

Sermon Transcript from July 17th, 2016
A Story of Pride
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We're continuing, this weekend, our series through the story of Esther. In our first week, we looked at the way God is at work in people in the story of Esther. Regular, messy people who, by and large, make tons of mistakes, compromise who they are as a people of God, make a mess of things. In that opening sequence there is sexual deviance, there is Esther marrying a non-Jew, there's continual drunkenness. It is everything but what the people of God are supposed to be. And yet, we see God working in the midst of messy people.

We reflected on this question as we thought about accepting your identity as people of God. We reflected on this question. In what ways have we compromised our lives and become concubines, like Esther did, to our culture. Esther was obviously in different circumstances, but it was relevant for us to think about. Last week, Josh Waidley showed us this incredible reversal of power that happened in Esther's life. This little girl, an orphan refugee with absolutely no power whatsoever to dictate the circumstances of her life, is suddenly and remarkably transferred to the most powerful post any woman could hold in the most powerful empire on earth at the time. An incredible transfer of power.

A position of privilege. And then again, through this divine providence, God working, Esther's asked to then lay down her power, lay down her privilege for the sake of those, her people, who have no voice of their own; have no power or privilege of their own. And we reflected on the question: what invitation is there for me to lay down my power and my privilege for the other? And what's at stake if I don't do that?

This week, we continue through Esther with my favorite chapter in the entire book. This might be my favorite chapter in the whole Bible. To fill in the gap so we don't have to read three chapters together, let me bring you up to speed. Remember, Queen Esther is in this precarious position where we left her last of having to go before Xerxes on behalf of her people and plead that he have mercy and not annihilate them. But, of course, it tells us that she's in this precarious position. It's been 30 days since the king has called on Esther socially or intimately been with her.

So, it tells us that there's a probability that Esther has lost some favor with the king. And she certainly remembered what happened to the last queen, Queen Vashti, who disobeyed the king. She was stripped of her crown and her position. But, for Esther, the stakes are even higher. If she approaches the king in his court without being invited, then the only punishment allowed is death. But, Esther has accepted this possibility. She has weighed the cost and determined there's no choice for her. For the sake of her people, she will go courageously into the king's court. And this is where we pick up in chapter 5 that she goes and, by divine providence once again, the king extends his favor to Esther and he welcomes her in.

And Esther has this really strange request. She says, "Will you come to this banquet tonight? And I want you to bring your second-in-command," this man named "Haman."

"I'll come attend this private banquet."

And, as we've learned through the story, King Xerxes loves a good party, and so he agrees to go with Esther and she leaves to go prepare for her guests. In that evening, the king is delighted with Esther and he's probably drunk. And he gives permission, "Ask for anything you want, Esther. Up to half of my kingdom."

Now, that sounds very generous, and he's not being serious. That's just like a way of talking. "You have my favor."

And in this strange twist, once again, Esther says, "My only request is you come back tomorrow and let's party again."

And Xerxes is like, "Yes. I'm down."

So, they leave that evening – this is chapter 5 – and everyone's in good spirits and Haman walks out of the court and he sees Mordecai, the Jewish man Mordecai, who will not bow down to Haman. And all that joy, whatever happiness he had in that moment, is completely lost and he prepares to destroy Mordecai. Haman cannot stand. He's put this

decree out to destroy the people of Israel, but he can't wait. So, the next day, he is going to have Mordecai impaired on a stake 75-feet high so everyone can see what happens when you mess with Haman.

And that's where the story brings us. Open your Bibles to chapter 6 and let's read together.

Esther 6: "That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

"What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked.

"Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered.

"The king said, 'Who is in the court?' Now Haman has just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him.

"His attendants answered, 'Haman is standing in the court.'

"Bring him in," said the king.

"When Haman entered, the king asked, 'What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?'

"Now Haman..." – good old Haman – "...thought to himself, 'Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?' So he answered the king, 'For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"

"Go at once," the king commanded. 'Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended.'

"So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'

"Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened.

"His advisors and his wife said to him, 'Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!' While they were still talking to him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared."

This is God's Word. Let's pray.

God, I believe You have, in this crazy story, a beautiful message for us. So, would You, Lord, give us eyes to see? Would You give us ears to hear? Would You give us hearts to receive? Lord Jesus, would You use me today for Your glory? May my words and my thoughts be glorifying to You, Jesus, and would You bless us together by Your Spirit. In Jesus' name, amen.

