

Esther 3 and 4

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[0:00] Good morning, friends. If you have a Bible, then please grab it.

! Father, will you open our hearts as you speak from your word.

We thank you for your Holy Spirit who helps us. I pray that all that is from him, his truth, his love, would remain with us this week. And all that is not would be forgotten.

And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. Last week we learned that human empires are not safe places for God's people, didn't we? There's pressure to blend in.

Why be different for the sake of a God that we can't even see? And when we look around for help, you'll remember, no human heroes to be found.

[1:14] And even though we can't see him, we learned last week, God is carrying out his plan in human history. He's moving Esther and Mordecai and you and me exactly where he wants us.

And we met an unpleasant king last week. And we're reminded by contrast that Jesus, our king, is a sacrificial saviour. He's not self-serving.

And so we're learning to trust him, even though we can't see him. And to find our identity in the fact that we're adopted into his family. And to find our community not out there anywhere, but in his kingdom.

And all that is true. And yet, when you wake up tomorrow, there will be people in this world who want to kill you. Some of you are thinking, what?

What? What is he saying? People who want to kill me? Has he finally succumbed to the persecution complex that I always suspected he had? You know, all that wood he's been asking for on the men's WhatsApp group.

[2:24] Is he building a bunker in the back garden and stockpiling tin food? You know. I knew it would happen. There's no genocide against God's people. What are you talking about, preacher?

But of course there is. Two recent headlines. 2022, 2019.

Christian persecution at genocide levels. Christianity is the world's most persecuted faith. You see, as well as forgetting the unseen God in Esther, we tend to forget the spiritual battle that's raging around us.

Because in our country, it's often unseen as well. And yet, the words of Jesus are very clear. Here's what he says in John chapter 17.

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them. For they are not of this world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one.

[3:32] Now, in those circumstances where the world hates God's people, and in some parts of the world it's more obvious than others, who's going to go public with their privatized faith?

Will Esther? Will Mordecai? Will you and I? Because God is not the only unseen force acting in Esther.

Esther. So as we come to read Esther chapter 3 now, think about those questions. Try and think about what's going on. Thanks, Louise. Esther chapter 3, on page 503 of the church Bibles.

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews. After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman, son of Hamadatha, of the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.

All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

[4:59] Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, why do you disobey the king's command? Day after day they spoke to him, but he refused to comply.

Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, 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.

In the 12th year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, the poor, that is the lot, was cast in the presence of Haman to select a day and month.

And the lot fell on the 12th month, the month of Adar. Then Haman said to King Xerxes, there is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate.

[6:08] Their customs are different from those of all the other people and they do not obey the king's laws. 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 give 10,000 talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury.

So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman, son of Hamadatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. Keep the money, the king said to Haman, and do with the people as you please.

Then on the 13th day of the first month, the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people, all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples.

These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and children, on a single day, the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that they would be ready for that day.

[7:44] The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

Thanks, Louise. How many of you recognise that?

It's a bit old now, isn't it? But there's a certain kind of horror show that starts with everything on the surface looking hunky-dory. But, everything seems basically fine, but there is a hidden danger, isn't there?

It's one of those ones where you get the music. And it builds, and it builds. And that's what's going on here in this passage, and to some extent, it's what's going on with us. We think maybe the world isn't perfect, and folks don't always treat each other right, but we can still go to the beach, I can still swim in the sea with the kids, and now there's a shark in the water.

It's what happens in the story of Mordecai and Esther. Looking at verse 1, things get much worse, don't they? Because the Jews have now moved from a place where they are under, not a self-interested tyrant, but somebody who wants to exterminate every last one of them.

[9:07] God's enemy is also moving pieces on the board. But now Mordecai makes a stand, doesn't he?

He says, no, I'm not going to bow to this man. I'd encourage you to ask, why? Why now? Why here?

It's not about bowing, because he would have had to bow to Xerxes. Why didn't he make his stand when Esther's virginity was at stake? That might have been the good place to do it.

Why now? He explains why. He says, I'm a Jew. That's why. I'm one of God's people. Why this line, though?

What is it about being Jewish and this man that makes Mordecai say no? Do you see Haman's reaction to not being bowed down to? He scorns the idea of killing just Mordecai.

