

Lesson 17

Last week, when we ended (3:5-6), Mordecai had insulted Haman, Haman had been told about the insult, and Haman was now determined to kill all of the Jews.

Haman's reaction was certainly excessive, but can we say it is surprising? Some say (incorrectly) that it is so surprising that it is unlikely to have been true. And yet we may have witnessed a similar reaction in our own recent history. Some have argued that Adolf Hitler's hatred of the Jews was caused partly by his rejection by a Jewish director when he had applied to art school in Vienna.

Also, we should recognize that there is a kind of twisted symmetry in Haman's plan: Israel had been commanded to utterly exterminate the Amalekites, and now an Amalekite would attempt to exterminate Israel.

Esther 3:7-11

7 In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. 8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. 10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. 11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

That we are now in the 12th year of the king's reign means that Esther had been queen for five years when Haman convinced the king to go along with his evil plan. This was more than a century after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, more than 60 years after the first return to Jerusalem, and less than 20 years until Ezra's return to Jerusalem.

To determine the time for the attack, Haman consulted the "pur" (plural "purim"), the Hebrew form of a Babylonian word meaning "lot." The word was once thought by some to be a mistake or corruption of a foreign word – but no one thinks that anymore. Once again, the Biblical text has been vindicated and confirmed. Archaeologists have unearthed purim and found them to be clay cubes inscribed with either cuneiform characters or dots just like our modern dice. The difference is that they were not used for gambling but rather for divination. Both Herodotus and Xenophon wrote about the Persian custom of casting lots.

Verse 7 also gives the equivalent Hebrew word for lot, which is goral. In Psalm 16:5, David praised

God because “you have assigned me my portion and my cup, you have made my lot [goral] secure.” David praised God because it was God (rather than chance or luck) who had secured David’s destiny.

The phrases “from day to day” and “from month to month” in verse 7 do not mean that the lots were cast every day throughout the year. Instead, it means that the lot was cast to determine, first, the proper day of the month, and then the proper month.

We see in these verses one of the themes we discussed earlier – the clash of world views between those who trust in fate and those who trust in God. We know that God is at work, but like Esther and Mordecai, we cannot always see the end of things from the middle. But as Christians we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Haman uses a mixture of truth, error, and exaggeration to convince the king to follow his plan. He tells the king that all the Jews disobey all the laws, even though only one Jew had disobeyed only one law. He also says that the Jews are scattered throughout all the provinces, which was likely also an exaggeration, although the Jews do seem have to been fairly widespread. We know that some were in Judah at this time.

“Haman never explains that a personal feud with Mordecai is at the root of his plan. It is in Haman’s best interest to convince Xerxes that it is in the king’s best interest to destroy the Jews. How ironic that he enlists the king’s support to annihilate an ethnic group that includes a man who saved the king’s life and a woman who shares the king’s bed!”

Haman’s charges against the Jews were based on the fact that they were different – they had different laws and different customs. Anyone who takes God’s word seriously will be different – in Esther’s day or in our own. But we must notice that Esther, it would seem, had not been very different herself because her ancestry appears to have remained completely hidden for now going on 5 years. (And, again, before I get too judgmental, I should ask myself whether I have known anyone for that long or longer who still does not know that I am a Christian?)

Haman knew that his promise in verse 9 would sway the king to his side – money! Xerxes desperately needed to replenish his treasury after the disastrous war with Greece. Haman presumably planned to obtain this massive amount of money by plundering the property of those whom he would kill.

By giving Haman the signet ring in verse 10, the king was giving him unlimited authority to do what he wanted regarding this issue. Neither he nor Haman appears to have had any idea that Queen Esther herself was a member of this troublesome group.

Notice that Haman never once mentioned the Jewish race by name in his argument before the king but instead refers to them only as a “certain people.” Perhaps that was because Xerxes’ two predecessors, Cyrus and Darius, had issued proclamations favorable to the Jews. In any event, you would think the king would ask – but he did not. Some surmise that he may have been looking for a scapegoat to blame for his loss in Greece, and if so it would not be the last time God’s people found themselves in that position. Nero later used the church as a scapegoat for the devastating fire that many believed he himself started. And as times turn bad today, we might wonder if history might not repeat itself.

