

Sermon 5: Esther 2:19-3:15: Plots Uncovered

OUTLINE

Mordecai uncovers a plot
Haman hatches a plot

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever tried to do something good; and only bad comes of it? This is what happens in the text with Mordecai. Mordecai does a good deed in saving the king's life; and instead of him receiving a reward; Haman is promoted and genocide is now on the table. Where is God when bad things result when all I am trying to do is good? This reminded me of a situation the apostle Paul found himself in. You will remember that the Judean church was suffering due to a famine. Paul the apostle to the Gentiles wanting to break down prejudices and ease the relationship between the Jew and Gentiles came up with the idea of the Gentile churches giving money and representatives to the Jewish church as a show of unity. So Paul collects the money; takes a contingent of Gentile believers off to Jerusalem; meets with the church in Jerusalem to deliver the gift. The book of Acts does not make one mention of any gratitude, and in fact, some of the Jews from the towns where Paul has been evangelizing are present in Jerusalem and see him travelling with some Gentiles. They accuse Paul of bringing those Gentiles into the temple, this leads to a riot, an arrest, and Paul in prison for several years where he has to appeal to Caesar to save his life. All because he wanted to be nice to the Jewish believers and encourage good race relations. You may have heard the saying, 'no good deed goes unpunished' this was true in Paul's case. Or think of Joseph. He is already a slave who has been sold by his brothers. He is in Potiphar's house, and his wife thinks that Joseph is attractive and propositions him. Joseph in his faithfulness to God does not sleep with his master's wife; he has to run away naked because she is hanging onto his clothing begging him. Then she falsely accuses him and Joseph ends up in prison. And there we remember he interprets some dreams asking to be remembered by those whose dreams he had interpreted, only to be forgotten. Does it pay to be good, if these are the outcomes? Today as we consider the providence of God at work in Esther we are reminded that our faithfulness to God is seen by God and rewarded by Him even though man is against us; on top of that we will see how though man's plan against the church seem to prosper God is over it all bringing good out of evil.

Our text follows two plots; the plot against Ahasuerus and the plot against the Jews; there are two main characters Mordecai and Haman. These will make up our two points.

Mordecai uncovers a plot

V19-23, 'Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. ²⁰ Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. ²¹ In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ²² And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. ²³ When the

affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.' Ahasuerus was a bad man who was finally assassinated, but not yet. He was finally killed by some of his generals because he kept taking their wives. We are not told all the details of what is involved in this plot, but a plot is afoot. Our section opens with the second gathering of the virgins, it is not clear what this is. An event to send the rest of the unused virgins home; a formal ceremony to speed them all into the harem, we don't know. Mordecai is busy at his day job working for the government, this is indicated in the statement that he was in the city gates. This was the typical place where legal and civic business took place. Archeologists have uncovered this exact building, it is a room attached to the city gates which is 131 feet by 92 feet.

One day while at work Bigthan and Teresh two of the king's eunuchs who were part of his guard decided they were going to kill Ahasuerus. Why? We don't know, maybe they have fallen in love with some of the young girls; or their sisters were taken in the beauty harvest; or maybe they were incensed by the way the King treated people which they observed while on duty; or maybe they were hired to do the job. We are not told. Mordecai came to hear of this plot. Did they think that maybe Mordecai would be sympathetic and even offer a part of the plot to him because of the fact that Esther had been taken up in the King's selfishness? We are not told. Now imagine you are Mordecai and you stumble upon this news. Will you be a Bonhoeffer and be part of the suitcase plot to kill Hitler? Will you seek revenge because your dear little Esther has been stolen from you? Mordecai I think rightly decides to do the right thing and preserve the King's life. God is the judge not him; we must do good to all, even to the evil. Instead of going through the regular channels for reporting these things, he tells Esther who tells the king in the name of Mordecai. We see how it works out, the matter is investigated the men are guilty and they are put to death; and the matter is written down and recorded.

Let's stop and think about this. What do you think should happen to Mordecai right now? We would expect that Mordecai would be recognized and promoted; and maybe there would be some blessings coming upon the Jews because of Mordecai and Esther. But this is not what happens. 3:1, 'After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him.' Just where you would expect to hear King Ahasuerus promoted Mordecai, it is Haman the Agagite who gets promoted, and promoted to a Joseph like role of basically second in the kingdom. The name Haman means 'wrath' and he lives up to his name. we are told that he is an Agagite. This could be a literal descendant of King Agag the king of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15; the king that Saul failed to put to death and Samuel had to do the job. You will remember that in Exodus 17 the Amalekites were the first people to attack Israel while they were headed to the promised land and God promised to wipe them out. You remember the battle where Moses is on top of the Mountain with Aaron and Hur holding up his hands while Joshua was down in the valley fighting. After the victory we read, v15-16, 'And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord Is My Banner, ¹⁶ saying, "A hand upon the throne of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." Or Agagite could be a theologically loaded term that indicates that someone is an enemy of God's people. First century Jews used the word 'Agagite' to refer to Romans who were inhabiting Israel. Either way we have a very clear indication that an enemy of the people of

God is present and in power. A Jew and an Agagite are now orbiting each other and a clash is inevitable.

V2-6, 'And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. ³ Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" ⁴ And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. ⁵ And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. ⁶ But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.' So we come to a situation where Haman demands honor and Mordecai refuses to give it. It is by the king's command but Mordecai will not. Why? There has been a lot of speculation around this. Was Mordecai angry that he was overlooked for promotion; was there a past conflict that led to this; did Mordecai think that bowing down was a religious act? We just don't know. It cannot be that Mordecai thought it was a religious act; there was no demand for worship. In fact according to NT commands we are to give honor to whom honor is due. That does not mean only those who deserve it but the just and unjust as well. Mordecai was not advertising his refusal to bow, in fact it looks like Haman did not even know about it until someone doxxed him in; he must not be mistaken for some sort of revolutionary casting a mold for government resistance. However, his lack of respect kicks a hornet's nest and Haman is now out for blood for the disrespect. The second most powerful person in the country wants to be honored and Mordecai did not do it; now he does not only want to kill Mordecai and his family, but his whole people.