So, here the story is. Esther has petitioned for the life of her people. She's thrown her first banquet. Haman goes into the evening after the first banquet feeling so good. And yet, nothing has changed in the circumstances for God's people. They're still scheduled for mass genocide in the coming weeks due to Haman and Xerxes. Esther has still yet to reveal her true identity as a Jewess, and very probably will die as well. Mordecai, Esther's adoptive guardian, still mourns and fears for his people. So, while all of these things are at work and we begin to see this thing play out, the circumstances haven't changed, yet, for God's people. They hang in the balance.

So far, in the story of Esther, we've spent a lot of time unpacking Esther, the hero of our story; the centerpiece. And we've unpacked King Xerxes and this appearance of power and authority, but really this impotence when it comes to leadership. But, we haven't

talked much about our antagonist. And every good story needs an antagonist. That person who is just plotting and twisting and throwing grenades into the path. Chapter 6 is this pivotal moment and it hinges around our antagonist, Haman. It's that pivotal moment in the story where everything begins to shift, and all of this is connected to this man, Haman.

So, let's unpack who Haman is and what's going on in him. Where does he come from? In chapter 3 of Esther, we're introduced to Haman. In a quick verse, we're given an important clue about where he comes from and why it matters. It says that Haman is an Agagite. See, Haman is not Persian. He's not from Xerxes' tribe. He's an immigrant, like Esther and Mordecai. Another people group taken over by the Persians. A group called the Amalekites. And, as we've said through this Year of Biblical Literacy that we've been going through, sometimes you get in places in the Bible where you need to read backwards first before you can move forward.

And this is one of those moments where we're looking backward at 1 Samuel 15 in the early stages of Israel as a nation. And in that chapter, 1 Samuel 15, the young nation of Israel is attacked for the first time by an outside group, and it's the Amalekites. It's Haman's people. And they're attacked by this king; King Agag. Remember, it said Haman was an Agagite. He comes from the line of King Agag.

So, in 1 Samuel 15, God gives King Saul, Israel's first king, the command to destroy the Amalekites; every bit of them. There should be nothing left. Not even their animals, their livestock, should be left is what God commands of King Saul. But, King Saul makes a different decision and he decides to spare King Agag and parts of his tribe. And, for this disobedience, this moment, two things happen. Well, a lot of things happen. But, two in particular. God removes His Spirit from Saul. His favor's no longer on Saul and Saul's downfall begins. And, 500 years later, Saul's direct descendent, Mordecai – who we're told early on in this story – is facing off against King Agag's descendant, Haman.

This war, 500 years later, is still taking place. And, because of this disobedience, Israel is again on the brink of annihilation; this time in the hands of Haman the Agagite. Now, if there is any character in the entire Bible that manifests the full blown sickness of pride in a person's life, it's Haman. Haman is a great case study on pride in the human heart. Haman's pride is on full display throughout this whole story. In the beginning, we're told that Haman has been promoted to second-in-command over the entire empire. Second only to Xerxes. And yet, we're also told as kind of this comedic point by the author that Xerxes has made a decree that everyone has to bow down to Haman.

Now, think about that for a second. This is a day and age and culture where bowing down to the king or the prime minister would be a natural thing. Everyone would be doing that anyway. So, what this really means is Haman is incredibly obnoxious. This either means that people are not bowing down to Haman out of disrespect, they just don't like him, or Haman wants so much recognition, so much power and control that he wants a law passed that everybody knows you have to bow down. That's how powerful Haman is. That's how much King Xerxes thinks of Haman.

It's incredible. And, of course, there's one man in our story who refuses to bow down to Haman; law or no law. And that is Mordecai. And this incites Haman's ridiculous overreaction where he decides, "It's not just enough to wipe out Mordecai, I want all of his people through the entire empire completely wiped out; destroyed. That'll show him for not bowing down."

