

Prejudice Personified

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0 : 00] When we studied Esther chapter 2 last week, we met Mordecai and his cousin Esther.

! They were two Jews living in exile in the empire of King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes. Esther was raised by Mordecai after her parents died.

Because she was so beautiful, Esther was chosen to compete in the beauty pageant for replacing Queen Vashti. We know that Esther did more than compete. She actually won.

And when the king met Esther, he stopped the contest, he forgave some taxes, and he held a feast in her honor. We'll see a feast repeatedly throughout Esther to mark significant events.

Throughout the significant selection process, Esther kept her identity as a Jew a secret, and that was based upon Mordecai's advice. At the end of chapter 2, what seemed to be a footnote set the stage for the remainder of the book.

[1 : 05] Go ahead and look at chapter 2, verses 19 through 23. We'll read these for some review. And these verses follow Esther's selection as queen. Mordecai apparently has been elevated to a position as judge, perhaps because of Esther's influence.

And Esther chapter 2, 19 through 23 say this, Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.

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. In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Big Than and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

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. 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.

Saving the king's life should have resulted in recognition for Mordecai. The Persian kings kept careful lists of those who had done them a favor, so that no good deed would go unrewarded.

[2 : 24] Strangely, though, this particular good deed did go unrewarded at the time. It's likely that Mordecai spent weeks and months waiting in vain for some token of appreciation that never came.

As we get further into the book, we'll see that the king's initial failure to reward Mordecai was all part of God's plan. Before we get to that, we have a few more chapters to study, beginning with chapter 3 tonight.

Chapter 3 is actually one of the more disgusting chapters in the Bible, because in it we see prejudice personified. So let's read all of the verses of chapter 3, and then we'll study them in a little more detail.

Based upon the reference to the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus' reign in verse 7, most of the events in chapter 3 take place about five years after chapter 2.

So here are the verses in chapter 3. It says, Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, Why do you transgress the king's command?

[3 : 48] 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 told them that he was a Jew.

And when Haman said that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. 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. In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast pure, 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.

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.

If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it in the king's treasuries.

[5 : 06] So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, the enemy of the Jews. 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.

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. 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.

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. 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.

Immediately we see a new player in these events, and that new player, Haman, is the focus of the chapter. Verse 1 describes Haman as an Agagite, and back in chapter 2, verse 2-5 described Mordecai as the son of Jair, son of Shammai, son of Kish, a Benjamite.

[6 : 47] Because of our studies of the books of Samuel on Sunday nights, Agag and a Benjamite may sound familiar to you, so let's take a moment to remember why Agag and a Benjamite sound so familiar.

Way back in 1 Samuel chapter 10, verses 20 and 21, described King Saul as a Benjamite, the son of another Kish. Meanwhile, Agag was a king of the Amalekites, and because Haman is described as an Agagite, he had to be an Amalekite as well.

The Amalekites were descendants of Esau, and they were always bitter enemies of Israel. Sometimes they attacked Israeli villages alone, and sometimes they raided them in conjunction with other Bedouin tribes.

Their first unprovoked attack on Israel was at a place called Rephidim, when the recently emancipated slaves were leaving Egypt back in 1445 B.C. Israel had no organized army then, and they used farming implements as weapons.

Moses instructed Joshua to assemble able-bodied men to repulse the attack, and a fierce battle ensued. After Israel had run the victory, the Lord instructed Moses to write an official record of the engagement as a memorial, and from this time onward, there was intense hostility between the Israelites and the Amalekites.

[8 : 15] Fast forward to 1 Samuel chapter 15 now, and God gave these instructions in 1 Samuel 15 verses 1 through 3.

1 Samuel 15, 1 through 3 say, And Samuel said to Saul, The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel, and now therefore listen to the words of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to the destruction all that they have.

Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey. Skip down to verses 7 through 9 of 1 Samuel 15, and we see this.

It says, And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. And he took Agag, the king of the Amalekites, alive, and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword.

[9 : 18] But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatted calves and the lambs, and all that was good and would not utterly destroy them.

All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction. We know from elsewhere in the Bible that more Amalekites than Agag had to have been spared.

An Amalekite later would falsely claim that he had killed Saul, and Israel was still found fighting the Amalekites in the days of Hezekiah. Haman's ancestry then is mentioned to show that he was an enemy of the Jews by birth, and more than just personal hatred of Mordecai motivated him.

The time of Esther arrived 550 years after the death of Agag, but even this much later, Haman saw an opportunity to get revenge, and he wanted to get revenge on people who had yet to be born when the conflict between Saul and Agag occurred.

And that is why we can say that Haman was the prejudice personified. We're going to break this chapter's verses into three sections, starting with verses one through six.

[10:33] And in these verses, we see the despicable rage. The despicable rage is your first section there. Let's read verses one through six again.