And Haman in verse 11 heard what must have been music to his ears – “the money is given to you” (although the king certainly expected his promised 10,000 talents in return, which was about two thirds of the entire empire’s income according to Herodotus, leading some to believe that Haman was using hyperbole.) Later in 7:4, Esther will confirm that her people had been sold. It would not be the last time that God’s people would be sold. Those 30 pieces of silver have changed hands many times, and it is still happening today every time a congregation puts the contribution plate ahead of their faithfulness to God.

The king’s permission in verse 11 to Haman that he “do with them as it seems good to you,” is paralleled by a similar phrase later in 9:5 that the Jews “did what they would unto those that hated them,” but by that time the tables will have been turned!

Esther 3:12-15

12 Then were the king’s scribes called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded unto the king’s lieutenants, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and sealed with the king’s ring. 13 And the letters were sent by posts into all the king’s provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey. 14 The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day. 15 The posts went out, being hastened by the king’s commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.

Verse 12 tells us this is happening on the 13th day of the first month, and verse 13 tells us that the lots had chosen the 13th day of the 12th month as the date of destruction for the Jews.

In the religious context, lots had a variety of roles. They were cast to determine which goat would be slaughtered and which would be driven away on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:8); to divide up the promised land among the tribes (Joshua 18:6-10); and to publicly verify the choice of Saul as king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:20-21). Lots were used to determine guilty parties (Joshua 7:14-18; 1 Samuel 14:42) and to assign responsibilities for the singers in the temple (1 Chronicles 25:8). In the New Testament, lots were used to determine which of the disciples would replace Judas Iscariot among the apostles (Acts 1:24-26). Rather than making decisions by random chance, I believe the best view is that these were miraculous uses of lots, similar to the Urim and Thummim we discussed earlier.

The 12th month would have been the latest possible month that the lot could have chosen. The thirteenth day was considered an unlucky one to the Babylonians and Persians. It is almost as if “fate” itself was balking at the notion of the Jewish genocide. But is it fate, or is it the hand of

God? The text does not tell us. But perhaps we should recall Proverbs 16:33 – “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.” We said earlier that Esther contained no miracles? Are we sure of that?

Although Haman will have to wait 11 months for the day on which he will attack the Jews, he immediately sends out the decree announcing their fate. “The decree would likely have caused many Jews to leave their property and escape to other lands for the sake of preserving their lives. Thus Haman would attain his object. He would be relieved of the presence of the Jews, and be able to enrich himself by the appropriation of their possessions.”

That edict is sent out on the 13th day of the first month, which is ironically the eve of the Passover. The day before they would celebrate their freedom from Egyptian bondage, a decree had been made calling for their destruction. But, we also note that there is no mention of the Passover anywhere in the book. Did they even remember it?

The decree is made and copies are sent to every province. Chapter 3 ends with what one commentator has called the most horrifying sight in the narrative so far – after the death document had been issued, “the king and Haman sat down to drink.” The next time that Haman sits down to drink with the king it will be at a feast prepared by Esther.

It is interesting that verse 15 says “the city of Susa was perplexed.” Everyone seems to have been bewildered by such an order, whether Jewish or not. Perhaps they wisely thought that if it happened to them, it could also happen to us.

In Chapter 1, the disobedience to the king by one woman, Queen Vashti, brought about an edict for all women in the land. Now, in Chapter 3, the disobedience to the king by one man, Mordecai, brings an edict against all Jews in the land. There is an interesting parallel there to another’s disobedience to an infinitely greater king: Romans 5:18 – “Therefore as by the offence of one (Adam) judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.”