Interesting side note: as we read through the story of Esther, we see people's decisions, we see Esther kind of wrestling with whether to go before Xerxes or not and asking for people to fast. We see Mordecai wrestling with the mourning and fear for his people. We see what people are doing, but it's only Haman who the author gives us this inside look into his thoughts and into his heart. He's the only character. So, when the author says, "Haman scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai, but instead looked for a way to destroy his people," you're given this glimpse into his thoughts and into his heart, which is where pride resides. In the deepest parts of our thought; in the deepest parts of our heart.

Haman, of course, gets his way and he seems well until this complete reversal in chapter 6 where everything is turned completely upside down. This pivot point in the story. It is Haman's greatest display of pride unveiled, and it's in these opening moments. It starts with a question from the king. This question from the king: "What should be done to the one the king delights to honor?"

Would you guys underline that question? Would you highlight it? Would you just hold on

to it? Just pack it away. This is such a powerful question. "What should be done for the one the king delights to honor?"

And here, in this moment, is where all of Haman's grasping, all of his narcissism, all of his insecurity, all of his self-obsession just spills onto the floor. Like, he can't hold it in. "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me? Of course."

Have you ever met someone this self-obsessed? People are like, "Yes. I know that guy."

In our day, of course, 2,500 years later, not a lot has changed. Right? In our culture, we have over the top sports athletes, we have entertainment icons, we have caricature politicians. It's not hard to find examples of pride gone wild in our culture. Yesterday, my wife and I were driving with our two younger girls, Reagan and Maggie (10 and 7). We were driving to pick up our oldest daughter, Grace, from camp. She'd been at camp all week. It's about an hour and a half drive south into the Santa Cruz mountains.

We're driving and Noelle and I are talking and the girls had my phone and they're on Spotify and they're just picking songs. You know, the songs they want to listen to. Just pulling up whatever. Which is just a weird thing for me. I know most of you never lived through an age where there was radio where you had to wait for the song you were hoping to hear. It's called delayed gratification. Tuck that one away as well. An important virtue. My kids don't understand delayed gratification. They're picking out all these songs. So, Noelle and I are talking and then I hear this in the background:

"Who's that sexy thing I see over there? That's me, standing in the mirror. What's that icy thing hanging 'round my neck? That's gold. Show some respect. I thank God every day that I woke up feeling this way. I can't help loving myself and I don't need anybody else. Nuh uh. If I was you, I'd want to be me too."

She's not done.

"I walk in like a dime piece. I go straight to V.I.P. I never pay for my drinks. My entourage behind me."

Now, this part, I have to admit, I get pretty lost in this part right here:

"My life's a movie. Tom Cruise. So bless me, baby, achoo."

That probably has some significant meaning, but it's lost on me.

"And if they tried to, they can't do it like I do. I thank God every day that I woke up feeling this way. I can't help loving myself. I don't need nobody else. Nuh uh. If I was you, I'd want to be me too."

God bless Meghan Trainor. Now, this is a great example of pride taking just a sliver of truth – just a sliver of truth – and blowing it up on steroids and twisting it. There is this moment where she says, "I can't help loving myself." And we would say self-esteem is a really important thing. We would say, "Yes. Have a good self-image. Absolutely. That's a good thing."

But, all the other stuff? Wow. Really? If I was you, I'd want to be me too? I thank God every day I woke up feeling this way? Like, this is such a great example of the definition C.S. Lewis gives of pride; an obsession with the self. Listen how he puts this in Mere Christianity:

"Pride is the ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration on the self."

Listen to those word. Ruthless; it will do anything. Sleepless; there is no rest. Unsmiling; it has no joy connected to it. Ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration on the self. Haman is so self-obsessed that when this question comes from the king, "What should be done for the one the king delights to honor?" there isn't even a pause. There isn't even a hint of humility to even ask a question. "Have I earned an honor? Have I done something he would want to honor me for?"

To ask the question, "What are the circumstances leading to the king asking this question? What's the context?"

Does Haman give himself even a moment to ask the king, "Who did you have in mind?"

Not even a glimpse. Not even a hesitation. For Haman, he is so self-obsessed that he immediately puts himself into the seat of honor, because that is where Haman lives every day. Every day. Haman, in his own mind, is always the man of honor; is always the delight of the party; is always the best in any circumstance. How tiring it must be to be Haman. I hope you can have empathy for the thought of this constant striving in Haman. What a weary life it must be to continually be concerned and focused on yourself and your circumstances.

