

Text: Esther 3

Theme: Series-When God appears silent: Rage against the Lord's Favoured

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 07/08/2016 at 10.30am

We will consider Esther chapter 3 under 3 main headings:

1. Never forget there will always be someone who will resent your devotion to the Lord (vv.1-4).
2. Never underestimate the diabolical nature of revenge (vv.5-10, 12-15).
3. Never overestimate the value of your own importance (vv.8-11)

One would have expected that after the events of chapter 2, what would follow is that Mordecai would be elevated and become one of the king's trusted servants. No! Instead another person was promoted. We do not know what had transpired. There is a gap of around one year between the closing events at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. It was therefore about 5 years since after Esther's coronation as Queen that King Xerxes honoured Haman.

We're not told exactly how Mordecai uncovered the conspiracy to kill king Xerxes, but after a thorough investigation his accusations turn out to be true. Two of the royal protection officers were planning to kill the sovereign. But thanks to Mordecai, King Xerxes survives for another day.

We're told that all the events bothering on the plan to assassinate the king and Mordecai, who revealed the plot were recorded in the chronicles of the king but for some reason Mordecai received no reward for his priceless information. In a couple of weeks' time we'll discover why, but for now please notice who is rewarded by the king at the beginning of chapter 3 and the result of that promotion.

Point No. 1. Never forget there will always be someone who will resent your devotion to the Lord

(Verses 1-4)

"After these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour."

The big question of the chapter is 'Why?' Why did Mordecai, who has just saved the life of a Persian king, refuse to honour a royal official? Why did Mordecai decide to stand out from the crowd?

Everybody else was doing it, so why did Mordecai decide to stay on his feet when all of his colleagues were down on their knees? It's the big question of the chapter. And interestingly enough, it is the very question Mordecai himself is asked in verse 3. The royal officials say to him, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" And do you see, verse 4, it's a question they ask again and again. "Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore, they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behaviour would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew."

We are told that a few days passed without Mordecai bowing to Haman (v.4). But it appears that Mordecai did not make a scene in refusing to honour him. Haman himself did not notice Mordecai's refusal to bow until it was pointed out to him by the officials at the gate. Mordecai despite his insistence that Esther keep her nationality a secret, revealed that he was a Jew (v4) and this revelation led to a disturbing chain of events.

Why would Mordecai not bow down to Haman? Quite simply because he was a Jew. That's the answer he gave to his colleagues when they came around day after day. "Why do you defy the wishes of the king? You're what? You're Jewish? Since when. We've known you for years and you've said nothing before." But a Jew he was and it was his Jewish identity that prevented Mordecai from bowing before Haman.

I think some people have misunderstood why the Jewishness of Mordecai stopped him giving honour to Haman. It was not that Haman was to be worshipped as a god. We know from Persian history that the normal custom for showing respect to a high official was to prostrate yourself before them. So, Mordecai was not being asked to worship Haman as a god. He was simply being asked to follow standard protocol and honour Haman as a high-ranking civil servant.

So why did he refuse? The clue is in verse 1. Listen to how Haman is introduced to us. He's not simply described as Haman, but described as Haman the Agagite. If you have been following our series on Esther, you will know that it means a lot to a Benjamite to pay obeisance to a descendant of Agag.

There does not seem to be a Biblical command against bowing or paying homage to a political leader as a sign of respect (Genesis 18:2; 23:7; 43:26; Exodus 18:7; 2 Samuel 16:4). Rather, Mordecai must know something about this man Haman, which persuades him that Haman is unworthy of such honor – perhaps simply his ancestry.

King Agag was king of a group of people called the Amalekites. These people were the constant enemies of the Jews. We first meet them in the book of Exodus and thereafter there is constant tension, indeed constant hatred, between them and the Jews. The hatred between a Benjamite and an Agagite could be compared to that of a German Jew in the 1940s being asked to pay respect to Adolf Hitler. There is something in the very act which would be abhorrent to a Jewish person.

It is interesting that for so long Mordecai had kept his Jewish identity under the radar. But at the promotion of Haman his conscience is suddenly pricked and he finally decides to hide his identity no more. He has to take his stand as a member of the Covenant people-the Jewish race.

I don't know how you live your life at the moment. Can you identify with Mordecai? Secretly you believe but publicly you are no different from everyone else. And maybe you think to yourself, "Well, it's a bit late now. I've worked at this place for years or I've lived in this street for ages. But nobody knows I'm a Christian. Isn't it too late to identify myself with the followers of Christ?"

No! It's never too late to stick your head above the parapet and say not only do I go to church but I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. Do not miss another opportunity when you can naturally align yourself with the King you already follow in your heart.

Who is Haman?

Point No 2. Never underestimate the diabolical nature of revenge

(4-6) The wounded pride of Haman drives him to seek retribution against not only Mordecai but also his people – the Jews.

