

## Good Grief

by Ray C. Stedman

The story of Esther thus far concerns a king who is called here Ahasuerus, known also in history as Astyages, the grandfather of Cyrus the Great. He has married a young Jewish girl named Esther, a captive taken from the city of Jerusalem. Her cousin, Mordecai, became a judge in the city gates in Susa, the capital of Media-Persia. In the court of the king is an oily character whose name is Haman, who manages to pull the wool over the king's eyes and deceive him into signing a decree to destroy all the Jews in his kingdom. These people are called in this book, "the people of Mordecai." Now this is authentic history as confirmed by the celebration called "The Feast of Purim," named for the casting of Pur, recorded in the third chapter of Esther, when the lot (or Pur) was cast before Haman to fix the day upon which his planned destruction of the Jews was to take place. This feast is still celebrated today some 2,500 years after these events.

But the startling thing we learn is that this is also a glimpse into our own hearts. Each of us is a king dwelling in a capital city (the body), and reigning over an empire which touches everyone we

know. At the moment of your conversion, if you are a Christian, you gained a queen – a spirit made alive in Jesus Christ to serve as a place of communion between you and the Holy Spirit of the living God who dwells in your heart, symbolized in this story in the person of Mordecai.

In Chapter 3 we watch the consummate ease with which the flesh, that is, this Haman within each of us, deceives the human will into making a decision that threatens to destroy the entire kingdom. This whole story is a picture of a Christian who sincerely sins. This is not the picture of those stubborn, deliberate oppositions that we sometimes make to God's will when we know we are wrong. At such times God frequently lets us go ahead and live out our folly because we know to start with that we are wrong. We can only learn to overcome our stubborn pride by experiencing something of the sad results that follow. But Esther is not that kind of a problem. The problem we face here in this book is a picture of those spur-of-the-moment decisions when we react out of our "human nature" and do the usual, commonly accepted thing – a thing which all our worldly friends would say we

were perfectly right and justified in doing, and most of our Christian friends would agree. And thus, sincerely, with the best of intentions, openly and honestly, we launch upon a course which threatens ultimately to destroy our peace, our joy, our patience, our kindness, and our self-control. When these results occur we don't know what is wrong; we are confused and baffled.

I would like to suggest that right here is the major cause of weakness in the Christian life. There are times when each of us deliberately disobeys God and we know we are wrong. But these are not nearly as frequent as the times when, wanting to do right, and thinking we are doing right, we stumble into a circumstance, or a situation, or a reaction which ultimately proves very wrong and destroys the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. This is the picture we have here. It is not our deliberate disobedience that causes most of our problems, it's our ignorant folly. It's not our love of evil that defeats us, it's our *ignorance* of it. So frequently we are victims of spiritual naivety. We are tricked by our own sense of dedication and become pushovers for the flesh within us (Haman) to do what it desires.

Chapter 4 begins to unfold God's reaction to such folly and how God sets about to save us from our own mad choices. What a wonderful unveiling this is of the ground of God's deliverance for the believer. As we read this, can we really doubt what Paul says, that all these things happened as types and examples for us {cf, 1 Cor 10:6}, that we might know the mind and purpose of God in our own lives.

We will pick up the story in Chapter 4. The first reaction of Mordecai to Haman's plot is a manifestation of what we may call here, **Divine Grief**:

**When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with**

**fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. {Est 4:1-3 RSV}**

What a picture of painful grief! Lay this passage, this parable, alongside a passage from the New Testament:

**And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God in whom you were sealed till the day of redemption. (Eph 4:30 {RSV})**

This is the reaction of God to the folly of human choice, following the flesh. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. And what is it that grieves him? The next verse says,

**Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, {Eph 4:31 RSV}**

These are the things that grieve the Spirit – these opposite attitudes to the fruit of the Spirit. What are the opposites of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control? They are malice, bitterness, envy, jealousy, anger, clamor, and strife. So the apostle says,

**and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. {Eph 4:32 RSV}**

When Mordecai learned the choice the king had made (which, though the king did not realize all that was involved, Mordecai knew would destroy, throughout the kingdom, the people of God), he was moved with deep sorrow, and he cried out in heaviness of heart – a beautiful picture to us of the grief of the Holy Spirit. It is most remarkable to see that what grieves the heart of God is not the enmity of the sinner so much as the unthinking foolishness of the saint!

