



SESSION 4

STAND WITH HUMILITY

▶ **The Point**

Humility ultimately wins the day.

▶ **The Passage**

Esther 5:1-14

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

It was the email I regret sending. I was seething. After a meeting where I felt my opinions were not taken seriously, I fired off an angry email to a coworker. I blasted him for what I considered to be rude behavior and demanded that he apologize. I didn't seek out advice, nor did I review my words to make sure they were appropriate. I didn't even pray before hitting "send."

Thankfully, the recipient of my bitter missive was far more gracious than I was, and we cleared up our differences for the most part. But the email sowed stress in our relationship that never fully recovered. Even now, years later, I cringe at the memory of sending that email in the heat of the moment.

Esther faced a far more serious injustice than hurt feelings. We learn from her careful, deliberate process that fighting injustice takes wisdom, patience, and humility. Grace-filled approaches build bridges that can lead to change, but hasty moves almost always lead to worse outcomes.

▶ **The Setting**

Events in the Book of Esther occurred during King Ahasuerus's reign (486-465 BC). After Mordecai informed Esther of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, Esther instructed her people to abstain from food and liquids for three days. After that period of fasting and prayer, she would approach the king on her people's behalf. Esther acted courageously for she knew she faced the death penalty if the king did not extend to her his gold scepter.

What does the Bible say?

Esther 5:1-14

¹ On the third day, Esther dressed in her royal clothing and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace facing it. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal courtroom, facing its entrance. ² As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard, she gained favor in his eyes. The king extended the gold scepter in his hand toward Esther, and she approached and touched the tip of the scepter. ³ “What is it, Queen Esther?” the king asked her. “Whatever you want, even to half the kingdom, will be given to you.” ⁴ “If it pleases the king,” Esther replied, “may the king and Haman come today to the banquet I have prepared for them.” ⁵ The king said, “Hurry, and get Haman so we can do as Esther has requested.” So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. ⁶ While drinking the wine, the king asked Esther, “Whatever you ask will be given to you. Whatever you want, even to half the kingdom, will be done.” ⁷ Esther answered, “This is my petition and my request: ⁸ If I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and perform my request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet I will prepare for them. Tomorrow I will do what the king has asked.”

⁹ That day Haman left full of joy and in good spirits. But when Haman saw Mordecai at the King’s Gate, and Mordecai didn’t rise or tremble in fear at his presence, Haman was filled with rage toward Mordecai. ¹⁰ Yet Haman controlled himself and went home. He sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh to join him. ¹¹ Then Haman described for them his glorious wealth and his many sons. He told them all how the king had honored him and promoted him in rank over the other officials and the royal staff. ¹² “What’s more,” Haman added, “Queen Esther invited no one but me to join the king at the banquet she had prepared. I am invited again tomorrow to join her with the king. ¹³ Still, none of this satisfies me since I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the King’s Gate all the time.” ¹⁴ His wife Zeresh and all his friends told him, “Have them build a gallows seventy-five feet tall. Ask the king in the morning to hang Mordecai on it. Then go to the banquet with the king and enjoy yourself.” The advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows constructed.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Esther 5:1-4

¹ On the third day, Esther dressed in her royal clothing and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace facing it. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal courtroom, facing its entrance. ² As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard, she gained favor in his eyes. The king extended the gold scepter in his hand toward Esther, and she approached and touched the tip of the scepter. ³ "What is it, Queen Esther?" the king asked her. "Whatever you want, even to half the kingdom, will be given to you." ⁴ "If it pleases the king," Esther replied, "may the king and Haman come today to the banquet I have prepared for them."

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Esther 5:1-4 on page 107 of the PSG.

RECAP: Read the two paragraphs after the Scripture on page 107 of the PSG.

Esther made her decision. She would use whatever influence she had and approach the king about the impending genocide of her people. Esther was willing to risk her life, but she did not approach her task lightly. She and her people fasted for three days before she entered the king's presence. (See Esth. 4:16-17.)

Even though he was her husband, King Ahasuerus was a ruthless despot; so approaching the king surely would have been intimidating even for Queen Esther. She showed wisdom in her approach and won over the most unlikely of converts with her humility. Perhaps she knew the wisdom of the proverb that speaks of the kind of skill that allows one to stand before kings. (See Prov. 22:29.)

