

LESSON 22

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 discussion with the king was happening on the 13th day of the first month, and verse 13 tells us that the 13th day of the 12th month was the date of destruction for the Jews. Again, the most likely use of the lots we saw earlier had been to choose that particular day and that particular month for the attack against the Jews.

If we are looking for God in this book, then perhaps we get a glimpse in the month and day chosen for the Jews' destruction. The 12th month would have been the latest possible month that the lot could have chosen, and the thirteenth day was considered an unlucky one by both the Babylonians and Persians.

Are we seeing a random toss of the dice, or are we seeing 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.”

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. This decree would likely have caused many Jews to run for their lives, leaving their property behind - both relieving Haman of their presence (as he wanted) and allowing Haman to confiscate their abandoned property (as he also wanted).

This edict calling for the destruction of the Jews is sent out on the 13th day of the first month, which is ironically the eve of the Passover (Numbers 28:16) - the day before the Jews would celebrate their freedom from Egyptian bondage.

But there is no mention of the Passover anywhere in this book. Did the Jews even remember it? Did they celebrate it? Esther almost certainly did not, at least not openly.

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 Queen 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 the Jews, it could also happen to us. And if other Jews had been living like Queen Esther, then perhaps the people were wondering who these Jews were! Did they know any Jews?

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 the situation of all mankind.

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 Esther has also always been very meaningful to the church for the same reason.

And the church has also faced a threat of extinction by a foreign power. We see that, for example, in the conflict between the church and Rome in the first century.

The Roman emperors ordered 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. And that situation has been repeated throughout history.

We can turn to Esther for comfort that God loves his people and will protect and preserve his people. And we can turn to Revelation to see the simple theme of that book - we win! Despite the power and might of Rome, we win! And that is true no matter who takes the place of Rome in our own day and time.

Daniel and Revelation and Esther have the same central theme - we win!

But does “winning” mean we won’t face persecution and death in this life? No. In fact the opposite is true - winning **may** require that we do face death and persecution in this life. We may be physically delivered (as with Daniel and Esther) or we may not (as with the first century martyrs).

Revelation 2:10 - Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

1 John 5:4 - For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.

Romans 8:31-39 - What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the message of Daniel. That is the message of Revelation. And that is the message of 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.

Was Mordecai now regretting his failure to honor Haman?

There is no indication here 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.) And perhaps if Mordecai had bowed down to Haman, then Haman would have just found some other reason to move against the Jews. This ethnic hatred seems to have run both ways, and is usually the case with ethnic hatred.

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 the tearing of clothes 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, unlike Mordecai 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. The others were no doubt shocked by this edict against them seemingly coming out of the blue. Did Mordecai explain it to anyone, or did he act like he was just as perplexed as they were?

In verse 2, we see great mourning; we see fasting; we see weeping; we see wailing; and we see sackcloth and ashes. What don't we see anywhere in verse 2? We don't see any mention of prayer.

As we have said, the book of Esther omits direct references to God perhaps in order to highlight God's 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 to God in this hour of crisis.

These verses are the low point in the narrative. Death seems certain – unless a deliverer can be found. But who could that be? We know the answer when it comes to our own deliverance. Verse 4 answers that question for the deliverance at issue here, and 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 perhaps they witnessed her reaction. And one of them carried the clothing she sent 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 seem to have still been very close, although they also seem to have carefully 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.”

The phrase “to know” in verse 5 is important.

There is a contrast running throughout this book between those who know and those who do not know.

- The king does not know all that Haman is 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 throughout Esther, but we shouldn't limit it just to Esther. Isn't it a contrast that runs throughout the Bible - a distinction between those who know and those who do not know when it comes to a life and death matter?

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. And we need to proclaim that knowledge to all who will hear it.

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 have met in such a place without drawing any 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.

Verse 7 may suggest that Mordecai told Esther what had caused the decree to be issued, but we are not certain that he did.

Mordecai also instructed the eunuch to "charge" Esther to go to the king and plead with him on behalf of "her" people.

And there in verse 8 we have the central question for Queen Esther in this book that bears here name - **who were "her" people?**

Was Esther Jewish or was Esther Persian? And if she had one foot in each camp, into which camp would she now jump when forced to make a decision?

And if Esther did what Mordecai commanded, then her secret would be out! Wasn't Mordecai the same one who had earlier 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 this terrible edict! Revealing her identity as a Jew would make her an easy target in the treacherous Persian court. Many, no doubt, (perhaps including Vashti!) were looking for a way to get Esther out of the picture. This fact, if revealed, would give them a huge opening to do just that.

How would Esther respond? Esther had to decide who she was – was she Esther or was she Hadassah? Who were “her” people?

When we studied Daniel, we talked about “Daniel moments.” A “Daniel moment” is a moment when we are given an opportunity to stand up and let the entire world know whose side we are on. Esther is having a Daniel moment here, or perhaps we should now call it an Esther moment!

We need to pray that we, too, will be given such Daniel or Esther moments! Every Christian has had at least one Esther moment because that is the choice demanded by the gospel, and that is the choice we declared to the world when we made the good confession. That choice to identify ourselves with the people of God defines who we are. That choice answers the question: **who are my 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.

2 Timothy 2:19 - Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

Esther moments will come again and again throughout our lives. Often they will come unexpectedly and they will 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. When an Esther moment comes in my life, do I stand up, or do I keep my seat?

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 Esther 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 very 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? An irrevocable no is a difficult thing to get around!

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 Esther's secret was already out.

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 Esther had cooled. Perhaps the king was ready for another queen, and, if so, perhaps the king 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. For example, 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, you repeatedly disobeyed 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 that 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 Mordecai heaps the 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 Mordecai was. He certainly got Esther to act, but was his motive just self-preservation, or did Mordecai recognize something much bigger than himself was at stake? God knew that – did Mordecai know that?

In countless lessons and sermons, 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 of things at the end of the book – but is Mordecai on top of things with God or just on top of things 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 evidence, but we do not know what they are thinking. And 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 do.

1 Corinthians 2:11 – For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?

The “time such as this” in verse 14 had come upon them because of Mordecai's disobedience to King Xerxes. And remember that Esther's current position came about because of Vashti's disobedience to King Xerxes. Esther herself is about to appear before the king unbidden. For such a powerful king, Xerxes seems to have had trouble getting people to do what he wants them to do!

Mordecai tells Esther that she is in danger no matter what she does. She is in danger if she acts, and she is in danger if she fails to act.

Why was Mordecai so certain that Esther would perish if she failed to act? After all, her identity remained a secret among the Persians.

Mordecai's statement to Esther is a little unsettling when we consider it closely. Mordecai understands that Esther's life may be in peril if she acts, but Mordecai is certain Esther will perish if she fails to act.

Was Mordecai invoking a divine judgment upon her if she failed to act for her people? Or was Mordecai, as some suggest, threatening to reveal Esther's identity as Jew if she failed to act. How did Esther understand Mordecai's statement? Did she see a veiled threat? We are not told.

Another, perhaps more likely, explanation is that Mordecai may just have felt certain that Esther's secret would not be a secret for very long.

Verse 16 suggests that other Jews knew who Esther was, and her servants may also have known, with at least one of them (the courier she sent to Mordecai) almost certainly knowing. Once the killing started, the other Jews who knew Esther would likely turn to Esther for help. And so Esther could not avoid danger by remaining silent. (Yet another lesson for us!)

#ezra-esther