

Assassination to Annihilation
Esther 2:19 - 3:15; November 8, 2020

Introduction

- Go ahead and open up your Bibles to the book of Esther. Before we jump in, let me provide a quick recap, just like Netflix, of the story from last week. Just don't press the "skip recap" button :).

A recap of what happened in the story last week:

1st Main Character: We first learn about **King Ahasuerus**.

- He throws two feasts (180 days and 7 days) to build support and loyalty across the entire empire for an upcoming invasion of Greece.
- These feasts display his absolute wealth and power and shows that he'll use it to do whatever he wants to whomever he wants. He rewards loyalty and punishes those who question or reject his authority. We see this clearly as we're introduced to his wife, Queen Vashti.

2nd Main Character: **Queen Vashti**, for now.

- The king requests Vashti's appearance at his feast to show off her beauty.
- But she refuses to attend and completely embarrasses the king.
- He becomes furious and with the advice of men closest to him, and in particular, a guy named Memucan, Vashti is banished from the king, loses her queenship and an order goes out across the entire empire commanding all women to respect their husbands.

Continuing the Story in Chapter 2:

- When we come to chapter 2, four years have passed and the king was defeated in his battle to conquer Greece.
- We now hear about his plan to find a new queen. This plan involves holding a beauty pageant across the entire empire and the king selecting one woman to be the new queen.

3rd Main Character: **Mordecai**

- This is when the author introduces us to Mordecai, a Jew, living in Susa.
- He has adopted his cousin, a beautiful young woman.

Setting the Context:

- Finally, we have an allusion to the biggest concern of the book: the future of the Jews.
- The Jews are now a minority group scattered among the nations. They have no king, no army and no land.
- The book of Esther answers the question: "How is it that the Jews are still here?"
- The author is showing us that the odds are stacked against Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people. How will they fare any better than Vashti?

The New 2nd Main Character: **Esther**, who replaces Queen Vashti.

- By the author mentioning both of Esther's names, she is being introduced as one in conflict with her identities.
- She is one of many women who spend one year preparing for one night with the king.
- The author tells us that Esther gains favor with Hegai, all the people and eventually the king (cf. 2:9, 15, 17).
- In the end, the king makes Esther queen, a great reversal. The story begins with a queen absent at a feast and it ends with a feast being thrown for Esther, the new queen.

An Invisible Main Character: **God**

- I concluded last week by introducing you to another main character, who, ironically, isn't mentioned anywhere explicitly in the text. That character is God.
- In fact, this is what the entire book of Esther is about. It's that even when God is most hidden and invisible, he is still present and working to fulfill his promises and plan.
- God's hand and imprint are all over this book and he's behind every apparent coincidence.

This week we're going to be faced with other hard questions. Do you ever wrestle with these?:

- What do I do when I feel forgotten, unrewarded and potentially even abandoned by others and God?
- I deserve to prosper but it seems like it's the wicked who are prospering. Why is that?

Read Esther 2:19-23.

I. Mordecai Saves the King (2:19-23).

- We're again reminded that Esther had not revealed her identity as a Jew.
 - Esther is portrayed as an obedient daughter.
- The passivity of Mordecai's actions:
 - "...was sitting at the king's gate" (19, 21)
 - The author doesn't make it explicit why Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate but most likely it means that he held an official position in the king's court (maybe as a result of Esther's influence).
 - "And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai" (22).
 - He just happens to be in the right place at the right time (do you see God at work behind this apparent coincidence?)
- The chain of communication (the game telephone).
 - Bigthan and Teresh planned to "lay hands on King Ahasuerus."
 - In other words, they're planning on assassinating the king (so NET, NIV).
 - Mordecai heard about the plan.
 - Mordecai tells Esther
 - Esther tells the King (in the name of Mordecai).
 - She makes it clear to the king that Mordecai should be the one who should

- receive credit and be thanked.
 - The King has it investigated
- The King punishes Bigthan and Teresh by hanging them on the gallows.
 - What are the gallows?
 - See the ESV footnote 1: Or *suspended on a stake*.
 - NIV: “impaled on poles.”
 - This is a brutal way to die.
- The result: Mordecai thwarts the assassination plot
- This was recorded in the book of chronicles.
 - This is not referring to the biblical book of 1 and 2 Chronicles in the Bible but rather a record of significant events in the king’s reign and benefactors of the king.
 - You would think that the king would really reward Mordecai for saving his life.
 - In fact, with the author mentioning of this being recorded, we’re left anticipating how the king is going to repay Mordecai. You eagerly play the next Netflix eager to see what the king is going to do for Mordecai.
 - But sadly, that’s not what immediately happens. In fact, Mordecai goes from saving the king’s life to now potentially losing his own life.

