

Last week we saw that the vile Haman got what was coming to him for his evil plot to have the /Jews killed, and in an ironic twist, he was executed on the gallows that he had had built for Mordecai the Jew.

But, the death of Haman only removed the source of the terrible edict that had decreed the annihilation of the Jews. Esther's task of saving the Jewish people had really only just begun, as the threat to their existence lived on in the irrevocable edict that Haman had issued in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet ring.

And the final verse of the previous act captures perfectly this sense of continued threat - "then the king's fury subsided". The king had quite naturally been furious with Haman that his plot to kill the Jews had put his wife, his favourite wife's life at risk – but he was seemingly unmoved about the plot as a whole.

That is the situation that Esther needed to modify by appealing again to the king, this time making sure the issue of the edict was dealt with. However, this would be extremely delicate, because having been able to get rid of Haman without publicly exposing the real reason, the king had apparently decided to leave the whole affair buried, undoubtedly because of his own part in it.

So as Esther began the next part of rescuing her people she resorted firstly to some pretty astute political manoeuvring – she informed the king of all that Mordecai meant to her, the fact that they were blood relatives but also the quality and closeness of their relationship.

And as a result of Esther's intervention, Mordecai was brought into the presence of the king, he was given direct access to the king without a specific summons, a highly exalted position. The king also gave him his signet ring, retrieved from Haman, transferring to him the power to act with the king's full authority. And finally Esther appointed him as administrator over Haman's property, giving him the resources that his new status afforded.

And this was all part of Esther's plan to save her people. Her political skill at having Mordecai appointed to such a powerful position in the empire, would be crucial in nullifying the edict that threatened her people with annihilation.

Then Esther launched the next phase of her plan and confronted the king with the matter of Haman's edict, seizing the moment while it was still fresh in his mind. But this was an extremely dangerous thing for her to do. She had already used up all the good will that she might expect from the king, and yet she must turn the king's attention to the matter that he was trying to forget, because of his own involvement.

And again we are challenged about **what we would do** if we were faced with Esther's situation? Would we speak up or would we remain quiet? How far would we push it? How much of a risk would we take? Esther was willing to risk everything to save her people. She was an incredible woman – brave and courageous and a superb example for us to follow.

And having found the courage to speak up, she once again expertly handled the situation with supreme tact. Firstly she collapsed at the king's feet in tears and made a passionate plea – but even here, she chose her words carefully – she dubs the decree to annihilate her people as “the wicked scheme of Haman the Agagite”, which he – singular – had devised against the Jews – and in so doing she virtually exonerated the king.

Then, having been invited by the king to continue – she proceeded with her appeal using more skilful rhetoric. She repeated the polite, almost apologetic approach she had previously used when addressing the king – If it pleases the king – and if he regards me with favour, and to these old favourites, she added two more – if you think it is the right thing to do – recognizing how improper it was to ask the king to rescind one of his decrees and then finally, If he is pleased with me, which was virtually the same as saying if you really care for me, and how many times have we heard that phrase today – if you love me you will. And while this last statement is logically speaking the least relevant to her cause, it is the reason that's likely to have the most impact on the king.

Clearly Esther was a skilfully and tactful woman.

And so having manoeuvred Mordecai into a position of power, and manoeuvred the king to where she wanted him, she continued with her request, that the edict that had gone out to annihilate her people be revoked, and notice again, that at this most dangerous stage in her petition, she carefully concealed the king's involvement.

But how was Esther going to get the king to nullify the edict, what would be the basis of her appeal? She had already used the threat against her life, so that wasn't going to work? And the king had shown that he was largely unmoved by the plot to annihilate the Jews, so she couldn't appeal to the king's feeling for the Jews or even human decency. What would she say?

Again, showing that she was a master at reading the situation, she realised that over the course of the previous events, the king had demonstrated that he cared for her, and so she based her appeal on that.

The basis of her appeal for the king to act was the terrible pain that she, his queen, would feel to see the destruction of her people and all her relatives. How can I bear...how can I bear. Her appeal wasn't that the king saved the Jews, but that he saved her from grief.

And all of Esther's tact and political skill was sorely needed, because the king's reply showed that he wasn't happy with what Esther was asking him to do – he had indicated that this whole thing be dropped, and she was refusing to let it go.

So he reminded her of what he had already done. Look, he says – I have hanged Haman and given his property to you, what more do you think I can do? You know I can't revoke an edict sent out in my name with my authority – I don't know what more you expect of me.