Various lessons stand out for us as we pause here to reflect. Firstly, why we do good and who we do it to. Mordecai did not use the attempt on the king's life for personal revenge, nor did he receive his reward, at least not yet. Friends we are believers who are called to do good to all. This is hard, firstly because the good we think we should do like stand up for the unborn; or refuse to use people's preferred pronouns; or evangelize; or insist that gay marriage is not real marriage, is not very welcome, nor is it even seen as good. Our good deeds are seen as good by God and perhaps we will go unappreciated until judgment day. We must remember that we serve to please God not man, reward in this life or not. In a fallen world full of sinners and injustice we will not necessarily be acknowledged. That is ok, God sees. As Christians we have the ultimate example set for us by Christ. He taught us to love our enemies, and this is exactly what He did in dying on the cross to save us. We were deserving of nothing but judgment but He chose to give mercy not justice; He chose to give it at His own expense. Paul applies the same to us in Romans 12:17-21, 'Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'

But there is another aspect here. God is in this, God is in the oversight, and all will be overturned later on, to the glory of God, the preservation of His people,

and the punishing of His enemies. Your situation may feel very unfair right now, you have done the right thing and the good is not coming like you hoped. Stay faithful, trust in God. As with Paul; as with Joseph; as with Mordecai God is in it for good. How do we face these disappointments? Do we decide God is weak; that He has failed us; that He is no longer reliable and we now need to take matters into our own hands? Truck on in faith. Mordecai did not know how it was going to end, and nor do we. What we do know is that these oversights are part of His plan and He is good even though it does not feel good.

Secondly we see not only no good deed going unpunished; but even the smallest misdeed being overpunished. If it is not the injustice of our good deeds not being recognized then it will be the injustice of our misdeeds being overpunished and milked by the world as an excuse to exterminate us. If Mordecai and Esther had not hidden their identity Haman would not dare to plan to annihilate the family and race of the new favorite queen. If only Mordecai had given honor to whom honor was due. Sometimes we blow it, our sins cause trouble and break things, they get out of control. God is in control and His grace and sovereignty are still at work. Are you sitting with the wreck of some past decisions? God is still your God; you are still His child; He has not abandoned you though you may be feeling some consequences and discipline.

Haman hatches a plot

V7, 'In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.' The rest of our section looks at the details of Haman working towards his Anti-Semitic goal of annihilating the people of God. Esther has been a queen for about 5 years. Haman is covering all his bases and taking out divine insurance on his plans. So in the first month of the year he has people cast lots for him, called Pur. The Hebrew plural of this is Purim, from which the feast at the end of this book is named. Many religions used lots, in this instance it was clay dice used to determine the most propitious day to kill the Jews. You will notice that the lots said the twelfth month would be best. Now you and I are already triggering on the mention of the lots and immediately we recall Prov. 16:33. 'The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.' There are no random events, even the hair that falls from your head is known by God. The text throws us another important detail, the month of Nisan, the first month, the month of the Passover. So while Haman is casting dice to decide when to kill the people of God; the people of God are beginning their preparations to remember the exodus. Will God deliver His people again; is God the God of the exiles?

With the date chosen and apparent divine blessing upon his endeavors, Haman sets his plan into motion. V8-11, 'Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. ⁹ If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." ¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you." The picture is familiar. The enemy of the people of God is in power. The people are

God are in his sights. The people of God are slandered and presented as public enemy number one. Some form of unjust act takes place to bring persecution to bear. In this instance we see that Haman offers to pay an amount that amounts to about 2/3 of what the nation would usually produce in taxes in a year. A bribe buying death with silver, does this remind you of anything? It is likely that the money would be paid out of the plunder taken once the Jews were killed, 3:13. Ahasuerus, ever the terrible king, he is not the protector of his subjects; he is indifferent and allows himself to be bought off. The king surrenders his authority to be appropriated for the destruction of the people of God. The most powerful king at the time is an instrument of destruction for the people of God. The order is given and the details follow, v12-15, 'Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring. ¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.' On the Eve of Passover (Ex. 12:14), Haman makes all his plans to kill God's people. He seduces the masses to get involved by offering them the plunder. He calls for a complete genocide of men; women and children. The text ends with an understandable and often experienced reality, 'confusion.'

The book of revelation sketches the experience of the NT church in the same terms as here. Satan is pulling the strings of government power to bring the collective weight of the administration to bear to wipe us out. The people of God are slandered, misrepresented, and like Mordecai and the Jews, like sheep for the slaughter. Our response is not one of starting a revolution but faithful trust. We are a part of the war of the ages, and we will experience times like these where we are caught in the crosshairs of satanic attack. We should not be surprised; we should not be anxious; we should know how things will end. In fact we can have more certainty than Mordecai. He was an exile, not in the land; he had not been the best obeyer of God's law; were God's promises still true for those who had not returned? They really would have been confused and had less grounds for assurance that God would work all things for their good. We on the other hand have Christ. He has defeated satan and paid our sin debt by dying on the cross; He has broken death by resurrecting; He has begun the new age and given us the Holy Spirit as a downpayment and guarantee of what is to come; one day He will banish all the things that are a contradiction to His rule. He too was sold for silver and remains undefeated, and we are more than conquerors in Him.