

Series Esther

This Message #3

Scripture Esther 3:1-15

In the previous message I pointed out that the writer of this story introduced the main characters one at a time by describing them in the context of their circumstances. King Xerxes was introduced in chapter 1 on the occasion of elaborate banquets he gave for the important officials of his kingdom. We also learned about his personality and his reaction to challenges to his authority.

Esther was introduced to us in chapter 2. We learned about her humble Jewish background and her “success” in winning the competition to become the designated queen of the empire. Mordecai was also introduced to us in chapter 2. He had been the guardian of Esther and, in what should have been for him a moment of glory, he saved the king’s life by reporting an assassination plot.

Today, in chapter 3, we will learn about the fourth and last main character. Every good story has an antagonist, someone powerful who acts unjustly and cruelly toward innocent and unsuspecting victims. In chapter 3 we are going to be confronted with the pride, hatred, and deception of such a person. The plot of the story will finally begin to unfold. And amidst the danger and tension which is building, we will learn about the sovereignty of God.

Read Esther 3:1-15

According to verse 7, more than five years had passed since Esther was elevated to the position of queen. There is no information about these years. We assume that Esther, the king, and Mordecai had settled into their respective roles and activities. However, in the intervening years, the king had elevated a man named Haman to the top spot among the nobles, to a position like that of prime minister. This position was so prestigious that the king had commanded the royal officials at the king’s gate to kneel before Haman and to honor him.

Everyone obeyed except Mordecai. Even though the royal officials urged Mordecai to obey the king's command, he continued to disobey. When asked for an explanation, he stated that he was a Jew. This explanation must have been puzzling to the royal officials. Mordecai wasn't being disrespectful on religious grounds. After all, we recognized in chapter 2 that Mordecai and Esther were very secular and non-observant Jews. The key question for us to figure out is why Mordecai called attention to his Jewishness. Once we understand the background, then the plot will make sense and we will experience the tension in the story.

Mordecai's unwillingness to respect Haman was connected to ancient conflicts between Israelites and a Palestinian people group known as the Amalekites. Verse 1 informs that Haman was an Agagite. This indicates that he was a descendent of Agag, one of the kings of the Amalekites. The Amalekites were the oldest and among the bitterest enemies of Israel. The hostility between them went back almost 1000 years before the time of Esther, to the time shortly after the Israelites exited from Egypt. Exodus 17 explains that the Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites. It was the first battle the Israelites had to engage in on their way to their promised land.

When battle was unavoidable, "Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.' So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered." Perhaps you know what happened on the day of battle. "As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning." The problem was that Moses grew tired holding his hands in the air, so two men stood with him to steady his hands until the forces of Israel overcame the Amalekites.

After the battle, "the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered, ... because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.' ... The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation" (*Exodus 17:8-16*).

About forty years after that day of battle, the commands of the LORD were repeated to the generation of Israelites who were about to enter the promised land. This is what the LORD said: “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget” (*Deuteronomy 25:17-19*). Did you notice? The Jews were told to never forget how they were treated by the Amalekites.

Through the subsequent years there were a number of armed engagements between the Israelites and the Amalekites. For example, about four hundred years after the Israelites entered their promised land, King Saul was given orders to kill all the Amalekites as well as all their cattle, sheep, camels, and donkeys (*see I Samuel 15:1-3*). Unfortunately, Saul and his army did not fully obey the LORD’s command. He preserved the life of Agag the king of the Amalekites and the soldiers spared the best of the sheep and cattle (*see I Samuel 15:7-9*). Because of his disobedience, Saul was rejected as king.

In Esther chapter 2 we learned that Mordecai was a Benjamite, a descendent of Kish, who was the father of Saul. Haman was a descendent of Agag, the enemy of Israel. The ill-will between Benjamite Jews and Amalekites was so strong and deep that even in the time of Esther, which was more than 550 years after King Saul, Haman had not forgotten their traditional hatreds. Haman was not angry at Mordecai just because he failed to bow down, but because he carried deep hostility towards all Jews. Mordecai did not bow to Haman because of any religious scruples, but because of his ethnicity and his animosity toward Amalekites. As a Jew, he had not forgotten the history of his people.

Now I think we can recognize the direction that the remainder of this story will take. The story involves four main human characters, but the most significant forces in this story are God and the devil. Deep down, this story is mostly about the spiritual conflict between good and evil, between God and the devil, which is represented by the conflict between Jews and Amalekites. The devil is not mentioned anywhere in the story but his influence can be recognized in Haman.

The devil, Satan, has sought to disrupt the plans of God since creation. The temptation of Adam and Eve was the first step in the devil's efforts to destroy the relationship between God and His human creation. The murder of Abel, the first offspring of Adam and Eve, by his brother Cain was another step. The devil's role in causing the corrupt and violent lifestyles of humanity before the time of Noah was another effort to thwart the plans of God.

The book of Exodus describes how vigorously the devil used the powers of Egypt in his attempt to reduce the Hebrew people to abject poverty and disrupt the covenant promises God made to Abraham.

