



Sunday School Lesson for February 22, 2004.
Released on February 20, 2004.

Study Esther 3:1-6; 4:7-16. A Time For Courage
Questions and answers below.

TIMES: between 478 and 474 B.C.; 474 B.C.
PLACE: Shushan

Esther 3:1-6

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.

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.

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 showed 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.

Esther 4:7-16

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 show 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.

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.

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?

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

Lesson Background

The book of Esther recounts an incident in Persia that nearly resulted in the annihilation of the Jews. Historically, it fits between chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Ezra. One group of exiles had returned from captivity, and the temple had been rebuilt. The events of the book of Esther are set among the Jewish exiles who had not returned but had chosen instead to remain in Persia.

King Ahasuerus, who ruled the Persian Empire from 486 to 465 b.c., is also known as Xerxes, the name the Greeks gave to him. The book of Esther opens by mentioning a banquet that took place in the third year of his reign (Esther 1:3) which lasted 180 days. When these days were over, the king gave another banquet lasting 7 days. This feast proved to be an occasion of unrestrained drunkenness (Esther 1:5-8). When Queen Vashti was ordered to appear before the revelers, she refused (1:10-12). This refusal came at the cost of her position! The plot of the story that follows is both involved and intriguing.

The book of Esther is a classic that reveals the faithfulness of God in sovereignly protecting and preserving His children. What makes it even more impressive is the fact that the Israelites were outside their homeland and were not worshiping Him as they should. Those who had returned to Judah had reestablished their worship as outlined in the Mosaic law. Those who remained in exile had no temple in which to carry out their system of worship with its ceremonies and animal sacrifices.

Haman
(Esther 3:1-6)

As the search for a new queen begins, we are introduced to "fair and beautiful" Esther; she is an orphan who was reared by her cousin named Mordecai (Esther 2:7). As the result of a long and involved beauty contest, Esther becomes the new queen (2:8-18). During this whole process Esther keeps her Jewish heritage a secret (2:10, 20). Next, the evil Haman enters the picture.

1. Who is Haman (Esther 3:1)?

Haman is an Agagite, which may indicate his lineage from King Agag of the Amalekites (see 1 Samuel 15:7-33). If Haman is a descendant of the Amalekite nation, it is interesting to note that Mordecai was a descendant of Saul. It was Saul who killed Agag and defeated the Amalekite nation. The conflict portrayed in this book would then be a conflict that was centuries old. We are not told why Haman is elevated to a position that is above all the princes. No doubt Haman is a man of

some ability. But as the story unfolds, it will also be obvious that he is a clever operator-someone who takes every opportunity to advance his own career.

Along with the promotion came a command from the king that everyone pay homage to Haman (v. 2a). As a result, all the king's servants sitting in the gates of the palace bowed whenever he approached.

2. What report did Haman hear about Mordecai, and how did he respond (vs. 2b-5)?

"It was customary for Persians to bow down in reverence to the king. Since Haman had been promoted to a second position in the kingdom, it was also customary to show reverence for his position. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. Although everyone else was submissive to the authority and position of Haman, Mordecai refused to bow. It was not out of pride that he made the refusal, but rather out of religious conviction (v. 4). Most commentators believe that the act of bowing down was in essence a religious act and that the people were not only showing reverence for Haman's position but were also worshiping him as a religious god. This would indeed violate the conscience of Mordecai. It was customary for Jews to show reverence by bowing to the ground (I Kings 1:16). Mordecai refused to bow, not because he did not respect the position, but rather because he refused to worship any god other than Jehovah" (The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, Nelson).

The king's servants noticed Mordecai's behavior and asked him day after day why he was not obeying the king's command. Mordecai replied that he was a Jew. It was his loyalty to God that prevented him from showing religious submission and loyalty to a man. The servants finally reported him to Haman "to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand."

3. How did Haman plan to get back at Mordecai for his refusal to bow and pay homage to him (v. 6)?

Since we understand there is something going on behind the scenes in Esther, we recognize that Haman was elevated to his position not just by King Ahasuerus but by God Himself. The Jews constantly lived with the potential for disaster, and they needed protection. God already had Esther in place for her role, and now He had allowed Haman to accede to his position. Although Haman thought he was plotting and carrying out his own plans, God was actually doing a most amazing thing, something that would again prove His faithfulness and sovereign protection of His people.

