

Esther 06-03-21A

This is Tuesday, the 21st of March 2006. We are in the book of Esther, picking up in chapter three. We take a moment at the beginning of our study to pray individually and then together so that God can bless our time in his word.

Shall we pray? Father, we know that the fulfillment of your plan in our lives is not by might or by power, but by your spirit. We thank you for the gift of the spirit that is ours because of the Lord Jesus Christ and his fulfillment of your plan and purpose, his obedience even to the death on the cross. And he now intercedes on our behalf and is preparing to come and gather us to himself and to take us to that place that he has prepared.

We pray that our study tonight will prepare us for that day, that in the time that remains to us, we can not only learn the theory, but also the practice of the truths that we find in your word. And that this particular passage that we look at this evening will make an impression on us and enable us to live more fully and more completely as you would have us to live. We ask it in Jesus name.

Amen. As I said, we resume tonight in Esther chapter three. We have had three of the four major characters in this story introduced to us in the first two chapters, and we know a little bit about each one.

First of all, Ahasuerus or Xerxes, the Persian king. We know quite a bit about him from looking at history and his excursions and experiences with the Greeks, with the women in his family and in his periphery and most especially his erstwhile queen Vashti. We also are aware that there are two people in view from the people of God, from the nation of Israel, specifically Judah and specifically within that the tribe of Benjamin.

And this is Mordecai and Esther. We know a little bit about them now. And the fourth character is now introduced to us in chapter three.

After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hamadathah, the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. And all the king's servants who were within the king's gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. Now, we've already seen that Mordecai sits in the king's gate.

And the phrase has to do with government, has to do with the cabinet. In fact, archaeologists have worked even just recently over in the area where this temple stood and have found a giant court. It's near the entrance to the palace, but it's a huge courtyard.

And this is believed to be the king's gate. This is a place where the royal officials did their business. And so we know from this that Mordecai is not just a lurker.

He's not a passerby. He's not a idler just leaning against the wall. It says he's sitting in the king's

gate.

He is a government official. And this administrative area, building really, is where these people did their work. This would be sort of like one of the federal buildings in the capital.

Now, I want to clear something up because I made a little bit of a hash of it last time. And that is in verse 20 of the last chapter. It says, when the virgins were gathered together a second time, Mordecai sat within the king's gate.

Now, Esther had not revealed her family and her people just as Mordecai had charged her. For Esther obeyed the command of Mordecai as when she was brought up by him. And Esther is now the queen of the kingdom of Israel.

The gathering of the virgins that resulted in Esther becoming queen has already come and gone. And this seems to say that virgins are gathered together a second time. In fact, that's what it literally does say.

And I puzzled over this and wrestled with it. I thought, well, maybe it's a second reference back to the first gathering. And that's what it is.

But I don't think I made that very clear. In fact, I'm sure I did not. One of two things is true.

This verse is left out in the Greek translation, the Septuagint, either because it was too confusing or because it did not even exist in the copy of the Hebrew scriptures that the Septuagint translators used. But one of two things is true. Either Ahasuerus, after a period of time measured in years, decided he had had so much fun the first time around getting Esther that he was going to have another convocation of virgins and pick another queen for which we have absolutely zero evidence.

But that's what it seems to say. Virgins gathered a second time. Why else would they be gathered? You can't make this work with the concubines or you can't think of any other good reason for virgins to congregate.

But some commentators think that this is just a reflection of the degenerate nature of Ahasuerus, but it's not referred to again. Here's another suggestion that I ran across. I really think this has merit.

It is possible that verse 19 is not really in the text at all. And let me explain. You notice verse 20, which is a good, solid verse.

It says now Esther had not revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her. Have we heard this before? Look back up at verse 10. Esther had not revealed her people or family for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it.

Right now in verse 20, we have this same statement made a second time. What could have happened, and there's well-known documented cases where this happens, is early, early on in

the history of this manuscript, somebody was reading along and you know how a lot of us like to mark up our Bible, we'll make a note in the margin. So someone is reading along and they get to verse 20 and it says, now Esther had not revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her.

And they say, hey, wait a minute, this is the second time it has said this. And so the word shanit or shanit was written out in the margin, second time. Now, second time for what? The second time that it's stated that Esther did not reveal her people and her family.

When was the first time? When the virgins were gathered together. When is the second time? When Mordecai sat in the gate. And see, all of those components are in that verse 19.

