

Lesson 16

When we ended last week, Esther had just joined the harem of King Xerxes of Persia.

Esther 2:15-18

15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her. 16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. 17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.

We need to pause and consider an important question that we have only hinted at so far in our discussion – is Esther portrayed here as a positive example or as a negative example?

For many, the question itself is surprising – is there any doubt that Esther is a positive role model? Yes, there is doubt, at least by some. And remember that the inspired text has carefully concealed and will continue to conceal Esther's thoughts and motivations from us. We see her actions, but we are not told why she acted that way. And, quite frankly, she does not seem to rise to her high position by consistent obedience to the Law as, for example, Joseph did in Egypt or Daniel did in Babylon.

Here is what one modern commentator has said on this issue:

“How would you use this episode from Esther's life to teach virtue to your teenage daughter? What message would she get? Make yourself as attractive as possible to powerful men? Use your body to advance God's kingdom? The end justifies the means?”

Did Esther initially hide her identity rather than face persecution as a child of God, as some suggest? Did she engage in situational ethics, as others argue? We know that she will soon take a very courageous stand, but is she being courageous here as well? Here is a very harsh quote from a 15th century Jewish commentator:

“Now when Mordecai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass? He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act. Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from

idol worship? Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor? Esther too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with Xerxes.”

The text makes no attempt to vindicate Esther by explaining the extenuating circumstances or reporting that she was operating under God’s special instructions. Later Greek translators added such explanations, even having Esther announce at one point that she abhorred “the bed of the uncircumcised.” It cannot be an accident that the original text is silent on these questions. The reader is left to decide. Is Esther wholly righteous? Is she partly or maybe even mainly unrighteous? Did she start out unrighteous but later experience a reversal and become righteous?

Although we have some clues, the Bible does not explicitly answer those questions, either here or elsewhere. You will look in vain for Esther’s name on the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11 or anywhere else in the Bible outside of this book that bears her name.

So what is the answer? I think the answer is likely somewhere in between. We definitely see Esther’s righteousness and courage in the book, but we may also see the opposite. And, if so, would it be that surprising? How many Old Testament characters are presented as solely righteous? A few, but not many. Don’t we more often than not see negative qualities mixed with the positive? And remember that every Jew we see in the book of Esther is here only because he had not returned with God’s people to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. Thus, to many, every Jew in Esther would have started off with a negative mark.

Also, we know one reason why Esther was doing what she was doing – verse 20 will soon tell us that she was obeying Mordecai.

As for the intercourse with Xerxes, I think the Jewish scholar had at least one thing right – it would have cost Esther her life to refuse. And I believe we can see that God did not want Esther to pay that price, but rather he had other plans for her.

The ultimate answer to the question of Esther’s character is to see the providence of God working in her life and in the events of this book. Whether righteous or not, God was able to use Esther to advance his plans – and that is something we see God doing throughout the Bible.

We know that Esther will make a very courageous stand in this book, but should she have made that courageous stand earlier in the book? Perhaps, but what we know is that when that later time for decision came, Esther made the right decision. And that, too, is a message for us if we, perhaps like Esther, ever look back on our lives with regret. “But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.” (Philippians 3:13) As long as we remain on this earth, it is never too late to do the right thing. If you ever find yourself wondering whether it is too late to turn things around, then Esther is the book for you! The theme of this book is reversal! As long as you have breath in your body, it is not too late to turn things around.

After the 12-month beauty treatment in verse 12, Esther is finally taken before the king in verses 15-18. She took with her only what Hegai suggested, perhaps trusting that he knew best what would please the king.

The tenth month was a cold, wet month in the middle of winter. The seventh year would have been 479 BC.

Verse 17 is a key verse in these events – King Xerxes made Esther queen instead of Vashti. This sudden decision suggests that the king was overwhelmed by Esther’s beauty, and may explain why he chose a queen outside of the leading Persian families. Although Esther was no doubt beautiful, I think we also see here the providence of God working through Xerxes, just God’s providence had worked through Cyrus and Pharaoh.