We have noted that Esther has always been very meaningful to the Jews, particularly during times of persecution. But the same is also true with the church. In fact, the early church faced a similar situation when in the first century it felt the full force of the mighty Roman empire. The Roman emperors demanded respect with a command ordering all people to acknowledge them as Lord. When the Christians refused, they were persecuted. The early Christians, like the Jews in Susa, had their existence threatened by the government under which they lived. The book of Revelation is focused on that conflict between Rome and the early church, and it was written to encourage Christians in that time of persecution. There are important parallels, not only between Revelation and Daniel, but also between Revelation and Esther.

Esther 4:1-3

When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry; 2 And came even before the king’s gate: for none might enter into the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth. 3 And in every province,

whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Mordecai shows intense grief over the edict, and no doubt particularly because his personal conflict with Haman has brought the entire Jewish nation into jeopardy. It is one thing to bring persecution upon yourself, but he had brought it upon his entire people by his refusal to show respect to Haman.

But there is no indication that Mordecai regretted having not bowed down to Haman, which some say supports the idea that it was done for religious reasons. (But since we are not told what Mordecai was thinking, we can't say for sure whether he had any regret.) In any event, had Mordecai bowed down to Haman, Haman would have most likely found another excuse to move against the Jews.

We see the tearing of clothes as a display of grief by Jews throughout the Old Testament by such men as Joshua, Caleb, David, and Ezra, but it was also a custom of the Persians. Herodotus says that the Persians under Xerxes tore their clothes because of their grief at having lost the battle of Salamis.

Mordecai went up to, but did not enter, the King's Gate because no one in sackcloth was allowed to enter.

Mordecai's mourning was duplicated by Jews wherever the decree reached – and they, of course, had no way to know what had caused the edict. In fact, Mordecai may have been the only Jew who knew what had triggered the edict.

Given the length of time between the edict and the carrying out of the edict, had things not turned out as they did later in this book, there might have been a much larger number of Jews who decided to join those who had already returned to Jerusalem!

Verse 3 includes the phrase “with fasting and weeping and wailing,” which is the same phrase we find in Joel 2:12 – “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning.” Many commentators see that phrase as a link between Esther and Joel. If so, the next phrase in Joel 2 is telling: “Rend your heart and not your garments.” And a verse later in Joel, we read, “Who knoweth if he will return and repent?” And in the next verse, there is a call for fasting. Each of these statements from Joel can be linked to an event in these verses from Esther. Why is that interesting? Because there are no explicit references to the book of Esther elsewhere in the Bible.

The reference to fasting without any reference to prayer is unusual and almost certainly intentional. As we have said, the book omits direct references to God perhaps in order to highlight his providence at work behind the scenes.

“The promise of God, the justice of God, and the providence of God shine brilliantly through the entire crisis, so that the mere omission of his name obscures nothing of his identity, attributes, and purposes for his chosen people and for the entire world of mankind.”

But another possibility is that these exiled Jews had moved so far away from God that they did not

even pray in this hour of crisis. If I had to point to the surest sign that someone has drifted away from God, I would point either to a failure to delight in God's word or to a failure to pray. When either of those things occurs in someone's life, that person has likely crossed the line and drifted away from the church.

“Apostasy begins in the closet, no man ever backslid from the life and power of Christianity who continued constant and fervent in private prayer.”

These verses are the low point in the narrative. Death seems certain – unless a deliverer can be found. But who could that be? Verse 4 answers that question. We will soon see a great reversal.

Esther 4:4-5

4 So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him: but he received it not. 5 Then called Esther for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and gave him a commandment to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was.

We have mentioned that Esther was hiding her identity as a Jew, but her maids and chamberlains may have known her identity. They told her about the edict, and then they witnessed her reaction. One of them carried her messages to Mordecai.

Another possibility is that the servants were not bringing news specifically because they knew of Esther's relationship with Mordecai, but were merely reporting the latest court gossip. It could have been quite an object of interest that one of the court officials was at the king's gate dressed in sackcloth, weeping and wailing. Perhaps the only one who knew the relationship was the trusted servant who carried her messages to Mordecai.