GUIDE: Use the last two paragraphs of the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to share background on how Esther implemented her plan.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 107 of the PSG: **"In what ways did Esther's actions demonstrate courage and humility?"**

TRANSITION: We are to take initiative and act with humility. In the next verses, we see Esther continue to do just that.

Esther 5:1-4 Commentary

[Verse 1] God wants His people to take the initiative and act with humility. Esther did so as she heroically approached the king **on the third day**. This time reference indicates Esther acted after the Jews had completed their three-day fast. They had demonstrated humble dependence on God by prayer and abstaining from food and drink. The time had come for Esther to carry out her part of the plan. Esther demonstrated initiative in approaching the king without first being summoned. Yet she wisely exhibited humility rather than arrogance when she entered Ahasuerus's presence. Esther also showed wisdom by preparing to go to the king **dressed in her royal clothing**. Esther prepared herself both spiritually and physically to enter Ahasuerus's presence.

[Verse 2] Esther did not have to wait long to learn the consequences of her bold action. **As soon as** King Ahasuerus perceived Esther's presence, she won his favor. A similar expression appears in Esther 2:9 to depict Esther's favor with Hegai, keeper of the women. The Hebrew in 5:2, however, differs from that in 2:9. In 2:9 the noun expressing favor depicts such qualities as "kindness," "mercy," and "loyalty." It directs attention to the religious emphasis in Esther. In 5:2 the Hebrew can also be rendered "charm." In the Book of Proverbs, the woman who possesses this grace or charm, not just physical beauty, is worthy of being honored. (See Prov. 11:16.) King Ahasuerus held out to her his **gold scepter**. This rod was the king's official staff or baton. It symbolized his authority. When a king extended his scepter to a visitor or dignitary, it signaled his approval and allowed the individual to approach the throne. Recognizing that she gained the king's approval, Esther approached his throne. Following Persian protocol, she **touched the tip of the scepter**. By touching the tip of Ahasuerus's scepter, Esther demonstrated respect and honor for the king. Esther had successfully passed the first danger. What could have resulted in her death had become an opportunity to help deliver her people.

[Verses 3-4] Ahasuerus recognized Esther had an important matter on her mind or she would not have risked her life to approach him unbidden. Thus he initiated the conversation by asking, **"What is it, Queen Esther?"** Without giving the queen time to respond, the king continued by offering **even ... half the kingdom**. This expression evidently was a formality or an example of cultural courtesy. It indicated that he favorably received her. It expressed the king's generosity but was not meant to be taken literally. Esther's response must have puzzled Ahasuerus. She invited Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet she had prepared for them that day. Esther did not want to make her request there in the court in the guards' presence. In that time and culture banquets provided a socially accepted place for discussing serious issues. Why did Esther include Haman in her invitation? Perhaps Esther was attempting to make Ahasuerus jealous and thus create conflict between the king and Haman. Maybe Esther invited Haman to avoid being alone with the king. Possibly the queen wanted to lull Haman into a false sense of security. Conceivably Esther wanted Haman present when she accused him of selling her and her people to destruction and death. We cannot know for sure. More than one of these motives may have been involved.

Esther 5:5-8 Commentary

[Verses 5-6] As the drama continues, Ahasuerus ordered that Haman quickly be brought to Esther's banquet. Everything a king commanded had to be done quickly, not necessarily because the matter was urgent but because it was an imperial decree. Thus the king and Haman attended Esther's banquet. In ancient Near Eastern culture, participants in a banquet did not engage in serious discussions until they had finished eating. Important issues received attention in the more relaxed atmosphere following the meal. Thus **while drinking the wine** after dining, Ahasuerus informed Esther that she could have whatever she requested, **even to half the kingdom**, again indicating the king's favorable reception of Esther.

[Verse 7] Esther formally introduced her response to King Ahasuerus with the words, **"This is my petition and my request."** The Hebrew term rendered *petition* derives from a verb meaning "to ask," "to request," or even "to beg." Such petitions might be made either of people or of God. The word translated *request* comes from a verb meaning "to seek" or "to desire." It is a technical term denoting a subject's request for a king to grant the subject's specific desire. The form in which the word occurs denotes an earnest request. This term occurs less than ten times in the Old Testament. Most of those usages appear in the Book of Esther.