After God made His promise to David concerning David's future offspring, who would sit on an everlasting throne (*II Samuel 7:12-13, 16*), there were new kinds of attempts to eliminate the royal line through which the Messiah would come. In one case, all the members of the king's family except one were murdered. The only one who survived to carry on the royal line was a six year old named Joash (*II Chronicles 22:10-12*) who was miraculously protected.

And you undoubtedly remember what happened after Jesus' birth. Herod had all the infants of Bethlehem killed, thinking that Jesus was among them (*Matthew 2:16*). And you know that Satan motivated Judas, one of the twelve Apostles, to betray Jesus, which led to His unjust trial and crucifixion. The devil has been busy throughout history in his efforts to prevent the eternal purposes of God from being accomplished.

In the time of Xerxes, Haman was Satan's representative in this ongoing struggle of evil against God. Haman was in a position to use the power of the Persian empire to attack the Jews. Verse 5 indicates that Haman, when he learned who Mordecai's people were, "scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all ... the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes."

Let me remind you that "the whole kingdom" of Xerxes included territory which extended from modern day India to Africa, and from southern Russia to Saudi Arabia. The Persians controlled everywhere in the known world at that time except Greece and into Europe.

Because of their captivity and exile at the hands of the Babylonians, and their further migrations after the Persians conquered Babylonia, the Jewish people were scattered over all the Persian empire. Only 50,000 of them had accepted the opportunity, granted by Cyrus, the first Persian king, to return to their homeland after 70 years in exile, and, when Haman made the decision to destroy all Jews everywhere, even those Jews in their homeland were at risk.

As I said, the devil is not mentioned in this story, and neither is God. However, the influence of God is recognizable in every event that takes place. God's plans and purposes for humanity had been formulated before creation, and He had chosen one specific group through whom those purposes were to be accomplished. God was not going to permit any Satanic influenced opposition to stand in the way of the completion of His will.

Through Moses, many centuries earlier, God had committed Himself to the eventual annihilation of the descendents of the Amalekites. Furthermore, God had committed Himself to protecting His chosen people, the Jews, because He had planned that the Messiah/Savior of all humanity would be raised up through them. I hope you are beginning to understand the deep spiritual conflict that lies behind this story.

In Scripture the Amalekites are a type of the sinful nature which dominates the thinking and behavior of people who are in rebellion against God. This sinful nature is often described as the "fleshly nature." The Apostle Paul said, in his letter to the believers in Galatia, "for the sinful nature (or flesh nature) desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other" (*Galatians 5:17*).

Because of that, God wants the old sin nature, which the Amalekites represent, to be completely wiped out. Believers are expected to do away with the sin nature, to literally put it to death, for in it nothing holy or righteous or godly exists. Paul gave clear instructions on how believers are to do away with the sinful fleshly nature; he wrote, "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (*Galatians 5:16*).

If Satan's plan, as articulated by Haman, were to succeed, then all of God's unconditional covenant promises to Abraham (*Genesis 17:1-8*) and to Moses (*Exodus 17:8-16*) and David (*II Samuel 7:8-16*) and the Old Testament prophets would come to naught. Fortunately, we will learn before the end of this story that our God is a faithful and powerful God, and He is fully capable of overcoming evil and fulfilling His commitments.

Haman, like most of the people of that time, was superstitious. The method to determine the most propitious days for important events involved the casting of the lot. This was done by a select group of wise men and astrologers. After Haman determined the day for the destruction, killing, and annihilation of the Jews, he then went to King Xerxes to gain support for his plan.

Haman was deliberately deceitful in what he said. He described the Jews as a people who had different customs from other people groups, and who did not obey the king's laws. According to Haman, it was "not in the king's best interests to tolerate them."

Haman cunningly did not mention Mordecai as the special object of his wrath, or that he was the only one who disobeyed, nor did he give the name of the people he had in mind. Neither did he mention that the two predecessors of Xerxes, Cyrus the Great and Darius I, had issued proclamations favorable to the Jews, permitting all of them who wanted to do so, to return to their home land (*Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5, 8-12*).

Furthermore, in order to obtain the king's approval for his mission to destroy the Jews, Haman offered to put a large fortune into the royal treasury to pay the men who would carry out the pogrom.

Apparently, Haman's proposal was immediately accepted by King Xerxes. He removed the signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman with his permission to "do with the people as he saw fit." The signet ring was the symbol of royal authority. Thus Haman was given complete authority to carry out his plan.

The remainder of the chapter describes how the decree was written up and disseminated throughout the empire. The royal secretaries began their work on the thirteenth day of the first month. Ironically, this was the day before the Jewish Passover, which was the great annual celebration of deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. In other words, at the same time that religious Jews were preparing the lambs for the Passover sacrifice, the orders were being prepared for the slaughter of the Jewish people.

The couriers departed Susa to carry the decree to all the provinces of the empire. Every person of every nationality was to know about the law so that they would be ready for the day of killing.

This story is:

- *A picture of spiritual forces at work in the world.
- *A picture of evil at work in human hearts.
- *A picture of how God anticipates the rebellion and opposition to His purposes and how He is sovereign over all Satanic efforts against Him.

Conclude with reading of Psalm 2

This story pictures Haman as having all seven of the characteristics that the writer of Proverbs 6:16-19 said the Lord hates:

a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren.