

# Setting the Traps

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Two weeks ago, we saw Mordecai's extreme grief attract Esther's attention.

! If you'll remember, she sent Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs, to discover the reason for Mordecai's grief. And Mordecai told Hathak how Haman had duped the king into signing a decree that ordered the extermination of all the Jews in Persia. Through Hathak, Mordecai challenged Esther to go to the king in an attempt to save her people. This was a significant turning point in the book of Esther. Until that point, Mordecai consistently advised Esther to keep her ethnicity a secret. Esther did such a good job at that that nobody suspected that Esther was a Jew herself. After hiding her background from the king for several years now, Esther was less than thrilled with the thought of intervening. For some review, look at Esther 4, verses 10 and 11. Esther chapter 4, verses 10 and 11 say, Then Esther spoke to Hathak and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 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 court without being called, there is but one law to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come into the king these 30 days. Then a little bit further down in chapter 4, verse 14 summarized Mordecai's blunt response to Esther's message. Mordecai told her, For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise from the Jews from another place, 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 the last verses of chapter 4 set the stage for what we will cover tonight. Starting in verse 15, it said, Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, Mordecai, go gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women 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. From this point on, Esther took the initiative. She determined to go to the king illegally, and she knew that she was going to be disobeying the law, even as Mordecai had done earlier when he refused to bow to Haman. Esther also acknowledged the possibility of failure, but she had the hope of success. Tonight we're going to cover all of chapter 5, so before we look at the verses in detail, let's go ahead and read the chapter. Starting in verse 1, it says,

On the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand.

Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. And the king said to her, What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you even to the half of my kingdom.

[ 3 : 39 ] And Esther said, If it pleased the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king. Then the king said, Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther had asked.

So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request?

Even to the half of my kingdom it shall be fulfilled. Then Esther answered, My wish and my request is, If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said. And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart.

But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. And Haman recounted to them the

splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. Then Haman said, Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she had prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it.

Then go joyfully with the king to the feast. This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made. Chapter 5 is all about two competing agendas.

[ 5 : 39 ] As Haman remains intent on killing Mordecai and the other Jews, Esther, meanwhile, starts working her plan to stop Haman. Both Haman and Esther start setting the traps for their targets, but they approach their missions in very different ways. As we go through the chapter, think about this, because there are a few better examples than the one we find here of the wise advice given by Jesus in Matthew 10, 16.

In Matthew 10, 16, Jesus said, Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Tonight we'll see Esther's wisdom get put to the test. And we're going to split chapter 5 into five sections. The first section comes in verses 1 through 3, and in that section we see the risk.

So let's look at the risk. Esther takes the risk of approaching King Ahasuerus, and we know he's also known as Xerxes, and she approaches him uninvited. So look at verses 1 through 3 again.

They say, Esther was under no illusion as to the risk she was taking, from the human point of view especially, and we saw that when we looked at verse 4 of chapter 11 just a little while ago.

[ 7 : 34 ] The king, like any other oriental monarch, had supreme authority. In his hands were the life and death of his subjects, and we know that to appear uninvited before him was to ignore the required code of behavior.

After her three-day fast, Esther dressed in her royal best and she presented herself before the king. She made every attempt to avoid conflict with the king because she made herself as attractive as she could by dressing in her finest royal robes.

She then positioned herself demurely. She placed herself in a place that was strategic. She was near enough that the king could not fail to see her, but she was discreet enough for it to be not a very obvious violation of protocol.

We need to remember, though, that in that situation, condemnation was assumed. The sentence had already been prescribed. The penalty was death, and her only hope lay in the king's intervention.

The moment her presence was detected, the guard would be alerted and every eye would be turned toward the king, and if he wanted her to go ahead and die, all he would have to do would be to turn his eyes away from her.

[ 8 : 48 ] If that happened, Esther would be swept away from his presence to her execution. So mercy was the king's prerogative alone. Only he could spare Esther and indicate his acceptance of her intrusion by extending the golden scepter, which was the emblem of his authority.

Against all expectations, Esther won favor in the king's sight. He extended the scepter to her in a gesture of recognition and welcome, and we know that the sovereign god actually melted the king's heart.

Esther was not merely spared. She was warmly welcomed. The king quickly forgave Esther because she pleased him, and after 30 days of not seeing her, perhaps he'd forgotten how beautiful she was, but most importantly, he had no idea why she had come.