Haman's reply to King Xerxes to that question, "What should be done for the one the king delights to honor," is loaded with meaning. Listen carefully to what Haman asks for. "Give me a robe the king has worn. Give me a horse with the royal crest, one that the king himself has ridden. And parade me through the city celebrating me before the whole empire."

Now, we already know in the story that Haman has wealth, he has power, he has privilege beyond anyone else in the kingdom, save one person. When the king asks what should be done for the one the king delights to honor, Haman knows exactly what he wants. "Make me king for a day. Give me your spot for one day. I want your robes and I want your horse and I want your seat and I want your praise. I want to be you. Make me king for one day."

For someone who has everything, this is the only thing left to ask for. "I want to sit in the seat of the king." And isn't that what pride always wants? To sit on the throne. The power to make every decision unchecked; limitless authority. It's been the same temptation in the human heart from the very beginning when the serpent asked a simple question: "Did God really say don't eat of this tree? Surely you won't die. Instead, you will be like God. You will be like God."

This is what makes pride the great sin. It seeks to dethrone God and become comfortable in His seat. Now, Haman is without question an over the top character. Over the top. But, are we so different from Haman? Are we all like Haman in our own way? Buckle in. Tim Keller does a terrific job unpacking some ways pride can hide itself in everyday life and he puts it this way: there are two forms of pride. Superior pride is when you're always measuring yourself against others and finding yourself superior.

"I'm in better shape than that person. I have a better position than that person. Oh, I'm smarter than that guy for sure."

Inferior pride is always measuring yourself against others and finding yourself inferior.

"Oh, I'll never look like that. Oh, that person's got that position? They're way more talented than I am. Man, I'll never make it to that position."

Either way, you are obsessing about yourself. In a superior way or an inferior way, you're obsessing about yourself. And, if you're like me, you just bounce back and forth between the two. Last night – I wish I could say this was two years ago and I've matured. A long time ago. I wish I could say I knew a guy who this happened to.

Last night, Noelle and I are at Trader Joe's and we just had to grab a few things. We had like 10 things. And I've got my wheely cart, push cart, and it's got 10 things in it and I go into the open line and I roll in and the dude at the counter looks at me and he just goes like this. And I look above him and there's a sign that says, "Hand baskets only."

And I'm like, "Oh, okay." And I'm thinking in my head, "Okay. There's actually no one in line right now and there's an empty hand basket on the counter. What if I just take my 10 things and put it in that? Then can I check out?"

I'm thinking this. And, while I'm saying it, three other people come in line behind me and the guy's like, "Hey. Sir. You need to move your cart."

And I'm like, "Whoa. Who's the cart Nazi? What's the deal? There's no one here."

And, as I'm saying this he's like, "Sir. Please go in the other line. This is for hand carts only."

And I'm flustered and now there's like five people behind me. So, I'm like, "Okay. I heard you." And I back my cart up and I wheel over and I kind of give him the stink eye a little

bit. And here's what's going through my head. I'm just going to be super honest with you guys. Here's what's going through my head:

Step one: I think, "Man. That guy's a jerk. Why is that guy such a jerk?"

And then step two: my old friend pride says, "He's not just a jerk, he's an idiot."

"Oh, yeah. That guy's a total idiot."

Step three: "You know what? That guy's older than me and he's working as a checkout clerk at Trader Joe's. I'm better than that guy."

I'm being honest with you guys. You can judge me for it. That's fine. But, I'm being honest with you guys. This happens in a matter of like three seconds. "Well, that guy's a jerk. No, actually, he's an idiot. Actually, I'm way better than that guy, so he can keep his hand basket to himself. I'm going to go do my thing."

And Noelle's looking at me and she's like, "What's going on?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

We get in the car and have a whole debrief and I'm like, "Can you believe this guy? He's making me move because the hand cart and da da da da."

And she says, in her Noelle, beautiful, loving, voice of God way, "It sounds like this really stirred something up in you."

"No. I'm fine."

Here's the thing. Okay. Let's break this down for a minute. Here's what happened. I'm in this stupid line and this guy says to me, "You can't be in this line," and I'm embarrassed. I'm offended right away that he would point out that I am in the wrong line. And then it's compounded by these people that are gathering behind me hearing this guy say, "Go to the other line. Hey, bro. Go to the other line. You're in the wrong line."

And I'm embarrassed and I'm angry. So, my pride just takes that little seed of inferiority and it flips it into superiority. "Oh, you're better than that guy. Just don't even worry about that guy. He's an idiot."

And I'm just telling you guys, this is what is like the hula hoops all day long that I jump through. And I hope you'd be honest and say you do too. Maybe you wouldn't. But, I hope you would say that this is the constant churning in our heart of inferiority, superiority, "Where do I fit? Who am I better than?"

And here's what pride does: it makes you a fool. It makes you a fool. It keeps you from ever learning from your mistakes. It keeps you just justifying, constantly, your behavior. It's always someone else's fault. It's always tough circumstances. It's always miscommunication. It makes you evil. Pride makes you evil. Guys, we just are living in this world of chaos right now. Just chaos. And if we could be honest, like if you dig down, there is just pride at the center of all of this chaos. In some way, shape or form there is just pride at the center.

Tim Keller says pride is the carbon monoxide of sin. It's killing you slowly without you even knowing it. It is just present all the time. Now, we can – this is a Keller line again. I'm plagiarizing it. This is so good though.

He says, "We know when we're doing certain sins."

Like, if you're committing adultery you don't say, "Oh, you're not my wife." Like, if you're stealing, you don't think, "Oh, I don't know where this 10 grand came from. Oh, 10 grand, where'd you come from?"

But, no one would ever sit and say, "I just deal so much with pride. It is this root that bears the fruit of death and decay and evil and foolishness in our life."

Let's take a litmus test real quick. If we're honest, haven't you, through this whole time, just been thinking about someone else? Like, through this whole thing you've been thinking like, "Oh, I'm going to send this to this guy. I know somebody who needs to hear this. I

know somebody who needs to hear this."

And that is pride. So, it's worth begging the question, as we wrap up here, when Haman says to Xerxes, "Give me your robes and give me your horse; give me your seat. Make me king for a day," what is Haman really after? What are we really after? Haman is longing to receive and be recognized; to receive love and adoration from the one he most respects; the one he has on the pedestal.

J.R. Tolkien, in The Lord of the Rings series, the Two Towers book, says, "The praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards."

If you were able to identify that person in your life who you just long to hear acceptance from, who you, if that person were to clothe you in recognition and elevate you before other people, that you would be satisfied in your heart? You can connect with what Haman is asking for. We all can. And here is the beautiful thing: Christ tells the story of a son who runs away from his father, who disgraces his family, who squanders everything he has and he ends up in the dirt with nothing. And, as he sits there, he thinks to himself, "I could go home to my father, and at least I could work for him."

And it says that, as the son started to turn toward home, as he made his way back home, the father sat in front of his house watching the horizon line, waiting for his son to return. And when he did, do you know what happened? He runs to his son and he puts a robe around him; the family robe around him. And he puts his own ring, identifying himself, on his son. He says, "This is my son. He has returned home. Let's throw a party."

And Christ tells us that story because this is the invitation that God has for you and for me that we can be robed in royal robes of Christ. That He will identify Himself with you. But, here's the cost: you have to get off the throne. You have to get off the throne. That's not yours to sit in and it's not mine to sit in. This is the struggle of the human heart: identifying the times we sit on the throne and get down. Get at the feet of Jesus. And then He puts His robe around you and He just tells you how much He delights in you and how accepted you are. Everything Haman hoped for. That is in all of our hearts. But, we have to get off the throne.

Let's pray.

God, I want to confess. I want to hold my brothers and sisters up before You with this, Lord. Too often I find myself seated on the throne of my life and I repent, Jesus, where I have turned a deaf ear toward You; where I have sought desperately to make a kingdom of my own. I confess, Lord, and repent of the ways I have elevated myself about my brothers and sisters; thought more highly of myself than I should. Forgive me, Lord.

Lord, I believe there's an invitation from You here to just offer for Your sons and daughters to come before You and lay down their crowns and open their hands to receive what You have for us, Jesus. Would this be, Lord, a place of Your Spirit where the Word says, "Where Your Spirit is, there's freedom."

Today, God, we want to experience a freedom that comes with laying down our crown and be seen by You, be known by You. To step into that place of being co-heirs with Christ as Your Word promises.