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A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The book of Esther is the history of the holiday of Purim. (March 14 in 2006) This is an unusual holiday, in keeping with the unusual nature of the book.

For my Christian readers who may never have attended a Purim assembly, here is a brief description. One of the first things you notice as you approach the synagogue is that the children and some adults are in costumes. While these may represent the characters in the story, they may also be historical or political figures. Thus you might see an Abraham Lincoln or Hillary Clinton in the crowd. Once inside the synagogue the principal event is the reading of the book (Megillah) of Esther. This is a study in contrasts. Throughout much of the story silence reigns, so everyone can hear the reading. Around chapter three, however, be ready to cover your ears. It is in that chapter that Haman is first mentioned. Every time his name is read, everyone uses a noisemaker to "blot out" his name. Then everyone goes silent again until the hated name comes around once more. This is reminiscent of old melodramas where everyone boo's the villain. After the reading comes the party. This may include beauty contests (like the one in the book) or judging of the best costume. There is food and drink and general merriment, and a general letting down of one's guard. Later, at home, there may be more parties. Usually the food includes triangular fruit-filled pastries called Hamantaschen (Haman's pockets), or sometimes Haman's Ears. The only other essential of the day is sending food baskets to others (at least two people) and giving to charity.

Most Jewish assemblies, like most conservative Christian assemblies, are pretty staid affairs. There is praying and scripture reading, and maybe a sermon. There is almost never shouting and celebration. The Megillah of Esther is similar. Although it starts and ends with celebrations, most of the book seems pretty serious. There are plots, and subplots. There is danger of death, and even the construction and use of a gallows. Not the sort of things that parties are made of. As suddenly as the cacophony that greets Haman's name in the reading, the danger is over and the celebration ends.

The book is also in mask, so to speak. Purim celebrants wear costumes and masks, and hide their true

identity. It is often remarked that in the reading of Esther you will never hear the name of God mentioned. God is there, but hiding behind a mask of coincidence and happenstance.

Like the other book named after a woman, this book may even contain a surprise ending. If you were reading Ruth for the first time you might say this is a nice story, until the end when you realize that it is really about the great-grandmother of King David. In like manner, after reading the book of Esther you may realize that this woman may have been the grandmother of Cyrus the Persian, who made the decree returning the Jews to Jerusalem. What a lesson! We may think that our lives are pretty ordinary. We may be involved in something unusual, even. But we usually consider our forebears and not our descendants. We honor those who made us who we are, but we should also consider that we may be the forebears of someone great, someone who will lead God's people.

Toward the end of the book Mordechai decrees that the resulting holiday should include sending food and charity to others. This practice continues among Jews today. But even that is part of the strangeness of this book. Throughout much of the reading we find uncharitable attitudes, even hatred. What caused the potential destruction of the Jews was one man's self-centered behavior. It is that selfishness that causes occasion for generosity.

Melodrama. Surprise endings. Bigger-than-life characters. These are the things of drama. These are also the things that make rereading Esther annually such a fun and important thing.

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WHEN WILL I BE BLESSED?

One of the more familiar passages in the New Testament is that part of Matthew known as the beatitudes. Much has been written about this passage. These sayings have been called the “be attitudes.” They have been analyzed, compared, contrasted, and generally picked apart for nuggets of wisdom. Thus it becomes a bit intimidating to try to write about them, as if there is something I can add to the body of writing about them. And yet I hope to add something.

This passage, Matthew 5:3-12, is part of what is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount. This section that comprises three chapters as the Bible is divided today was probably not a single sermon. It may be a compilation of highlights from several sermons by Jesus. It covers a wide variety of topics, not always related to each other. Nevertheless, the beatitudes are a clear unit that probably were a part of one or several sermons.

The format

Each of these nine sayings begins with the word blessed. The Latin form of the word, from which we get the common name of this section, is also the word the Catholic Church uses for the process leading to

The church has a variety of people so that everyone has another to comfort them.

sainthood—beatification. So there is a sense in which these sayings describe what is necessary for sainthood. Of course, in the Bible any Christian is a saint so this section describes various characteristics required of all.