So now the direct threat to Esther's life from the king may have been diffused, but behind that threat was the far greater danger to Esther and the whole Jewish community, and that's because of the edict to destroy the Jews.

We know that this edict was issued by Haman in the king's name. It had now become a law of the Medes and Persians, which, according to custom, could not be changed.

[ 10 : 02 ] So it would take all of Esther's skill and subtlety to save her people. In verse 3, the king asked Esther, What is it? And literally, that can be translated, What to you?

The king obviously was smart enough to know that Esther came like this at risk of her life. She must have had an important matter on her mind. The king told Esther that anything she asked would be

given to her, up to half her kingdom, and it might have seemed tempting at first for Esther to lay out her request immediately while the opportunity was there.

But think about the numerous challenges that she faced. First, she was going to be asking for the reversal of an irreversible law, and that had been sponsored by the most powerful man in the empire and signed with the king's own signet ring.

Granting her request would cost the king 10,000 talents. And of course, that was less than half his empire, but it was still significant, and it was a good chunk of his tax revenue.

Some people think that was up to half of the annual tax revenue of the empire. So it was no small sum. Perhaps even worse, though, it would be hard for the king to grant her request without losing face to the people.

[11:19] After all, the edict had been officially authorized by him. And finally, to make her request, she would have to reveal her hidden Jewish identity, and she would risk a backlash from the husband that she'd been deceiving for the past five years.

So she had a lot of things working against her at this point. And in verses 5 through 8, or actually 4 through 8, we see the second section of the chapter.

In these verses, we see the request. So let's look at the request, and we'll see what request that Esther makes. In verse 4, she said, And Esther said, If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king.

Then the king said, Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked. So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, What is your wish?

It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled. Then Esther answered, My wish and my request is, If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.

[12:44] Nothing short of a miracle would re-enable Esther's request to be favorably received. Even though she'd spent three days fasting and implicitly requesting divine assistance, she was in no position to presume extraordinary assistance from on high.

Think about some of the other Old Testament figures. Moses and Elijah had dramatic signs from God to tell them that God was with them. But unlike Moses and Elijah, Esther had no dramatic signs and wonders that she could call upon to convince a skeptical audience.

Instead, she would have to do the best she could and come up with the best strategy she could think of, and then rely on God to make it effective in changing the king's heart. In response to the king's invitation to unburden her soul, she merely invited her husband to come to a feast that she was arranging that day, and she told him to bring Haman in tow.

That suggestion pleased the king. He immediately sent for Haman so that they might do as Queen Esther had asked. After the main course had been enjoyed, it was customary in Persia for guests to continue the banquet for a considerable period of time with fruits and wine.

During this part of the feast, Xerxes again asked Esther, What is your wish? It shall be granted to you. And what is your request? And one more time he said, Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.

[14:14] So once again, he must have recognized that she hadn't risked her life in appearing before him simply to get a date for the evening. It seemed like a prime opportunity for her because the wine had been served, the king was in a good mood of expansive generosity, and like we talked about, he offered her anything she wanted up to half his kingdom.

We've already seen elsewhere in Esther where the king gets himself in trouble when he has some wine, so he's easy to take advantage of at that time. And Esther seemed almost about to comply because she started to say, My wish and my request is, but then she broke that off and she merely asked the king and Haman to come to another feast the next day where she said everything would be revealed.

So why do you think Esther decided to wait? Why didn't she strike while the iron is hot? Some people think she might have lost nerve and she might not have had the right nerve to make the request while the opportunity was there.

And that's a possibility, but perhaps there's another likely explanation. Really, Esther was playing the king like a trophy fish. She was taking her time and not rushing to reel him into the net.

If you think about it, she was carefully maneuvering him into a position where he would be obligated to do whatever she asked without his even being aware that he'd been hooked by her.

[ 15 : 41 ] He now twice publicly offered to grant Esther whatever she desired up to half his kingdom. And her response was actually a study in meekness, an attribute she knew that the king valued in women.

We saw her say that if I have found favor in the sight of the king and if it pleased the king, so she made the king feel like he was in full control of his fate.

And because all that she was overtly requesting the king to do was to come to another feast the next day, it's hard to see how the king could have refused such a request. And that's all the more true because the purpose of the feast was to do as the king has said, that is, to reveal her actual request.