Let's take a closer look at the cause of this grief. Mordecai knew that the matter involved the unchangeable law of the Medes and the Persians and that the consequences of the king's decision were inevitable. Even the king could not change it now that it had been uttered, and though the ultimate salvation of the people of Mordecai might be worked out by other means, still there would be

some suffering they would be unable to avoid. This is what caused him grief; for later on in this very chapter we hear this man declare that God would somehow work out a deliverance. He had no doubt that God would deliver his people, but he knew also that suffering would be involved due to the decision that had been made. Thus, though the Holy Spirit will work out a way to bring us to an ultimate display of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, nevertheless, he knows that the process, because of the decisions that we make in our consummate folly, will be a painful one and certain consequences simply cannot be avoided.

Some time ago as I was talking with a young man about thirty years old, I remarked about all the white hair he had. He looked at me with a rather rueful smile and said, "Yes, the Lord saved me from my sin, but the marks of sin are still there." I thought immediately of that story of a father whose son had gotten into trouble and had come and asked forgiveness. His father had forgiven him, but the boy seemed to act as though all he needed to do was ask forgiveness and he could forget the whole matter. He didn't seem to realize that there was a great deal of suffering caused by his foolishness. So his father took him into the garage where he drove a nail into the wall. He handed his son a hammer and said, "Now, son, pull out the nail." The boy took the hammer and pulled the nail out and his father said, "That's like forgiveness, isn't it? When you do something wrong it's possible to pull out the nail by asking forgiveness." Then, handing the hammer back to his son he said, "Now, son, pull out the nail hole!"

There are decisions which we make, the full consequences of which can never be avoided, because we are dealing with the law of inevitable consequence; the law of the Medes and Persians which can never be changed. Mordecai wept because of this.

Also, he wept out of sympathy for the king and the kingdom because of the sorrow they unwittingly brought upon themselves. Mordecai knew that the Jews were under special protection from God wherever they were. As a Jew he knew the history of his race. He knew that no nation laid its hand upon the Jew in anger or in punishment with impunity. This is the thing that Hitler forgot. Mordecai knew that if these people were destroyed, as the king in his

innocent folly intended to do, it would react upon the kingdom to destroy instead, as every nation has been destroyed that has ever touched the Jew in anger.

So it is in the parable of our own lives – the Spirit knows that when we unthinkingly permit our natural, human reaction to control us, we ultimately destroy ourselves in the process. This natural reaction creates in us tensions and pressures, neuroses and compulsions which tear us apart, causing us to come unglued in moments of pressure and creating depression of mind and spirit, so the Spirit weeps out of sympathy. "The wages of sin is death" {Rom 6:23a}, and so the Spirit grieves.

You see this spirit of grief in our Lord Jesus on the way to the tomb of Lazarus, as he leads that sorrowing, wailing company along the way. He knew that in a few moments he would speak the words that would bring that man, dead four days, back to life. All the grief and sorrow would be turned into joy; and yet we read that as he went to the tomb his spirit was moved deeply within him. The Greek is much stronger than the English. It says that he was torn inside and being torn, he wept. Thus we have that shortest verse in our English Bibles, "Jesus wept" {John 11:35}. The tears rolled down his face even in the expectation of that moment of triumph and deliverance because he knew the sorrow, heartache, and pain that inevitably results from human sin no matter what the ultimate outcome might be.

Thank God for the grieving of the Spirit. It is this grieving Spirit within us that is the guarantee that God will never leave us in that condition. It marks the unwillingness of God to let us go on stumbling into the full results of our own folly.

As we read this account, we realize that as yet neither the king nor the queen is aware of this grief.

The next section reveals the results in the human spirit when the grieving of the Holy Spirit is made known. It's a picture for us of **Spiritual Distress**.

The first step is an uneasy *realization* that something is wrong:

**When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his**

**sackcloth, but he would not accept them.**  
{Est 4:4 RSV}

Have you ever sensed this? Not in your soul, not at the level of your conscious life, but deep in your subconscious, in the depths of your spirit, have you sensed that you are living with a grieved Spirit? You don't know specifically yet what it is, but deep in your heart you feel there's something wrong. That is the reaction we see pictured here.