How does God’s providence work? That is a difficult question. The best answer to that question comes from seeing examples of God’s providence such as the one here. The events in Joseph’s life are another good example. Cecil May has recently published a book on the subject, which is very helpful.

Is God providing for his people in the book of Esther with miraculous signs and wonders? No. Is God providing for his people in the book of Esther? Absolutely. We see God at work in all of these events, and that is why Esther is such a modern book. It is showing us how God works today, and has always worked, to provide for his people. Miracles have come and are now gone, but God’s providence has never gone. We see it in the Garden. We see it in Esther. We see it today. God has always worked to provide for his people. The age of miracles has ended, but the age of providence will never end!

The author avoids the word “marriage,” although it is implied ... eventually. Some commentators argue that it was a marriage beyond her control and therefore not a true marriage at all. Certainly her only other choice at this point would have been death.

It is interesting to note that Jewish Esther married Gentile Xerxes at about the same time that intermarriage became an issue among the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. When we return to Ezra 9 and 10, we will see Ezra’s harsh condemnation of the mixed marriages and his insistence that they divorce. How would Ezra have judged this Jewish queen?

What was Esther herself thinking about all of this? Had she been swept off her feet by the attention of the most powerful man on earth? Or was she wondering why God had allowed such a horrible thing to happen to her? We are not told.

To celebrate, the king gave a great feast and granted a remission of taxes, which no doubt caused the people to love Esther as much as the king did! Remember that feasting is a theme of this book.

It is interesting how often the people of God found themselves in royal courts. Joseph and Moses went before Pharaoh, Daniel went before Nebuchadnezzar, and now Esther goes before Xerxes. As Christians, we should never shy away from opportunities to do likewise. Who knows but that we might have come to that position for such a time as this? For those who don’t believe God’s people should ever be involved in politics, I’m glad they didn’t convince Esther or Joseph or Daniel of that!

Esther 2:19-20

19 And when the virgins were gathered together the second time,

then Mordecai sat in the king's gate. 20 Esther had not yet shewed her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.

What does verse 19 mean when it says that the virgins were gathered together “the second time”? Some think it is a flashback to a time before Esther was chosen as queen, but the better view is that it refers to a second gathering of the virgins after Esther became queen. Most likely it was a second procession of the unsuccessful contestants, perhaps intended to highlight Esther's beauty in comparison to theirs.

That Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate tells us that he was an official of some sort. One commentator suggests that after Esther became queen she had Mordecai appointed a magistrate or a judge.

The king's gate was a building with a gate within it and in which legal, civil, and commercial business was conducted. The foundations of this gate have been located at Susa (in present day Iran), and it measures 131 by 92 feet. (See last week's handout.) It consisted of a central hall that led into the royal compound and two rectangular side rooms. The evidence from the excavation of the gate and the palace corresponds well with the details given in Esther.

In verse 20 we are again reminded of Mordecai's command to Esther that she not reveal her identity. Here we see that Mordecai had commanded Esther to conceal her identity. And we see no effort by Esther to get him to change his mind. Later we will see Mordecai command Esther to reveal her identity – and that is when Esther will finally stand up to him and try to talk him out of it! In fact, the only time in the entire book when Esther raises any protest at all to Mordecai is found later in 4:11 where Esther protests not Mordecai's instruction to keep her heritage hidden, but rather his command (4:8) that she reveal it before the king.

After those events, we will see, not Mordecai commanding Esther, but rather Esther commanding Mordecai, which will be yet another example of our theme of reversal.

Esther 2:21-23

21 In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. 22 And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name. 23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

Why did these two eunuchs become angry? We are not told, but remember that between these events and the events in Chapter 1, the king had been humiliated in a battle against the Greeks. That humiliation may have caused this anger. We know that the king was eventually assassinated under very similar circumstances.

Mordecai hears of the plot, and he tells Esther, who then tells the king. The conspirators are hanged on a tree, which likely refers to death by impalement, and the events are recorded in the book of chronicles before the king. According to Herodotus, “whenever Xerxes saw one of his officers behaving with distinction, he would find out his name, and his secretaries wrote it down, together with his city and parentage.”

Verse 22 tells us something very important about Esther – she gave credit where credit was due. And if she had not done so, these events would have turned out very differently.