Read Esther 3:1-6.

II. Haman Plans Annihilation of the Jews (3:1-15).

- “After these things”:
 - 12th year of the king’s reign
 - 5 years had passed since Esther had become Queen (cf. 2:16; 3:7).

4th main (human) character: Haman (*Hayman*)

- Haman is promoted to 2nd in command (instead of Mordecai).
 - We are on the edge of our seats anticipating Mordecai’s reward and promotion but instead Haman is promoted.
 - Can you imagine how Mordecai must have felt? Not only was he unrewarded and overlooked, his enemy was promoted instead of him.
 - Have you ever experienced this?
 - Do you ever feel this way? Unrewarded and overlooked?
 - And not only is Haman promoted over Mordecai, Haman the *Agagite* is promoted over Mordecai.
- Agagite, the son of Hammedatha
 - Let me pause and unpack this for a second because it’s crucial for understanding what’s going on.
 - Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time Saul was the first king of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 15).
 - God tells Saul to completely destroy Agag and the Amalekites and all that they

have. But Saul spares King Agag along with the best of the sheep and oxen (cf. 1 Sam. 15:9).

- As a result, God regrets making Saul King over Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 15:11).
- But long before Saul, the Amalekites were enemies of Israel. In fact, they were the first to attack and try to destroy God's people after crossing the Red Sea on the way to the Promised Land.

And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:13-16 ESV; cf. Deut. 25:17-19)

- By introducing Haman as an *Agagite*, he's characterizing him as an enemy of the Jews and implying that Haman and Mordecai's relationship is going to mirror the enmity between the Agagites and the Jews. We should expect conflict and war between these two.
- But it also raises some theological questions:
 - God had promised to be at war with Amalek.
 - Would God still fulfill his promise to his people even as they are in exile as a result of having violated God's covenant?
 - Would God still be faithful to his covenant promises even in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness to him?

Enmity between Mordecai and Haman

- The king demands that all honor Haman but Mordecai refuses.
- We're not told *why* Mordecai refuses though we can make some guesses:
 - 1) Personal: He could've resented Haman's promotion.
 - 2) Religious: He was trying to be a faithful Jew who only bows before the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords (this is my lean).
 - 3) A combination of both of the above.
- As his colleagues question him on his decision and urge him to change his behavior, he reveals to them that he is a Jew.
 - These servants then speak with Haman to see if he will "permit" (NET) or "tolerate" (NIV) Mordecai's behavior.
- Haman seems to be unaware of Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him. But when the other servants make it known, he is "filled with fury."
 - This echoes the king's response to Vashti (cf. 1:12).
- Haman refuses to kill just Mordecai and instead seeks "to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom" (3:6).
 - Just as Memucan, in chapter 1, urges the King to take action not just against Vashti but against all women, so Haman expands his actions from Mordecai to include all of the Jews.

- As Commentator Timothy Cain notes, “The reason he doesn’t go into that crowd and strangle Mordecai for refusing to bow isn’t because that would be too barbaric or over the top—it’s because that would be way too small” (Cain).
- This is clearly anti-Semitism toward all the Jews.
- Mordecai has now gone from thwarting the king’s assassination to potential annihilation of him and his people.
- We’re now seeing much clearer the main point of this book: How is it that the Jews have survived? It’s because the invisibly present God is working providentially to fulfill his covenant promises and plan to save his people.

Read Esther 3:7-11.

