pride makes it clear to you that your opponent is a lower form of life. You think not? Consider the Jews in Germany during World War II – and the Japanese in California.

The Lie

At some point the lie must be set forth. If the truth would get the Christian convicted, you would need nothing else. You create this lie by melting together the popular conception of truth and such lies as seem convenient at the moment. For example, Haman very publicly consults the astrologers – those men whose word today would be prefaced with, “Science says...” The idea is to force the decision – give them a time limit and after that no mercy. Let them know that the end justifies the means – and the politically correct ends will use all means possible.

Look, please, at the crafty lie of Haman:

- ✚ These people are not concentrated in one place, where they could be dealt with by the ordinary authorities. No, these people are scattered throughout the nation. (Terrorists, anyone?)
- ✚ And, they follow strange ways. Mystic ceremonies which clearly show their bloodthirsty desires (aka The Lord's Supper).
- ✚ They are lawbreakers (look at the worship they won't give) – and that makes them clearly evil.

Therefore – in the king's best interests, of course – I will destroy them. Even pay for the privilege too.

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<sup>31</sup> Job 5:2

<sup>32</sup> Proverbs 16:29

## Persecution – topside

One of those curious political tendencies that never go away is the winking knowledge of the king. He seeks what politicians today call “plausible deniability.” The way this is done is shown here; the king hands the business off to Haman along with his signet ring – allowing him to dictate the king's orders. The king need no longer concern himself with the details; if something goes wrong, it's Haman's fault.

The work, however, will be done by “the system.” Why? Because the system has already shown that it's good at carrying out orders from on high. They're efficient at it. Moreover, they get a share of the profits of this little exercise, being allowed to plunder the Jews of their material goods. It's a stick and carrot thing; the stick being that not doing this would ruin your reputation with the king.

### Can it happen here?

Consider first the Lie: “It's really the Christians who are persecuting us.” You mean, bringing a Bible to school and keeping it in my locker; using it during an after school Bible study is persecuting you? Absolutely right.

Hidden behind this is American humanism's grand desire; the supremacy of the state. Then the intelligentsia can efficiently reform society into their own image. The issue is always the same: Who do you say this Jesus really is?

On the odd chance you think this can't happen in America, wake up. It is happening already. Increasingly, cities are using eminent domain simply for the purposes of increasing tax revenues. The ACLU is diligent in threatening to sue anyone who even remotely espouses Christianity. Even after a Supreme Court ruling to the contrary, the ACLU regularly sends out letters to churches telling them that they cannot even mention an upcoming election. They can't espouse, for example, a political initiative. Schools are constantly threatened with lawsuit for any action which even remotely benefits Christians.

You see the point: social pressure and legal pressure. More coming: did you know that the US Government has an accurate listing of all Christians in America? That little business of the church sending out quarterly statements to you should tell you why. Contributions to any other non-profit can be validated by a cancelled check. But not churches; the fraud is so widespread we have to have the church validate your contributions. Every three months, the government gets an updated listing. Why are Christians the exceptions who must do this reporting? Well, we all know how fraudulent most Christians are, so we need to keep close tabs on them.

## Grief and Courage - Esther 4:1-5:8

In this section the threat of persecution suddenly becomes much more real; the Jews are given a death sentence. From action and reaction we may take an example of how the Christian is to behave under threat.

### Grief

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes. Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept *them*.

(Est 4:1-4 NASB)

Grief, when it is upon us, seems overwhelming. But we must remember that the children of God receive their grief as it passes through the hand of Almighty God. He regulates our afflictions:

- ✚ He regulates how much grief one gets. Do you remember Job? Satan came and asked permission to afflict him. The Lord specified what could, and could not, be done with him.
- ✚ He regulates how long the affliction lasts. He knows that our endurance is not eternal.
- ✚ Most importantly, he regulates it so that it does not necessarily overwhelm you. Most of what we get is common to mankind; it is bitter, but it will pass with time.

We see grief and affliction as being something that “just happens.” God sees it as a tool to benefit us:

- ✚ Often, from our affliction and grief, He teaches us His ways. Who among us has never attended a Christian funeral? If you have, you know that death looks you in the face – but also the sure and certain resurrection.
- ✚ He uses it to refine us. In our afflictions we often find ourselves faced with choices – what to keep in our lives, what to discard. As we choose His ways over our ways, we grow closer to Him in purity of spirit.
- ✚ Remarkably, He often uses the grief and affliction of His people to show His kingdom to the world.

That last is particularly important. A friend and coworker lost his wife to cancer. She left him with eight children. When I arrived at the church for the funeral, his first words were, “John, how does anyone get through this without Jesus Christ?” My answer: “I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out.” Standing next to us was my boss, thinking.

Remember, too, that you have a duty to those who are grieving. The afflicted are in our care, like it or not. This applies both to those suddenly afflicted (death of a spouse, for example) or those who are continually afflicted<sup>33</sup>. Who could not be moved by the death of the farm workers toiling in 100+ heat? Their deaths made it news, but their treatment has been like this for many years. Would you have imagined that the law of this land lacked a provision that such workers be provided both shade and

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<sup>33</sup> Isaiah 58:6-10

water? When the governor issued his emergency orders on same, even the farmers who pay these workers had to agree that this is just and right.

More commonly, we get the privilege of being Good Samaritans<sup>34</sup>. Privilege? Yes, it costs you in time, money and effort – but by this you become more like God, whose rain falls on the just, the unjust and even the unknown.

One very important reason for rendering comfort during a time of grief is this:

"For the despairing man *there should be* kindness from his friend; So that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty.

(Job 6:14 NASB)

To allow our Christian brother or sister to go through grief uncomforted is to risk them losing the faith. The fear of God comes from the presence of God; often enough, you and I are that presence.

Courage

Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king's eunuchs, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him *to go* to Mordecai to learn what this *was* and why it *was*. So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people. Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him *to reply* to Mordecai: "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days." They related Esther's words to Mordecai. Then Mordecai told *them* to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" Then Esther told *them* to reply to Mordecai, "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.

(Est 4:5-17 NASB)

Somehow, there always seems to be a problem between us and a just solution.

- ✚ Sometimes the problem is in "the system." This is particularly tough for Christians, as we are taught to be obedient to civil rulers as an example for Christ.
- ✚ Sometimes, it's just one person. A rich, powerful person, usually, but none the less one. We compare our strengths, and despair. (But the battle belongs to the Lord).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Luke 10:30-37

<sup>35</sup> Proverbs 21:31

- ✦ Often enough the problem is not external so much as it is internal. The inner man says, simply, "I can't".

We need to remember that we are not alone in this. Mordecai puts the point personally to Esther.

- ✦ God has charge of this; He will provide deliverance for His people.
- ✦ Don't think you can skate by denying Him; He remembers.
- ✦ Most important – maybe God has selected you to work his works.

There is a sureness about God that we should rely on. Solomon says that God directs the steps no matter what we plan.<sup>36</sup> We can share in that sureness of God by being his children. How so? Look at it this way: those who are devious and hateful quite naturally assume everyone else is too. So when it comes to taking courage, they need a lot more to get past the enemies they don't really have. It is by the pure heart we see God; seeing God, the pure heart knows its deliverer.

There is also the "Indiana Jones" principle: you and I have read the end of the Book. We know how it all turns out.

Taking courage – note that verb – is something that is commanded by God rather frequently in the Bible. It therefore must be something which can be taken. In other words, it's not something built in – but a decision we make.

That's how God turns the obedient chicken hearted into the courageous. The armies of the world look for courageous men, to beat them into being obedient soldiers; the armies of God are composed of obedient ones commanded to be courageous.<sup>37</sup>

## Two Banquets

Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance to the palace. When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his sight; and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which *was* in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter. Then the king said to her, "What is *troubling* you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you." Esther said, "If it pleases the king, may the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him." Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman came to the banquet which Esther had prepared. As they drank their wine at the banquet, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done." So Esther replied, "My petition and my request is: if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king says."