[10:09] He says, no, I'm going to wipe them all out. Now, that sounds like a fantasy story, doesn't it? That and the fact that Mordecai chooses this moment to bow down. They need some explanation.

There must be more going on. There is more going on. And we need something more, because otherwise, why should we care?

Isn't this just an ethnic conflict long ago in an empire that doesn't exist anymore? What's it got to do with us? We need more. And the clue is in what Haman represents.

See, the Bible tells us that this is a small part, a small part of history's greatest ongoing battle.

Because who is this Haman?

Haman is an Agagite. He's the descendant of King Agag. Agag was the king of the Amalekites. The Amalekites who tried to annihilate Israel when they asked for safe passage through the desert.

[11:16] And this is the Agag and the Amalekites who King Saul, who you remember is Mordecai's ancestor, should have got rid of completely because God told him expressly to do so.

And he failed to do so. And here we are. The enemy's back. Episode 3. Revenge of the Sith.

That's what we should be thinking. The enemy is back again. And Mordecai knows that when the enemy finds you, you make a stand. What's going on?

Well, Mordecai knows his history, doesn't he? He knows that it is from his people, the Jews, that God's king will be born. And it is through Abraham's offspring that all of the peoples of the world will be blessed.

See, God's people are not on the right side because they're better than everybody else or because they were born in a certain place, but because God wants to use them to secure peace and victory for everyone.

[12:21] It's not ethnic. It's about the future of the whole world. And so Mordecai stands because he realizes that. He says, no, this is not ethnic. It's not a social question.

It's not even a moral question. It is a question of our allegiance, our spiritual allegiance. He can be loyal to pagan King Xerxes, but Haman, Haman poses a threat to God's salvation plan.

So to Haman, he will not bow. When the enemy finds you, you make a stand. But there's more bad news.

Haman rolls the dice. That's what the lot is. He rolls the dice and he brings all his weapons to bear and goes to King Xerxes and he tells them about the Jews.

Just enough truth mixed in with the lies. And a big financial incentive. Wiggles the carrot. And Xerxes, you don't have to do a thing about it.

[13:28] I'll sort it all out for you. It won't cost you a penny. So Xerxes can carry on being lazy. And he gets the signet ring.

And all the king's horses and all the king's men are suddenly arranged against God's people.

Mordecai makes his stand. What happens? Things get worse.

Where is God? Where is God? We are in the same battle today. Even if the water seems safe.

And who knows when the shark in the water will surface, when another Haman will arise. You see, this is not about hating people who don't belong to the church or who don't follow Christ.

Because people have good and bad in them, don't they? And people can join God's nation. That's what the whole book of Ruth is about. Scripture tells us our struggle is not against flesh and blood.

[14:32] Ephesians 6, verse 12. But against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

So when the enemy finds us, whatever form that takes, we need to make a stand. Even if we're compromised, like Mordecai was, we were seeing last week.

It's hard to find good news in this chapter. Except maybe Mordecai making his stand, which doesn't seem to help. Where is God? Well, remember, what was the question for Mordecai and Esther last week?

Do you remember? The question was, who will they be in the end? When will their real identity shine through? Well, Mordecai's identity isn't in doubt anymore, is it?

He is first of all one of God's people. He will not bow. He is a citizen of another kingdom. And that is where God has been at work. Because God has changed Mordecai from someone who wouldn't reveal his identity as a Jew to someone who publicly stands up and says, I am a Jew, and therefore I will not bow.

[15:52] And so he stands. And that same God can help us stand. Or we can carry on swimming, blissfully unaware of the danger in the water.

And most of the Bible tells us, be ready, be alert. So when the struggle surfaces, you're ready to act. Whether you get attacked, like Mordecai does, personally or verbally, or whether it takes the form of unemployment, or a divorce, or illness, or miscarriage, or childlessness, all of the effects of sin and a broken world can be used by the enemy to attack God's people and their faith.

So be ready. And we have to teach our children to be ready. So I want to recommend a book to help you explore that.

It's the kind of thing you can read by the pool. It's a book called Live Not by Lies by a man called Rod Dreher. Come and have a look later if you're interested. What else can we do?

Well, when we think of our Bibles and our prayer times, and dare I say it, maybe even fasting, do you know how I think of it sometimes?

