

## The Fulcrum of Finances (Esther 3-4)

Chris Altrock - June 12, 2016

### Turning Points in the Air

The BBC once ran an occasional series called “Turning Points.” This series highlighted key moments when the storyline of history turned in a significant way. Here’s their infographic on turning points in aviation. I’ll highlight a few of the times in history when manned flight pivoted in a powerful way:<sup>1</sup>

- 1903 The first heavier than air aircraft
- 1919 The world’s first non-stop flight across the Atlantic
- 1939 First flight by a jet aircraft
- 1947 First supersonic flight
- 1958 First commercially successful jet airliner
- 1968 First supersonic airliner
- 1988 B-2 Stealth bomber enters service
- 1995 World’s first hunter killer unmanned aircraft

*Every story in history has a turning point, a fulcrum, on which important things pivot.*

Think about your own life. There are probably some key moments. Some turning points. Some points at which the whole narrative of your life pivoted in a certain way. The day you broke up. The day you moved. The day you graduated. The day you gave birth or adopted. The day you moved to the mission field. Your first job. Every story has a turning point, a fulcrum, on which important things pivot. Often there are several of these.

### The Evil Fulcrum of Finances

There are a few key turning points in the story of Esther. One of those is very surprising. If you’ve been listening to the story on Sundays or Wednesdays at Highland, you know that there are two basic moves in Esther’s narrative. The story flows from 1) a scene when the Jewish people are discouraged but alive in the kingdom of Persia to 2) a scene when they are on the verge of being completely exterminated.

The story pivots from that one scene to the other. In the one scene the Jewish people in this godless and secular land are alive. They have homes. They are engaged in productive labor. But then their lives pivot radically. Sadly, tragically, they are faced with genocide. A decree is written under the authority of the king of Persia authorizing their extermination. Esther’s story moves from that one scene to the other.

And one particular text reveals the point on which this pivot takes place:

*Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/future/ bespoke/great-turning-points-aviation/assets/images/great-turning-points-aviation.jpg>

*different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries.*” So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, “The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.” (Est. 3:8-11 ESV)

Notice the substance of Haman’s argument to the king. It’s made up of two lines.

1. The first line is brief: “*let it be decreed that they be destroyed.*” It’s passive language. Haman doesn’t tell the king to decree it. He just asks the king to *allow* it to be decreed.<sup>2</sup> Although this seems to be the worst part of Haman’s proposal, it’s the briefest part.
2. The longest part of the proposal is found in the second line: “*I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries.*” You can tell, can’t you, where the real emphasis lies in Haman’s proposal? Haman spends at least twice as much time talking to the king about the money the king will make as he does about the lives he’ll take.

There’s a reason for this. You may remember that when this story began in chapter 1, the king was lobbying his fighters and financiers with a six month feast to support his quest to go to war against Greece. Nearly ten years have passed since then. And in that time the king has fought and lost a disastrous war with Greece, according to the historian Herodotus. The war and the loss have emptied his treasury. Haman is thus appealing to the king’s need to replenish his treasury.<sup>3</sup>

According to Herodotus, in a good year, the total revenue of the Persian Empire was 14,560 Eubonic talents or nearly 17,000 Babylonian talents (we don’t know which measure would apply today). This was generated by receiving tribute/taxes from the satrapies. For example, the satrapy of Media was assessed a tribute of 450 talents each year plus 10,000 sheep and pasturage for 50,000 horses.<sup>4</sup>

Haman offers 10,000 talents--a huge amount of money. This could be money he will gain by plundering the Jews.<sup>5</sup> It could be the equivalent of what might have been gained by selling the Jews into slavery.<sup>6</sup> Either way Haman is working hard to ensure the king that he is not going to profit personally from this plan. Anything he might gain, for example, by

<sup>2</sup> Michael V. Fox *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 51.

<sup>3</sup> Karen H. Jobes, *Esther The NIV Application Commentary*, 94, 121.

<sup>4</sup> Fox, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Jobes, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Fox, 51.

plundering their property after killing them will go right into the king's treasuries.<sup>7</sup> The bribe shows just how obsessed Haman is with killing the Jews.<sup>8</sup>

Here's how the king responds to this bribe:

*So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you."*

When the king says "The money is given to you" it may sound to us like he's saying, "Keep the money" and that he's refusing the bribe. That's not what's happening. Probably what's happening is similar to what we see in Gen. 23 where Abraham asks to buy a field and the man selling it seems to give him the field but then after a few more polite exchanges a purchase price is set. This technique of polite refusals was standard for ancient Middle Eastern culture. This is simply the king making the culturally expected gesture of appearing to to down the offer. In the end, he accepts the offer.<sup>9</sup>

What we see in this text is this: *Evil pivots into the lives of people through the fulcrum of finances.* The story of the Jews in Esther turns bad because of the bad use of money. This story turns on money. Not simply racism. Not simply selfishness. This story turns on money. The Jews are about to die because of a 10,000 talent bribe to the king. Evil pivots into the lives of the Jews through the fulcrum of finances.

That becomes even more clear through two more scenes:

*When Esther's young women 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. 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 command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. (Est. 4:4-8 ESV)*

It's clear by Mordecai's explanation to Esther that the king has not turned down Haman's bribe. Mordecai has inside information about how much money Haman has offered to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.<sup>10</sup> What disturbed Mordecai was not

<sup>7</sup> Adele Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS Bible Commentary, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Jon D. Levenson *Esther* Old Testament Library, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Fox, 52; Levenson, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Mordecai seems to have access to a copy of the written decree issued in Susa. To have a written copy is a sign of eminence. (Samuel Wells, *Esther & Daniel* Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, 52-53).

only the news of the plan for extermination of the Jews, but the fact that it had been put into motion by money.