(Est 5:1-8 NASB)

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<sup>36</sup> Proverbs 16:9

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Elijah and Jezebel.

There is a fascinating puzzle in here: how did Esther know, or decide, to have two banquets?

Looking back on the whole story, we can see how two banquets make sense in the economy of God:

- ✚ God needs that extra night for the king's insomnia.
- ✚ It's also the night in which Haman's pride precedes his fall.
- ✚ And of course in the second banquet Esther exposes Haman.  
So it all makes sense – in hindsight. But what was Esther THINKING?
  
- ✚ Perhaps it was simply that she was timid and hesitant – and thus decided to put off the actual challenge until the next day. If so, we can see how God can still use us for His purposes.
- ✚ It's possible that Esther had mastered feminine wiles, and she knew the value of keeping the king in suspense.
- ✚ Or did God reveal this to her, commanding her to make it twice?  
We may never know.

But whatever the reason, we see here three characteristics of the providence of God:

- ✚ God's providence is given in His timing. It is not something we can command; it is His.
- ✚ God will do this using the things of this world.
- ✚ God will do this using the people of this world – who won't understand a bit of it.

## Peacocks, Providence and Presumption - Esther 5:9 – 6:14

Many years ago, when I was in the army, I was stationed at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. (Don't ask me how army went to navy – it's a long story). The buildings were originally those of the old Del Monte Hotel, which was taken over by the navy. The hotel had some peacocks on the grounds; these were given to the Admiral Commanding, and have remained his property since. This is fortunate for the peacocks, for they are worse than roosters about crowing in the morning, and many a resident has had the firm desire to strangle them.

Peacocks are beautiful birds, but they are dumb. We used to feed them peanuts, just to see if we could get them to come closer, or display their feathers. Sometimes the peanut would land a little too close to the humans; the peacocks would ignore that. Squirrels would do the same – but when the humans left, the squirrels remembered where those peanuts were, and got them. The peacocks could step on them and not remember what they were. Dumb.

The peacock's display – and its stupidity – are remembered in our saying, "strut like a peacock." We find out this morning just what is going on in the human peacock's brain.

### The Peacock

Then Haman went out that day glad and pleased of heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate and that he did not stand up or tremble before him, Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai. Haman controlled himself, however, went to his house and sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh. Then Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, and the number of his sons, and every *instance* where the king had magnified him and how he had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king. Haman also said, "Even Esther the queen let no one but me come with the king to the banquet which she had prepared; and tomorrow also I am invited by her with the king. "Yet all of this does not satisfy me every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go joyfully with the king to the banquet." And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.

(Est 5:9-14 NASB)

### Pride is personal

By the standards of the time Haman had it made. He was wealthy; he was powerful. But all it took to send him into a rage was the sight of one man, Mordecai. We might think, "What's the big deal?" But consider:

- ✚ Sinful pride is essentially competitive. It's "I'm better than you are." It is, in the sinner's eye, my pride against yours – and I'll do anything to win.
- ✚ Pride gives rise to rage when the sinner's whims are frustrated.
- ✚ Pride cannot exist alone. It must have victims to triumph over, and sycophants to praise the victory. That last is important in marriage. "You are so wonderful, honey, and I am so lucky to be married to you. Take out the trash."

### Anger and envy

Your teacher is in the habit of making balloon animals for small children. This is a fun thing to do, but it has taught me much about children and the adults they become. The animal is nothing but hot air and latex rubber (there's a great line in there, but I leave that to you), but when placed in the hands of a child it produces a number of reactions that speak much about the child's character. One thing you notice quickly: if you don't want the kids screaming and fighting in anger, you have an order for who comes first. I usually start at the youngest (as the older ones might be learning patience) and work to the oldest. When a child feels he's been skipped, and not going to get one, rage is very quick to arrive.

The cause of this? Envy. Envy arises when I think I should have something (and I don't) and I know that I deserve it more than you (but you have it). If the little sister gets a balloon big brother can soon get a bad case of green eyes.

This kind of rage – the rage of envy – is something that a prince cannot afford. Such behavior soon damages the kingdom, and it is the wisdom of kings to overlook these things – bigger fish to fry, so to speak. In this, Haman shows that he is not fitted to be a prince among the people.

### Pride – strutting

One thing about the peacock – he has to have an audience. Did you notice that Haman sent for his friends? He must have a willing audience. Did you notice he brags not only about his new status but also his old accomplishments? Just to speak of the new would not be enough; you really need to know how truly great I am.

That has its drawbacks. It leaves the man open to the suggestions of his sycophants. Why a gallows 75 feet tall? It's got to be the biggest and best – and his friends know that such an idea will appeal to him. Anyone can build an ordinary gallows and get the job done – but his must be the tallest.

### Providence

During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. It was found written what Mordecai had reported concerning Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who were doorkeepers, that they had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. The king said, "What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." So the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace in order to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows which he had prepared for him. The king's servants said to him, "Behold, Haman is standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in."

(Est 6:1-5 NASB)

It's all coincidence, right? Well, let's consider just how slender the thread of coincidence is here.

### Insomnia

Those who deny providence have spent a good deal of ink showing how the king's insomnia was deliberately induced by Esther. After all, her feminine wiles were sufficient to pull all these strings. (How was she so sure that he'd call for the chronicles?)

Insomnia was a lot rarer then than now. Why? When the sun goes down, it gets dark. People commonly were in bed by sundown. This was powerful conditioning in those days; Edison's light bulb may be blamed for the change.

Most of us, when insomnia strikes, don't call for someone to read us a book. No, we go to bed and toss and turn. The king didn't. It's just a coincidence.

### Chronicles

OK, Mr. Skeptic, let's try this one on for size. You're the king. You have insomnia. You also have half the world's supply of wine and an ample supply of concubines to play with. Having no direct experience with such a harem, I myself could not say – but I find one woman's favors an excellent antidote to insomnia. Which would you pick?

Now, you might think these chronicles would bore him to sleep. Not so; they were written by the finest poets of the land; they were designed to be read aloud and be eloquent. In other words, they were designed to be heard. Is this what you'd do with insomnia?

Now, one last: it surely must have been "just a coincidence" that the section about Mordecai's discovery of the plot was what the king was hearing as dawn broke. Instead of telling someone to take a memo, he asks who's in court. Let's get it fixed, now. The king is being diligent – right on schedule.

### Haman

And, of course, just by coincidence, Haman had business with the king that morning. The timing is exquisite. Not only that; you can see what God had planned for Haman – and He set him up beautifully. Haman is there to get rid of Mordecai.

And the king doesn't ask him what might be done to honor Mordecai. No, he asks the question generically. Did the king plan this? No. He knows nothing of Haman's errand. He got his question in first (you can do that if you're the king). So, unknowingly, he sets Haman up – for the fall.

### Presumption

So Haman came in and the king said to him, "What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?" Then Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king desires to honor, let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed; and let the robe and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble princes and let them array the man whom the king desires to honor and lead him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, 'Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor.'" Then the king said to Haman, "Take quickly the robes and the horse as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew, who is sitting at the king's gate; do not fall short in anything of all that you have said." So Haman took the robe and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and led him *on horseback* through the city square, and proclaimed before him, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor." Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried home, mourning, with *his* head covered. Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish

origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him." While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hastily brought Haman to the banquet which Esther had prepared.

(Est 6:6-14 NASB)

#### A Window on the Peacock's Soul

This is a fascinating glimpse into the twisted soul of a man of pride.

- ✚ It is completely unthinkable to Haman that it could be someone else the king is speaking of. It's not a case of rejecting the other candidates; there are no other candidates in Haman's mind.
- ✚ Note, please, that his ideal of being honored does not include money. It's not about money; it's about Haman. Everything he suggests is for show – to show off how wonderful the man is, and how close he is to the king.
- ✚ Note the man to lead the horse: "one of the most noble princes." The show is not sufficient; there has to be humiliation for one of his rivals – and Haman doesn't care which one.

