

5. Courage in the midst of a storm of malice

May 22, 2008

Nowadays there are many movies that come from comic books – Spiderman, Batman, Superman, Hellboy, Ironman, X-Man, Hulk, Fantastic Four and so on. What is the reason people like to see these superheros? What do they have in common other than super power? Courage.

But does it mean that normal folks like you and me cannot have courage? Actually, we find more courage from normal people than some fancy politicians, ridiculously overpaid actors and athletes and even these comic book superheros.

One summer morning as Ray Blankenship was preparing his breakfast, he gazed out the window, and saw a small girl being swept along in the rain-flooded drainage ditch beside his Andover, Ohio, home. Blankenship knew that farther downstream, the ditch disappeared with a roar underneath a road and then emptied into the main culvert. Ray dashed out the door and raced along the ditch, trying to get ahead of the floundering child. Then he hurled himself into the deep, churning water.

Blankenship surfaced and was able to grab the child's arm. They tumbled end over end. Within about three feet of the yawning culvert, Ray's free hand felt something – possibly a rock – sticking out from one bank. He clung desperately, but the tremendous force of the water tried to tear him and the child away. "If I can just hang on until help comes," he thought. He did better than that. By the time fire department rescuers arrived, Blankenship had pulled the girl to safety. Both were treated for shock.

A few weeks later, Ray Blankenship was awarded the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal. The award is fitting, because this selfless person was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew. Ray Blankenship didn't know how to swim.

Tonight we find Queen Esther obediently carried out what the Lord laid in her heart for the Jews in the Persia kingdom. It was possible for her to lose her life if the king, her husband didn't want to see her in the throne room. The courage of the queen shined like a precious gem that was surrounded by a storm of malice that came from Haman who wanted to kill all the Jews in the kingdom. What a contrast, what lessons the Lord bestows on us!

A. CALM YET WISE PLAN

Esther 5:1-5 Now it happened on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, across from the king's house, while the king sat on his royal throne in the royal house, facing the entrance of the house. 2 So it was, when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, that she found favor in his sight, and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther went near and touched the top of the scepter. 3 And the king said to her, "What do you wish, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given to you--up to half the kingdom!" 4 So Esther answered, "If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him." 5 Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, that he may do as Esther has said." So the king and Haman went to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

For three days Esther has waited on the Lord. Now it is time to stand in courage. It wasn't enough for the Jews to pray and have faith that God would work. Somebody had to act, because faith without works is dead. But Esther wasn't operating on the basis of blind faith. She knew that God had covenanted with the Jews to deal with their enemies. She also knew that the God of Israel was a forgiving God who would hear His people when they humbled themselves and prayed.

During our times of prayer, fasting and waiting, God prepares not only our hearts but the hearts of those with whom we could have conflict – even those who might be unpredictable or hostile.

Proverbs 16:7 When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

Unlike Esther, when we come to the throne of grace, we don't have to wonder what our Father thinks about us because He always loves His people and welcomes them into His presence. One of the greatest needs in the church today is for intercessors who will pray faithfully for a lost world and for a church that desperately needs revival.

Notice Esther's self-control. She doesn't spill out what's troubling her. She doesn't point a finger at Haman and ask for his head. She doesn't play on the king's emotions and manipulate him into action. She doesn't get into a frenzy or act in haste. Instead, she restrains herself and stays with her prayed-over plan: issuing the king an invitation.

B. COME AGAIN FOR THE ANSWER

Esther 5:6-8 At the banquet of wine the king said to Esther, "What is your petition? It shall be granted you. What is your request, up to half the kingdom? It shall be done!" 7 Then Esther answered and said, "My petition and request is this: 8 If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, then let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

Queen Esther was not in a hurry to plead for her request to the king. She didn't want him to take her request as one of those palace gossips or the king becoming an advocate of Haman. She waited upon the Lord while she was doing her part.

Isaiah 40:31 But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.

From this verse we learn of four things that happen when we wait on God rather than rush into a frenzy of activity.

- 1) We gain new strength which we'll need when the road gets rocky.
- 2) We get a better perspective which gives us an eagle's-eye view of our circumstances.
- 3) We store up extra energy which we can draw upon at a later time.
- 4) We deepen our determination to persevere which wards off weariness.

What an honor for Haman to attend a special banquet with the king and queen alone and in the queen's place at that. It's unlikely that any official in the empire had ever been so honored. As Haman ate and drank with Ahasuerus and Esther, his confidence grew. In his own mind, he was indeed an important man in the kingdom, and his future was secure.

At the banquet, we see two more evidences of the sovereignty of God.

1) We see the sovereign hand of God at work in the way the king accepted the delay and agreed to come to the second banquet.

