

Esther Lesson 3 - Mordecai and Haman

HOMEWORK FOR NEXT WEEK: Read Esther 4: 1-17

TEXT

Read Esther 2:19-3:15

PASSAGE SUMMARY

Mordecai overhears two of the king's eunuchs conspiring to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Mordecai reveals the plot to Queen Esther. Esther then revealed the plot to the king in the name of Mordecai. The king investigated the plot, found it to be true, and subsequently executed the two conspirators. The incident was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king (Esther 2: 19-23).

King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, an Agagite, to a position above all other officials with the king. The king commanded all his servants to bow down to Haman. Mordecai chose not to bow down or pay homage to Haman. When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down, Haman became enraged and sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom in retribution (Esther 3: 1-6).

Then the king's servants cast Pur (cast lots) to establish the calendar for the killing of the Jews in the kingdom. Then Haman went to King Ahasuerus and stated that there were a certain people in the kingdom that did not keep the king's law and Haman will seek out and destroy those people while also paying 10,000 talents to those who have charge of the king's business, which would improve the tax revenue of the kingdom. The king granted Haman's request (Esther 3: 7-11).

Lastly, the king's scribes wrote an edict to the king's satraps and governors around the provinces. The edict included instructions to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews in the twelfth month and to plunder their goods. The king and Haman sat down to drink, while the city of Susa was in confusion from the edict (Esther 3: 11-15).

STUDY

1. READ

- a. How did Mordecai save the king in Chapter 2? How did the king reward him?
- b. How did Haman respond after learning that Mordecai did not obey the king's command to bow down to Haman?
- c. How did the king respond to Haman's request to seek out and destroy the Jewish people? Why did he so easily trust Haman?
- d. How would the Jews in the kingdom likely respond to the edict once it was issued and published in all the provinces?

2. MEANING

- a. What reasons did Mordecai have for not bowing to Haman? Do you think this was a show of integrity or was it foolish (hint: do you think God is at work here, even if He is not visible; consider what happened in Chapter 1)?

- b. Why do you think Haman opted to target all the Jews in the kingdom rather than simply targeting Mordecai after Mordecai's defiance of the king's order?
- c. King Ahasuerus chooses to deal harshly with the Jews in his kingdom because he is told that they do not obey the king's laws. How does God (the Great King) choose to deal with us when we sin against him?
- d. Why do you think the city of Susa was thrown into confusion after the edict for the destruction of the Jews was issued?

3. APPLY

- a. In what ways might have Mordecai felt that God owed him after doing the right thing by warning the king of the plot against him? How can the gospel free us from thinking God is in our debt after doing what we should be doing all along?
- b. It might be easy to cast condemnation on Ahasuerus for putting blind trust into his evil official, Haman. However, in what ways do we sometimes blindly grant others the signet ring, while evading our responsibilities to hold them accountable?
- c. The Jews were understandably shaken by the edict declaring their annihilation in 11 months. How can recalling God's faithfulness in the past help bolster our trust and faithfulness in his provision in the present?
- d. What, if anything, are we as Christians currently fearful or anxious about? How can we cast our cares on him?

NOTES

ch 2, vv 19-23 - Mordecai happens to be in the right place at the right time to serve King Ahasuerus. This is one of several examples in the book of Esther where we see God's hand at work, although God is never explicitly named.

v 19 - It is not clear what **the second time** is referring to in this verse. It might refer to a second gathering of virgins from v. 2 for a ceremonial parade to make the queen's coronation. **The king's gate** was a place where justice was dispensed by officials appointed by the king.

v 21 - Mordecai was likely **sitting** as an official because of Esther's new influence with the king. **The threshold** might refer to the door to the king's private quarters.

vv 22-23 - **The chronicles** likely refers to a record of significant events in the king's reign.

ch 3 vv 1-15 - Haman's plot to kill the Jews might appear to be disturbing when viewed on its own in Chapter 3. However, it sets the key events throughout the remainder of the book of Esther into motion and should be viewed in light of subsequent events and actions involving Mordecai and Esther.

v 1 - Haman is an **Agagite**, which is a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, ancient enemies of Israel. Agag was defeated by King Saul and killed by the prophet Samuel (see 1 Samuel 15: 1-33). The conflict between Haman and Mordecai is symbolic of the earlier conflict between their ancestors, Saul and Agag.

vv 2-4 - Bowing to superiors was a normal practice in the Persian court etiquette and was not considered an act of worship. The text only suggests that **Mordecai did not bow** because he was a Jew. The text provides no other reason for Mordecai's refusal, but because of Haman's ancestry and negative attitude to the Jews, Mordecai likely felt he could not bow without compromising his identity and values. It is also possible that Haman was claiming some divine status in his new position and Mordecai refused to recognize that honor. By revealing **he was a Jew**, Mordecai did exactly the thing he advised Esther not to do. Mordecai's determination likely derived from his faith in God. Although the act might be interpreted as being foolish because it put Mordecai's people in danger, it was a protest to authoritarianism, a motif we have already read in Esther 1 and Daniel's friends have similar convictions (see Daniel 3). When people demand loyalties or duties from you that do not honor God, this is an appropriate response. Sometimes it is time to take a stand in those situations.