#### No satisfaction

It's important to see that there is no satisfaction for such pride – for there is always a higher honor to be sought. "The system" is set up that way – to encourage such pride and use it as a motivator which overrides all sense of right and wrong. As Mark Twain once wryly remarked, Satan is the religious head of four fifths of the human race – and the political head of all of it.

There is no satisfaction to pride; there is only repentance, which often requires humbling. Even in the humbling there is still a chance for repentance, as we shall see.

#### Pride goes before destruction

When God goes to all the trouble of setting up such a situation as this, you can be sure His purposes are in it. One such purpose is the preservation of the nation of Israel, from whom will come the Messiah. But he also provides a chance for Haman – to repent. The humbling for such pride is intense indeed. Note, please, that the king didn't see it that way. He saw it as a chore; unfinished business of the kingdom. Haman saw it as disaster.

But even in disaster there is room for repentance. Haman's friends – who were so happy to suggest a gallows about an hour before – now tell him it's hopeless. Mordecai serves the living God. Now, if I were Haman I think I'd shoot back, "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

Probably because he wouldn't have listened, then. God sends his warnings and opportunities through any available channel. He tells Haman here: repent – or be destroyed. It is his message to the proud.

## Scene in Power - Esther 7,8

There is a well known species within the sports world: the Monday morning quarterback. After the game is over, all the critics emerge to tell the team what they should have done. It irritates the real quarterback, but the coach does the same thing. MMQ is simply inflating his own ego, but the coach has a purpose. He wants the team to improve, to perform better next time. Let us examine the pivotal action in Esther with an eye to what we can do to improve.

### Moments of Decision

Now the king and Haman came to drink *wine* with Esther the queen. And the king said to Esther on the second day also as they drank their wine at the banquet, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done." Then Queen Esther replied, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request; for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated. Now if we had only been sold as slaves, men and women, I would have remained silent, for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king." Then King Ahasuerus asked Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who would presume to do thus?" Esther said, "A foe and an enemy is this wicked Haman!" Then Haman became terrified before the king and queen. The king arose in his anger from drinking wine *and went* into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm had been determined against him by the king. Now when the king returned from the palace garden into the place where they were drinking wine, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. Then the king said, "Will he even assault the queen with me in the house?" As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs who *were* before the king said, "Behold indeed, the gallows standing at Haman's house fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai who spoke good on behalf of the king!" And the king said, "Hang him on it." So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.

(Est 7:1-10 NASB)

### Esther

It is likely that Esther spent the night before this banquet in prayer – for she knew what was coming. What was coming? Fear.

- ✚ First, there is the fear of uncharted waters – an oriental queen leads a sheltered life; she would now take that life in her hands.
- ✚ More than that, there is “the sum of all fears.” Many things could have happened. She might face death; more likely disgrace. Worst of all, she could have been ignored – patted on the head with a “There, there, honey” She would then have to live with her own ineffectiveness.

God will not answer the sum of fears; He only encourages you and calls you to what I call “combat Christianity.” Permit me an example.

One of my students took up the habit of beating his wife. Somebody needed to rebuke this man, and you can guess who “somebody” was. It occurred to me on the way over that this man had about 5 inches on me, was twenty years younger, and had no hesitation about beating his wife. From which, one might infer, he would have no difficulty in beating me, either. There is only one thing for it:

if you face death, injury, destruction, then face it confident in the right. The battle is the Lord's. Do not ask the odds, ask your duty.

### Haman

If ever there was a man who felt like a toy boat in a washing machine, it was Haman. He walked in the door to get Mordecai's death warrant; he walked out being Mordecai's personal publicity agent. His pride was hacked, whacked and shellacked.

So when the accusation hit, he was unprepared. The accusation and the king's reaction to it tell him clearly that he is in big trouble. It is at moments like this that a man's true character is revealed. He has two options: die like a man, or plead for his skin. One leaves him a dead lion, the other a live dog.

There is a reason that men used to be called "noble" or "vile" for their character. The noble prepare for the call of duty; the vile reveal themselves like this. We no longer make such distinctions; this says a lot about how far we have fallen from grace.

### The King

The king, of the three of them, has the most difficult problem. He suddenly faces a tough political problem. His prime minister has proven to be false, a man who has conned him into an act of injustice. But it is no small thing to execute your prime minister – political upheaval will follow. So the king decides to take a minute to make up his mind.

- ✚ He goes into the garden – so he's not with a glass of wine in his hand.
- ✚ He leaves the scene – to control his anger.
- ✚ And he comes back in – undecided.

Suppose Haman had been a man of honor, and defended himself against Esther's accusation? But he was not – and the king finds him begging for his life, probably physically taking hold of Esther. You don't mess with the king's main squeeze. That decides the king.

### A Sense of Justice

On that day King Ahasuerus gave the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had disclosed what he was to her. The king took off his signet ring which he had taken away from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept and implored him to avert the evil *scheme* of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews. The king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king. Then she said, "If it pleases the king and if I have found favor before him and the matter *seems* proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces. "For how can I endure to see the calamity which will befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" So King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given the house of Haman to Esther, and him they have hanged on the gallows because he had stretched out his hands against the Jews. "Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal *it* with the king's signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked." So the king's scribes were called at that time in the

third month (that is, the month Sivan), on the twenty-third day; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded to the Jews, the satraps, the governors and the princes of the provinces which *extended* from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to every province according to its script, and to every people according to their language as well as to the Jews according to their script and their language. He wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horses, riding on steeds sired by the royal stud. In them the king granted the Jews who were in each and every city *the right* to assemble and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill and to annihilate the entire army of any people or province which might attack them, including children and women, and to plunder their spoil, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the thirteenth *day* of the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar). A copy of the edict to be issued as law in each and every province was published to all the peoples, so that the Jews would be ready for this day to avenge themselves on their enemies. The couriers, hastened and impelled by the king's command, went out, riding on the royal steeds; and the decree was given out at the citadel in Susa. Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a large crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. For the Jews there was light and gladness and joy and honor. In each and every province and in each and every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy for the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them.

(Est 8:1-17 NASB)

If you ever get elected supreme ayatollah, here are some tips about the matter called justice:

1. See that evil does not prosper – and that your people see it too. We recently passed a law to prevent criminals from profiting by their crimes. Their method? They would write an autobiography – and the more notorious the criminal, the better the sales. This is unjust, and we fixed it.

The king does something similar. The offense is against the Jews, the people of Esther, so Esther will get Haman's estate. More than that, the king knows the value of justice displayed. The hanging mentioned here is not what we would know from the western movies. The criminal was first dispatched, by garrote or impalement. His body was then bound in chains and suspended from the gallows. His body was left to rot until the chains held it no more - a public warning and lesson.

2. Fix the evil already done, as best you can. The evil of this world always wants its victories to be permanent and its losses temporary. Hence the law of the Medes and the Persians, "which altereth not."

You can't fix it all; this is a fallen world. But you should fix what you can. As God told us:

"Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways, As a nation that has done righteousness And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me *for* just decisions, They delight in the nearness of God. 'Why have we fasted and You do not see? *Why* have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you find *your* desire, And drive hard all your workers. "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like *you do* today to make your voice heard on high. "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed

And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD? "Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke? "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? "Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

(Isa 58:2-8 NASB)

Could the same complaint be made today? Conservatives tell us to value the yoke, for it makes money. Liberals want to remove this yoke – and add a much heavier one. And the children of God?

3. Rejoice and celebrate in the triumph of the right. Think about it: whose birthdays do we celebrate as a nation? Washington, the man who made us a nation, life, liberty, happiness and all. Lincoln, the man who freed the slaves. What are our holidays? The Fourth of July, we proclaim liberty. Veteran's day, honoring those who kept our freedom. We honor those who break the yoke.