And over time, this marginal note, second time for this statement, first time when the virgins were gathered together, verse 10, second time when Mordecai sits in the gate, verse 20 and 21. And this inadvertently, as copies were made, got rolled into the text. And I really think that that's the most likely explanation for this.

There's no further reference to any virgins being around. It's immaterial to the story. This is a very well told tale.

It's economical. It doesn't waste words. And this would seem to be a meaningless and unnecessary and kind of distracting detail because everybody's scratching their heads.

And they have for a couple of thousand years now saying, what do you mean the virgins were gathered a second time? But I think a second time means this is the second time it's stated. Now, why would that stand out in someone's mind as they read the text? Well, for one thing, it was just 10 verses ago that it was stated or nine, actually. And secondly, the order is reversed here.

The first time it says Esther had not revealed her people or her family. This time it says Esther not revealed her family and her people. And with this reversal of order, it emphasizes the fact that now more so than the than the people, it's Mordecai that is in view.

At first, the idea is she hasn't revealed that she's a Jewess, that she's from Israel. Here, the emphasis is more she hasn't revealed her her family, her connection to Mordecai. This is still unknown.

And as Mordecai becomes known as a Jew in this coming chapter, it doesn't reflect on her because the connection between Mordecai and Esther is unknown. So anyway, I thought I would clear that up. I believe that verse 19 is actually an early note on the text, and it's a helpful note in the sense that it points out something that we also observe.

It is important to the story that Esther is obedient and does not reveal this information. She obeyed the command of Mordecai as when she was brought up by him. So then we resume.

And again, if 19 is a legitimate verse, we have some repetition here because once again, we have the exact same statement. Mordecai was sitting within the king's gate. Two of the king's eunuchs, Big Than and Tiresh, doorkeepers, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

The matter became known to Mordecai, who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. Now, these men are high functionaries in the government. They are doorkeepers.

They're in security. Mordecai sitting in the king's gate. This tells us something.

Mordecai has exposure, access to these men so that he becomes aware of their plot. They are government functionaries. He's a government functionary.

Mordecai has his little channels of communication, his little network that penetrates within the palace. That's how he communicated with Esther during her time in the during her year of preparation. And so Mordecai is in the government.

These men are in the government. Mordecai becomes aware of their plot. And because he sits in the king's gate, Mordecai also continues to have a relatively convenient, surreptitious means of communicating with Esther.

So why do we care about this? How did this all come about? God's superintending hand. And this is one of the points we concluded with last time, isn't it? You and I are enmeshed in circumstances. I am sure right now as I speak to you that you have circumstances.

You have situations. You have people with whom you rub elbows, with whom you relate. You have family.

You have friends. You have co-workers. You have whatever it may be in work, in school.

You're interrelated with people. Those relationships and your position in those relationships is not an accident. It's not a happenstance.

It's not just the result of millions of years of evolution and rolling of the dice that brought you and me to where we are today. God superintends. God knows and God coordinates.

And it is no accident that Mordecai sits in the king's gate. It is no accident that Esther is now the queen. It is no accident that the plot of Big Fan and Tiresh comes to the notice of Mordecai.

It's not an accident. God made sure that Mordecai became aware of this and that he was able to communicate it to Esther, who was able to communicate it to the king, and that it was noted because this is critical. If this doesn't happen, the rest of the story will not unfold.

As it's going to unfold. And so our narrator here is showing us in advance the providential arrangement of circumstances. That's a phrase I hope we can all remember tonight after this

lesson is over.

Providential arrangement of circumstances. What do I mean by providential? This is Providence with a capital P, right? This is one of the names whereby we refer generally to God. Providential arrangement.

There is a design. There is a purpose. There is reason behind the things that happen to us.

Providential arrangement of circumstances, situations. So, he tells Esther. Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name.

This is recorded in the books. An inquiry is made. These men, it says they were hanged on a gallows.

Now, this literally says they were hanged or affixed to the wood. And it's explicitly in the Septuagint rendering. The language used is very similar to that used for crucifixion.

Were these men crucified? No. But hanging by the neck until dead is an unknown form of execution at this time in history. People were typically impaled or lashed to a stake and left to die or whatever.

Most scholars believe that this is a reference to being impaled. But the word gallows, there was really no such invention as a gallows with a hangman's noose and so on as we're familiar with. But the bottom line is they were executed and it had something to do with wood.

It says they were hanged on the wood, pretty much. The Persian Empire specialized in impaling people with stakes and posts. Darius once impaled three thousand men using this method.