May I here put in a word of warning: We need to distinguish carefully between the condemning voice of Satan and the true grief of the Holy Spirit. The one is a vague, unspecific sense of guilt designed to trap us into some legality or some busy activity in the flesh. You know well that vague nagging feeling of guilt as though something is wrong but you hardly know what it is. If it continues that way, that's the voice of Satan. It's an attempt to get you so concerned with your inner self that you will do some legal penance or try to compensate in another direction, or get busy in a flurry of religious activity, or the like. Satan knows well that if he can get you operating out of the flesh you are utterly useless in the kingdom of God. But the other, the voice of the Spirit, is always specific and to the point, and continuously insistent. You refuse to allow the matter to come into your conscious thinking, but in the back of your mind you know there is something wrong and you know specifically what it is. You might not want to look at it. You may try to shove it out of your mind, but you can't escape the sense that the thing is wrong.

Now, that is the voice of a grieved Spirit within, and, if it is of the Spirit, it will lead further to a clear *revelation*:

**Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and charge her to go to**

**the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.** {Est 4:5-9 RSV}

Notice how clear and specific this is. Mordecai knew the whole story. He knew the exact sum of money that Haman, in secret, had told the king he would put into his treasuries, and he had a copy of the decree. He revealed the whole plan in specific, exact detail. We hardly need to interpret it, do we?

It's significant that the name of the servant who acted as an intermediary is Natach, which means "The Truth." When you know that something has come between you and the Lord, some shadow has come between you, some cloud has hidden his face, where do you go to find out what it is? How frequently you have found the answer in the Word of Truth! Perhaps while reading through your morning devotional time, or seeking light from the Scriptures, you found the Spirit of God illuminating a verse and making it speak right out to you, and you knew then the thing that was wrong. Or perhaps in prayer you realized that something was wrong and asked God to make it clear and there came into your mind an image of something that was out of line and you couldn't shake it off. Suddenly, out of the blue, there came the picture of that money that you took, or that word that you spoke, or that thing that you did, and you knew that this was it – the truth! Or perhaps a word of counsel or reproof comes from someone else and you know as they speak that the thing they are saying is the truth. In some such way God undertakes to make the whole matter clear, as here it is set clearly before the queen.

Now, somewhat amazingly perhaps, we discover a certain *reluctance* on her part:

**Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law; all alike are to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter that he may live. And I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days." And they told Mordecai what Esther had said.** {Est 4:10-12 RSV}

What a remarkable picture this is of the inner workings of our hearts. The king, as we know, is the soul of man, our own soul – our mind, emotions, and will. And in this portrayal we learn there is a definite danger in confronting it unexpectedly. The soul, you see, is such a creature of moods. Even our subconscious mind (if you want to put it in terms of psychology) – our spirit is hesitant to catch us in a bad mood. It might upset the whole kingdom!

This is amazing, isn't it, that God, through the Spirit, orders his approach to catch us in the right mood. In our conscious mind we are very reluctant to allow things that are unpleasant to come before us for consideration. Perhaps this explains why in our dreams we sometimes are confronted with things that lie in our subconscious that we wouldn't allow when awake. Well, let's leave that problem for the psychologists. It is clear, at any rate, that there is some hesitation on Esther's part in going to the king. He needs to be handled with care because he is so subject to his own reasonings and emotions, and is a creature of moods.

At this point Mordecai acts with vigor and insistence. His own grief has produced an answering spiritual distress in Esther, and she is now ready for an act that we will call **Voluntary Death**.

**And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to return answer to Esther, "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king; though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. {Est 4:12-17 RSV}**

These words of Mordecai are the best known words from the book of Esther. He said to her, "Look, though you may not act, deliverance for the Jews will arise from another quarter," that is, God has an infinite number of ways to accomplish his will. You and I may fail in the program that he gives us to do, but that doesn't stop the accomplishment of God's will. He will raise up another, or do it in some other way, or bring deliverance from another quarter. No, God is never hindered by man's failure. But we may miss out on the beauty of God's perfection for us – we "suffer loss" {1 Cor 3:15}, as Paul puts it.

Mordecai also reminds Esther of these wonderful words, "Who knows whether thou art come to the kingdom for just such a time as this."

As we have seen in this study together, the coming of Esther to the kingdom is a picture of conversion or regeneration. Our spirits were made alive in Christ Jesus fulfilling the picture of Esther's coming to the kingdom. What is the purpose of that conversion? What did God have in mind when he saved you? Is it only that he might take you to heaven some day? Is it that you might have glory in the sweet by-and-by? No! "Thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this."

In entering your life and heart, as a believer in Jesus Christ, God's whole desire for you is:

- that you might live in fruitfulness and victory right now, *today*,
  - where you live,
  - where you work,
- that there you might manifest the fullness of the character of God.