They say, after these things, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. 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. Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, Why do you transgress the king's command? 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.

And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury, 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.

[11:48] So sometime between the seventh and twelfth year of Ahasuerus' reign as king, the king appointed Haman as the number two person in the kingdom. The verses don't tell us why Haman was the one selected.

A plausible selection, though, or explanation could be that the king wanted someone who would be watching for another assassination attempt against the king. Verse 1 seems to hint at that possibility when it notes that Haman's appointment came after the assassination attempt recorded in chapter 2.

Verse 2 tells us that the king required everyone to bow down and pay homage to Haman. Mordecai refused, and he refused repeatedly. Based upon the following verses, this at first sounds a lot like what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to do years earlier when the king wanted them to worship the statue that he had created.

From both scripture and recorded history outside of the Bible, though, the situation here seems to be different, though, than what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced. According to Herodotus, the Jewish historian, bowing to superiors was a normal part of the Persian court etiquette rather than being considered an act of worship.

We see other cases in scripture where people bowed down to superiors without having that act interpreted as worship. Plus, Mordecai and Esther must have paid similar homage to the king, otherwise somebody else would have their positions in the court.

[13:22] And later in the book, we'll see Esther bow down before the king. The reason for Mordecai's refusal seems more likely to be that circumstances finally reached the tipping point.

To bow to Haman, a descendant of King Agag's family was just too much for him to swallow. It would have seemed to be giving in to a hated enemy whom God had cursed.

Bowing to King Ahasuerus, the pagan authority, set over God's people by God on account of their sin was one thing, but bowing to Haman was another thing altogether.

We've already seen that Mordecai previously showed little concern over the ethical issues involved in his cousin Esther being taken into the harem of the Gentile king. Obviously, she had to face defiling food and corrupting practices, and he was the one who insisted that Esther should entirely conceal her Jewish heritage.

So, Mordecai was no Shadrach, Meshach, or Abednego. He'd been a good servant of the empire, and he was quietly obeying all of the other laws of the king, and he was committed to fitting in.

[14:31] But bowing to Haman had become a bridge too far for him. So, do you think it's better that he discovered some convictions late than never to have found any at all?

Perhaps it is better that he found some convictions late, but his line in the sand was still drawn over what seems to be a relatively secondary issue. He seems to show a sign of human nature that's been true throughout history.

Think about how Jesus complained about the Pharisees of his day when he said that they swallowed camels, but strained out gnats, and that comes from Matthew 23, 24.

We also, though, can be victims of similar thinking. We tend to strain out the wrong movies, the inappropriate clothes and hairstyles, sinful styles of music, whatever we define those to be, and any minor deviances from church traditional practice whenever and wherever we encounter them.

But at the same time, we may easily tolerate in ourselves and others around us camel-sized sins such as gossip about others or our own pride or prayerlessness.

[15:41] This is not to say that we should let the gnats slide down unchallenged. Jesus didn't mean that we should become careless about what we watch or about how we conduct ourselves. Mordecai was not necessarily wrong to refuse to bow down before Haman, but there were perhaps other places where he could have first started to show his convictions rather than shoot flies with cannonballs, which is what he's really doing here.

Regardless of whether we agree with what Haman did, we see that one person's actions can have far-reaching consequences. When Haman found out about Mordecai's refusal and his explanation for it, Haman reacted with the despicable rage that we've talked about, and he reacted with that rage against more people than just Mordecai.

He wanted to destroy every Jew in the kingdom, and we see that from verses 4 through 6.

Eliminating one individual was far too small a payback for Haman's wounded vanity.

Instead, he wanted to end all of Mordecai's people throughout the empire, and his stand for truth would have repercussions not just in his own life, but also in those of his family, his friends, and his community.

So we see here that because of what Mordecai did, the whole people group would have to pay for the actions of a single individual. Starting with verse 7, we see Haman put his extermination plan into action.

[17:07] In verses 7 through 11, Haman makes the diabolical request. The diabolical request is your second set of blanks. Let's read verses 7 through 11 again to see just how diabolical that request really was.

Starting with verse 7, it says, In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast pure, 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.

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.

If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand 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.

So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, The money is given to you and the people also to do with them as it seems good to you.

[18:30] In Haman's worldview, finding the most lucky day to carry out his scheme was important. They've discovered ancient dice in the Assyrian Empire, and that helps explain what likely happened.

Scholars believe that in the first month of the year, lots were cast to choose opportune days for important events. This would explain why Haman cast lots in the first month and chose a date so much later.

Haman starts casting these lots in the first month, which is equivalent to our late March or early April, and from this method, he settled on a date that was eleven months later.

Although we might scoff at how he settled on his date, when you think about it, our world today is not much different. Many forms of the pagan worldview pervade our modern and western culture today.