[17 : 19] I've realized I think of it a bit like hair gel. It's great to have it on a morning where I've got time for it. Or makeup, maybe.

Hair gel isn't your thing. Yeah? Maybe we should be thinking about it more like shoes. Don't leave the house without them. Why?

Because that, the word of God and prayer and fasting, that is the armor that we wear in this fight. maybe you're not a believer.

Do you know anything in this world that can turn a compromised, cowed collaborator like Mordecai into a man who is willing to take a courageous stand all by himself just when it will cost him the most?

Do you know anything in the world like that? God can do that. So crisis has arrived for God's people. Their enemy is on top.

[18 : 28] Mordecai's resistance has just made the situation worse. What will they do? Let's read Esther 4 and find out. So still on page 503 of the church Bibles.

Esther 4 Mordecai persuades Esther to help. When Mordecai learned of all that had been done he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and went out into the city wailing loudly and bitterly but he went only as far as the king's gate because no one clothed in sackcloth was quiet.

Is that right? No. Was allowed to enter it in every province to which the edict and order of the king came there was great mourning among the Jews with fasting, weeping and wailing.

Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai she was in great distress.

She sent clothes for him to put on instead of the sackcloth but he would not accept them. Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

[20 : 01] So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him including the exact amount of money Harman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.

He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation which had been published in Susa to show to Esther and explain it to her and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai all the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king without being summoned the king has but one law that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives.

But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king when Esther's words were reported to Mordecai he sent back this answer do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape for if you remain silent at this time relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place but you and your father's family will perish and who knows but that you will have come that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai go gather together all the Jews who are in Susa and fast for me do not eat or drink for three days night or day I and my attendants will fast as you do when this is done I will go to the king even though it is against the law and if I perish I perish so Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions thanks thanks Louise

I wonder if you know what this is on the screen I hope you don't actually does this clarify it so on the right hand side you've got a hurricane shelter on the left hand side you've got the hurricane now I want you to imagine for a moment that you're in a hurricane situation and you need to get to the bunker and you have someone next to you and they see the hurricane coming too and you say to them come and join me in my shelter and be safe and their response is oh no hiding in just one shelter that's for suckers I'm not doing that you won't find me putting all my eggs in one basket no I'm going to hide in two shelters I'm going to run between one and the other and I'm going to

maximise my safety that way now what would you say to them don't be silly perhaps slightly stronger words given the danger you pick one shelter don't you the one that promises to keep you safe and that is what

[23:25] God's people need to do and that is what they do in this chapter see what could they have done well they could have changed their dress and their appearance and moved to another town and assimilated into the empire and tried to stay safe that way couldn't they that's one shelter or they could hedge their bets move start over where nobody knows them and pray do they do that no see the ripples of God's transforming work spread from Mordecai through all the Jewish people in the empire and they instead they unite and they go public with their faith because that is the effect of what they do at the beginning of chapter 4 do you see what they do Mordecai tears his clothes puts on sackcloth and ashes and goes out into the city well if nobody knew he was a Jew before they certainly do now and then everybody does in verse 3 in every province there was great mourning fasting weeping wailing people have been asking what's that noise and the answer would have been it's the Jews it's the Jews they go public on their faith and they double down on their identity as God's people don't they it's as if the whole of Bethel put on black for mourning and wore that all day every day they're all in are we so God's people unite and they go public all except

Esther except the one person who's in a position to really make a difference she doesn't what does she do when she hears Mordecai is upset perhaps she doesn't know the reason because she's too closed off from the rest of the city perhaps she does news like that spreads doesn't it Mordecai Mordecai stop making a fuss here new clothes a set of new clothes that'll make you feel better a bit of retail therapy it'll all be over soon don't worry I'll take you to Gales and buy you a cinnamon bun and a cup of tea and you'll feel right as rain but that is of course in this situation not God's word that's the language of the empire and Mordecai knows it and he says no that's not going to cut it that's a sticking plaster in this situation and he tells her exactly what's going on and exactly what she needs to do he tells her exactly what's going on and exactly what she needs to do and what does she do she balks she's afraid and who can blame her can understand how she feels haven't I risked enough