But do we? May I make a comparison for you? On my shelves I have a book which happens to list the toasts made on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1822, in New Milford, Connecticut:<sup>38</sup>

- ✚ The Patriots of '76 – May we ever cherish their principles and imitate their virtues.
- ✚ The Armies of the United States – The laurels acquired by them in honorable war have never been sullied by outrages like those of our enemies at Hampton<sup>39</sup> and Frenchtown<sup>40</sup>.
- ✚ Our Declaration of Independence – A beacon to the friends of liberty and a terror to monarchs.
- ✚ Independence – May we not lose its substance and court its shadow.
- ✚ The Next Congress – May they encourage Domestic Manufacturers and be contented with forty-two dollars a week.
- ✚ The Legislative and Executive Departments of the United States – May they think less about the next Presidency, and more about our national concern.
- ✚ The American Fair – Their smiles animate the soldier's bosom; their virtues awe him into respect.

We have traveled far from this.

### The Character of Mordecai

Through all this we have not paid much attention to Mordecai; it now seems a good time to examine his character. I bring to your attention three facts.

#### He was entrusted with the estate of Haman

Esther had no hesitation in putting him in charge. The main reason is clear; he has shown himself faithful in little, and he will be faithful in much. Perhaps more important is this: he has shown himself a man of wisdom. The slaves serving Haman may not feel particularly happy about the change of the tide; winning them over will take wisdom and effort.

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<sup>38</sup> *Eric Sloane's America*, Promontory Press. New York, NY, 1954, 1955, 1956, p.299

<sup>39</sup> I regret that I cannot find anything concerning this battle except its date, June of 1813. A man's library cannot contain everything.

<sup>40</sup> A battle during the war of 1812 which involved British-allied Indians massacring prisoners of war.

### His reaction to being honored by Haman

Think back: what was his reaction? Nothing is recorded. Haman's idea of honor was that of one who thinks of pomp and prestige; Mordecai had no use for it. Indeed, when the king repeated the honor later<sup>41</sup> he had no reaction then. But what did you expect? Those who fear God treat victory and defeat as things of this world.

### He was trusted by the king

The man has proven himself faithful (think about that assassination plot). He has proven himself capable. And – the king knows that because Mordecai is loyal to God he will be loyal to the king<sup>42</sup>. It is interesting to see all the fuss about our current nominee for the Supreme Court. American liberals are shocked, shocked to find that he is Roman Catholic – nothing but a good humanist need apply. Things have changed – or have they?

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<sup>41</sup> Esther 8:15

<sup>42</sup> Why? I leave this as an exercise for the reader.

## Justice - Esther 9-10

"... with liberty and justice for all." So ends the Pledge of Allegiance in America. It is a reflection of the fact that this nation was founded on God's own principles, as best understood by the Founding Fathers. The Revolutionary War was fought over such issues. I propose to examine the question of justice in government in this lesson, taking as example the closing chapters of Esther:

Now in the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar), on the thirteenth day when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm; and no one could stand before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples. Even all the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and those who were doing the king's business assisted the Jews, because the dread of Mordecai had fallen on them. Indeed, Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai became greater and greater. Thus the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying; and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. At the citadel in Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men, and Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jews' enemy; but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. On that day the number of those who were killed at the citadel in Susa was reported to the king. The king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman at the citadel in Susa. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your petition? It shall even be granted you. And what is your further request? It shall also be done." Then said Esther, "If it pleases the king, let tomorrow also be granted to the Jews who are in Susa to do according to the edict of today; and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on the gallows." So the king commanded that it should be done so; and an edict was issued in Susa, and Haman's ten sons were hanged. The Jews who were in Susa assembled also on the fourteenth day of the month Adar and killed three hundred men in Susa, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. Now the rest of the Jews who *were* in the king's provinces assembled, to defend their lives and rid themselves of their enemies, and kill 75,000 of those who hated them; but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. *This was done* on the thirteenth day of the month Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing. But the Jews who were in Susa assembled on the thirteenth and the fourteenth of the same month, and they rested on the fifteenth day and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing. Therefore the Jews of the rural areas, who live in the rural towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar *a* holiday for rejoicing and feasting and sending portions *of food* to one another. Then Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month, annually, because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and *it was a* month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions *of food* to one another and gifts to the poor. Thus the Jews undertook what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to disturb them and destroy them. But when it came to the king's attention, he

commanded by letter that his wicked scheme which he had devised against the Jews, should return on his own head and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, the Jews established and made a custom for themselves and for their descendants and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they would not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation and according to their appointed time annually. So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants. Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim. He sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, *namely*, words of peace and truth, to establish these days of Purim at their appointed times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and just as they had established for themselves and for their descendants with instructions for their times of fasting and their lamentations. The command of Esther established these customs for Purim, and it was written in the book.

(Est 9:1-32 NASB)

Now King Ahasuerus laid a tribute on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. And all the accomplishments of his authority and strength, and the full account of the greatness 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 second *only* to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and in favor with his many kinsmen, one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation.

(Est 10:1-3 NASB)

### The Problem

The king has a problem: there is a clear injustice pending in his kingdom, and the facilities of law do not immediately offer an easy solution. The problem is not altogether unknown to our time; someone wants to kill all the Jews.

Historians of the time bring out a fact which is not mentioned in the Bible. Haman was a member of the tribe of Amalek, one also forcibly displaced to Babylon. There was an ancient feud between the Jews and the Amelekites.<sup>43</sup> The ancient Jewish commentators assure us that the “enemies of the Jews” were the Amalekites; these would have been the enemy.

That was then; how about now? In our time we see the Jews blamed for everything that’s wrong in the Middle East. It’s by no means a new idea. Consider this order given by a major general in the United States Army:

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example Deuteronomy 25:17-18, for the beginning of this. Trace the word Amalek through the Scriptures and you will see that they were completely destroyed.

“The Jews as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby to be expelled from the department within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order.”<sup>44</sup> Wondering what bureaucrat in uniform did this? Ulysses S. Grant.

The injustice here comes from the falseness of the charge, then as now. But there is another point of injustice: this is justice against a tribe or class. Is man capable of rendering justice to a tribe or class? Against individuals, perhaps. But against a class or tribe?

A classic instance of this occurred in World War II. The United States “interned” Japanese Americans in California. But not in Hawaii. It’s been a sore spot since. The injustice is now recognized. But it still stands as a bad example.

#### The law of the Medes and the Persians, which altereth not

The problem has its roots in a technicality of Persian law: once a decree is made, it cannot be altered. This is wise.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, we may take from the preamble to our Constitution some of the reasons why:

- ✚ **Domestic tranquility.** If the rules don’t change, I can continue to earn my daily bread without providing for governmental changes on a whim.
- ✚ **Establish justice.** In America a man cannot be tried for a crime which is not known to the law. This serves a similar purpose.
- ✚ **A more perfect union.** When the rules don’t change, and they’re the same for everybody, trade between tribes increases, and people are drawn together.

So, how is the king going to get out of this trap?

#### Solution: Self-Defense

The solution is quite, well, kingly. The new decree is itself established in justice. How so?

- ✚ It invokes the universal conception of self defense. If their enemies can band together to attack, they can band together for defense. The rest of the empire likely saw it as perfectly justified.
- ✚ It is limited to the same day as was given their enemies. No permanent power is given; just enough to meet the case.
- ✚ Most important: it gives clear warning to those in authority (and the Amelekites) just which way the wind is blowing. Fair notice served.

Justice – intended, done, and seen

If justice is to prevail in the nation, then I submit it cannot be left to chance or leftovers from something “more important.”

#### Justice intended

Justice is not a “bolt-on”; it’s part of the original equipment – or it isn’t there at all. It cannot be an afterthought. Therefore it must be included from the beginning.

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<sup>44</sup> Catton, *This Hallowed Ground*, Doubleday, NY, 1956 p220.

<sup>45</sup> Proverbs 24:21 – Bet you didn’t know this was in the Bible.

- ✚ There must be a passion for justice in the founders of the nation. Its great value must be seen as something essential.
- ✚ There must be planning for justice as well. Wishful thinking must be replaced by careful planning of the system – keeping that which is good, fixing that which is not. (Corporate management types might consider that this applies to them, too.)
- ✚ There must be a love for justice. It’s something you do – and praise when others do it too.  
God is a God of Justice<sup>46</sup> - imitate Him.