So this all leads up to the introduction of Haman. And right away we see a contrast because here's Mordecai, who has essentially saved the king's life and thwarted this devious plot within the ranks of the security detail, the secret service. We're supposed to guard the king and here's the very ones who are going to do away with him.

And they are successfully found out, prosecuted and executed. But nothing is done for Mordecai. We hear no more about it.

And that's unusual in the ancient world. Now in chapter three, after these things, Ahasuerus promotes Haman, the son of Hamadath, the Agagite, and we're not told why. He has advanced and his seat is set above all the princes who are with him.

He is the head guy in the king's gate. Everybody else is made subservient to him. All the servants within the gate bow and pay homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him.

But we have no idea why. It goes back to this sort of fickle and unpredictable affection that Ahasuerus seems to have. He doesn't seem to be a very good leader, a very good ruler.

He's not real good with people. We saw this in chapter one, where he's trying to curry and bribe everyone's favor. Mordecai would not bow or pay homage.

And we know from what is said later, that this relates to his identity as an Israelite. The king's servants within the gate say, why do you transgress the king's command? They spoke to him daily, would not listen. They told him to Haman to see where the Mordecai's words would stand.

Mordecai had told them he was a Jew. All of this time, nothing about the Jewishness of Esther and Mordecai has ever come up. But at this point, it becomes public knowledge that Mordecai is a Jew.

At what point? At the point that he does not bow to Haman. So we infer that these two things are linked. He does not bow to Haman, and it has to do with his identity as a Jew.

We have further confirmation of this in verse five. When Haman saw Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, he was filled with wrath. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai.

So instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, all the people of Mordecai. It's a function of who they are. Now, have you ever been discouraged from doing what ought to be done? Because people say, look at the effect it's going to have.

Look at the impact it's going to have on others who are associated with you, who are related to you. It's going to reflect badly. In some cases, this is a good motivation.

You say, well, you shouldn't go to school and be disobedient. It's going to reflect badly on your parents. You shouldn't go out.

And I think if I go out and hand somebody a card and says, well, hello there, I'm Sam Hall, and I'm the pastor of Grace and Truth Bible Church, and then I go get falling down drunk in the bar and get thrown out through a window or something, it reflects on more than just me, doesn't it? And they say, well, I wonder what kind of church that is, where this yo-yo is a ne'er-do-well. Oftentimes, we realize that the things we say and the things we do reflect on a group larger than ourselves with which we are closely associated. And sometimes that's a good thing.

Paul the Apostle says, you have not so learned Christ. Your behavior reflects on the Christian community. He tells Timothy, don't let anyone despise your youth.

Don't let anyone construe your good for evil and so on, because it reflects, it makes a difference. And this is a legitimate consideration. But what if there's a difficult thing to do that is the right thing to do? And people start saying, well, if you do that, it's going to mess these people up over here.

And they start using that as a discouragement from doing what is right. Someone could have come up to Mordecai and said, boy, you know, if you tell these people you're a Jew and you're not bowing to Haman, you're going to get us all in trouble. And that's exactly what happens.

Now, is it right or is it wrong for Mordecai to defy, to transgress the king's command? We are told all through the Bible, obey those that have the rule over you. Here's a clear rule that is made by the king and Mordecai, who is a government functionary and has probably taken some sort of an oath of loyalty or whatever, refuses to bow. And he says it is because I am an Israelite.

What is the inevitable conclusion that we draw from this? Whatever it is that Mordecai is asked to do, he cannot do because his identity as an Israelite comes first. What is identity as an Israelite? It is worship of God. It is obedience to the law of Moses.

And in Mordecai's eyes, to bow before Haman is a sin. And it doesn't matter what kind of law or what kind of rule or what kind of command the king gives. If it is a command to sin, Mordecai will not do it.

And people say over and over, day after day after day, Mordecai, Mordecai, you're messing up the works. You're rocking the boat. You're getting everybody in trouble.

Why will you not do this? He says, look, there is a reason why I live the way I live. There is a reason why I decide the way that I decide. And this is it.

And he tells them, I am a Jew. And there are certain things that Jews who are obedient to their God cannot do. Now, all of that we infer, we understand, we read between the lines because it's not explicitly stated here, but nothing else makes sense.

You could say, well, Mordecai is just a cranky old guy and he doesn't like Haman. Well, why would God include that in his inspired word? What sort of spiritual application do we bring away from that? God is going to bless you even if you get mad at somebody and decide you're not going to do what they say. It just doesn't fit.