[Verse 8] Esther again delayed giving the king a direct answer. Instead she invited Ahasuerus and Haman to another banquet to be held the next day. Why did Esther delay in revealing her petition? Scholars have offered various suggestions. Ancient Near Eastern protocol and custom no doubt played a role in the queen's actions. More importantly, however, Esther must have relied on wisdom from God to know when to make her request known to the king. The queen must have sensed that the time was not yet right. And because we know the end of the story, we know God was at work in this waiting time—giving Haman time to construct his gallows and allowing a sleepless Ahasuerus to hear the record of Mordecai's saving the king's life. Esther acted with sensitivity to God's timing. Do we?

We might easily overlook a subtle message in the way Esther worded this second invitation. It was more than an invitation to another banquet. Esther said, **"If it pleases the king to grant my petition and perform my request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet."** By agreeing to attend this second banquet, the king was consenting in advance to honor Esther's request, whatever that request might be. By taking this approach, Esther likely kept Ahasuerus from seeking advice from his counselors regarding her petition. At that second feast, Esther would make her appeal. With the statement, **"Tomorrow I will do what the king has asked,"** the queen in effect succeeded in representing what she wanted as what the king had requested.

Esther 5:9-14 Commentary

[Verse 9] This portion of the narrative focuses on Haman and reveals that pride brings no genuine satisfaction. Haman departed from the first banquet **full of joy and in good spirits**. He was on top of his world. He regarded himself as privileged and elite. Haman's happiness, however, depended on external circumstances and soon evaporated. Mordecai **didn't rise or tremble in fear** when he saw Haman. Not only did Mordecai refuse to bow down to Haman (see Esth. 3:2), but he also declined to rise in Haman's presence. Furthermore, Mordecai didn't express fear when he encountered Haman. Thus Haman **was filled with rage**.

[Verses 10-11] Haman evidently displayed some degree of self-control over his anger. The basic meaning of the Hebrew verb translated **controlled himself** is "to hold" or "to be strong." Thus Haman temporarily succeeded in holding in his rage. Perhaps he was already contemplating ways he might get revenge. Haman returned to his house where he gathered his wife and friends so he could announce to them the great honor the king had bestowed on him. Haman boasted to them about **his glorious wealth** and **his many sons** and his promotion in rank. While the Old Testament sometimes views riches as the blessing of the Lord (see Ps. 112:1-3), it also recognizes they can lead to depending on oneself rather than depending on God. (See Hos. 12:8.) Thus we are counseled not to boast in riches, but rather to boast in knowing Yahweh. (See Jer. 9:23-24.) As Haman would soon discover, wealth cannot redeem a person. (See Ps. 49:6-7.)

[Verses 12-13] Haman's arrogance knew no bounds. Queen Esther had **invited no one** else to attend the banquet with her and the king. And Haman had received such an invitation not once, but twice! With his pride, however, Haman was setting himself up for a great downfall. His boasting only highlighted the humiliation he was about to receive. Even with so much apparently going his way, Haman expressed dissatisfaction. Haman's anger accelerated. It motivated him to plot the murder not only of Mordecai, but also of all Mordecai's people, the Jews. On a positive note, verse 13 illustrates that one individual can have a significant impact on the social order. God can break through a society's oppressive behavior with just one person who, like Mordecai, is willing to take a stand.

[Verse 14] Observing Haman's dissatisfaction, his wife and friends counseled him to **build a gallows** and request the king **to hang Mordecai on it**. The Hebrew term rendered *gallows* basically means "tree." Thus it came to also designate timber, plank, stick, and gallows. Probably Haman erected a sharpened pole on which the dead body was to be impaled and exhibited. The height calls attention to the public nature of the intended execution. Furthermore, this extreme height fits consistently with Haman's arrogant desire for revenge. Haman desired not only that Mordecai be put to death, but also that he be publicly humiliated. Haman approved the advice he received and **had the gallows constructed**. Little did this official realize that in seeking to destroy the man he perceived as his enemy, he was in reality destroying himself. Haman would eventually be hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai. (See 7:10.) Whereas Mordecai would stand with humility, Haman would hang in humiliation.

