

Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church
10 Downing Street, Oakleigh, Vic. 3166

DHW
BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 3

ESTHER 3

INTRODUCTION

Esther was already made queen. The Jews would be celebrating. There was never a better time for them to have one of them as the Queen of the Medo-Persian Empire. But happiness in the world is always short lived. People are like the weather which changes suddenly. One moment it is bright and sunny and the next moment dark clouds gather and lightning and thunder follow. So it was with the Jews. They were now celebrating but they would soon be sorrowing. The pride and power of one man would ruin their good fortune. Pride and power are deadly twins. When a man who is endowed with these two things, he can do great harm to others who cross him. This chapter describes such a man in the history of the Jewish people. However, will God allow His chosen people to be annihilated? The answer would be found as the flow of events unfolds before us. It would be instructive for us to know more about the LORD God. God's people have always been the minority in the world, and more often than not they are

subjected to persecution and oppression by others for their beliefs and practices in order to be faithful to their God. And so for Christians, who are the blood-bought children of God, such persecutions and oppressions are satanically inspired, as the Apostle Paul reveals (Ephesians 6:12): *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*

In chapter 3, we see a man who defies paying homage to another; and another, who neglects to exercise his authority; and another who abuses his power. The combination of these factors creates anxiety and havoc to any community. The chapter can be divided into the following sections:

- 1) Mordecai refuses to respect Haman (3:1-3);
- 2) Haman determines to destroy all the Jews (3:4-7)
- 3) Haman petitions the king to issue a decree to destroy the Jews (3:8-11)
- 4) The king decrees the destruction of the Jews (3:12-25)

STUDY THE WORD

Mordecai Refuses to Respect Haman (3:1-3)

After these things refers to all the events which happened before this time which was probably about three to four years since Esther became queen (circa 475 B.C.). Ahasuerus promoted Haman, and after that he placed his position above all the other princes, and

at the same time ordered that all the king's servants should pay homage to Haman by bowing to him. Haman was the son of Hammedatha the Agagite. As an Agagite, this suggests, that he was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite, the old enemy of the Jews. When Israel came out of Egypt, the Amalekites attacked them for which the LORD God cursed and condemned them to extinction (Exodus 17:8-16).¹ The reason for the king to promote Haman was not stated. And the text does not in any way indicate that Haman got this promotion by illegitimate means. Haman's position was like the modern day Prime Minister of a country. But there is a difference. Haman was directly responsible and answerable to the king unlike today's Prime Minister who has to report to an elected legislative body.

This chapter surprisingly begins with the promotion of Haman who had not been introduced in the preceding two chapters, in contrast to Mordecai's loyal deed in saving the king. One would expect at the beginning of the chapter to read of the king's reward for Mordecai's loyalty. But Mordecai was not rewarded; instead a worst thing happened to him. In compliance with the king's command, all his servants bowed to Haman whenever he made his appearance. But Mordecai did not bow

¹ Exodus 17:14 And the LORD said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. 15 And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovahnissi: 16 For he said, Because the LORD hath sworn that the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

to Haman and pay homage to him. Mordecai's colleagues working in the king's gate daily asked him why he disobeyed the king's command. But Mordecai still refused to pay homage to Haman. One day Mordecai told them that he was a Jew and that was why he refused to bow to Haman. One wonders why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman even though he was a Jew. The king did not command his servants to bow down in worship of Haman as one would do to God. It is possible that Mordecai was quite conversant with the history of his people. He knew about the age-old enmity between Israel and the Amalekites. The mention of the name of Agag would have so incensed him that he would refuse to bow and respect an Amalekite whom God had condemned.

Haman Determines to Destroy All the Jews (3:4-7)

Mordecai's colleagues gave up persuading him and informed Haman regarding the matter. Apparently, their intention was not to get Mordecai punished for not bowing to Haman. But rather as the text suggests, they wanted to know whether a Jew like Mordecai whose refusal to bow to Haman could be exempted. When Haman realized that Mordecai, who was a Jew, refused to bow and respect him, he was *full of wrath*. The Hebrew word translated here as *full of wrath* is *hamah* (anger). It is a very strong term to describe the inner emotional feelings of person who is filled with a burning and consuming anger. It is also used in chapter 1:12 of King Ahasuerus' anger with Vasthi for disobeying him. But the

king's anger subsided after a time. In the case of Haman, his anger did not subside but it lingered on because of Mordecai.