The format of each of these sayings is pretty much the same for the first eight. “Blessed be the..., for theirs is...” (I will discuss the exception later.) It is significant that they are expressed in the plural. Christianity is an inclusive religion. The general plurals, they and their, are not limiting like him or her. Paul recognized this inclusiveness. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) And, “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.” (Col 3:11)

Most people interpret the “theirs is” statements to be anticipatory. If you are this sort of person, they say, you can expect something in the future. The problem with this thinking is that it emphasizes what is to be at the expense of what is now. The danger there is that people are tempted to go through the motions without the enjoyment of “today Christianity.” If all they have is hope of the future then the present becomes a burden to bear. If the rewards of Christianity are here and hereafter then we can enjoy life now and forever. With one possible exception the beatitudes, I think, are promises of today.

The promises

Two of the beatitudes more clearly promise rewards in the present. “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.” (Matt 5:4) “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” (Matt 5:6)

To the mourner a promise of future comfort is scant consolation. It would be like those spoken of by James who tell the naked “Depart in peace. Be warmed,” (Jas 2:16) while not giving them clothing. Likewise the coldness of mourning requires immediate comfort. This is what Jesus promises. This is what God offers. Twice on the night before he died Jesus told his disciples, “let not your hearts be troubled.” Even at such a time of mourning he offered peace.

It is true that in this same context Jesus offered a delayed comfort. He was to die the next day, but the Comforter would not come for fifty days. On the other hand, Jesus remained with the disciples himself for forty of those days after his resurrection. So the promised comforter was only delayed five days—hardly a delay at all.

How are mourners comforted today? Some would say Jesus is only talking about mourning over spiritual things, such as sin, and the comfort he gives us is forgiveness. While this may be part of his meaning, the clear sense his listeners would have understood includes mourning over physical matters as well. When one is sick or has lost a family member, then, how does Jesus promise comfort to mourners today? In several ways.

The word of God itself offers consolation. However, at such times many people are less prone to seek comfort directly from the scriptures. That’s OK. Many people have received more comfort in time of mourning from their spiritual family than from blood relations. One who is touched with another’s mourning, yet not as directly involved, can make a huge difference. Perhaps the church is open to such a number of people,

with various backgrounds and a kaleidoscope of sins, just so that everyone has someone who can offer comfort. “Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.” (1 Thes 5:11)

Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled. Filled with what? Obviously with righteousness. Jesus offers forgiveness of sins to any who will come to him on his terms. James also talked about one who meets a hungry man and says, “Depart in peace. Be filled.” Neither is God this kind of giver. His grace is generous and free. Jesus gave himself freely so that we can be filled with righteousness. “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32) “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” (Rev 22:17)

Some of the beatitudes seem at first glance to promise things in the future rather than now. And yet I think these promises are for this life as well.

“Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy.” (Matt 5:7) On the face of it, Jesus is promising a present mercy. Yet many would say that this means God will be merciful at the final judgement. God’s mercy does not need to be delayed. Now is when we need it. If we can see it now, we can offer mercy to others. “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.” (Lk 6:36) Jesus did not say to show mercy because God will be merciful. It is something we do because we have already obtained mercy. We don’t have to wait for it.

“Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matt 5:9) It may be true that we will be called God’s children in heaven. Nevertheless, we are called his children here as well. Whether one demonstrates against war or not, whether one serves in the military or not, our obligation is to make peace on our own level. “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” (Rom 12:18) If we can do this, people will recognize us as God’s children.

“Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matt 5:5) Many people consider that the earth the meek will inherit is in some future Messianic Age. Surely, most people think, the meek are not to inherit this earth. In this world it is the bold, the ruthless, the conniving that get ahead. And yet, consider him who was called the meekest man on the face of the earth (Num 12:3). Moses may have been meek, but he was one of the most powerful men of his age, and honored by men ever since. Surely if he could attain his stature while remaining meek, we also can inherit this earth. For honest men will always honor the man (or woman) with the inner strength to defy worldly conviction and follow God. In that way we will inherit the earth, and heaven to come.

“Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God.” (Matt 5:8) If any of these promises can truly be considered future it would be this. Still, there is a sense in which the pure in heart daily see God. For the pure in heart refuse to see the depth of evil in others. They try to see the godly in everyone. While they may not get to see God face to face until later, for now they see the potential for purity in everyone, and the face of God in those who are like they are.

Two of the beatitudes share a promise. The poor in spirit and the persecuted are blessed, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:3, 10) This is really a promise for today. Most of the time the phrase “kingdom of heaven” occurs in Matthew, it is not referring to heaven. So it is probable that Jesus is also here referring to the kingdom of heaven on earth, the church. It is thus appropriate that these characteristics are associated with the church. To enter the kingdom requires being poor in spirit. “But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid

To see that the meek will inherit this earth we only need to look at Moses, the meekest man on this earth.

them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 19:14)

Certainly persecution has historically been part of being a Christian. Even today people are being shunned, beaten, and killed for their faith. It is not clear whether verses 11 and 12 are a separate beatitude. The format is different, in that it is addressed to “you” and does not contain a promise. Therefore it may merely be commentary on the last one. Nevertheless, these verses do point out that persecution is a common thread in the godly existence. After all, they kill prophets. This beatitude says that when we are persecuted for being righteous we know we are on the right path. “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.” (1 Pet 4:15-16)

The beatitudes do give us hope for what is to come. We need such hope. But we can know from them that God’s promises are also immediate. We don’t have to wait for God, as long as we continue to wait on God.

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF

Every now and then an intriguing bit of scripture raises some unimportant and unanswerable question. Such questions may be merely a waste of time. They are generally meaningless. But still, they may be interesting and occasionally even informative. Such is a question raised by Deuteronomy 1:1. "These are the words which Moses spoke unto all Israel on this side Jordan in the wilderness, in the plain over against the Red Sea, between Paran, and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazeroth, and Dizahab." The question is, if Moses truly spoke these words (and many words they are) did God at some point cure him of a speech impediment?

When God first approached Moses at the burning bush, one of the objections Moses raised to his speaking to Pharaoh was that he was "slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Ex 4:10) Four verses later God says of Aaron, Moses' brother, "I know that he can speak well." So Aaron was to be Moses' mouthpiece before Pharaoh. God, in essence, acknowledged the fairness of Moses' argument.

Forty years later this man of slow tongue delivers a speech that lasts for thirty-three chapters. His slow tongue seems to have been loosened in four decades. Was this a miracle of God or something else?

We can't say for certain that any miracle occurred. Surely God hints that he could perform such a miracle, saying, "Who has made man's mouth?" (Ex 4:11) He could have cured any speech impediment he chose. He apparently chose not to before the exodus. But did he afterward?

There is another possibility that teaches all of us a lesson. Moses may have cured himself. He may not have been conscious of doing so. It may have taken the full forty years. But it is possible.

Perhaps it happened this way. One night somebody runs to Moses with a problem. Aaron is nowhere to be found, or maybe unable to get away from service in the Tabernacle. It is entirely possible that Moses speaks only a little Hebrew. But this is a matter that can't wait, so Moses responds to the petitioner himself. Soon he realizes that a leader has to take charge for himself. After all, how well could a President of the United States lead if he spoke only Chinese? Analysts say John Kennedy beat Richard Nixon for the presidency because he expressed himself better and looked better on television. So Moses realizes that he has to take a more direct role in governing Israel. To do this he learns to speak better, just by doing it. Or perhaps he realizes that he never really had a speech problem.

That is, of course, only a possible scenario. But don't we play out variations on it every day? What Bible class teacher might not have thought at one time that they couldn't teach? (Myself being the exception.) They may even have told God they couldn't do the job. Over time they found that they could not only teach, but that they could enjoy doing it well. I doubt that I know an elder who knew from the beginning that he was qualified and able to do the job.

Maybe God cured Moses. Maybe he just let Moses learn that the "slow of speech" thing was just an excuse. Maybe we need to let God teach us the same thing. Whenever God places an opportunity before us, instead of saying "I can't," perhaps we need to tell God instead to "prove to me I can't." What might we be able to do for God with this attitude? Maybe cure ourselves.

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