

4

STAND WITH HUMILITY



What animal would represent your typical approach to dealing with conflict?

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

Humility ultimately wins the day.



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.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Esther 5:1-8

¹ On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. ² When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. ³ Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." ⁴ "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." ⁵ "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. ⁶ As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." ⁷ Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: ⁸ If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

Esther made her decision. She would use whatever influence she had and approach King Xerxes 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 Xerxes 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.)

In what ways did Esther's actions demonstrate courage and humility?

QUESTION #2

Esther didn't enter the king's presence in sackcloth and ashes. She entered wearing her finest royal apparel, fit for the king. Perhaps Esther did this to remind Xerxes, who hadn't seen his wife in thirty days, just how radiantly beautiful she was. Esther won over his heart and Xerxes granted her permission to enter his presence.

Esther could have asked the king, right then and there, to save Israel. But Esther chose to set the perfect conditions, when the king's heart was in the right place to grant her request. Why? Esther knew the value of timing and relationship building. If she rushed her request, the opportunity for justice might be lost forever.

If any Jews in Susa knew what Esther was doing, they also might have questioned her actions. *Why would she honor a man like Haman, who had authored their death warrant? How could she possibly honor a king who signed away their freedom?* To the average Jewish person in fear of death, her actions might have even seemed offensive.

But Esther's approach was a wise one. Jesus would later encourage His disciples to "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16). Doing the right thing isn't just about being right on the issues; it is about using our intellect and relational skills to achieve the maximum impact for good. It does not do our cause any good if we simply rage against evil without working to build relationships with people who can bring about change. This is true whether we are working for change in our families, churches, or communities.

We can stand up for others with the same humility as Esther. She didn't insist on things being her way because she was queen. A Christian's life calls for humility, but it's not always easy. It's easier to let our anger and pride lead the way when dealing with a problem.

Humility is a beautiful thing, and it works wonderfully when our actions demonstrate it toward others. Humility doesn't back down, but it takes a stand with a Christ-likeness that makes a difference. As Solomon said, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1).

What are the biggest hurdles we face when it comes to nurturing humility in our lives?

QUESTION #3

PICTURING HUMILITY

Which of the following images best pictures biblical humility to you?



How has your understanding of humility and application of it personally changed throughout your journey with Christ?

*"Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall."*

— PROVERBS 16:18

Esther 5:9-14

⁹ Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. ¹⁰ Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, ¹¹ Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. ¹² "And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. ¹³ But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."

¹⁴ His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the pole set up.

Haman presents quite a contrast to Esther's humility. You can just feel the spring in Haman's step as he bounded away from the palace. But then he walked past the king's gate and there sat Mordecai, refusing to show any respect to Haman. Haman's excitement quickly changed to rage. In this moment, verse 10 records the only positive quality we see in Haman's life: "Haman restrained himself."

It's important to notice the continued courage of Mordecai, who still refused to show fear before Haman. Considering Haman's obvious ruthlessness, surely everyone else in the palace was fearful of him.

Mordecai and Esther lived for something—and Someone—greater than themselves, but Haman was all about Haman. He wasn't interested in using his exalted position in the Persian kingdom to serve people; he was only interested in his own power and honor. Haman lived to please himself.



Why is pride so dangerous?

QUESTION #4

Even at home with family and friends, Haman bragged on himself. Surely they had heard it all before, but Haman regaled them with the story of his newfound status and increased wealth. In Haman's mind—and in the mind of his friends and family—these facts confirmed he was on the fast track going up in the kingdom of Persia. Today we might say, "Haman is kind of a big deal."

But we see something terribly sad about Haman. Despite his wealth, power, and privilege, Haman was deeply unsatisfied. His self-worship was so pervasive that he could not find happiness until every last person acknowledged his greatness. Mordecai's refusal to bow dominated Haman's thoughts, like a pebble in his sandal. So much so that he would order gallows to be built to display his vengeance to all.

We like to think we have none of Haman inside us, but the sad truth is we all tend toward selfishness and narcissism. We are all hardwired with the desire to be noticed by others. Even introverts secretly cry, "LOOK AT ME!" It's part of our old, sinful human nature to seek approval, power, wealth, and/or status.

We'll see in the next session that Haman's self-centered worldview was not only unsatisfying, it was disastrous. Haman presents a textbook case of the poisonous fruit of pride and bitterness; his pride eventually led to his own demise. As Solomon said, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

Haman had no idea what was about to befall him. Just because justice seemed delayed, though, doesn't mean it would be denied. God was at work.

We should learn from both examples: Esther's humility and Haman's pride. We should ask Jesus daily to remove any bitterness in our hearts, break down any tendencies toward pride and narcissism, and keep us humbly content in Him.

What are some helpful ways you've encountered for dealing with anger and pride?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

Though pride seems to be our default in this broken world, humility is possible for believers. Choose one of the following suggestions:

- ▶ **Reflect.** Reflect on your own tendencies toward selfishness, bitterness, or the desire to seek power at others' expense. Confess and give these sinful attitudes and actions to God. Trust Him and thank Him for His forgiveness.
- ▶ **Review.** Create a list of your current obligations and priorities, and evaluate how any of these might feed pride or self-centeredness. Prayerfully consider withdrawing from or eliminating anything that nurtures pride or narcissism.
- ▶ **Reconcile.** If pride in the past has caused a problem in a relationship or stirred up enmity toward another person, prayerfully consider moving toward reconciliation. Ask the Lord to help you forgive and/or ask for forgiveness.



We all have countless opportunities in a day to act rashly without considering others. Let's do the better thing—the Christlike thing—and act with wisdom and humility.

My thoughts