### Justice Done

Noble words mean nothing without the deeds to match. This has its difficulties and warnings:

- ✚ Justice is often blessed by those who receive it – but the givers of justice often are not blessed. The poor have only their prayers for this.
- ✚ Justice perverted does not last forever – the stench of it may be buried, but it comes back again and again, each time worse.
- ✚ Giving justice is often expensive. The Christian is taught never to expect it, but always to give it. That cannot be inexpensive.  
It’s a fallen world; we must do the best we can with it.

### Justice Seen

It is essential that not only is justice done, but that it be seen to be done.

- ✚ This business of hanging in chains is likely most effective for the blue collar fool. It’s the kind of thing that mothers would bring their children to, and then say, “See? If you don’t eat your spinach, that’s where you’ll wind up.”
- ✚ Does it deter the white collar fool? We really don’t know; nobody has good numbers concerning those who would have turned criminal. But I suspect it doesn’t hurt.

### Considerations in a democracy

All this is fine, and applies to all forms of government. But there are specific requirements for the citizens of a democracy; we are to “establish justice.” How?

#### “Render unto Caesar”

- ✚ First, if you’re called as a juror, serve. When you serve, take it seriously. Justice is placed in your hands.
- ✚ Next, you’re a taxpayer. When the facilities of justice are in need of repair, do you begrudge the next dollar? Or do you see such spending to be as necessary as a hospital?
- ✚ Finally, you are a voter. Do the candidates for whom you vote bring justice forward, or let it languish?

There is much in that last question. If one might put it colloquially, the Republicans are the party of greed, and the Democrats the party of envy. We need to be the party of justice.

### The power of service

Justice is not just a matter for the courts. Indeed, justice should prevent most matters from appearing before a court. For example: an immigrant farm worker dies in 100° heat in our Central

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<sup>46</sup> Isaiah 30:18

Valley. Perhaps his kin will find a lawyer who will work on commission; but in the meanwhile is it not a matter of justice that such things should not happen? Should we not compel the employer to provide shade and water, regular breaks and first aid supplies?

Often such justice is delivered in an organized way by the church. Is it just that children who have lost their parents should be obliged to wander the streets as beggars – until they are old enough to be prostitutes? What then is an orphanage built by Christian hands?

Often such action is individual. You see someone suffering unfairly, and you help them directly. This too is justice – often unseen by all but God.

### **The power of suffering**

The Christian has a weapon for justice that accords great strength. It is the willingness of the Christian to suffer. It is the willingness to walk away from a job that you wanted to keep – because they want you to deceive the customer. It is the willingness to go to jail so that others might see the pain of abortion which is so conveniently swept under the rug of our consciences. It is the willingness to reproach evil, knowing fully well that you will suffer for it.

Justice – neither cheap nor easy. But if a man's principles don't cost him anything, they're not worth much, are they?

## Affliction from God - Ruth 1

One of the most common questions a Christian will ask concerns affliction: "Why me?" There is much more to the problem than that; We shall study it in this lesson as the beginning of our study in the Book of Ruth.

(Ruth 1 NIV) In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. {2} The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. {3} Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. {4} They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, {5} both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. {6} When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. {7} With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. {8} Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. {9} May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud {10} and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." {11} But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? {12} Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me--even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons-- {13} would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" {14} At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her. {15} "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." {16} But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. {17} Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." {18} When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. {19} So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" {20} "Don't call me Naomi, " she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. {21} I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." {22} So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

### Affliction due to sin

It is an old story: affliction comes from sin. This is not always the cause, but it is often enough that we must examine it first. We can see it in the background of the story – indeed, our Lord has provided us with some meaning even in the names of our characters.

Elimelech – the name means "My God is King."

Naomi – means “pleasure”

Mahlon – means “sick”

Kilion – means “pining away”

Orpah – means “fawn”

Ruth – means “beauty”

Listen then to the story. “My God is King” marries “Pleasure.” Is that a mistake? Yes indeed! We don’t know that it happened as such, but marrying for pleasure alone is a major mistake. It brings down this Godly man, and he dies for it. We know this man strayed, for he took his wife out of the Promised Land and married his sons to Moabites – which the Israelites were forbidden to do. He does this for the sake of his belly. It is no surprise then when his children are sickly (look at those names again). They marry these girls, and die.

One quick warning must be brought forward here. Affliction often comes as the result of our own sin – but we must not presume that to be the case. How often have we seen the suffering told that they must have done something very wicked to deserve this? It is not always so; ask Job. (His friends didn’t believe it either).

#### The sin of others

Often our affliction is due to the sin of others.

- ✚ Sometimes it’s a family member. The husband who commits adultery; the abusive parent; the wayward child. All these cause affliction to those who love them. To love is to risk being hurt by sin. Jesus would know.
- ✚ Sometimes it’s a complete stranger – the drunk on the highway, the thief, or even the callous indifference of those in authority.

#### The existence of sin in general

Often, affliction cannot be traced to any one person at all! Why is there disease and illness in the world? It is a fallen world, that we know, but tracing the responsibility can indeed be difficult.

Perhaps it does not matter. Just because you know the cause doesn’t mean you know the cure; just because you don’t know the cause doesn’t mean you don’t know what to do about it. Sin happens.

#### Affliction in Persecution

For the Christian, it must be acknowledged that there is affliction specifically because we are Christians. It is called persecution.

#### The Nature of Persecution

- ✚ First, we should expect it! Our Lord told us this; the Apostles repeated it and (it’s only been two millennia, so let’s not be too hasty) so far history has borne them out completely.

- ✦ These afflictions, however, are relatively mild – compared to the glory we are to receive for them.<sup>47</sup> Relatively mild – which is often not so much comfort.
- ✦ These afflictions are temporary. How often we presume to the contrary! But the Lord hears the call of his people.
- ✦ Afflictions like this end in blessing and joy.<sup>48</sup>

#### What we should do in persecution

Our Lord permits us to flee persecution – indeed, it is one of the chief means of spreading the Gospel. He also gives us much other encouragement and direction:

- ✦ First, we are to consider such persecution a sign of blessing.<sup>49</sup> Satan does not assault those he already has captured.
- ✦ Our reaction to this sign of blessing should be joy.<sup>50</sup>
- ✦ When faced with such persecution, we must react in the way God would intend. We are not to strike back; rather, we are to strengthen and encourage each other.<sup>51</sup>
- ✦ Always, in the face of persecution, remember that God cares for us. He has not forgotten nor will He.<sup>52</sup>

#### Affliction for God’s purpose

“Why?” That’s the question everyone really wants an answer to. With God’s help we can endure the affliction – but we just want to know what happened to cause this – especially, “Why me?”

#### Affliction for correction and discipline

Sometimes God uses affliction to discipline his children. It’s his way of saying, “Pay attention!”

- ✦ When this happens, we are to consider it a blessing.<sup>53</sup> God disciplines those He loves.
- ✦ One primary purpose of such discipline is to force you to return to Him, just as Naomi was obliged to return to Bethlehem.
- ✦ As Naomi announced her bitterness, we too can serve as examples to others – if the others will open their eyes.
- ✦ Surprisingly to a lot of Christians, one reason is that God uses this to oblige us to seek his consolation – so that we might be closer to Him.<sup>54</sup>
- ✦ Ultimately, those who are disciplined by the Lord – and accept it as such, and act on it as such – are those who escape condemnation at Judgment Day.

#### To produce character

Often, affliction is designed to produce character, particularly for a specific purpose. If you have suffered in a particular way, you can bring the love of Christ to those who are suffering in the same way.

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<sup>47</sup> Romans 8:18

<sup>48</sup> Psalm 126:5; see also the Beatitudes.