Think about how we have an increase in spiritism, of horoscopes, of magic, and various forms of oriental religion that are based on pantheism, which of course is the view that God is in everything

and everyone, and that everyone and everything is God.

[19 : 38] We also have transcendental meditation and a new age, and they are a subtle mixture designed to offer guidance that is both misplaced and wrong. People today just make those pagan influences sound more sophisticated than the writer of the book of Esther did.

But now that he's selected his date, Haman has one more obstacle to clear before he can set his plan into motion. He lacks the authority to order the massacre, but Haman works for the king who does have the authority, and Haman also knows that King Ahasuerus can be manipulated.

For proof that the king can be manipulated, just think back to chapter 1 when the seven advisors convinced the king to banish Queen Vashti. By the time the king realized that banishing Vashti was a good idea, the king had already enacted a law that even the king lacked the authority to repeal. So look again at verse 8 of chapter 3 where Haman starts his manipulation. It says, Haman's method is diabolically effective here.

He started out with a true statement. It's true that a certain people did exist who were scattered and dispersed among all the provinces. He moved from that complete truth to a half-truth.

[21 : 14] The Jews' laws were different than those of the other people groups. But Haman claimed that the Jews disobeyed the king's laws and this part of the argument was a lie.

Mordecai disobeyed one law but as a whole the Jews were law-abiding people. And then Haman finishes his argument with a complete lie. He said that tolerating the Jews was detrimental to the king.

By starting though with something that the king knew to be true Haman gave his subsequent lies some believability. Using that approach he convinced the king that the Jews were a threat that provided no value to the king.

And after that the conclusion was obvious. The rebels should be eliminated. We talked last week about how many of the Jews were prosperous. Prosperous people paid taxes and those taxes benefited the king.

King Ahasuerus may have been gullible but we know from chapter 1 how much he enjoyed his wealth and even the gullible king might ask about the loss of tax revenue. So Haman shows the extent to which he anticipated all possible objections.

[22 : 27] The destruction of the Jews would reduce the king's revenue and Haman therefore proposed to make up the king's loss from his own wealth. 10,000 talents of silver would amount to about 12 million ounces of silver to put that in perspective.

Of course we know that Haman intended to reimburse himself from the wealth confiscated from the Jews but when you think about it the 12 million ounces had to represent an attractive fortune even to a wealthy king.

I think we'd all take 12 million ounces if somebody offered us 12 million ounces of silver today too. Not knowing the precise identity of the people whom Haman wanted to exterminate and certainly unaware of Esther's membership in the group the king put a seal to Haman's decree of destruction. Verse 11 seems to imply that Xerxes declined the money Haman had promised to place in his coffers. It seems more likely though based upon precedent that he was giving Haman permission to take the spoils of the Jews for himself.

Just look at how chilling verse 11 is. Again that verse says, 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.

[23 : 45] So why do you think Ahasuerus allowed Haman to pass his decree? In the first place he didn't really care enough to find out what was really going on.

Apparently he never even inquired about who the people were or what exactly it was costing him to leave them alone. As in chapter 1 where he asked what should be done according to the law concerning Queen Vashti's disobedience here Ahasuerus cared little for the truth.

All he needed was enough reason to do what seemed in his best interest. He was the victim of flimsy logic a superficial argument that can persuade a lazy mind and he's certainly showing that he has a lazy mind.

That might be a charitable description of his mind as well. Second, as we've already mentioned, Ahasuerus was motivated by simple greed. When he thought about the potential financial benefit against the cost of signing off to destruction of an obscure unidentified people there was no contest. The result was that he handed over his power to an evil man who used it to plot genocide. So Xerxes or Ahasuerus as before was easily influenced by his officials.

[25 : 00] He accepted Haman's advice and he acquiesced to it. By giving his signet ring to Haman Xerxes was allowing the enemy of the Jews as Haman was now called to send out a proclamation to the empire in the king's name.

We've seen the despicable rage and the diabolical request in the last verses of the chapter verses 12 through 15 we see the disconcerted reaction.

The disconcerted reaction is what we see there and this disconcerted reaction comes from the citizens of Susa. So let's read starting with verse 12 through the end of the chapter.

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. Letters were sent by couriers to all of 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.

[26 : 25] A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all peoples to be ready for that day. 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.

Verse 12 tells us that the edict was signed on the thirteenth day of the first month. That date has been calculated by historians to be April 7th 474 BC.

In that year the fourteenth day or the next day was the first day of Passover and of course we know Passover is the celebration of deliverance from Egypt for the Israelites.

Do you see some irony there? It's really unmistakable because the day before celebrating freedom from Egyptian oppression a decree had been signed that ordered their very destruction.

The extermination of the Jews was made explicit by the words destroy kill and annihilate and the decree extended to everyone young and old men women and children.

[27 : 42] Verse 13 tells us that the day of the slaughter itself was set for the thirteenth day of the month of Adar and the month of Adar corresponds to February or March and so historians have calculated that date to be March 7th 473 BC and by allowing Haman to do this the king had unwittingly approved the provision that would kill his own queen the target date for the massacre is 11 months away the royal mail carried the king's dispatches by courier via a pony express type of system to the farthest bounds of the empire the couriers were part of the famous postal service organized by Cyrus one of the predecessors of King Xerxes and they were stationed at 24 hour intervals when you think about it though the most horrifying side in the narrative so far is verse 15 the death document had been issued and the king and Haman sat down to drink the text doesn't use the king's name but it does mention

Haman by name and therefore it highlights the fact that this program was his idea the last part of verse 15 is very revealing we see that the king was pleased with the way in which his new high official had handled his affairs we know Haman was pleased the issue that had noddod him for so long was about to be resolved but while the collaborators celebrated with the suitable supply of the royal wine the city is perplexed over the cause for such a decree Haman's bloodthirstiness along with Xerxes seeming indifference to such atrocities was incredible even to a sophisticated society which was used to cruel behavior after all they might have been thinking if the Jews are going now maybe other minority populations will be the next to be annihilated once you start down that path it's hard to know where it's going to stop despite being such a dark passage though chapter 3 should remind us of several things first it shows us the consequences of sin bowing to Haman was only a secondary issue and it was an issue only because of the past failure on the part of

God's people way back in the day of King Saul if King Saul had carried out his commission properly in the first place there wouldn't have been any agagites left to threaten his descendants past sins have a way of coming back repeatedly to haunt us and sometimes they haunt the children after us how many difficult ethical decisions over which we agonize for hours wouldn't even be confronting us if it were not for past sins we know that people's lives can become horribly complicated to the point where the wisdom of Solomon is needed to know how to proceed but in many cases the most substantial complications come as a direct byproduct of past sin the chapter the chapter also shows how depraved humans can be without God ruling their lives Haman is the obvious example for this

but King Ahasuerus is another example in verse 11 we saw the king tell Haman to do whatever Haman wanted to do in verse 15 we saw the king sitting down to drink after his authority had been used to order the extermination of an entire people group the chapter also reminds us that God is in control after all just one small example of this is the method that Haman used to select the date for the massacre the book of Esther's early readers would have seen the irony in the method because Haman used lots to determine the date Proverbs 1633 says this Proverbs 1633 says the lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord at this point in the story though Haman thought he was in control we in the book's original readers know who really was in control and by controlling the lots God gave the Jews 11 months to plan a response next the chapter without explicitly saying it invites us to consider how different our true king is from the human king just think about things from God's perspective

God himself has far more reason to act against us and our families than Ahasuerus did against the Jews after all we really have not kept God's law and we have refused to bow to bow down before him and to submit to him as we ought and we refuse to give him the honor that is his right as our creator it's actually true in our case that it's not God's prophet to tolerate us because we're born rebels against him and against his goodness and grace we also have an enemy Satan who would happily present plenty of valid reasons why we shouldn't be allowed to live we saw that in the book of Job for example God could easily sign an edict for our destruction that could be legitimate against us but that's not how our God the true sovereign king chooses to deal with people look at what our king did instead he didn't listen to the case that Satan brings against us instead he's taken his own dear son the one who is precious to him as a signet ring and has handed him over to his enemies to buffet in effect

[33 : 26] God said Satan do with my son as seems good to you let him be punished for their sin but let his people go in other words destroy kill and annihilate Jesus because sin must be paid for plunder his few goods and distribute them among those who are putting him to death go ahead and torture and mock him and execute him on a cross but as for my people you shall not touch them so instead of letters of death winging their way speedily to all corners of the empire in every language now the gospel of life goes to every tribe and nation in their own tongues as the gospel penetrates our hearts we actually become ourselves living letters from god we're god's mail delivery system to bring his message of life to our neighbors and even to the furthest nations we we carry we carry the aroma of christ everywhere we go as it says in second corinthians 2 15 also in second corinthians chapter 3 verses 2 and 3 are where paul wrote you you yourselves are our letter of recommendation written on our hearts to be known and read by all and you show that you are a letter from christ delivered by us written not with ink but with the spirit of the living god not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts nothing and no one can evade the reality of god's law we all deserve to die on the account of our transgressions and we've all earned the wages of our sin we know that death is god's verdict on all who are outside of christ whether they're male or female young or old adult or child but by god's grace those in christ have that awful sentence lifted because he has taken their place and to us comes the glorious good news of the free gift of god which is eternal life through his son that of course is a reference to romans 623 which says for the wages of sin is death but the free gift of god is eternal life in christ jesus our lord