Your conversion is but the point of beginning, and the main purpose of it is that you might learn to walk in victory over bitterness, resentment, malice, anger, lust, and every other manifestation of the flesh, *right now!* Thank God that is true. The very purpose for his coming into our lives is that we might experience the glory of his presence – *right now!*

Now, Esther's reply to Mordecai is highly significant here. She says, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf [a fast, not a feast], and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day." What she is saying, in application to us, is this:

“Go and act out for me a reminder of the death of Jesus Christ on my behalf. Remind me of that death which held him in the grave, uneating, undrinking, dead, for three days and three nights; and with the memory of that death before me I am willing to die myself. With that unchangeable fact to rest my faith upon, I will go to the king – and if I perish, I perish!”

If you laid the book of Romans alongside the book of Esther, you would now find that we are standing at the opening verse of Chapter 6 of Romans:

**What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! {Rom 6:1-2a RSV}**

**We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. {Rom 6:4 RSV}**

This is the place where daily deliverance begins. How beautifully Esther’s words picture this identification of the believer with the death of Jesus Christ. This is not yet the realm of the soul, the emotional life, the feelings which are subject to change, but rather we are talking about the realm of the spirit, the deepest part of man’s nature. What this declares is that, down at the very deepest level of your life, a fact has taken place from which all deliverance will stem. It means that whether or not you feel like a Christian, you still are a Christian if this has occurred: Christ’s death for you, and your death with him, are unchangeable facts, and nothing you do, or don’t do, affects them.

This is a truth we greatly need, for until we begin to believe what God says is true about what happened to us when Jesus Christ died, we never will have the confidence to accept the deliverance that he has based upon it. If you once died with him, you are not the same – you never will be the same again. Even though temporarily you do fall into sinful acts which are the same as those you committed before you were a Christian, still you are not the same – you cannot be. You have been translated, the New Testament says, “out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of

his love,” {cf, Col 1:13}. The evil one cannot lay his hands upon you any longer. You are not in bondage; you are a believer and your deliverance rests upon an unchangeable fact.

A number of years ago, I was talking with young man who had been staying away from church for some time, and I asked him why. He said, “Well, I’ll tell you. I hesitate to come any longer because when I’m at work I can’t seem to live like I ought to. There is so much of failure in my life when I am working. I lose my temper and sometimes curse and say things that I shouldn’t. This is why I don’t want to come to church, because I feel like a hypocrite when I do.” I said, “You know, a hypocrite is someone who acts like something he isn’t. When do you act that way?” “Well,” he said, “if I came to church after the way I live through the week, I’d be a hypocrite, wouldn’t I?” I said, “Are you a Christian?” He said, “Yes, I am.” “All right,” I said, “if you are a Christian, then when is it that you do not act like one? In church, or at work?” “Oh,” he said, “I see what you mean. I’m being a hypocrite at work!” “Yes,” I said, “when you come to church you’re being what you really are for perhaps the first time during that week.”

It is not hypocritical to come among the people of God in a sense of weakness and even failure. You belong there – that’s what Christians are. You may be a hypocrite at work, and, if you wish to avoid acting like a hypocrite, apply it there.

The point is this: You need not go on deluded and deceived because God has arranged a way out to the believer in Christ. “There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man, but God is faithful,” whether you are or not is beside the point. God’s work never changes. The death of Jesus Christ is an unchangeable fact in your experience if you have received him. “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able, but will, with the temptation, make a way to escape that you may be able to bear it,” {cf, 1 Cor 10:13 KJV}. He will bring you through if you rest upon the unchangeable fact of what he has already done in your life.

From this vantage point, the identification of the believer with the death of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is now ready to move into the realm of the conscious life, the soul (our emotions, reason, and

will). It is necessary to bring to our conscious attention what is going on deep in our life before we can be delivered. And the power with which God works in our life will always be the power of a resurrected life.

Notice, in anticipation, the very first words of the fifth chapter: “On the third day, Esther put on her robes and went in to see the king,” {cf, Est 5:1}. On the third day, *the day of resurrection*, Esther went in. This is your clue for Chapter 5!

**Prayer:**

Our Father, how much we may learn if we are ready to approach this book with simple, believing hearts; not trying to analyze it in order to challenge it, but rather to understand it and believe it. Lord, we thank you for this revelation of your faithful work in our own lives, and we pray that we may act in the strength of it. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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