And there are some lessons for us here. First, the obvious lesson is that we should also give credit where credit is due and not take unearned honors upon ourselves.

But there is also a second lesson – our seemingly small acts of integrity (which may seem like nothing to us at the time) can have huge unforeseen impacts on our lives and the lives of others – as can our seemingly small (seemingly to us anyway) acts of disobedience.

There was a commercial on recently in which a person did a kind deed, which was witnessed by someone else, who then did a kind deed himself, which was witnessed by a third person, and so on. We are not living in a vacuum. People see what we do and how we live. They see our actions, they hear our words, and they perceive our priorities. Everything we do, either good or bad, creates a ripple. We need to be sure we are creating good ripples. We don’t know where those ripples are leading or how long they are lasting. What may seem small to us at the time may be just the thing that God will decide to use to turn the world upside down! We cannot see the resulting chain of events, but God can.

God plays a perfect game of chess. When we make a move, God can see all of the resulting moves all the way to the end of the game. We can see only a few moves ahead, but God can see all the way to the end, and beyond. Rather than saying that God is the perfect chess player, perhaps a better analogy is to say that God is the perfect chess coach. He is telling us through his word what moves we should make. Are we going to trust ourselves, only being able to see a few moves ahead at most, or are we going to trust God who can see all of the moves ahead?

The “butterfly effect” refers to the idea that small causes can have large effects – such as the wind movements created by the beating of butterfly wings leading eventually to a hurricane. The problem is that we can’t tell which events in our lives will experience that effect. Most of them seem small at the time, but some of them may be the first wing flap that leads to a hurricane. This small decision by Esther in verse 22 to give credit to Mordecai eventually leads to the salvation of the Jewish people from an evil plot to destroy them.

Esther 3:1

| |
|---|
| After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him. |
|---|

The villain takes the stage in Chapter 3. When Jews today celebrate the feast of Purim, the children are given noisemakers to use while the book of Esther is read, and they try to drown out the reader with noise every time Haman’s name is mentioned. (I am not recommending we follow that custom

this morning!)

We are not told why Haman is honored in this way, but it is interesting that the text places the promotion of Haman just where a reader would expect to see Mordecai's promotion for foiling the plot against the king's life. Haman is promoted to be second only to the king, while Mordecai appears to go unrewarded. Mordecai saves the king, and Haman is promoted.

When Haman is introduced, he is identified as an Agagite (which is one of the most important words in the entire book). This reference to Haman's nationality hints at a conflict that by this time was already centuries old. (Which in terms of Middle East conflicts is just like yesterday!) Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time that Saul was the first king of Israel. (You will recall that Mordecai and Saul were both of the tribe of Benjamin and were both descended from someone named Kish, although that could not have been the same Kish for each.)

The Amalekites had the dubious distinction of being the first nation to attack and try to destroy God's newly formed covenant nation. In response, God promised Moses that he would completely destroy the Amalekites and be at war with them from generation to generation. (Exodus 17:8-16) Balaam's oracle in Numbers 24:7 predicted that the Israelite king would be greater than Agag (the Amalekite royal title).

Later, God instructed King Saul to attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belonged to them. (1 Samuel 15:1-3) Saul did attack them, but he spared the life of King Agag and kept the best of the sheep and the cattle, in disobedience to God's command. When Samuel showed up, he cursed Saul, and he cut Agag into pieces. Saul was killed by an Amalekite. (2 Samuel 1:1-16)

God's promise to be at war with the Amalekites in every generation was given to Moses within the context of the Sinai covenant. Would that promise still stand for the Jews living in exile for having violated that same covenant? Could they expect God to remain faithful to his promises when they had not remained faithful to theirs? These are the questions posed by the simple identification of Haman as an Agagite.

Esther 3:2-4

2 And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. 3 Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? 4 Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.

In the first chapter, we saw an example of respect commanded and respect refused, and here we see a second such example.