Curiosity alone would have made it hard for the king to stay away at that point. And if the king came to the second feast, he implicitly was agreeing in advance to grant her wish and fulfill her request, whatever it was.

If he tried to back out at that point, there would be three public strikes against him. The first two would have been when he offered to give her anything up to half his kingdom.

[ 16 : 49 ] So if he went back a third time when she actually made the request, he would lose a great deal of face and it would be in public and people would know about his repeated promise. So it seemed that Esther had laid her plans well and executed them with patience, care, and cunning.

So all that now remained in this desperate game of chess was to wait until all the pieces were in exactly the right position before she made her decisive move. And hopefully then that would checkmate Heyman.

It still was a long shot, but Esther had done everything in her power to give her plan the best chance of success. So far we've seen the risk taken by Esther and the request made by Esther.

Esther's attempt at setting the trap for Heyman seems to be going really well. And as we move into the remaining verses of the chapter, the focus is going to shift to Heyman from here on out in chapter 5.

In verses 9 and 10, we see the resentment. We see the resentment from Heyman. And this resentment is directed once again at Mordecai.

[ 17 : 59 ] Check out verses 9 and 10 again. They say, And Heyman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Heyman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.

Nevertheless, Heyman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. Haman was unaware that just like the king, he was being played too.

He went out from the feast really high in spirit, not just because of the effects of alcohol, which is one type of spirit, but also from the intoxicating effect of prestige. What Heyman claimed above all things was simply significance.

He wanted to be seen as significant, so it was quite an accolade, he thought, that he alone was summoned to this unprecedented and intimate party with the king and queen. In his mind, surely his star was now rising to even greater heights than he already was.

But something went wrong to spoil his mood. Once again, Mordecai failed to show Heyman proper respect by rising before him or trembling with fear at the thought of him being the one who ordered Mordecai's imminent death.

[ 19 : 19 ] But Heyman's failure to instill either fear or respect in his enemy pricked his bubble and turned his joy into wrath. Heyman's whole world revolved around his fragile ego, and when it was stroked, as when the invitation to Esther's party came, he felt blessed, even though nothing in the real world had actually changed.

His power hadn't increased, but Heyman rejoiced. Likewise, his power wasn't diminished when Mordecai refused to bow, but Heyman was incensed by it.

So his emotional strings were being pulled by his idol, which was public respect. And when that idol was fed, he felt good, but when his idol was challenged, it led Heyman to malice and anger, the same malice that caused his earlier decree to eliminate the Jewish people.

So his joy and anger were simply the outward expressions of his heart's idolatry. For now, though, he simply bided his time. We know, though, that even despite the great anger he felt, it says he restrained himself.

His plans, which were already set in motion, were going to destroy Mordecai, or so he thought. His pride was hurt, but he looked forward to Mordecai's permanent removal.

[ 20 : 36 ] And Esther's strategy had succeeded in lulling Heyman into a false sense of security. Many things are wrong with what Heyman did, but we also can be guilty of at least one thing that Heyman did wrong.

Heyman let his mood be determined by another person's actions. Heyman was happy when he felt respected, and he was angry when he felt disrespected. So we can fall victim to that same type of behavior.

Instead, we need to remember that no matter what happens, believers are secure in their standing before God, regardless of what other people, especially non-believers, might think of us.

Heyman tries to lift his spirits by telling his family and friends how successful he's been from a worldly perspective. So in the fourth section of the lesson, we see the recap.

So let's look at that recap. We find that recap in verses 11 through 13. And here they are again. And Heyman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king.

[ 21 : 51 ] Then Heyman said, Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the feast she had prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king.

Yet all this is worth nothing to me so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. Do you notice something a little strange about this scenario?

Heyman summoned his wife and his friends and required them to listen to a lengthy recitation of his exploit. We know he talked about his wealth, his sons, and his promotions. And if these people were his friends, they probably knew all about the stuff that he had anyway.

And we could presume his wife at least knew how many sons he had. She probably had to be there most of the time when that happened. But he still felt like he needed to tell them all about how many sons he actually had.

And then he announced the plum piece of news that he had when he said, Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she'd prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king.

[ 22 : 56 ] So you can just feel him wanting the people to really react to how great a news that is. So Heyman alone in the company of the king had been summoned to Esther's banquet that day and he was invited to another tomorrow.