<sup>49</sup> 1 Peter 4:14

<sup>50</sup> James 1:2

<sup>51</sup> 1 Thessalonians 3:2-3

<sup>52</sup> Luke 12:6-7

<sup>53</sup> Psalm 94:12

<sup>54</sup> See Psalm 62

- ✚ This is a process which develops character.<sup>55</sup> We need to remember that a day of suffering is not likely to do this. It takes time.
- ✚ Such character needs to be developed to completion.<sup>56</sup> We need to see God molding us to his ends, even if we don't know what those ends are.
- ✚ For those who make it, there is a crown of life promised upon the return of our Lord.<sup>57</sup>

#### For the glory of God

Remember the man born blind?<sup>58</sup> The disciples were so sure that this man, or his parents, must have done something sinful to cause so great an affliction. Jesus tells them simply that this was done so that they might see the glory of God. How is it that we suffer affliction, then, for the glory of God?

- ✚ First, we know that if we share in Christ's sufferings, we shall share in his glory.<sup>59</sup>
- ✚ Sometimes, we suffer so that the kingdom itself may be blessed. God works all things together for good for those (note the plural) who love Him.<sup>60</sup>
- ✚ Often – as in the case of martyrs – such suffering advances the kingdom of God.<sup>61</sup> What is your suffering if another man gains heaven because of it?
- ✚ For those who suffer for Christ, they will share in his glory when He returns.<sup>62</sup>

Affliction is not something we desire; it is something which is a consistent element of our lives. Some have more, some have less. Some earn it by their sins, some from the sins of others or simply the purposes of God. But know this: there is no evil so great that God cannot bring from it a greater good. The Crucifixion of the innocent Lamb of God was a terrible injustice; from it came our salvation. Trust God in this; bear your afflictions patiently and in company with the church, and look to his return for your reward.

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<sup>55</sup> Romans 5:3-5

<sup>56</sup> James 1:3-4

<sup>57</sup> James 1:12

<sup>58</sup> John 9:2-3

<sup>59</sup> Romans 8:17

<sup>60</sup> Romans 8:28

<sup>61</sup> Philippians 1:12-14

<sup>62</sup> 1 Peter 1:6-7

## Character in Action - Ruth 2

One of the reasons this story is so beloved is that it shows character in action. There are no villains in this piece; only troubles. So let us see how character deals with those troubles.

(Ruth 2 NIV) Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz. {2} And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." {3} So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. {4} Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!" "The LORD bless you!" they called back. {5} Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" {6} The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. {7} She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." {8} So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. {9} Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." {10} At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner?" {11} Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband--how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. {12} May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." {13} "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant--though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls." {14} At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar." When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. {15} As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. {16} Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." {17} So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. {18} She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. {19} Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. {20} "The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." {21} Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'" {22} Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." {23} So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

## The character of Ruth

The Targums of the Jews say that Ruth was the daughter of the king of Eglon. This is unconfirmed by the Scripture, but if it was true, then you can imagine what a fall it is to go from the daughter of a king to someone who is gleaning grain in the fields. Character is developed in hardship; it is also seen in hardship.

### Humility

Just because you're in poor circumstances doesn't necessarily mean that you've learned the lesson of humility. The proud poor are often with us. But notice the signs of humility in Ruth:

- ✚ She's the one that makes the suggestion that she should glean the grain. She doesn't wait for Naomi to tell her to do it; she accepts it and does not let pride get in the way of necessity.
- ✚ Note that she asks permission to glean in the field.<sup>63</sup> By the Old Testament Law, the owner of the field was to allow such. That doesn't mean she had the "right" to glean; it just meant he was commanded by God to allow it. How many of us go before God telling him what we are entitled to. We have missed the meaning of his grace by demanding our "rights."
- ✚ We can see this again in her reaction to Boaz, as she bows and asks him why she is so favored. This is the humility which comes of setting your expectations correctly. It is a model for us in our dealing with God; we need to know we are not worthy; we are loved.
- ✚ But there is one thing we can give to God, as Ruth does here: honest gratitude.

### Industry

There is no substitute known for hard work.

- ✚ Note that she gleans as long as there is light. How many of us are good at beginning, but tire during the work!
- ✚ You never know who notices these things. With what did the foreman commend her to Boaz? She'd been at it all day with only one short break. We, as Christians, never know who is looking and drawing conclusions.

### Her care for Naomi

Scripture says very little about care for your family, for the simple reason that it is assumed that any idiot would know that this is a serious duty. You can tell from the way Naomi counsels and blesses Ruth just how well Ruth did this.

- ✚ Naomi shows the proper concern that a mother would – instructing her that it is both polite and safer to stay in the fields of Boaz. Ruth has no words of reproach for the fact that Naomi is not gleaning (probably due to age).
- ✚ Note how Ruth shares out the grain with Naomi. There is a sense of love in this; we may have little to share, but share it we should.

## The character of Boaz

There are many men who are pious and good fellows on Sunday. If you want to know what they are really like, check on Monday morning at work.

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<sup>63</sup> The law in California *prohibits* gleaning. We have come a long way.

### His relationship with his workers

Boaz is rich. He is a prominent man in the community. It is instructive to see how such a man does not carry himself with arrogance, but with the easy grace – it is humility in the rich – of a man who accepts all things as a steward, not with greed.

- ✚ He greets his workers in the Lord; they reply in kind. The basis of his relationship with them is not master/servant. It is that of a man of God who has been placed in the position of being rich by God. Therefore, he blesses and is blessed in that name. How many of us can say the same?
- ✚ Note his foreman's diligence. He already knows all about Ruth; he has already given permission for her to glean. This shows he knows his master's mind, and acts accordingly. It's a great example for us; know your Master's mind – and act accordingly.
- ✚ Boaz has come to inspect the work. For those who are in positions of responsibility in the church, here is a lesson. Check and make sure that things are going well; then set the example for your workers.
- ✚ It is a little thing, perhaps – but there is a tent to provide shade from the sun as the workers take a break. This man provides for the comfort of his servants. For those in authority, here is another example. Does our Lord meet our every need? Then what should we do for those under us?  
Boaz is a model of the servant-leader; an example of what such a man should be.

### His care for strangers

One of the great tests of the faith is this: how do you treat those who cannot possibly repay the favor?

- ✚ Boaz – and we can tell from his foreman he does this consistently – obeys the commandments of God, particularly in the matter of gleaning.<sup>64</sup> Obedience is the foundation of faith.
- ✚ Note the detail of his care; he has her stay with his servant **girls** – lest there be any impropriety towards her, an alien in Israel.
- ✚ He tells his servants to be generous in this to her. He could have let her glean just by the Law; he could have given her the grain outright. Instead, he spares her harm and especially embarrassment.
- ✚ He treats her like the gracious host he is; in essence, he feeds her lunch. (My father taught me that no one was to leave our house hungry; it would be disgraceful. Disgraceful = dis (not) + ful (full) + grace)
- ✚ As Naomi says, this is kindness to the living (the two of them) and the dead (meaning her late husband.) If there is ever a favor which must be rewarded by the Lord, it is a favor to the dead. It is a measure of a man that he does kindness to those who absolutely cannot repay him.

### A man who honors righteousness

When Boaz first meets Ruth, he praises her for what she has done for Naomi. It may seem a small point – after all, the two women have had plenty of nothing but troubles – but even the humblest may share. Boaz sees this, and honors it. This is a man who has trained his conscience to the things of God.

### Lessons to be “gleaned”

There are a number of lessons here just itching to pop out of the text.

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<sup>64</sup> Leviticus 19:9-10

## Gleaning

Harvesting is hard work. Gleaning is even more so. But it is a model of Christian behavior, if we see it correctly.<sup>65</sup>

- ✚ Gleaning is done *bit by bit*. What an example of patience is this woman, Ruth. How many of us make the good beginning but falter over the long race; it should not be so.
- ✚ Gleaning is done with *eyes open*. So often the Christian today assumes he can learn nothing about God and His will except in the church – when God is trying to teach him every day.
- ✚ In gleaning, *you stoop to succeed*. It is a humbling experience; you must bend over to pick up every little bit. It is hard; it is also required.
- ✚ In gleaning, *what you gather you must hold on to*. It is of no use to pick it up if you can't keep it. So it is with us; how many of us need to be re-taught the same basic lessons simply because we won't apply them the first time, and keep on applying them?

