

Lesson 5 Commentary

Day 7: For Such a Time as This

Esther 3–4

Haman Plots to Destroy the Jews

Throughout Esther, Haman is referred to as “Haman the Agagite” (3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24). There are two possible reasons for this reference. One is that Haman came from the province of Agag in Media. A second view, which most scholars seem to prefer, is that Haman descended from Agag, king of the Amalekites. When Saul was king of Israel, God ordered him to completely destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:2-3). But Saul did not fully obey the Lord’s command. He took King Agag alive.



Think about partial obedience. If Saul had fully obeyed God, the Jews would not have had Haman as their enemy centuries later. God does not allow us to choose the portions of His commands we will obey. In Saul’s case, the personal consequence of his rebellion was the loss of his throne. But disobedience has far-reaching consequences—it rarely affects just one person. Millions of Jews living in Esther’s day were nearly annihilated because of Saul’s partial obedience.

Haman was one of King Ahasuerus’s favorite courtiers during the time after Esther became queen (see 3:1, 10). Haman had all seven characteristics that Proverbs 6:16-19 tells us God hates: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness and one who sows discord among brothers. In spite of Haman’s evil characteristic, the king commanded all officials to honor Haman by kneeling before him. Mordecai, however, refused to pay such homage.

It is not clear why Mordecai refused to bow. Some scholars suggest that he refused in obedience to the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:5). However, it was not uncommon for other Israelites to bow before kings (see Genesis 23:12; 1 Samuel 24:8; 1 Kings 1:16; 1 Chronicles 29:20). He seems to have willingly revealed his Jewish identity to the royal officials, even though he had instructed Esther to keep her Jewish identity secret. The Scriptures do not say why he did this. Haman’s rage toward Mordecai the Jew spread to include the entire Jewish population. Consequently, Haman made plans to kill the Jews throughout the whole Persian Empire.

In the month of Nisan, the first month of the year, “they cast the Pur (that is, they cast lots).” The “*Pur*” represents the Babylonian word *puru* (“lot” or “fate”). The lot fell on the 13th day of the 12th month. There would be 11 months between the edict and the destruction of the Jews. Because the Persians were superstitious, they would not have considered changing the date they had selected by casting the lot.

After he determined the date, Haman sought Ahasuerus’s permission to destroy the Jews. He offered the king 10,000 talents of silver if he agreed to the plan. The Greek historian Herodotus recorded that this sum of money would have amounted to about two-thirds of the empire’s budget. The financial benefit to Persia would be great.

Haman did not explicitly identify the Jews. Instead, he described the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws that separated them from Persian society (see Deuteronomy 4:8). To charge the Jews with disobeying the king’s laws, however, was an evil distortion of facts. Ahasuerus gave permission for this “certain people” to be destroyed. He did not care enough to ask who these people were, which revealed the weakness of his character.

“On the thirteenth day of the first month” Haman finalized the plans and had them announced. Ironically—yet providentially—this date was the eve of the Jewish Passover (Exodus 12:1-2; Leviticus 23:5). With this terrible announcement fresh in their minds, what must Passover have been like for faithful Jews that year?

The king’s scribes soon issued the edict “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and children ... and to plunder their goods.” The Jews had prospered in exile. The Persians would gain

much by plundering them and confiscating their property. Perhaps the edict was even issued long in advance in the hope that many Jews would flee and leave their property behind. While the residents of Susa were “thrown into confusion” by this edict, “the king and Haman sat down to drink.” What a dramatic contrast!

Esther Makes Her Decision

Mordecai tore his clothes when he “learned all that had been done.” Perhaps he felt responsible because he had revealed his nationality to royal officials, ultimately bringing Haman’s wrath upon all the Jews. He showed his anguish publicly by appearing in sackcloth, wailing loudly and bitterly near the king’s gate. Jews all over the empire reacted similarly, “fasting and weeping and lamenting.” Public expression of grief was customary in that day. Tearing the clothes and wearing sackcloth and ashes are mentioned many places in the Old Testament.

It seems that everyone in the kingdom—except Queen Esther and the women in the royal harem—knew about the edict. When the servants told the queen about Mordecai’s public appearance in sackcloth, she did not understand. Esther sent Mordecai clothing to replace his coarse, rough sackcloth. When he refused these, she sent Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs, to find out what was wrong.

Mordecai thoroughly briefed Hathach, telling him the “exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.” Mordecai gave Hathach a copy of the edict to show to Esther. He urged her to appeal to the king for mercy.

Esther responded with fear for her safety. The king had many wives besides Esther. He had not summoned her for 30 days. Furthermore, he had deposed the previous queen when she challenged his authority. Esther would risk her life if she took the initiative to see him and make such a bold request. Mordecai’s reply was brutally explicit: death for her, a Jewess, was certain if she did not appeal to the king. Whether Esther helped or not, Mordecai was certain that help would come for the Jews. God would sovereignly accomplish His purposes. But Esther would miss a great opportunity. She would give up her role of helping to save God’s people from destruction. So Mordecai challenged her with the piercing question: “And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”



Think about God’s timing in our lives. It was not an accident that Esther was born in Persia, lived during the reign of Ahasuerus, and was chosen to be his queen. God worked all of this out so that He could use Esther to save the lives of millions of Jewish people. In the same way, God chose the year you would be born, the place you would live, and the people you would know because He has a specific purpose for your life. Are you available to Him like Esther was? Who knows? You may be where you are right now “for such a time as this.”

Esther appealed to Mordecai for support. She asked him to gather the Jews of Susa for a three-day fast. Fasting and prayer usually go together. In this crisis, surely the Jews must have prayed, but it is not mentioned specifically here.

At the end of the fast, Esther approached the king. Her words did not show confidence that she would succeed, but she was courageously determined to try: “If I perish, I perish.”



Personalize the TRUTH!

How do you see God working behind the scenes in this lesson? Is there a crisis or hardship in your life right now? Do you trust that God is working behind the scenes for you, too? Ask God if He might be willing to help you see His behind-the-scenes attention and care for you. Sit quietly with Him for a while, to allow Him to speak to your heart. Thank Him for whatever comfort, assurance, or insight He gives. Then ask Him for faith to trust Him more—even when you can’t see the outcome.