vv 5-6 - Mordecai's refusal to bow gave Haman all he needed to reveal his hatred of the Jews and setting out to destroy them all. It is not clear from the text whether Haman always intended to take this action and simply needed an excuse to do it, although this cannot be ruled out. There are several reasons why Haman might have taken this action: 1) Haman was an Agagite, a descendent of Agag, king of the Amalekites who were ancient enemies of the Israelites. 2) As second in command in the Persian empire Haman loved power and authority and yearned for the reverence shown to him. Haman's quest for power, prestige, and reverence as well as his hatred of the Jews consumed him. Haman's action though is another example of what we see throughout the book of Esther of impulsive and destructive actions taken by pagan leaders that set into motion God's bigger overall plan. **The whole kingdom of Ahasuerus** included Jerusalem and the surrounding areas with Jewish population.

v 7 - **Nisan** refers to the first month of the Jewish religious calendar, which typically began in spring with the Passover. While the Jews prepared to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt, Haman plotted their destruction. **Pur** refers to the Persian word for "lot". **Casting lots** was a traditional way of seeking divine guidance or finding the most opportune time to take an action. By casting lots to determine the day of the destruction of the Jews, Haman was playing into God's greater plan. Setting the death almost a year away gave Esther the time she needed to make her plea to the king.

v 8 - Haman generalizes Mordecai's refusal to bow to falsely claim that all Jews **do not keep the king's laws**. Haman makes a clever move to try to convince the king that killing the Jews was the right action to take by appealing to the king's greed for profit. The remission of taxes and an unsuccessful war against Greece likely left the empire low on funds.

v 9 - **10,000 talents of silver** that Haman offers is a huge sum and again appeals to the king's greed for profit. Haman likely anticipated that he would acquire great wealth by plundering the homes and businesses of the killed Jews.

v 10 - The **signet ring** refers to a ring used to seal official documents. By giving Haman the signet ring the king is empowering Haman to act with royal authority.

v 13 - Because of the extent of the empire, it would take 12 months to notify and prepare the empire for the extermination of the Jews.

v 15 - Haman and the king callously celebrate the edict by **sitting down to drink**, but the reference to **Susa being thrown into confusion** suggests that there was evidence that many of Susa's citizens did not share Haman's intense hatred of the Jews. This is a foreshadowing of events that will follow in response to the edict.

COMMENTS

In Esther 2:19-23, Mordecai saves the king's life by reporting intelligence to Queen Esther that some of the king's eunuchs were plotting to assassinate the king. Queen Esther reported the intelligence to King Ahasuerus and after confirming that the plot was true, the king executes the conspirators. The events were recorded in the book of the chronicles, but Mordecai was not rewarded for reporting the plot. Acts of loyalty like this were usually gratefully rewarded immediately by Persian kings, yet Mordecai's loyalty was overlooked. Adding insult to injury, Haman, an Agagite, was promoted over all other servants of the king. It is not clear if this slight influenced Mordecai to not bow to Haman or if he had other reasons not to honor Haman. Mordecai might not have bowed to Haman because 1) he resented Haman for being promoted over him, 2) he was a Jew and might have resented Haman being a Gentile, or 3) because Haman was an Agagite, historical rivals of the Jews. In any case, Mordecai's act of defiance not only put him in the crosshairs of Haman, but it jeopardized all of Mordecai's people, the Jews. It is worth considering whether Mordecai's refusal was extremely brave, foolish, or an act of integrity. Initially the reader is led to believe that his disobedience might be foolish because it puts all the Jews at risk. However, later in the book, we learn that Haman's overreaction to Mordecai's refusal sets in motion a series of events that ultimately vindicates Mordecai and saves the Jewish people. This situation mirrors Queen Vashti's refusal to obey the king in Chapter 1, which put all women in the kingdom at risk. In both situations though, God is at work in the background.

In this situation, Haman manipulates King Ahasuerus to accept his proposal to annihilate the Jews. Haman 1) exaggerates by condemning all the Jews because of one Jew's (Mordecai's) disobedience and 2) appeals to the king's greed by promising a sum of money that Haman does not have. The king was easily manipulated because 1) he likely did not care enough to investigate Haman's claims and 2) he was probably motivated by greed. It might be tempting to condemn Ahasuerus for his lack of attention to detail, but how often do we abdicate our power by being easily deceived by our respective echo chambers? How often do we carefully examine issues before casting our vote? Haman cast the Pur to determine the timing of the decree. It is important to recognize that this ultimately is God's timing. The twelve month timeframe that the Pur showed bought enough time for Esther and Mordecai to undo Haman's twisted plot. The Jewish people would not have understood this at the time, but they could rest assured that God's providence was in action to protect His people.

When we consider the totality of the situation, it appears to be hopeless for the Jewish people and for Mordecai. The reaction of the people of Susa after they heard the edict from King Ahasuerus is illustrative. They were thrown into confusion, which is understandable in a kingdom that runs its subjects using fear and intimidation. Ironically, when we consider God's approach to us, we should recognize that because of our sinful nature, God has much more reason than Ahasuerus to condemn us to death. We often refuse to bow down and repent for our own evils. God has plenty of reasons to issue an edict for our own destruction. Yet, that is not how God deals with us. Instead God took his only Son and handed him over to God's enemies so that He might be sacrificed for our sin. After hearing and believing the good news, how could we not bow down before this King and worship? Although Haman used money and manipulation to purchase death, God uses Christ to purchase our life.

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