## The providence of God

"As it turned out" – she wound up in the fields of Boaz. Did you think there are such things as accidents? You are watching the providence of God. See one other characteristic of God's providence: it is more than sufficient. Ruth did not just "get by;" she came away with more than her daily need. So it is with those who will trust God.

## Under his wings

One hates to give away such things like this; I do so wish I could charge you all for this and become fabulously wealthy. Alas, our Lord has arranged it so that you can read it for free in his marvelous Word! Here is the secret in this story:

(Ruth 2:12 NIV) May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

How often in your difficulties have you gone to God and said, "Help me!" Yet he seems to do nothing for you, and your difficulties remain. Would you like to know why?

You go to God and you say, "God, help me. I'm too fat (or too poor, or hooked on pornography, or an alcoholic, or whatever). I need some help from you in this." Sound familiar?

There are two kinds of "help."

- ✚ If I have to move a table, and I ask you to pick up the other end, that's help. But it's help between two equals. You and God are not equals.
- ✚ There is also the cry for help of the one who has given up all thought of doing any part of it themselves. It is the cry of the victim for the police; it is the cry of the Christian for refuge under the wings of God.

Until you take refuge under the wings of God, you will not see his help. When you do, you will not see the end of it.

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<sup>65</sup> I am indebted to C. H. Spurgeon for this point.

## Kinsman Redeemer - Ruth 3

We come now to one of the strange stories of the Old Testament. We must remember that we are three millennia away from these people, and their customs may be strange to our understanding. Even so, many have seen something not quite right about this. Let's take a look:

(Ruth 3 NIV) One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? {2} Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. {3} Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. {4} When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." {5} "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. {6} So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. {7} When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. {8} In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. {9} "Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." {10} "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. {11} And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. {12} Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. {13} Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning." {14} So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." {15} He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town. {16} When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her {17} and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" {18} Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

### Background

If we hope to understand this passage, we need a little background information – everything from farming practices to Levitical Law.

### Threshing floor

Every farmer had to have one. If you could get it, a large slab of flat sandstone would be best. Otherwise, you leveled a piece of ground, spread it with chalk and rolled it into a hard, flat surface, not likely to grow weeds.

To separate the wheat from its chaff, you constructed a tent over your threshing floor. In the evening, when the sea breezes blew in, you would arrange its sides so that the maximum amount of wind came through the tent. Taking a shovel, you would throw the grain into the air. The lighter chaff

would float on the wind while the denser grain fell more or less straight down. This is the process known as winnowing.

Having separated your grain and disposed of the chaff, you then closed up the sides. You slept there at night to keep the grain safe from robbers. Now you know what Boaz was doing there.

### Law of the Kinsman Redeemer<sup>66</sup>

The people of Israel were held to have been redeemed by God as he took them out of Egypt. They were redeemed by the blood (remember Passover). This law was extended to those who sold their property (the land is holy, remember). It was also extended to those who sold themselves into slavery.

Every 50 years came the year of Jubilee. All Israelite slaves were released (unless they wished otherwise) and all land was returned to its original family.

A variant of this was the duty of the nearest kinsman to redeem on behalf of a widow. This kinsman – called the “kinsman-redeemer” was obliged, if able, to repurchase the land sold, and in the process take the widow as wife. Any children born to this marriage were accounted as children of the original husband, and entitled to inherit that property. (It’s interesting that four generations later, Obed’s descendants are indeed poor again – must have been a small plot.)

### Social Security

We’re so used to the idea that people save for their old age, rely on Social Security, etc., that we’ve forgotten what these people did. They relied on their children to support them in old age! (A thought which horrifies children these days). If you were a widow with no sons, you were liable to starve, barring charity. So it is that a widow who had a chance to remarry would be anxious to do that.

### Marriage as a portrait of Christ and the church

When we read these passages, we need to consider the symbolic meanings involved. This is not just for pleasant reading; God has painted on the living canvas of our bodies a portrait of his love for the church. We must see the colors of that portrait in this painting of Ruth and Boaz.

### What really happened that night?

It is interesting to see the split in commentators. We know very little outside the Bible about these people. Some commentators see this as an attempt by Ruth, encouraged by Naomi, to seduce the man. Others see it as proper and correct in their culture. We’ll take a look at that later; now we shall examine the characters as shown – as a preliminary.

### Character

Naomi – often neglected in this story, she models a mother’s role for us.

✚ She sees it as her duty to care for Ruth – even though she is a daughter-in-law. United in marriage is united before God, and Naomi sees Ruth as a daughter. It’s a great example.

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<sup>66</sup> Found in Leviticus 25

- ✦ She's willing to kick-start things. Remember that in this culture marriages are usually arranged. But who's to do the arranging here? It's tough, because Ruth is from Moab – and Israelites are forbidden to marry Moabites. Somebody has to pull the trigger on this one.
- ✦ As befits the older woman, she is a counselor to the younger one. Today we don't see that as good – but Scripture universally commends this point.
  - Ruth – a stranger in a strange land; an alien.
- ✦ She is obedient – both the Naomi and Boaz. Obedience is the lubricant of faith.
- ✦ She is humble. There is no presumption that the Law says someone must do something for her; she asks.
- ✦ She is an alien as well – one who is not of the chosen people. It is a model for us, that God has now spoken to bring all nations to him.
  - Boaz – do remember that this guy is the older man! He's probably Naomi's age.
- ✦ He is a diligent farmer – the harvest is on, and he's out in the fields with his workers.
- ✦ He is generous in his provision – that load of grain would have been exceedingly heavy; the Talmud tells us that Ruth was strengthened by God just to carry it.
- ✦ And – see verse 10 – he is not expecting Ruth to have any interest in him. Fat, old bald guys know that Miss America is usually busy nights.
  - So, just what happened that night?

#### The seduction version

Some commentators see it this way: Naomi (the schemer) tells her daughter-in-law (the no doubt reluctant Ruth) that it's time to make her move. Sneak into the tent and seduce the man in the middle of the night. But due to the noble character of Boaz and the honesty of Ruth, the seduction doesn't come off. God intends something better.

#### The cultural version

Other commentators see it differently. We really don't know that much about their culture. What we do know is that Boaz clearly reacts as if he has been asked to exercise the right of kinsman-redeemer. So they conclude that this is what has been done. Considering that they legalized deeds by swapping sandals, this just could be.

All I can tell you is that this says more about the commentators than it does about Ruth and Boaz. Modern commentators tend to the seductive version, for we live in a time like that. Older commentators presume the cultural version, in general. All I can tell you is that to the pure, all things are pure.<sup>67</sup>

#### Characters

What's really important: see the picture that Ruth and Boaz present – as the examples of Christian and Christ.

#### Boaz – the figure of Christ

We can see in Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, a figure of the Christ to come.

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<sup>67</sup> Titus 1:5

- ✦ He is related to Ruth. In the same sense, our redeemer is not an angel or spirit, but rather the flesh-and-blood Jesus of Nazareth. In this we see the humanity of Christ.
- ✦ He is *approachable*. This is not the awesome figure of some benefactor at a distance, but another human being who is approachable by anyone. The God of Sinai becomes the Jesus of Nazareth.
- ✦ There is one key phrase here. When Ruth asks him to spread the corner of his garment, the word she uses for “corner” is the same one used for “wings” in Ruth 2:12. The action is symbolic. Boaz by doing this is spreading the wing of his protection over Ruth. The action is symbolic of taking her under his care, as Christ has taken us “under wing.”

More than that, we can see the providence of God in the provision of Boaz:

- ✦ He sends her away with as much as she could possibly carry. Is that not typical of how God blesses us?
- ✦ He tells her, “Don’t be afraid.” Does not Christ take away our fears?
- ✦ “I will do all you ask.” Do you hear the echo of Jesus telling his disciples that whatever they ask in his name, he will do for them?

### Ruth – the figure of the Christian

We can see the Christian in Ruth as well:

- ✦ She comes in and lies at his feet. This is the gesture of a servant, not an equal. We too should approach our Lord as servant.
- ✦ She asks his protection, knowing her own strength to be insufficient. We too should acknowledge our dependence upon Christ.
- ✦ She does not come to him unprepared, but dressed and anointed. Symbolically, anointing might be prayer; Revelation tells us that fine linen on the Bride represents the righteous acts of the saints. So we should approach our Lord with prayer and good works.
- ✦ She is obedient to him, not leaving in the night, but at the dawn. So we too should be obedient to our Lord.

### The Church – the Bride of Christ

The most important fact of marriage is this: it is the picture of the relationship between Christ and his church. Time does not permit a full exploration of this; but here are some things to think about:

- ✦ The Bride is in submission to her husband. I know that is not politically correct; perhaps political correctness is not the same thing as truth! The church must be in submission to her Lord, or she is not the church. Therefore, we should be following his commands, not the political philosophy of the moment.
- ✦ The Bride is to be adorned for her husband – think of wedding gowns. But how shall this bride be adorned? By righteous acts of the saints – which is commanded for our brides instead of jewelry<sup>68</sup>, and is fitting for all the saints.
- ✦ We are a spotless bride – without fault or blemish, as the Scripture says, - but only because of the blood of Christ.

From the oldest book in the Bible (Job) to the last book, one thought is clear: My Redeemer Lives. May we greet him in holiness, righteousness and homage at the wedding of the Lamb.

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<sup>68</sup> 1 Peter 3:3-4

## Redemption - Ruth 4

Redemption is, ultimately, a love story. Here it is a love story between Boaz and Ruth; it is a sign of the love story between God and his people.

(Ruth 4 NIV) Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down. {2} Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. {3} Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. {4} I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line." "I will redeem it," he said. {5} Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property." {6} At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." {7} (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) {8} So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal. {9} Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. {10} I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!" {11} Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. {12} Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." {13} So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. {14} The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! {15} He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." {16} Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. {17} The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. {18} This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, {19} Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, {20} Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, {21} Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, {22} Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

### Refusing to Redeem

Throughout the Old Testament Law we find the theme of redemption. First born sons are redeemed, as are first born animals. Land is to be redeemed; slaves may be redeemed. The essence of redemption is that something is restored to its original state. The land is redeemed in this story, and is accounted as belonging to the dead husband.

Redemption is like that for us, too. We were intended to live forever in fellowship with God. That fellowship was broken by sin. Christ came to redeem us – to restore us to that fellowship with God. Even more shall we be restored when he comes again.

With these thoughts in mind, let us see how our story plays out.

### Redemption – requirement and option

It is interesting that the people of this town are descendants of Perez. In Genesis 38 we learn the story of his birth. It seems this law of redemption predates the Mosaic Law, for it is applied there. Judah has several sons. One of them marries Tamar; he dies. The next son (Onan) marries Tamar – but refuses (the sexual technique is found in Genesis; I leave it as an exercise for the reader) to have children by her. God punishes this; Onan dies. Judah is now out of sons of marrying age. He tells Tamar to stay in his household until his young son is of marrying age.

But when the lad gets old enough, Judah does nothing. Tamar takes matters into her own hand. Disguising herself as a prostitute, she lures Judah into having sex with her. He leaves his signet ring and seal behind as promise of payment. But when he tries to pay, she's gone. Later, she's found to be pregnant. Judah commands that she be burned to death for her sin – until she produces that signet ring! From this pregnancy come two sons, one of them Perez.

From this we can see that this people considered the redemption of a widow to be a requirement for a brother – and some of the trouble that can come from such a regulation.

### Required by the Mosaic law

The Mosaic law takes this custom and puts it into code. The brother of the deceased is to take his brother's wife. That's mandatory. But evidently unwritten was the concept that another near kinsman could perform that duty. After all, other types of redemption were permitted (but not necessarily required) of a near kinsman. Clearly, however, the widow comes with the property.

### Purpose

Why would God bring up such a strange regulation? Remember that things in the Old Testament are set there as an example for us of things that would come in the New Testament. Redemption in the Old Testament is the picture of our redemption by Christ. In particular,

- ✚ Redemption is a form of eternal life. Note that the purpose is to keep the name of the deceased brother alive in Israel, as being on the historical records. His name is there; it is not blotted out. So our names are written in the book of life, not blotted out.
- ✚ Redemption is a form of eternal inheritance, or blessing. We are said to be joint heirs of the kingdom of God with Christ – by the redemption.

### Boaz and “cousin”

We do not know the name of the nearer kinsman. This is probably deliberate; it is a way of saying that this man was not worthy of being in the ancestral line of the Messiah. It certainly is an example to us, for redemption is a form of charity and love.

### The other kinsman

Why did this man decline the redemption? Clearly he intended to do it until he realized he would wind up with Ruth for a wife. His answer is that it would “endanger his estate.” This could mean one of several things:

- ✚ He may have had several children, and the thought of having more might have discouraged him. How to divide the pie?
- ✚ Perhaps it would have been a good financial transaction – but bringing home a new wife is not designed to encourage the existing one. That’s particularly true if you do it on the spur of the moment.

Whatever the case, he had the chance, declined it – and became anonymous. There is a parallel here for us. Many people are enthused when they first encounter the Lord. Then the cost of Christ sets in, and suddenly their enthusiasm becomes lukewarm approval.

### Boaz

Boaz, you will remember, is a picture of Christ. As such, we can see some things here that remind us very much of Jesus.

- ✚ Boaz is a redeemer – not a purchaser. He could have bypassed this whole episode (and omitted the wife complication) if the price was right. But he redeemed, and in so doing blessed Ruth and Naomi.
- ✚ He does so in an honest, fair way. There is no deception in the dealing. He “fulfills all righteousness” by doing this in the established, customary way.
- ✚ Just in case you missed it, he’s wealthy. You have to be to be a redeemer.
- ✚ His motivation is love.

### A look to the future

The elders of the town pronounce what is probably a typical blessing of the time upon the couple. There are three things that you might look at here:

- ✚ “Rachel and Leah” – the words mean amiable and fruitful – were the wives of Israel. So this is a wish to establish such a clan. We know that our Lord established a kingdom innumerable and of no end. They had 12 sons, creating 12 tribes; Christ had 12 apostles.
- ✚ Perez – the one born of Tamar – was noted for his prolific number of descendants.
- ✚ They pronounce for standing and being famous; surely this has come to our Lord as well.

### Lessons on our redemption

From this word picture we can see lessons about our own redemption.

### Our Lord

- ✚ Our Lord was not required to redeem us – He did it out of love for us. He owed us nothing, but from his deep love for his people he did it.
- ✚ He did it at great cost, out of his incredible riches.
- ✚ And even to the timing of the death on the Cross, it was done in accordance with the Law of God. Our Lord took no shortcuts.

### Ourselves

- ✚ The result of this redemption is eternal life. Our names are recorded forever in the book of Life.

- ✦ Our inheritance is eternal; it is rich and incredibly fruitful, for we are joint heirs of the kingdom of God with Jesus Christ.
- ✦ Indeed, we are “known” – by name – to God Almighty, and that is eternal. It is a permanent relationship, just as redemption was to maintain relationships permanently in the land of Israel.
- ✦ We are redeemed – not sold. Christ did not bring us in at bargain rates, but rather paid the full price for our salvation.

#### Others

- ✦ Many there are who pay lip service to God. But when the moment of sacrifice comes, there are many reasons they cannot come through.
- ✦ These may even go through the motions of being a Christian – they’re here every Sunday – to relieve their conscience.
- ✦ But ultimately they are lost – because they are lukewarm. They will not do what God commands.
- ✦ For this, their name is blotted out of the book of Life. They are unknown, anonymous – for eternity.

This is a love story. It’s about a man and a woman, or about Christ and his bride, however you choose. But like all good love stories, the right man gets the bride. Soon – however God counts soon – our love story shall end the same way, at the wedding feast of the Lamb of God.