After the king's servants told Haman about Mordecai's attitudes and actions, Haman no doubt paid special attention to Mordecai from then on. As he personally observed Mordecai's refusal to bow before him, his anger grew into wrath. Our English dictionaries describe wrath as forceful, vindictive anger.

The most arrogant people are often those who must measure their self-worth by the power or influence they think they have over others. Haman was not just angry but also determined that he would get revenge in some way. That in itself was bad, but Haman decided on something extreme.

Haman's desire for revenge is incredibly ominous seeing that he scorned the thought of merely laying hands on Mordecai alone (v. 6). His hatred had grown into a haughty disdain for all Jews, and he determined that Mordecai's punishment would have far reaching consequences for all the Jewish people in the empire. Anti-Semitism is not new. It has been in the world for many centuries. Since the Jews are God's chosen people, Satan has a deep hatred for them also. He has been the

moving force behind the centuries of hatred of Jews and attempts to exterminate them.

4. As a result of Mordecai's refusal to bow, Haman became a man "full of wrath." How can anger do more damage to the hater than to the hated?

The anger that results from personal "slights"-real or imagined-often leads to a thirst for revenge. Thoughts can escalate in a person's mind until "molehills become mountains." Haman's anger focused itself first on Mordecai and how to destroy him. Then he reasoned that hurting Mordecai was best accomplished by destroying his people. Imagine it: a plan for mass murder simply for a refusal to bow!

Such anger often does more damage to the hater than to the hated. That was true in Haman's case. Hatred creates a blindness that diminishes one's ability to sort through the good and the bad. Perhaps that's one reason the Scriptures warn us against taking revenge (Romans 12:19).

Mordecai
(Esther 4:7--9)

Haman sets the plan in motion "in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus," or about 474 b.c. (Esther 3:7). Esther has been queen for five years (2:16) by the time Haman goes to the king with the charge that "a certain people" do not keep the king's laws and that it would be in the king's best interest to eliminate them (3:8,9).

Ahasuerus goes along with the proposal. The appropriate documents were drawn up and dispatched to the far reaches of his empire (3:12-15), with the massacre scheduled to be carried out on a set day. It is to include "all Jews, both young and old, little children and women" (3:13).

When Mordecai hears the news he goes into mourning. He rends his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes (4:1). There is similar mourning by Jews across the empire (4:3). When Esther learns of Mordecai's distress, she sends him new clothes so that he can enter the king's court. But he refuses to accept them (4:4). Then she sends "one of the king's chamberlains," Hatach, to inquire of Mordecai what is troubling him (4:5).

Mordecai Persuades Esther to Help

5. What important message took place between Mordecai and Esther after the issue of Haman's decree (Esther 4:7-9)?

Mordecai told Hatach all that had taken place, including what Haman intended to do and the amount of money being paid (v. 7). Mordecai then gave the servant a written copy of the decree and told him to show it to Esther (v. 8). By now Mordecai knew what would have to be done: Esther would have to appeal to the king for help. His giving Hatach a copy of the decree was accompanied with a command to Esther to go in to the king and plead on behalf of her people. They needed him to rescue them from the certain deaths they all faced.

It may seem surprising to us that Esther knows nothing about Haman's plot to kill her people. But we need to keep in mind that the harem of an Oriental potentate is virtually isolated from the world of politics and from most other activities as well.

Hatach faithfully carries out his part of the plan (v. 9). Now, as we say, "the ball is in Esther's court." She can, of course, ignore Mordecai's request. At first glance this

would seem to be the safest course. But to ignore his request might not actually be all that safe. There is always the possibility that her heritage would eventually be revealed, a fact that Mordecai mentions to her (4:13). But more important than doing the safe thing is doing the right thing.

Esther's Problem (Esther 4:10-16)

6. What did Esther remind Mordecai about regarding going before the king (vs. 10, 11)?

Even if Esther chooses to do as Mordecai asks, she has a big problem. Anyone who approaches the king in the inner court without being called faces the death penalty. This seems like a very severe law, but Oriental rulers are surrounded with all kinds of intrigue and plots against their lives (2 Kings 12:19-21; 15:10, 25, 30; 21:23). Under such conditions this severe rule seems to be a reasonable precaution. Indeed, we see one assassination plot already has been foiled in Esther 2:19-23.