But as far as Heyman was concerned, even this was of no consolation as long as Mordecai refused to worship him. That's where he said, Yet all this is worth nothing to me so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.

Should Heyman have been pleased with where he was despite what Mordecai did to him? Really, Mordecai didn't have much impact on Heyman at all unless Heyman let Mordecai have that impact. But Heyman is a case study at what happens in our hearts when our idols get challenged. We talked about how Heyman made public recognition his idol and the result was that as long as he was receiving the adulation, he felt great.

But when the achievement of his goal was challenged, he responded by lashing out in rage and seeking to feed his idol through boasting, even though he still possessed unparalleled power in the kingdom.

[ 24 : 10 ] That power wasn't enough. And that really shows that there was a void at the center of his life that no amount of success could fill. So far in this chapter, we have seen the risk taken by Esther, the request made by Esther, the resentment from Mordecai and now the recap from Mordecai.

In the final verse of the chapter, we see the resolve from Mordecai. The resolve. And Heyman resolves to get rid of Mordecai one way or another.

And actually I said we've seen the resentment from Mordecai. It's actually the resentment from Haman and the recap from Haman. And we see that Haman does resolve to get rid of Mordecai one way or another.

And verse 14 is where it says, Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, Let a gallows be made fifty cubits high and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it.

Then go joyfully with the king to the feast. This idea pleased Haman and he had the gallows made. So Haman's wife and friends seem to have been cast in the same mold as Haman.

[ 25 : 18 ] Without any thought of the hurt that it would inflict on Mordecai's family, they suggest that Haman have a gallows fifty cubits high, which is seventy-five feet, be made and have Mordecai hanged upon it.

It's amazing to us, isn't it, that somebody just in casual conversation could say, Well, if he bothers you, just go out and have him hanged on a gallows. But look at the translation of it, too. Some translations say that Haman's friends said that he should ask the king to have Mordecai hung on these gallows. The ESV translation gives us a better sense of Haman's wife's and his friend's attitude.

The ESV says they told him to tell the king to have Mordecai hanged. So Haman's inner circle thought that Haman simply could order the king to do what Haman wanted.

And Haman's actions show that Haman felt the same way. So confident was Haman of his influence with the king that he did not even have the forethought to delay building the gallows until he had permission to kill his enemy.

[ 26 : 22 ] We know that God hates presumption as he does all other manifestations of pride. And Haman, once again, is showing his pride here. If he really stopped to think about it, even superficial thought should have shown that this solution would never deal with his underlying problems.

The very size of the gallows would unintentionally have elevated Mordecai to a position of significance because his very death would draw all eyes to him and away from Haman in a way that a smaller gallows would not have done.

And of course, this is inevitably what happens when we seek to deal with our idolatries by feeding them rather than by starving them. We end up emptier than ever and in even greater bondage than before.

And it's only a matter of time before something else reignites our negative emotions. And the counsel that Haman received from his friends led him nowhere. So let's think about what we can learn from this chapter.

First, we see an example of how God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. James 4.6 says, But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

[ 27 : 39 ] The interesting thing is that the way up often proves to be the way down and the way down often proves to be the way up. That's one of life's paradoxes and that truth is illustrated by the dramatic events of this chapter.

Haman, the villain in the narrative, is full of pride and he sought to advance only himself and his self-interest. So as he sought to lift himself up, he's actually setting himself up for God to bring him down.

Esther, on the other hand, humbled herself and we'll see as we get into later chapters that God will raise her up to amazing usefulness and permanent renown. When we think about examples in the Bible of humility, the most obvious example of God raising the humble is our Lord Jesus Christ himself as he was handed over to the Jewish and Roman authorities at the time of his trial and execution.

Just think about your imagination and watch him being buffeted and spat upon and brutally treated. To the world, he appeared helpless and standing before Pilate, Jesus seemed powerless. But the opposite was the case. He was in his Father's hands and the Father was taking him to the cross and the Father was going to turn the greatest evil into the greatest good for our eternal salvation.

[ 29 : 01 ] Significantly, it was into his Father's hands that the Lord Jesus committed his spirit as he died. As we leave Esther tonight, her life too is in God's hands and it was in God's hands as she dressed herself in her full splendor as the queen on the third day.

So it should be a glorious assurance to us to know that our future and all it contains is also in God's perfect control. That's a confidence we can have not only for ourselves but also for everyone we love and for whom we're concerned.

Second, we see the danger of making public recognition an idol. Pride will always cause its possessor to be unhappy.

Haman had such a high opinion of his own worth that he conceived himself defrauded by everyone who did not pay him all the respect and homage which he believed he was due. If he'd recognized his idolatry, Haman might have been shown how the reign of his idol was being challenged by the day's events.

He could have been directed to repent of that idolatry by seeing how the gospel answered his need for true significance, the kind of value in life that's not challenged by what other people think about us.

[ 30 : 14 ] Haman could have been introduced to the God who loves his people unconditionally in spite of their sin and he could have been shown that he needed to abandon seeing the world revolving around him and his successes and instead see the world revolving around God.

That would make his achievements achievements of value because they would bring God the glory that God deserved. Such counsel might have saved Haman's soul and perhaps even his life if he'd been willing to turn from his idol to the true and living God.

The third thing we see is the effects of anger on a person's soul. It's really hard to talk about what might have happened to Haman if he'd turned to God and been saved because he's such an unsympathetic character in the story with little to make us feel sorry for him.

So it's hard for us to feel his pain. But at this moment in the story he was crying out for someone to guide him and direct him as to how he should handle his negative emotions.

What he needed was wise biblical counsel and that's a situation with which we can all identify whether in dealing with our own hearts or seeking to help others work through anger in their lives.

[ 31 : 28 ] What might we have said to Haman if we'd been one of his friends? Hopefully we could have come up with something better than why don't you just build a gallows and have your enemy hung up on it.

But there could have been several things we might have said that would have led his life in a different and more positive direction. A skilled counselor might have advised Haman to trace back his negative and positive emotions and discover what was driving his life.

His rage was actually an opportunity to discern the condition of his heart and to uncover what was filling the God-shaped hole in the center of his life. What was it in life that made him feel overwhelmingly joyful and what were the events that triggered such inordinate anger in his heart?

If Haman had been in as little touch with his emotions as many men are then on most days he might not have been able to give an answer. But looking back over that particular day that we studied tonight Haman wouldn't have had to search very far to discern his need for public recognition.

His rabid hatred of the Jews and of Mordecai in particular will actually pave the way for his downfall. He had every outward benefit to make him happy but instead he nursed his wrath to keep it warm.

[ 32 : 47 ] And Haman failed to realize that the soul was made for God and nothing but God could fill the soul and make it happy. Angels in glory couldn't be happy when they sided with Satan and cast off their allegiance to their maker.

And if you think about even Solomon in all his glory when he possessed everything that his heart could desire he found it to be nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit. Whether he knew it or not Haman's soul needed God at its center in order to be happy and he, though the prime favorite of the king, was wretched because Mordecai did not bow before him.

Think about how little a thing that is that actually ruined his whole day despite all the other supposedly good things or seemingly good things that happened that day. So let's think a little bit about how we can keep ourselves from falling victim to pride and idolatry like Haman did.

And we've touched on that answer already. The best antidote to pride is the development of our Lord Jesus Christ attitudes in us. When we treat one another after the pattern of Jesus' example, there's no unhealthy competition between us.

There's no conceit. And we strive to be self-effacing. We then consider ourselves to be lesser than others and we place their interests before our own.

[ 34 : 13 ] Our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated that the way up is the way down and the way down is actually the way up. After all, he humbled himself and became a man and he assumed the condition of a slave and accepted even death upon a cross.

But God the Father raised him high and seated him at his right hand. Jesus' self-humbling followed by exultation in his Father's own good time is the pattern for Christian discipleship even still today.

So we should ask ourselves with whom do we identify in this narrative? Do we identify with the humbleness of Esther or do we identify with the pride of Haman?

And remember that the way up may be the way down and vice versa. So we do well to ask is God going to have to humble me or will God be able to lift me up because of how I served him?

So let's all strive to be like Christ. Listen to how Peter described Jesus in 1 Peter 2, 19-23.

[ 35 : 18 ] 1 Peter 2, 19-23 say, For this is a gracious thing when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

For what credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

For to this you have been called because Christ also suffered for you leaving you as an example so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. That last verse is hard to emulate but it's worth hearing one more time.

Here is 1 Peter 2, 23 again. It says, When he was reviled he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

[ 36 : 23 ]