A final scene reveals this as well:

*Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king." (Est. 7:3-4 ESV)*

When Esther is finally able to reveal to the king just what a horror he has unleashed on her and her people, she describes it this way: "we have been *sold*." This has been a cold cash transaction. It's clear the king has accepted Haman's bribe. Ten thousand talents. Thirty pieces of silver.

*Evil pivots into the lives of people through the fulcrum of finances.* Their story turns bad because of the bad use of money. This story turns on money. Not simply racism. Not simply selfishness. This story turns on money. Evil pivots into the lives of the Jews through the fulcrum of finances. What persuades the king to allow Haman to flood evil into the lives of the Jews is Haman's money.

### The Good Fulcrum of Finances

But what Esther's story reveals negatively, other Scriptures reveal positively. Just as evil pivots into the lives of people through the fulcrum of finances, *so good pivots into the lives of people through the fulcrum of finances.* Again and again in Scripture the story of people's lives turns for good because of the good use of money.<sup>11</sup>

- Women with resources used their finances to support the work of Jesus and the disciples (Lk. 8:2-3).
- Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus used their wealth in service to Christ (Matt. 27:57-61; Jn. 19:38-42).
- Barnabas used his land investments to help the ministry of the early church (Acts 4:36-37).
- Cornelius gave alms liberally to people (Act 10:2).
- Lydia used her resources to benefit the cause of the early church (Acts 16:14).
- Paul collected money from multiple churches to assist those in Jerusalem suffering from a famine (2 Cor. 8-9).

The last example, in fact, is the origin of what we call our weekly Ministry Contribution. In the Corinthian letters Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to get in the habit of setting money aside each Sunday and, when he arrives in Corinth, he'll gather what they've set aside and he'll take it to Jerusalem to help people who've been affected by a

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<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex & Power*, 38-39.

famine. Paul knows that the story of famine victims in Jerusalem will take a turn for the good if the church in Corinth will set money aside for their relief. He knows the church's finances will become a fulcrum for good.

And we know that very well at Highland. *Highland's weekly ministry contribution is one way good pivots into the lives of people.* It's easy to think that this really only takes place through that bi-annual Outreach Contribution which funds those thirty outreach ministries. But it's also very true for the weekly ministry contribution. Let me share how this weekly contribution helps create positive turning points in the stories of people's lives.

- The money you give each week makes possible a substantial counseling ministry and marriage ministry which provides one on one counseling, marriage and family counseling, seminars and workshops that help individuals, couples and families throughout the year. These are critical turning points for people.
- For many, some of the most spiritually formative years in life occur in their youth. Faith decisions are made that impact all of the rest of life. Many adults look back at their youth as the most vibrant and critical part of their spiritual journey. When you give to the weekly ministry contribution each week or online, you provide salaries for Dawn Gilreath, Stephanie Howell, Scott Frizzell, Buster Clemens, Emily Thomas, and Donnie Stover who facilitate events and experiences that draw children and teens close to God. You provide mortgage payments and resources that allow us to hold events for children and teens in the Youth Mission and The Crossing. You make possible children's and youth events like Power Hour, TIME trips, Camp Highland, and Work Camp. These are critical turning points.
- Your weekly giving or giving online makes it possible for us to have amazing people on staff like Lawana Maxwell, Eric Gentry, Brishan Hatcher, Russ Turman, Allen Black, Larry McKenzie, Kevin Woods, Allen Hewitt, Jim Chester and others. Hundreds of you have experienced a turning point in your life because of something one of those staff members did personally for you or because of a ministry experience one of those staff members made possible for you. Your giving made that possible.
- Your weekly giving makes this entire building possible. It's a space where Muslim wives from the community gather in The Commons to hear about Jesus on Wednesday nights as part of Friend Speak. It's a space where fifth graders from LaRose can get a break from the inner city and enjoy an amazing field day every year. It's space where dozens of ministry drives are conducted every year like the ones going on now for the women's prison and Paragould Children's Home. It's the space where we gather for worship every Sunday. Just like you have a home, our church has a home. Your giving makes all of that possible. Countless good pivots into the lives of people through this weekly ministry contribution.

But we need your help because we are facing a challenge regarding our weekly ministry contribution. Our 2016-2017 fiscal budget begins on July 1. And we're facing a 6%

increase. This is largely due to the fact that the loans we financed to build the initial phase and then last year's expansion are maturing and our mortgage note is increasing. We knew this would happen. It's not a surprise. It's how large loans work. This is part of the reason we have been encouraging you to give to the Overflow campaign this year as well. The more we can pay against the Overflow campaign before January, when our loans are basically "locked in," the less our mortgage note will ultimately increase. But as far as we can tell, we'll need an increase in our weekly giving that is 6%. But that's because, ultimately, that contribution creates turning points in the lives of people. And we want to continue to help good pivot into the lives of others.

The book of Esther is the story of how unspeakable evil almost flowed into the lives of an entire race because of money. The rest of Scripture is the story of how unspeakable good can also flow into the lives of the human race also because of money. Every Sunday you have a chance to decide which story you will be part of.