Esther was deeply distressed when she learned of Mordecai's grief. She and Mordecai were still very close, although they seem to have maintained the secrecy of their relationship.

In verse 4, Esther wants Mordecai to change his clothes. In the book of Esther, changes of clothing often reflect a change in circumstances. For example, the Jews are clothed in sackcloth to signify their mourning (4:3); Esther puts on her royal robes before going to Xerxes, reminding him of her status as queen (5:1); Haman seeks to be clothed in royal robes as a sign of his own desire for honor (6:8-9); Mordecai is clothed in royal robes because the king wishes to honor him (6:10-11); Mordecai is clothed in royal robes to signify his promotion to vizier (8:10).

Today, we also change our clothes to represent a change in our circumstances. Galatians 3:27 – “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Ephesians 6:11 – “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” Colossians 3:9-10 – “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; 10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.”

The phrase “to know” in verse 5 is important. There is a contrast running through this book

between those who know and those who do not know; between the informed and the uninformed. The king did not know all that Haman was up to with the Jews. Esther does not know why Mordecai is so upset. Haman will not know why Esther has invited him to a feast. In each case, the knowledge is a life-and-death matter. I say that is a contrast running through Esther, but we should not limit it to just Esther. Isn't that a contrast that runs throughout the Bible? Hosea 4:6 – “ My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee.” 2 Thessalonians 1:8 – “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” What we don't know can kill us. We should thank God every day that he has revealed to us what we need to know to be saved. John 8:32 – “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Esther 4:6-8

6 So Hatach went forth to Mordecai unto the street of the city, which was before the king's gate. 7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them. 8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to shew it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.

The city square of Susa has been excavated by archaeologists. These locations often served as markets and public meeting places in ancient times. It would have been a very crowded, bustling location. Mordecai and Hatach could meet in such a place without drawing attention to themselves.

Mordecai was well informed, knowing even the details of the money that Haman offered the king. The text emphasizes that he knew the exact sum. Mordecai even sent Esther a copy of the decree so she could see for herself and know that he was not exaggerating.

Mordecai also instructed the eunuch to “charge” Esther to go to the king and plead with him on behalf of “her” people. Who were “her” people? Was she Jewish or was she Persian? And if she had one foot in each camp, into which camp would she jump when forced to make a decision? (We could ask ourselves those same questions! Are we in the camp we are in just because we have never yet been forced to make a decision? Which way will we jump?)

And if she did what Mordecai commanded, then her secret would be out! Wasn't Mordecai the one who commanded her to keep her identity a secret? If Esther now obeyed Mordecai's new command to do the opposite, she might find herself on the wrong side of that edict! Revealing her identity as a Jew would make her an easy target in the treacherous Persian court. Many, no doubt, (including Vashti!) were looking for a way to get Esther out of the picture. This fact, if revealed, would give them a huge opening.

Courage was called for – how would she respond? Esther was faced with a decision. She had to decide who she was – was she Esther or Hadassah? Who were “her” people?

When we studied Daniel, we talked about “Daniel moments.” Esther is having a Daniel moment,

or perhaps we should now call it an Esther moment! We need to pray that we will be given such Esther moments! Every Christian has had at least one Esther moment because that is the choice demanded by the gospel. Either we will continue to live as pagans apart from God or we will step out of that world and instead became part of and identify ourselves with the people of God. That choice defines who we are. That choice answers the question: who are your people?

I need to ask myself that question, as do you. Who are my people? If someone were to examine my life by watching everything I do, everything I say, and even everything I think – how would that person answer the question? Who would that person see as my people? The people of the world, or the people of God? But, of course, someone is watching everything I do, say, and think! We have no secrets before our creator.

Esther moments will come again and again throughout our lives. Often they come unexpectedly and they pass quickly – but we should pray that they will come, that we will recognize them when they come, and that we will respond correctly when they come. It is those Esther moments in our lives that define who we are.

And Esther moments don't just come to individual Christians, they come to congregations as well. And, as with individuals, it is the Esther moments that define us as a congregation. Are we on the side of Christ, or are we on the side of Persia? Congregations that have abandoned the word of God to appeal to the world on issues such as instrumental music and church organization have announced to the world that they are on the side of Persia. Perhaps there are some signs that should be changed to read “the church of Persia” because sadly that is what they have become.

Esther 4:9-11

9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai. 10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai; 11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

Esther's response to Mordecai in verse 11 seems a little condescending. As one commentary noted, “When finally Esther opens her mouth, we discover that there is some defiance in her soul.” What she says is: “Every servant of the king, and even the common people, know this is the rule.” The implication, of course, is that Mordecai knows the rule, as well. He should be aware that he is demanding that his adopted daughter place her life in the hands of a king who has proven willing to dispose of queens.

Esther reminds Mordecai of the Persian law forbidding anyone to approach the king without first being called. Under that law, such a person was to be killed unless the king held out his golden scepter. Esther had not been called for 30 days.

Herodotus confirms that the Persians had such a law, but he also says that one could send a message to the king requesting an audience. If so, why didn't Esther do that? Perhaps because it would take

too long, or perhaps the risk was too great that he would say no – and then what?

Under ordinary circumstances, Esther might have had less fear in approaching the king unannounced, but this decree changed things. Clearly, something had caused the king to issue the decree – and perhaps her secret was already out. (Verse 7 may suggest that Mordecai told Esther what had caused the decree to be issued, but we are not certain that he did.)

Remember that these events were taking place five years after Esther's initial encounter with the king. That he had not called for her in 30 days may suggest that his affection for her had cooled. Perhaps the king was ready for another queen, and, if so, perhaps he would welcome an opportunity to have Esther banished or killed. Is this what Esther was thinking? We are not told.

Esther 4:12-14

12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. 14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Mordecai's only recorded words appear in these verses, and they leave us with a number of intriguing questions. From where or from whom would this other deliverance come if Esther failed to act?

When Mordecai discusses the dangerous situation with Esther he refers to it simply as "such a time as this." That almost sounds as if Mordecai is just an innocent bystander and played no role in leading his people to just such a time as this! "Well, how did this happen?" It happened, Mordecai, because you went out of your way to repeatedly insult the second most powerful person in the Persian empire, and, in doing so, repeatedly disobey the express command of the first most powerful person in the Persian empire! We may not be sure what sort of person Mordecai is, but we are certain he is not an innocent bystander! God's people might never have been in danger at all had Mordecai not acted as he did. And notice how he heaps guilt on poor Esther after it was Mordecai himself who had created this problem!

Am I saying Mordecai was a bad guy? No. I'm saying we can't be entirely sure what sort of person he was. He certainly got Esther to act, but was the motive just self-preservation, or did he recognize something much bigger than himself was at stake? God certainly knew that – did Mordecai?

We have often supplied motives for Esther and Mordecai that are not given in the text. Perhaps we have been right all along, and Mordecai and Esther are heroes throughout, but perhaps we have not been right about them. Yes, Mordecai ends up on top at the end of the book – but is he on top with God or just on top with Xerxes?

I think there is an important lesson here for us. Esther and Mordecai are not the only people for whom we have often supplied motives. We do that all the time! Someone does or says something we don't like, and we immediately supply all sorts of motives and thoughts directed personally at

us – most often without any evidence. Yes, we can see what people do and we can hear what people say, and we can make certain judgments from that, but we do not know what they are thinking. When we act as if we do, we are putting ourselves in the place of God. John 7:24 – “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.” Jeremiah 17:10 – “I the LORD search the heart.” Revelation 2:23 – “I am he who searches mind and heart.” The next time we find ourselves acting as if we can search someone’s mind and heart, we need to pause and consider Revelation 2:23. That is something Jesus does, not something we can do. (1 Corinthians 2:11 – “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?”)