- Haman cast *Pur*, that is “lots” to determine the day of annihilation (7).
 - This means that Haman threw dice, not to gamble, but as a form of divination. It was his way of “asking the gods” for answers about the future.
 - The die falls on the 13th day of the 12th month (cf. 3:13), 11 months from now.
- Haman makes his request before the King (8-9).
 - “...a certain people”
 - Haman doesn’t mention the Jews specifically.
 - “...their laws are different”
 - “...they do not keep the king’s laws”
 - This may have been the case, but the narrative only tells us about one Jew, Mordecai, who only disobeys one command, to bow down to Haman.
 - “...it is not to the king’s profit to tolerate them”
 - “...I will pay 10,000 talents of silver”
 - Haman is appealing to the king’s treasury which would have taken a significant hit with the defeat of Greece.
- Does it really not profit the king to tolerate the Jews? Think about it. Without the Jews ...
 - The King loses Esther, his wife and Queen.
 - The King would’ve been dead, because Mordecai saved his life.
- Beyond the fact that this is a horrible injustice that Haman is proposing, wouldn’t a really wise and good King ask a few key questions before completely wiping out an entire race of people?
 - Who are these “certain people?”
 - How are they hurting my kingdom?
 - Which laws are they not keeping?
 - Where are you going to get 10,000 talents of silver?
- The King gives approval and authority to Haman’s plan (10-11).
 - “Signet ring:” this was used to sign and seal official documents and would’ve given Haman complete authority to carry out his plan.
 - Additionally, the King tells him to keep his money.
- Can you imagine what it would’ve been like to live in this kingdom, knowing that if you or one person from your race disrespected the wrong person, it might cost all of you your

lives?

Read Esther 3:12-15.

- An official order is sent across the entire empire to annihilate the Jewish people (12-14).
 - Ironically, this edict of annihilation was sent out on the 13th day of the 1st month, which was during Passover (a feast to celebrate God's rescuing of his people from Egypt).
- The King and Haman sit back and drink (15a).
- Susa, the capital city, is in an uproar (15b).
 - This gives evidence that many of the citizens of Susa didn't share this intense hatred toward the Jews.

Conclusion

Can you imagine how Mordecai was feeling at the end of this chapter?

- I saved the king's life and instead of being rewarded and promoted, my enemy is promoted and now me and my people are on the verge of extinction.
- I honored God and didn't bow down to Haman and now I'm facing death.
- God, do you see what's happening? Do you see this injustice? Do you even care? Will you be faithful to what you have promised?

The Point: Even when God seems most silent and life most unjust, God is working.

- Just like last week, there's a main character, a hero, that Haman and the king have overlooked.
 - God is behind the apparent coincidences that allowed Mordecai to find out about the assassination attempt.
 - God is the one who controls the throw of the dice.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. (Proverbs 16:33 ESV)

- Haman threw the dice but God is the one who determined the exact date and he chose it far enough in advance (11 months) to give him time to accomplish his rescue plan.
- In our story this week, we don't see *how* God is going to save his people, but we're called to trust and believe that he is clearly present and working to fulfill his promises and plan and he will succeed.

You've heard me mention the word "providence" or God "providentially" working a number of times. Here's how we define this in our statement of faith:

RHC Statement of Faith: Providence

God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any way to be the author or approver of sin nor to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures.

- When life is most unjust and it feels out of control, remember, God never loses control.
- God is providentially working such that he can use even the worst days and the worst things in our lives to accomplish his purposes but also in a way that he is never the one to blame for our pain.
- God's providence secures God's promises.
- Connect and relate...
 - I don't know what you are going through right now.
 - I don't know what's overwhelming you today.
 - I don't know what part of your life that you are struggling to see God in or understand what he's up to.
 - But this story encourages us to endure with patience and grace, trusting in God's sovereign plan.
- When you feel forgotten, unrewarded and potentially even abandoned by God, this book is teaching us:
 - God is working even when you don't see him.
 - You can trust him. He will never abandon you.
 - Walk by faith, not by sight.
 - Do you know why we can be overcome by fear and worry at times?
 - We remove God from the equation.
 - God controls not just the end of this story, but of THE story.
 - God is faithful.
 - He will save and protect his people.
 - He will destroy every single one of his enemies.
 - There is no enemy that can thwart his purposes and plans.
 - He will repay every act of injustice (Rom. 12).
 - He will remember us, reward us and promote us.
- All of these promises are secure because of the gospel.
 - Jesus laid down his life to secure your salvation. He wasn't killed unjustly on gallows but a cross, to pay the penalty for your sin.
 - Jesus is the one asking you for the signet ring of your life, for you to give him control, to let him truly reign.
 - In fact, this is a great picture of what it means to repent and believe. When we confess and turn from our sin, we're saying, "God, here's the signet ring of my life. You are now in control. Your kingdom come. Your will be done."
- The early church rested in God's providence and his sovereignty especially displayed through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the greatest injustice. Their confidence in

God's work moved them to continue living with great boldness. I want to conclude today with their prayer from Acts 4:24-29:

Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"—for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness (Acts 4:24-29 ESV)