Now when Mordecai did this there were consequences and we read about these in verse 5. “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai’s people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.”

Verses 7

So, he came up with a plan. First of all, he consulted the sacred stones, or as verse 7 puts it, “in the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the *pur* in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. This was the Persian word for *the lot*, something like dice, used to leave a decision to chance – or to the God who guides every chance. Since this took place in the first month, the casting of the lot determined that the Jews would not be attacked and massacred for at least 11 months.

This proves the truth of Proverbs 16:33: *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.* The long delay between the first month and the month of massacre against the Jewish people was ordained by God.

Haman tells his plot to the king.

(8-9) Haman’s proposal to king Xerxes – A Concoction of Lies and Half Truths ...

Haman’s charge was the most dangerous possible; it was a half-truth. Haman’s speech to King Xerxes was a masterful example of how to get your way. Yes, the Jews were a **certain people scattered and dispersed**; and yes, they had their own **laws**. But their own laws, to this point, did not prevent them from keeping the king’s laws as loyal subjects. In fact, Mordecai’s refusal to bow before Haman was *not* based on the law of God, but on the principle of personal integrity.

Listen to what he said to the King. Verse 8, “There is a certain people [notice he doesn’t mention them by name] dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people [so far so good but then he tells the lie and says] and who do not obey the king’s laws [which is completely ridiculous – remember what Mordecai has just done!]; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver [which is about 60% of the annual income of the Persian Empire] into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business.”

Point no 3. Never overestimate the value of your own importance

Verses 9-11

What did Xerxes do? Nothing compared to the thorough investigation he instituted when there was a plot to kill him. Now that a whole race of people are to be annihilated, he cares little because his ego has been bloated and the accuser shows his loyalty by even wanting to pay so much to protect the king.

Verse 10, “So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ‘Keep the money,’ the king said to Haman [I think he means, let’s not give it to the people who carry out the deed, let’s keep it for ourselves], and do with the people as you please.” Again, king Xerxes probably had no idea

what he agreed to; he probably believed that he merely agreed to the execution of a handful of dangerous revolutionaries in his kingdom.

Verse 12 -15

Haman, now granted the king's permission, duly summoned the royal secretaries, dictated his orders and they wrote out numerous documents which were then distributed around the Persian Empire. And so, within days the news was spread that in roughly 12 months' time, on the 13th day of the 12th month, the Jews were to be exterminated, young and old, women and children, and their goods were to be confiscated. It's worth pointing out that by the end of chapter 3 there seems to be little hope for the Jewish people. One of the highest ranking officials in the Persian government has just issued a law in an Empire where laws cannot be repealed, which if followed, will result in the complete annihilation of the Jews. The situation is desperate and there appears to be no light at the end of a very dark tunnel. In verse 15, we read that 'the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.'

When the king sat down to drink, he thought he had done well – but he did not really understand what he had done. Haman also sat down to drink, and thought he had done well – and he knew exactly what he intended to do. Despite this, the city of Shushan was perplexed. The citizens of the empire knew Jewish people who lived among them, and they knew that they were good citizens who caused no trouble. Therefore, they were confused that such a decree came forth, declaring that these Jews were dangerous enemies. Again, all this came to pass because of the insecurity and wounded pride of one wicked man – Haman.

However, God was not taken by surprise. He was not confused or helpless. Although, in the text there is no mention of God's activity, He was working. He may have seemed silent, but He was not asleep. He was working things out according to His own will.

We can draw valuable lessons from the three major characters in this chapter:

First from Mordecai.

Never forget there will always be someone who will resent your devotion to the Lord.

I have seen it in ministry. I've certainly seen it in the business world, where pressure intensifies because a person's convictions cut across "company policy".

Second from Haman.

Never underestimate the diabolical nature of revenge and don't underestimate your own ability to connive and retaliate. A lack of forgiveness that stays on the back burner has the ability to poison your life if you allow it. It is for this reason that God invaded our polluted world in the person of Jesus Christ. We are not able to help ourselves, but the Lord Jesus can. He opened the door to forgiveness and power on the cross on which He died.

Third from Xerxes.

Never overestimate the value of your own importance. It's so easy to be blinded by one's own pride of position and power.

Where is God when it matters when the heat is increasing around his beloved?

Where is he when the nations plot against Him and His anointed ones. The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath (Psalm 2:4-5).

No doubt Haman was rather pleased that he had 12 months to organise his Jewish holocaust but remember 12 months is also a long time to prepare a rescue plan. And we see the beginnings of this in chapter 4 verse 1.

God's grace sees beyond our deepest need. He meets us where we are through His Spirit and His Word. He can give us the ability to turn our pain over to Him in this life. Life and pain may be synonymous but they do not leave us helpless. Our Lord Jesus ensures that even when we do not see or understand what He is doing. But we must trust Him.