It doesn't justify its inclusion in the word of God. So Mordecai is standing on principle here. It is a difficult stand.

It is easy for people to argue. You are going to hurt many people other than yourself by doing this, but Mordecai does it anyway. And he explains that it is his identity as one of the people of God that forces him to this action or lack of action.

So because of this, Haman seeks to destroy all the Jews. And you can see everybody saying, see there, Mordecai, I told you this was a big mistake. Now look at what's going to happen.

You've gotten us all in trouble. Now, does this ever happen, you know, other places? I can think about times where, you know, you're in a group at school. Somebody says, well, you know, if

you say what needs to be said, if you do what needs to be done, you're going to rat us all out.

You're going to get us all in trouble. You know, just be quiet and conform, go along with the crowd, don't make waves. That is not the basis for determining legitimate action.

How do you and I determine whether what we do is right or wrong? Is it based on what the crowd says or what the crowd likes or what the crowd thinks they will benefit from? Of course, the crowd doesn't want you to do anything that's going to harm them. But we ultimately all have to ask ourselves the question, do I live to please the crowd or do I live to please the Lord? And if the crowd doesn't like it, when I do something that is required of me because I am living to please God, tough. The crowd ought to be living to please God and they wouldn't be in this kind of fix.

Right. Who is going to prevail? Who is going to be sitting behind the desk determining fates at the judgment seat of Christ? Is God going to be taking a vote? OK, all of Sam's friends, please assemble here. What shall we give Sam? Shall we let Sam in the kingdom? Big chorus of boos.

Shall we have Sam chop cotton in Afghanistan? Big chorus of cheers. That's not how it's going to work, is it? And if the crowd doesn't like it, none of us, you can fill your name in that blank, God is not going to take a poll. He's not going to ask for a show of hands.

He's not going to have the applause meter running to see what the eternal future will hold for you and for me. The only thing the crowd can affect is a few moments of our life in the present. And even that usually doesn't last.

Even when you gain the approbation of the crowd, it is ethereal and fadeth quickly away. It really isn't much better to please them or to tick them off. It doesn't really change your pay.

It doesn't lengthen your life. It doesn't contribute anything to the eternal future. So Mordecai disregards whatever the effect may or may not be on the rest of the Jews.

And he says, I'm a Jew. Jews don't bow to godless, pagan, Amalekite goofballs, no matter what the king says. So Haman obviously didn't like this.

And he sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. Now, all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom, this isn't just Shushan. This isn't just the immediate environs of Persia.

Hapless villagers back in Samaria and in what's left of Judah and all over the 127 satrapies in the Persian Empire to which they have been scattered are going to look over their shoulder and see some guy with a big old sword coming over to take their head off over this. And they're going to say, what? You mean because some guy in Shushan didn't do the right thing? You're killing me? And they say, yep. What is the motivation for this? Why would the Persian Empire go to the trouble? Well, let's read on.

In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast poor. Now, twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, when was Esther made queen? Do you remember? Which year? Pop quiz. Everybody fails.

Seventh year. It was the seventh year. So how long has Esther been queen now? Five whole years.

I can even do that math. She's been queen for five years. Mordecai's been sitting in the gate five years.

This is the first month, the month of Nisan. This is April. It's the springtime.

They cast poor before Haman to determine the day and the month until it fell in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. So Haman goes to the king. Certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom.

This is going to be a bloodbath. This is going to be an extermination. This is going to be a purge, ethnic cleansing, all because of Mordecai.

It's a lot of baggage for him. People say, Mordecai, you're just proud. Look at the trouble you're causing.

Well, what do we take away from this? What's right is right. What's wrong is wrong. Let the chips fall where they may.

If we have faith in God, we trust that if we understand His word and if we are seeking to live in the light of it, we have to do what's right. Come what may. And sometimes it can seem very dark, but it's just a test of our faith.

It's a test of our obedience. Do we really believe that God can preserve and protect and defend and support and provide for us no matter what? The key thing is be sure that you are actually acting in accordance with the word of God and you're not just being a pig-headed ding-dong, which a lot of people are and do in the name of Christianity. This is why it's important for us to stay in the word and be sure that we're right.

And when we're right, be right to the hilt. Be right unto death. Well, it's a good place for us to pause and take our break.

When we come back, we'll see what the King lets Haman do.