But, at the same time, he did give Esther permission to write another decree as seemed best to her. In doing so, the king was again essentially washing his hands of the situation – you write something if you think it will do any good – feel free to write whatever you like, if you can think of a way to reverse the irreversible.

And so Esther had got her man so to speak. Her cunning, her tact, her patience had all paid dividends, and she now had the opportunity that she needed to save her people. In chapter 4 Mordecai had stated that it was the hand of God that had placed her in her royal position, so she could intervene in this situation. And she had made best use of that. And so we see the providence of God, and the willing obedience of Esther combine to create an opportunity to save the Jews.

And this is a perfect picture of the **kind of relationship that God wants with us**. In ways that we don't always see or even understand, he provides us with opportunities to serve him. But we must make the best of those opportunities, using the resources at our disposal, whatever they might be, so that God's will is completed.

I wonder what God might have in store for us this week? Who is God going to send our way for us to provide a word of comfort or challenge to? As we go about our daily life, let us keep an eye on God, to see what plans he is implanting around us. And let's get on board with those plans. That way we will see the will of God unfold.

Back in Esther, it was Mordecai's turn to make the most of the position he had found himself in. It was his turn to demonstrate his cunning and wisdom – the royal secretaries were summoned and he set about crafting a decree to nullify the one issued by Haman.

While it wasn't possible to overturn the previous edit, in a master stroke of genius Mordecai issues a decree giving the Jews the right to defend themselves on the day they were due to be attacked, with the permission to annihilate any ethnic to political group that attacked them.

And it is clear that the narrator presents Mordecai's decree as the complete reversal and annulment of Haman's edit. The narrator does this in three ways – firstly, by relating the circumstances of the issuing of the decree with the same language that Haman had used when he issued his decree, but with some important changes.

Haman issued his orders to the Satraps, governors and nobles. Mordecai issued his decree to the Jews, Satraps, governors and nobles. The Jews were not only given the same status as these administrative officials, because they were mentioned first, they were actually given more importance.

Also, the edit was written in the language of each people and also the Jews, thus giving them equal status in the empire. And also, the detail about the couriers riding royal horses was intended to convey the speed and authority with which the edict in favour of the Jews was circulated.

And secondly, the narrator conveyed the edict as a total reversal of the position of the Jews but using the same language within the edict itself, albeit with a few important changes. Now it wasn't the Jews who would be destroyed killed and annihilated, they had been granted permission to destroy, kill and annihilate anyone who attacked them. It is important to note that this wasn't a general right to go on the rampage, they could only attack those that attacked them – and thus avenge themselves.

All of this powerfully portrays the utter reversal of Haman's edict, and the corresponding rise in the power and authority of the Jews. They had gone from being a people living under the sentence of death, effectively walking about with a bag over their heads – to the most powerful and influential people group in the empire.

And thirdly, this complete reversal of position and power of the Jews is portrayed in the sharp contrast between the responses arising from the edict issued by Haman and the one issued by Mordecai. When Haman's edict was issued, Mordecai tore his clothes and went into the city in sack cloth and ashes- this image was replaced by Mordecai leaving the king's presence dressed in glory and honour.

With the first edict the city of Susa was thrown into confusion – now there were joyous cheers. In the rest of the empire, after the first edict there was great mourning among the Jews, accompanied by fasting, weeping and lamentation. This was transformed into joy and gladness, with feasting and celebration.

And finally, the new status and position of the Jews is highlighted by the reversal of chapter 4 verse 3, when the first edict was passed many made their beds on sackcloth and ashes, but with the edict issued by Mordecai, many people of other nationalities became Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Clearly the story has reached its resolution – through the combination of the hand of God at work in seemingly coincidental happenings, and the courage and skill of the human players, namely Esther and Mordecai, there had been a most dramatic reversal and God's people had been rescued. Praise be to God. For that surely is what the narrator intended.

And yet the resolution is not yet complete. The edict issued by Haman still stood. Despite Mordecai's edict, despite the clear ascendancy of the Jews in the empire with Esther as Queen and Mordecai as chief advisor, the Jewish community was still not safe. It couldn't be taken for granted that when the day of the edict came, no one would rise up against the Jews and seek to put the edict into effect. Victory may have seemed secure, as the Jewish celebrations affirmed, but it was yet to be realised.

And so we will have to wait again till next week to see what happens as that day draws ever nearer.