Monarchs like Ahasuerus aren't accustomed to being told to wait. Whatever plans Ahasuerus had made for the next evening in his daily planner were canceled to make time for the queen's second feast.

Proverbs 19:21 There are many plans in a man's heart, Nevertheless the Lord's counsel--that will stand.

The queen's unaccountable silence made the king be more curious and almost like a cliff-hanger "To be continued".

2) None of Esther's attendants who knew that she was a Jewess tried to convey this important information to Haman.

Had Haman known the queen's nationality, he would have immediately devised some plan to prevent her from interfering. Any of the palace attendants could have profited by telling Haman what they knew. But I wouldn't be surprised that none of Esther's attendants cared for Haman because of his never ending arrogance.

C. FROM ARROGANCE TO RAGE IN A SPLIT SECOND

Esther 5:9-13 So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with indignation against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh. 11 Then Haman told them of his great riches, the multitude of his children, everything in which the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and servants of the king. 12 Moreover Haman said, "Besides, Queen Esther invited no one but me to come in with the king to the banquet that she prepared; and tomorrow I am again invited by her, along with the king. 13 Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

Miserable Haman! After being honored by both the King and Queen of Persia, the disapproval of one man makes him feel worthless. This is an accurate description of how empty the rewards of this world are.

Haman's deep seated insecurities and need to be honored by everybody means that he can never be happy. God meant this hunger for acceptance in each of us to be ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Because we are accepted in the Beloved, accepted before God because of who we are in Jesus.

Ephesians 1:6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.

Haman's problem wasn't Mordecai, it was the emptiness in his own heart. Even if he solved the "Mordecai problem," it would not fill the emptiness in his heart.

Let's look at v10-11 again. How Haman showed off his riches, his sons, his promotion and now special treatment by the king and queen and anticipating a second banquet the next evening. I am sure that his head was swelled up so bad that he couldn't go through his house gate.

Obviously, Haman did not read the Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall.

Pride is the very essence of sin. That's why pride is number one on God's "hate list" in Proverbs 6:16-19. It was pride that turned Lucifer into satan:

Isaiah 14:14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.

Satan used pride to tempt Eve:

Genesis 3:5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

Pride is the ground where all the other sins grow.

Let's look at our pride for a moment. What does a sinful person have to be proud of? We certainly can't be proud of our ancestry. Our father was Adam, our grandfather dirt, and our great-grandfather was nothing. So much for the family tree! The only thing the Bible says is great about humanity is its sin.

Genesis 6:5 Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

I don't think we want to advertise that as our good achievement.

Pride is the only known disease that makes everybody sick except the person who has it. Unless cured, pride is a sickness unto death.

D. FROM PRIDE TO RAGE, THEN TO MALICE

Esther 5:14 Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows be made, fifty cubits high, and in the morning suggest to the king that Mordecai be hanged on it; then go merrily with the king to the banquet." And the thing pleased Haman; so he had the gallows made.

When Haman left the queen's palace, he was walking on air. But the sight of Mordecai immediately brought him down to earth again. His rage turned into malice at its worst.

Malice is a deep-seated hatred that brings delight if our enemy suffers and pain if our enemy succeeds. Malice can never forgive. It must always take revenge. Malice has a good memory for hurts and a bad memory for kindnesses. Malice in the Christian's heart grieves the Holy Spirit and must be put out of our lives.

Ephesians 4:30-32 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

The insidious thing about malice is that it demands us to act. However, there is a law of retribution in this world declaring that the person who maliciously seeks to destroy others ends up destroying himself. Malice doesn't please the Lord whether it is acted upon or it is nothing more than a thought.

Not one to waste time, Haman ordered that the gallows be made. Haman's plan was obvious: The execution of a prominent Jew such as Mordecai would paralyze the wills of the Jewish people in the empire, and Haman would have them at his mercy.

By the way, we think of gallows as a structure designed to hang someone by the neck like we saw in some Western movies, but the Persians used gallows for a much cruel-

er form of execution. A pointed stake was set upright in the ground and it would penetrate the prisoner's body from the bottom to the neck and leaving him there to suffer an agonizing death.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) When preparing for an unprecedented event, wait on the Lord before getting involved.

At least as important as what we wait for is the work God does – in us, in others, in our circumstances – while we wait.

2) When dealing with an unpredictable person, count on the Lord to open the doors.

Amazing things happen to our courage while we're waiting. Instead of becoming more afraid of our enemy, we become more confident in God.

3) When standing against an unprincipled enemy, ask the Lord for invincible courage.

God gave Esther the nerve to step into the king's presence uninvited. He gave Martin Luther the backbone to stand against the most powerful people of his day. And He can give you the grit you need to hold fast to what you believe.