

The House of Haman

Esther 3

Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 17 September 2023, AM Service.

Chapter 2 left us with something of a cliff-hanger. Esther the lowly orphan Jew is now queen of the Persian empire... she's in a position of favour to the king of the world.

But it wasn't easy. In order to get there, she made some compromises.

And the question then becomes: despite the fact she broke the Torah (the Law of Yahweh) to get there, will her choice, and the power that seemed to come from it, be the catalyst for change? Will the Jews rise? Will her new position, albeit gained in an ungodly way, bring freedom for her people?

Sadly, the initial signs aren't good. After all, nobody knows she was a Jew... nobody knows that Mordecai is her uncle... Which is why, you may have noticed, that Mordecai found himself, at the end of chapter 2, sitting in the gate rather than elevated to a high position.

He was the adoptee father of the Queen. But nobody knew about it.

Esther has also used her connections to drop his name to Achashverosh. Mordecai had overturned a plot... he'd protected the royal person. Surely that would gain him some attention. But no... we find him, at the opening scene in chapter 3 still sitting at the same gate.

In fact, rather than see what we expect, with Mordecai elevated, we're told of another man: Haman... and it is he, a previously nameless character, whose lifted up to political power.

Esther's position, and her sacrifice, at least at this stage, are not bearing the results that she and Mordecai perhaps hoped for... that they expected.

We're not told explicitly why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman. Commentators suggest many ideas... the most prominent being that he didn't want to worship a man as god. This would have been the parallel with Daniel's friends, right? Required to worship the king as God. And they refused.

Is this what stuck in the craw of Mordecai?

Well, that actually seems unlikely. He had lived under the Persian empire for many years... he wasn't known to refuse such deference to the **king**. So why to Haman?

Esther seems happy enough to perform obeisance to the king in chapter 8... and she's a Jew... and chapter 3 shows pretty clearly that those who investigated the matter didn't know the reason why this Jew would act this way until Mordecai told them.

It wasn't like they already knew this because none of the Jews had been bowing for the past 7+ years.

No, the reason for his refusal seems to lie in another direction. The text tells us that Haman was an Agagite. He was a descendent of Agag the Amalekite.

And when the Jews were rescued out of Egypt... another pagan nation... the Amalekites attacked them in the wilderness. Exodus 17 tells us of how God cursed them and declared that there would be a lasting enmity between these two peoples. In fact, God committed to blot them from the face of the earth.

In 1 Samuel 15, Israel's first king... a king like the other nations... King Saul, was sent by God to do this task... and yet he failed to do so and spared King Agag himself. Samuel had to kill him.

This is critical background to our scene for two reasons. First, Mordecai's line can be traced back to King Saul, a Benjamite, the son of Kish... Mordecai's heritage is the heritage of the first king of Israel...

In addition to his lineage, the heart of his forefather is also suggestive: Saul's excuse for forsaking God's command was that he had the best of intentions... he was going to make sacrifices with the animals he kept... and maybe ransom the king for political favour for Israel... But his disobedience angered God.

And Mordecai seems to have the same heart as Saul did.

And so we're led to wonder, why was **this** a bridge too far? As an isolated event, we may be sympathetic with him... he doesn't want to bow to an enemy of Israel... and yet it seems an odd battle to choose when he has compromised in so many areas already.

The Persian empire seems surprised at the Jewish disobedience... and yet... just as they made an example of the single woman Vashti, because they were worried about the ramifications among all women, so here, the logical step of escalation is that they cut out the cancer of Jewish defiance across the empire before it festers to the other conquered peoples.

In a way, Haman is willing to do to the Jews, what Saul was unwilling to do to the Amalekites. To protect his empire, he will wipe them out.

Nehemiah removed all pagan influence from Israel... Haman is doing that for Persia.

Those who say no to the king, and break his law, must be judged.

Interesting comparison then isn't it.

Now I want to make a minor observation which hopefully will help prepare you for what follows in the book, and then a major point which is the burden of this.

1. Minor point: Despite the efforts of man, God's plan will never be disrupted

God had told Israel that there will always be enmity between the Amalekites and Israel. And he would ultimately crush them. In this book, we see a testimony of God's faithfulness to his promises, even though we are in a far-flung empire with an unfaithful remnant of Israel in exile.

And he will bring his plan to fruition.

And this is important, congregation, because despite all the manipulations and political intrigue, God is the one who ultimately rules. His decrees will never be overturned. And he will strike straight blows with crooked sticks like Esther and Mordecai... and the Jews in exile.

This is a striking lesson for us today. It is not sinful to engage in politics. As long as you don't compromise your faith. We need Christian politicians. But we must always remember that the power dynamics that exist here on earth are all subject to God. The United Nations, the World Economic Forum, our own government, these are not entities to be feared... or even necessarily overthrown.

As God can lift up, so can God tear down. So engaging in the same game in the same way to try to manipulate circumstances for our good is ultimately an exercise of futility... and it indicates a lack of trust in the God who rules over all.

And we see this so powerfully in the cross don't we? That the kingdoms, allied to the Devil, try to engage in all these power plays... and yet, through Jesus, God redeems the very people who deserve judgement for that same sin.

It's a wonderful theme...

But I need to leave it there because the tension between I don't want to steal thunder from what comes later in the book. So count this as a whetting of your appetite.

What's the main point of application to draw from here then?

2. Faithfulness to God requires faithfulness in every area.

A man who fights on every front but one, loses the war.

That kind of logic makes sense to us. When an army conquered a city, it didn't need to break down the entire wall... just one breach was generally enough.

What's interesting about Mordecai's approach, though, is that he seems to think that he can fight on one front and ignore all the others. Even if you think his objection to Haman was righteous... and you can think that if you can prove it from the Scriptures... all strength to you. But even granting that, its singularity is striking in that it's set in stark contrast to a lifetime of compromise.

Significantly in this chapter, it was Mordecai's stand on this one Persian Law which brings down the wrath of the Persian empire on the Jews... and yet it was the compromise on all the other areas of God law that brought down God's wrath on the Jews.

Who deserves judgement more? Especially in light of chapter 2? Esther is a better Vashti... Mordecai is an inferior Haman.

Why is it, that we struggle with this so much? That on the one hand, we trust in God to save us, while on the other hand, we aren't willing to do it his way and trust in the outcome?

The call to be faithful to God's law, even in a foreign land, is a call to recognize that life is not mathematically defined.

God does not need your creative compromises to bring about positive change. He desires obedience... and he will concern himself with the outcome.

And the reality is, that doing your own thing, in your own wisdom, is not a guarantee that the ends will end up as you want them to.

What did God tell Saul when he tried to pick and choose what he would obey of God's commands? 1 Samuel 15:22—"*God desires obedience more than sacrifice.*"

And this was the example of godliness in the book of Daniel, where the young Jewish men refused to eat the unclean diet of the Babylonian house... it's the example of godliness expressed in the prayer of repentance of Nehemiah 1. Godliness in the life of Joseph. Faithful even in the little things.

And it's the parody of loyalty which Haman shows... in being willing to judge a nation... why? Because the law of the land, verse 11, had been broken... and there must be consequences.

But Mordecai, or Esther... or indeed, the entire people of Israel... where is their faithfulness to the Law of their true king?

Now... why do we love the gospel... we love the gospel because we recognize that we have much more in common with Israel's heart than we actually like to admit... Like them, we deserve to be driven out of God's presence... like them, we deserve judgement. We aren't somehow better than them. We compromise regularly too... don't we?

And yet, wonder upon wonder, we're taught in the Scriptures that God does not love us on the basis of our righteousness, because where would be the good news in that! None of us would receive love.

But the good news is that when we repent of our sin and follow Christ as Lord then *His* righteousness is credited against our account.

God loves us, not because of *our* work, but because of *his* work. We don't need to earn his love... we don't need to impress him by our good works...

Because we are *his* good works, Ephesians 2.

And when you're reconciled to him, redeemed, comforted, forgiven... when you recognize his love and his kindness to you in Christ Jesus... does that not then drive you to keep his commandments? To trust in him for the outcome? If he's your saviour, does that not mean he's also your Lord?

Is he king over all your life? Or just the part of it you're most passionate about at the time?

The story of Esther revolves around that major theme... God is king. And if you are his, you must be his all the way. Do not fall to temptation, and do not be tainted by the world, do not consider the end to justify the means... for that is not worthy of the gift you have received in Christ Jesus. Be obedient, and trust in him for all things.

And congregation, how much more should we be sensitive to this equation as those who have received all things in Christ? Is it appropriate that we hate the nails we caused to be driven into

Christ's feet, but be nonchalant about those we caused to be driven into his hands? May it never be so.

Give us holiness... make us Christlike... may we never grieve the spirit with a callousness towards unrighteousness. Christ is a faithful husband, may we never entertain unfaithfulness in any area of our lives as his bride.

He is worthy of so much more than that.

Amen.