Mordecai what are the chances of it even working you're not allowed to go and see the king just like that and he hasn't called for me for a month if I do what you ask I could ruin my career I could ruin my marriage I could ruin my financial security if I do what you ask lord sounding familiar and this is the climax of the whole story so far the big question will Esther identify with God's people just now when it is most dangerous or is she going to bottle it who will she be Hadassah or Esther can God really change people or is this real life that we're seeing here people compromise they get where they can when they can they keep their beliefs to themselves how does

Mordecai respond to Esther's fear we're at verses 12 to 14 now Mordecai preaches the gospel he preaches the gospel based on God's gospel promises to Abraham if you look at Galatians chapter 3 verse 8 it says there God announced the gospel in advance to Abraham all nations will be blessed through you that's what God said to Abraham and Paul identifies that as the gospel and Mordecai knows that and he explains it and he believes it he says because God has promised that his people will be like the sand on the seashore and that through them the whole world will be blessed because God has promised that his people cannot be wiped out therefore God will save them that is the good news and he says to

Esther you can either be one of those people and be part of that plan or not but it will happen regardless and if you don't identify with him if you don't believe that God will save his people and you don't make sure that you're one of them then what does Jesus himself say Matthew 10 verse 32 whoever acknowledges me before others I will also acknowledge before my father in heaven but whoever disowns me before others I will disown before my father in heaven so Mordecai preaches the gospel and the gospel changes everything verses 15 to 17 God is not absent he acts through the preaching of his word and what happens to Esther when she hears this message

[29:58] Esther is changed from the cowed and compromised coerced girl that she was and she comes out of the closet and she finds courage that's what the gospel does now she issues the orders did you see that the reversal Mordecai has been telling her what to do up until now but now she's the one telling Mordecai what to do something's changed fear is no longer in charge she joins the fast the fast that all of God's people have started to do to show their dependence on him to ask for salvation and that's a very interesting thing to do if you're Queen Esther why because if you're Esther the one tool you have at your disposal with King Xerxes is your appearance and what do you

look like after you haven't eaten for three days not your best see

Esther knows that God can use weak things to achieve his plans so she's willing to fast she becomes more than Esther more than Hadassah she becomes Queen Esther 12 of the 14 times that she's called Queen Esther happen after this story and what does she say she says I will go and mediate with the King even if it costs me my life does that remind you of anyone I'm not sure I could do what Esther and Mordecai did to tell the truth but Jesus could Jesus did do you remember him in the garden Lord if this cup can be taken from me but not your will be done not my will be done but your will be done if I must die

I will die that's Jesus and because he did what Esther and Mordecai did but so much more we can because he died we can risk it because if we trust him our life is already safe with him forever do you have anyone in your life who has already given their life for yours long before you and I became the fairly ordinary human beings that we are today if you're a child of God then you do do you have a Lord who can change you like he changed Esther and keep you safe forever if you don't give your life to him he's safe he saves his people make sure you're one of them maybe you're a bit like Esther you've succeeded you're in the royal bubble and you've got enough credibility or enough cash to be insulated from the effects of the world and the devil's hostility against God's people you don't see or hear the horrors that we talked about earlier together because even though there's not really much you could have done to engineer it you were born in a time and a place and with the talent to live a life that is peaceful and comfortable well praise the Lord for that that is a blessing but don't think that means you will always be safe there's a storm coming and we can pick only one shelter God saves his people we need to make sure we're one of them here's another good question to think about how do we react when someone outside the gated community the compound walls like Mordecai tells us all about the danger that God's people face outside those walls how do we react well we could do nothing couldn't we our bodies would be safe enough but if Mordecai is right then our souls are not necessarily so safe if we react that way there's a persecuted church isn't there are we helping them could we go and help them and then there is a church right here which holds out the same gospel message that Mordecai taught Esther and staked his life on like Mike was saying earlier are you giving in whatever way you can so that that gospel message will continue to be held out here now God will keep the lights on with or without our money and our time and our energy God will save his people we need to make sure we are one of them lots of encouragement here lots of

[35:29] God's people doing good and right things and depending on him for rescue but none of them is the hero are they God is the hero who changes people he is the one we need and we need that encouragement in a world which is hostile to God's people because if we follow Jesus we should expect to be treated like him shouldn't we hated crucified then raised and glorified so when the enemy finds you make a stand and trust that God will save his people make sure you're one of them Amen