The statement, *and he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone*, simply alleges that Haman scorned the thought of punishing only Mordecai (v.6). Mordecai seemed to be a representative of the Jews. Therefore, Haman resolved *to destroy all the Jews* who lived throughout the whole empire. Haman demonstrated that he was consumed with his own status. The lack of respect which was shown by one foolish Jew was enough to provoke him to exterminate every one of Mordecai's people.² Why would Haman seek to destroy all the Jews beside the obvious that he was full of pride and conscious of his political status? Is it because other Jews might follow Mordecai's example? Or did he plan it so that he could enrich himself by confiscating all the belongings and treasures of the Jews? The divine author does not reveal to us the innermost thoughts of Haman.

So Haman sought his gods by casting Pur or lots. He did this by consulting the astrologers on the month of Nisan, which was the first month according to Jewish calendar, and it was in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus' reign (474 B.C.). Day by day and month by month he would cast lots until an auspicious day was found. He

² Proverbs 30:32 If thou hast done foolishly in lifting up thyself, or if thou hast thought evil, *lay* thine hand upon thy mouth. 33 Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife.

got an answer. The auspicious day to carry out his evil plan to destroy all the Jews would be in the month of Adar which is the twelfth month. It means a delay of eleven months!

Haman Petitions the King (3:8-11)

Having consulted the astrologers and procuring an auspicious day from his gods, Haman went to King Ahasuerus. He did not have the power to destroy all the Jews in the empire. This evil plan of his must have the approval of the king. He must have thoroughly thought through the night before how he would present his case and persuade the king to agree to his proposal. Haman went straight to the point. He began by charging that *there is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people* in the whole empire of the king. Haman did not specifically mention the Jews by name. No reason is given but we can safely surmise that his integrity might be suspected by the king. The king must have known that the Jews in the empire were hardworking people and that they had contributed to the welfare of his kingdom. That the Jews were scattered throughout the empire was a fact. The implication is that they could pose a great threat to the king's reign. The matter involved only one of the many peoples, and the king could dispense with this group of people.

The next thing Haman brought up to the king was that *their laws are diverse from all people* (v8b). This was a fact for a true Jew would worship the LORD God and none else; and they had certain dietary regulations which restricted them from eating all other

kinds of food. While these were true of the Jews, the implication is that they were exclusive and not part of the king's subjects as a nation. They were divisive, narrow-minded and uncooperative. But did all the Jews obey their God-given laws? The very fact that the Jews were taken captive was because they had apostatized and worshipped other gods. Esther and Mordecai ate non-kosher food for sure. This statement was partially true.

Haman then added that *neither keep they the king's laws* (v.8c). It was true that the Jews did not worship the king's pagan gods. But it was a devious untruth that all the Jews were not law-abiding. This was a perversion of the facts. Did Mordecai not show to the contrary that he was a loyal subject of the king by reporting an attempt to assassinate the king? The Jews had different laws and customs but to generalize and charge them for being outright law-breakers in the kingdom was absolutely untrue.

Haman's final argument is that *therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them* (v.8d). These "certain people" should not be tolerated any more and the king should not let them continue to remain in the kingdom for they were of no use to him. This is a great lie. The LORD God had instructed them that when they were taken captive into Babylon they were to work for the welfare of the country.³ Extra-biblical historical evidence testifies that Haman's charge is not

³ Jeremiah 28:7 Nevertheless hear thou now this word that I speak in thine ears, and in the ears of all the people.

true.⁴ This last statement (v. 8d) seems to persuade the king to give his approval. He could not allow any potential rebellion in his kingdom.

Haman moved in to realize his diabolical plan. He asked the king in a polite way, *if it please the king let it be written that they may be destroyed*, and suspecting the king might be thinking of the cost of carrying out the plan, Haman quickly added that he would *pay ten thousand talents of silver* for the whole operation. This was a very great sum of money. This indicates that Haman was a very rich man. Why so generous? After all the king could well afford to pay to get rid of a dissident minority group in his kingdom. Had Haman already calculated how much he would stand to gain by confiscating the belongings and treasures of the Jews? It was difficult not to be tempted. Greed is one of the evils of men. The more they have the more they want. Haman would personally credit the money into the king's treasury (v.9). The king needed not to pay a dime. The king, without asking any question or conducting any investigation to ascertain the truth, *took his ring from his hand, and gave unto Haman*. A word which deserves mentioning here is that the divine author shows an utter displeasure for Haman by mentioning again that he was *the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the Jews' enemy* (v.10b)! The king said to Haman

⁴ The discovery in 1893 of an archive of Murashu Sons of Nippur consisting of 730 tablets from the period immediately following the time Xerxes show that a great number of the diaspora Jews made good in the land of their adoption (John C. Whitcomb, Esther, p.70)

that he could keep *the ten thousand talents of silver*; and that he could do as he liked with the people in question. Was the king genuine about not accepting the money Haman offered to him? One wonders. But the fate of all the Jews in the empire was sealed. They were doomed.