There is one exception to the death penalty of the king: if the person seeking an audience finds favor in his sight, the king will extend his golden sceptre and the law will be suspended. But Esther has another problem. She has not been called into the presence of the king for "thirty days" (Esther 4:11). Such a lengthy period of time may make Esther wonder if she has fallen out of favor with the king.

Esther was not telling Mordecai anything he did not already know. The beginning of her response, in fact, was "All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know" (v.11). Ahasuerus ruled over 127 provinces, reaching east to India and west to Ethiopia and Egypt (1:1). He was a very powerful king with a multitude of subjects, and it was evidently common knowledge that one did not dare displease him. Esther was doing her best to cause Mordecai to realize what he was commanding her to do.

Mordecai's Challenge

7. What did Mordecai suggest as the reason Esther was the queen (vs. 12-14)?

Esther may have been the queen and shared many of the privileges of royalty with the king, but she was just as much in need of God's protection as all the other Jews. This is what Mordecai reminded her of in the message he sent back to her. If the killing of the Jews got started, sooner or later it would be discovered that she was one of them; then those otherwise loyal to her would turn against her.

Mordecai had faith to believe God was going to protect His children in some way; that is, that the Jews would not be completely wiped out. That did not mean, though, that many individuals would not die. Mordecai felt quite certain that both he and Esther would be among those killed if the decree was not somehow nullified. He very forcefully reminded Esther of these stark facts. If she refused to be part of the solution for their salvation, God would accomplish it in some other way.

Mordecai then issued the greatest challenge of all: maybe the very reason she was the queen of the land was for this time of need faced by her people (Esther 4:14). She had direct access to the king, which was not true of any other Jew. She had previously won the king's confidence and love, which no other Jew had done. She was a model of integrity, and Ahasuerus could not have helped noticing; so she was

respected by him above many others in his kingdom. She was the most logical one to approach the king and appeal on behalf of all the Jews.

Mordecai was saying that Esther's advancement to royal position was the providence of God at work. She was there according to His will. While we do not see much about Mordecai's spirituality, we do see evidence that he believed in God and the covenants He had established with His people. Mordecai knew God was not going to allow them to be annihilated, for then the covenants would be broken. He was confident that God would rescue His people.

Esther's Determination

8. What did Esther plan to do (vs. 15, 16)?

Once again the courier took a message back to Mordecai. Esther understood the situation completely and was willing to do whatever she could to help, even if it meant her death. "If I perish, I perish," she said.

Esther's instructions were that Mordecai gather all the Jews in Shushan together and fast for her for three days. It was to be a round-the-clock fast, day and night. She and her maids would be doing the same thing at the same time. After the time of fasting, she would go in to the king even though it was against the law. They were about to see whether or not Mordecai's God would use her as he anticipated. She needed to be as ready as possible.

9. Esther made certain preparations before she presented herself to the king with her request. How could this be an example for us?

There is a very fine line to walk here! Spending too much time on preparation can indicate an over reliance on our own ability and a lack of faith in God. Spending too little time in preparation, however, may disregard God's desire that we use the abilities He has given us for their intended purposes.

Esther demonstrates the right balance. Her fasting and prayer show God her devotion to His cause. Gathering others to join in a supportive network strengthens that devotion. The three-day delay gives her time to strengthen her resolve and prepare her thoughts. Nehemiah will go through a similar preparation a few years later (see Nehemiah 1:4). How different life would be if all Christians chose to incorporate these elements into their God-honoring decision making!

CONCLUSION

Time of Decision

Most of us live out our lives in quiet routine, free of heroic choices such as Esther had to make to save her people. And yet God calls each of us to decisions that are spiritually heroic, even though they will never make the front page of the newspapers.

The most important decision we ever make, obviously, is to become a Christian. But there are many other important decisions as well. Will we be regular in our church attendance (Hebrews 10:25)? Will we resist the lure of illegal drugs? Will we avoid becoming involved in sexual immorality? The list could go on. The decision we make in each one of these situations can involve great courage. But our decisions

will go a long way toward determining our eternal destiny-and, perhaps, the destinies of others.

PRAYER

Gracious Father, we pray for help in the decisions we must make in life. Give us wisdom to make decisions that will be pleasing to You, and the courage to carry out those decisions even when they are painful. In the name of our Lord and Savior we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Know the times, live your convictions.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Our lesson next week helps us celebrate the glory of deliverance as we contemplate Esther's victory. Study background Scripture: Esther 8, 9.

I hope you enjoyed this week's lesson !

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