Why did Mordecai refuse to honor Haman? Some have suggested that Mordecai resented Haman's promotion and his own lack of reward. In the Greek version of Esther, Mordecai explains that he

refused to bow down to Haman because he would not give the glory due to God to any man. But, it is known from other sources that many Jews did bow to pagan officials of the Persian court because it was not seen as a religious act but rather one of court protocol. Herodotus confirms that Persians regularly bowed before high-ranking officials. Mordecai, along with everyone else, must have honored the king. No one in Persia who refused to bow down when Xerxes walked by would keep his head for very long!

Is it wrong to bow down to anyone? According to Genesis 33:3, Jacob bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother Esau. According to 1 Samuel 24:8, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before King Saul.

“The Greek historians report that Persians greeted social equals with a kiss on the mouth, those of slightly higher status with a kiss on the cheek, and those of much higher status with complete prostration.”

Did Mordecai refuse to bow down to Haman out of pride? Was he upset that Haman had been honored instead of himself after he was the one who saved the king’s life? History tells us that those honored by the king sometimes received promotions, tax exemptions, and an exemption from bowing to other nobles. Was Mordecai taking this honor upon himself as his due?

History tells us that the honor bestowed upon Haman back in verse 1 meant that he became the top official in the court, the prime minister. Such a person was also called the “king’s eye.” If Haman functioned in the latter category then he was required to report potential threats to the king. Why didn’t Mordecai get this position after he rather than Haman had uncovered the earlier plot.

Did Mordecai believe he deserved the honor that Haman had received? Later, he will be seen as the natural successor to that honor after Haman dies. Or perhaps Mordecai could see what sort of person Haman was, and he saw that Haman might be yet another threat to the king, just like the one that Mordecai had earlier uncovered. Maybe Mordecai was protecting Xerxes by not honoring Haman.

I think the correct answer is most likely the same one supported by Jewish tradition, which says that no self-respecting Benjaminite would show reverence to a descendant of the Amalekites. It could have been due to religious scruples instead, particularly if the act of bowing down had more than just a political meaning, but not even the Persian king himself demanded worship from his subjects, and so the more likely cause is the ancient animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites (which also explains why the text specifically points out Haman’s ancestry as well as Mordecai’s ancestry and also explains Haman’s reaction to the slight – he will seek to kill all Jews).

Whatever caused Mordecai to refuse, the text does not tell us and it was not obvious to his colleagues in the king’s gate, who repeatedly asked him to explain his actions.

The final phrase in verse 4, “he had told them that he was a Jew,” supports the idea that his refusal was based either on the animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites or on his fidelity to the Jewish law. Whatever the reason for Mordecai’s refusal to obey the king’s command, we know that it had something to do with Mordecai being a Jew.

Finally, they go and tell Haman what was going on. Would Haman have found out otherwise? Perhaps not. Perhaps Mordecai was standing in the background and not making an open show of his refusal to bow down. Perhaps Haman would never have noticed had it not been pointed out to him.

Those three little words in verse 4 – “they told Haman” – are they perhaps the three most important words in these events? Aren’t they the words that incited the conflict that nearly led to the destruction of God’s people? What does the verse say? Blessed are the troublemakers? No – blessed are the peacemakers. God has something to say to those who stir up trouble – God hates that.

Proverbs 6:16-19 – “These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: 17 A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, 18 An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, 19 A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.”

We should keep that list in mind as we read Esther. We will see each of those traits in the life of Haman. Will we see some of them in any of the other people in this book?

For example, is Mordecai himself completely in the clear on this? I would suggest no if the only reason Mordecai refused to obey the king’s command was because of something that had happened centuries earlier between Saul and Agag. We see that same kind of hatred today in the Middle East, and we are still suffering from the problems it causes. If Mordecai refused to bow down because of his fidelity to the law, then that was the right decision – but as we have discussed, that is almost certainly not the reason why he refused to bow down. We are told his tribe and Haman’s nationality for a reason.

If, as it seems is much more likely, Mordecai refused to honor Haman simply because Haman was an Agagite, then that was most likely wrong (see the verse from Deuteronomy below). Yes, Haman was evil, but so was Nero, and 1 Peter 2:17 commanded that he be honored. Why do we obey civil authorities when their commands do not conflict with God’s law? Because in such cases they are acting as a minister of God. (Romans 13:1-7) Had Mordecai given Haman the honor he was due (and the honor King Xerxes was due, because it was the king’s command that Mordecai was disobeying), then much of the trouble that followed might have been avoided. (I say “might” because Haman may have been looking for any excuse to attack God’s people. Mordecai was not the only person here with racial hatred.)

But, with all of that said, perhaps Mordecai believed he was following the Law in refusing to honor Haman. Deuteronomy 25:19 – “Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.”

Mordecai tells the other servants of the king that he is a Jew. Identification with God’s people can cause hardships, and Mordecai made that identification in verse 4. Esther had not yet done so, but her opportunity was coming.

Esther 3:5-6

5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. 6 And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.

Haman's pride and hunger for power cause him to become filled with fury at Mordecai's refusal to honor him. Notice the difference here in how Mordecai, Esther, and Haman are presented by the text. We are left to wonder at Mordecai's reasons for refusing to bow down, and we are left to wonder about Esther's feelings in Chapter 2. But we have no doubt about how Haman feels – he is filled with fury, and we are told what he was thinking in verse 6. Haman is allowed no mysteries!

Here is how one commentary describes Haman: "Haman is devoured by his obsession with control. Such an obsession is a single, ineradicable notion that dominates the thoughts and feelings in spite of one's own will. Mordecai's refusal to show fear, indeed his very presence in the King's Gate, proves to Haman that, whatever his might, he lacks control: he cannot govern the Jew's emotions; he cannot even prevent his current presence in the place of power. But ironically and appropriately, Haman's obsession with control in effect imposes Mordecai's presence upon all of his thoughts and gives Mordecai power over his mind, robbing him of all pleasure he might derive from the honor, wealth, and power in which he glories. Haman makes himself miserable."

Rather than attack Mordecai alone (which further supports the notion that Mordecai was an official), he decides to wipe out Mordecai's entire race. Whatever we say about Esther and Mordecai, Mordecai's Jewishness was known, while hers was not. That also explains why they spoke using intermediaries. Mordecai's relation to Esther must have still been a secret because otherwise Haman would have known that Queen Esther herself was a Jew.

That Esther's Jewish ancestry was not known may tell us something about how she had been living. As one commentator noted, "For the masquerade to last that long, Esther must have done more than eat, dress, and live like a Persian. She must have worshiped like one!" And before we become too judgmental, perhaps we should examine our own lives. Are we hiding our true identity from the world while we eat, dress, live, and worship like the Persians who surround us? Are we hiding our own identity from the world? Do our coworkers think we are Persians just like they are?

Incredibly, some commentators argue that Haman's attempted genocide is so improbable that the story must be fictitious. It is because of arguments such as that that professors get the reputation for living in isolated ivory towers unaware of what is going on around them! How anyone living in today's world could argue that attempted genocide is too improbable to be true is beyond me! Even in Haman's day it was not incredible. When Smerdis the Magus was killed, every Persian in the capital took up weapons and killed every Magus they could find.

We should pause for just a moment to say a few words about anti-Semitism, of which this attempted genocide is but one of many examples extending up until the present time. The sad fact is that anti-Semitism has often been linked with Christianity, and that is something we must never condone. Here is a quote about the Jews by a famous German – who said it?

“First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn ... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. ... Third, I advise that all their prayer books ... be taken from them. ... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. ... Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews.”

Who said that? Hitler? Are those statements from the Nuremberg Laws? No. That quote is from Martin Luther. Samuel Sandmel has written that “the pogroms [organized massacres] in Eastern Europe from which my parents fled began with the ringing of church bells. I remember as an American boy how my mother used to shiver whenever the bells rang in the church near our home.” Very sad!

Certainly, we know what our attitude should be toward the Jewish race or any other race. As far as the church is concerned, there are only two groups of people in the world – those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ, and that division crosses all racial boundaries. “Here [in the church] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:11)

I have mentioned that Esther is a very modern book, and one reason that is true is that Esther is a textbook on racial hatred and all of the problems that such hatred can create. At the heart of these events is the racial hatred between Haman and Mordecai – and that hatred, it seems, ran both ways.