The King Decrees the Destruction of the Jews (3:12-25)

Haman wasted no time; quickly he summoned the king's scribes (lawyers) *on the thirteenth day of the first month* that is the month of Nisan to write the decree and sent it on that very day to all *the king's lieutenants, the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province* that they should take action according to the written edict (v.12). Note the three echelons of administrators who were responsible for implementing the decree. It was speedily *sent by post* to all the provinces in the empire. There was a *horse-postal system*. In those days this was their courier service, which was the best and most efficient.

The written contents of the decree *signed, sealed and sent* was that on the 13th of Adar, the twelfth month, all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women were to be destroyed, killed and caused to perish, and to confiscate all their belongings. All the said officials were to publicly announce to all the people and that they should be ready to obey the king's command. This decree once issued could not be revoked. While the letters were being sent to all parts of the

empire, *the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed* (v.15). The announcement was made on the 13th of Nisan. This date was the eve of the day when all the Jews observed the Passover. They commemorated and celebrated their mighty deliverance from bondage and oppression in Egypt. Imagine how the announcement of the decree would affect their heart and mind? The people in Shushan were confused and perplexed, but the two most powerful men in the empire were drinking and making merry, while the Jews were grieving and sorrowing.

In comparison and contrast with the previous two feasts, the first one ended in tragedy in the banishment of Vashti, the pagan queen; and the second feast ended in celebration of the crowning of Esther, a Jewess as queen.

This third drinking feast by Ahasuerus and Haman celebrated the impending destruction of the Jews. Haman was a wicked and evil man. He was determined to kill all the Jews, a people whom the one true and living God had loved and chosen to be His possession. God would not be mocked.

PRACTICAL VALUE

There are some valuable lessons of life that we can learn from the examples and mistakes of others. Mordecai's pride in not bowing to Haman was self-serving. Although Haman was an enemy of the Jews, he had not planned to destroy all the Jews. As an employee in the government of king Ahasuerus, Mordecai should comply with the king's commandment to bow down to Haman. The king did

not command his servants to bow down to Haman as if he was a god, but as an act of respect to him which was the custom of that time because of his position as Prime Minister. So Mordecai's defiance was plainly an indication of his pride and probably his hatred of Haman because of his ancestry. From this seemingly insignificant non-compliance on the part of Mordecai, a Jew, his action developed into a monumental and devastating one that threatened the whole Jewish community in the empire. Our daily action may be seen as insignificant but it can affect others and the matter be blown beyond incredible proportions. We need to be careful in what we do and how we treat others. But if it is a matter between obeying God or man, we should not fear to obey God who has the power to control any untoward consequences.

In life we should be more circumspect when dealing with serious matters. King Ahasuerus should have meticulously examined more of Haman's proposed plan to destroy a minority group of his subjects. His failure to do so resulted in great sorrow to all the Jews in his empire. Similarly, when we are in a position of authority and control, we take care that we are not guilty of dereliction of responsibility and duty. King Ahasuerus also seems to shirk his responsibility and sells his integrity for money. We should not be like the king. As Christians, we hold to the teachings of the Word of God and behave in ways that honour and glorify God, which are different from others. We must never trade such Christian beliefs and practices for money or temporal benefits.

Reversal in life's situations and conditions can happen instantly and without warning. One moment we can

be celebrating a moment of triumph but the next moment this delight can turn to tragedy. The Jews never had a better time when Esther was made Queen of Persia. But soon their burst of exuberance and happiness turned into a nightmare when the king's decree declared that they would all be destroyed men, women, and children in about a year's time. Imagine the effect of this impending destruction it had on the Jewish people for one year! This is life and many things are beyond our control. We may enjoy the goodness of something for the moment and after that we should realize that every thing can change for the worst. Although, we are sons and daughters of God, who controls the affairs of men, and we can trust in His goodness, we must still be realistic and exercise restraint.

The ancient method of express mail by horse express system practised in Persia suggests a great idea. Christians are God's express postal system to carry out the message of salvation and condemnation to the world. God's wrath is upon His creatures who have sinned against Him, and they will all be punished in the Lake of fire to be tormented forever. But while God is holy, His love and mercy equally extend to men too. He has provided the way for sinful men to have their sins washed completely away by sincerely confessing and repenting of their sins and believing and accepting Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ, His only Begotten Son, has fully paid the penalty of sin for the world, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). AMEN