

Under Threat

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[0 : 00] Welcome, and if you have not met me, I'm John. I was on staff here last few years after I graduated from Moore Theology College, and I've been a member of this church for many years now.

And now I work in Anakin A, an agency of Sydney Anakin to help strengthen churches and transform community in the world's poorest nations in partnership with global church.

We have started looking into the Old Testament book of Esther last week, and we'll look into the second half of chapter 2 and the whole of chapter 3 today.

So please keep your Bible open to that session, and you can also use our St. Paul's app to take notes and also follow along today. So out of the total 66 books of the Bible, there are only two books that are named after a woman.

Esther is one of them, and the other is Ruth. And as already mentioned last week, Esther is the only book in the Bible that did not mention God at all. There is something unique about this book.

[1 : 09] The book of Esther is set in Susa, the capital city of Persia. During the time of King Cersei, he was the king that defeated the Babylonians, the captives of God's people.

And Susa's son was the king that allowed the captive to move back to the promised land, the land that God has set aside for his people to dwell and to form a nation under his name.

It is also supposed to be the place where God's blessing goes out to every nation. However, God's people rebelled against God, and they were exiled from the promised land to Babylon.

One of the reasons they rebelled against God was that, like many other people around the world now, have a small view of God. People do not accept or believe in one true God that is universal and is the creator and ruler of the universe.

God's people demand to have a human king instead of having God as the ultimate ruler and king above them. They want to appear as the same as the nations around them.

[2 : 22] And many modern people today do not ask for a king above them, but make themselves the king of their life. Believing putting themselves as the center of their life is the best way to live.

They believe that would be the best way to express the meaning of their existence, to be the king of their own life. Many cultures believe God is limited by location and assign certain God to a particular group of people.

They will assume Indian will be Hindu and Asian will be Buddhist. Some people will think being a Christian is something for a Westerner. People will consider a religion if it somehow provides benefit for their career advancement or help them to settle into a new culture.

They are not interested in having a relationship with God. God is God's people who are created by God and do not honor or glorify their creator.

So God used the Gentiles as a tool to exercise his discipline on his people and to show his mercy and grace. The book of Esther is part of the books in the Old Testament, then known as the post-exilic book, that show God is everywhere and he's not restricted by location.

[3 : 43] And he's always ready and at work to save his people. And he's still saving today. Many people, when we read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, will complain that it is hard to follow.

I used to think that way too. Until I learned that looking out for repeated themes and topics as I read can help me to maintain a focus and get more out of my reading.

One example is someone always finds their future wife at a well. So whenever a well is mentioned in a passage, I will look out for any nuptial arrangement.

One of the words that characterize the book of Esther is banquet. There are only 10 chapters in Esther, but there are 10 banquet scenes in that book.

And in fact, nearly half of the occurrence of the Hebrew term for banquet in the whole Bible appear in Esther. So banquet forms a structuring device in the narrative of Esther.

[4 : 47] It has a chiasm or chiasmic structure. A chiasm is when you see something presented as A, B, C, and C, B, A. So it's gone up and down.

The first few banquet I mentioned in chapter 1 is sponsored by King Xerxes and by Queen Vashti. They are mirrored and contrasted by the festival announced in chapter 9.

The first three denote excess and exclusion. As only the close circle of the king are invited and the women are invited separately in their parties.

The last three banquet are festivals celebrating deliverance and acceptance. Starting countrywide, then in Persia, and in subsequent years, everyone is invited to celebrate together and provide a contrast to the exclusivity of the first few banquets.

When you read the Bible, there's a big banquet at the end of the Bible. So look out for that as well. Our passage situated between the Esther's banquet that King Xerxes organized when he crowned her as queen and the private banquet Haman has with King Xerxes after they created a threat for God's people.

[6 : 12] Esther organized two banquets after that to save God's people from Haman's threat. There are continued reversal between what people are doing and what God is doing between all these banquets.

So keeping this in mind as you journey through the book of Esther, remember the chiasm. Look out and compare and set in the background of each banquet. It will help you appreciate what God is doing to save his people from the threat they are under.

So let's look at the nature of these threats. The first threat is a foreign king's under threat. After we were told that King Xerxes gave a banquet to celebrate crowning Esther as his new queen, the first Esther's banquet of the book, we were told in later half of chapter 2, 7, verse 18, that he proclaimed a holiday throughout the province and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

The holiday referring to here is not just a public holiday. It's also understood as a test amnesty. Imagine you're told you do not need to pay your taxes.

This would be a great celebration. Everyone would be overjoyed, except for some. Someone is not happy with what King is doing to a point that they are conspiring to threaten King's life.

[7 : 39] Two of King's officials become angry at the king. They conspire to assassinate him. We do not have many details of the circumstance of this conspiracy. We know it was during the second gathering of the king's virgins.

So maybe they are having another banquet. Maybe the banqueting just keep going on and on and on and on. And these two officials have no way to make more money from collecting extra taxes because there's a nationwide test holiday.

We do not know the exact reason why they are angry. I believe we are provided with limited information for a reason. It might be fun and intriguing to speculate on what we do not know, which a lot of us, myself included, tend to do.

But to do so may not be most beneficial to us when we read God's words. As we read God's words, the key is to focus on the bits we can be certain of rather than speculate on what we cannot know, even if that is what we might want to know.

We live in a time where many believe to exercise constraint on our mind and curiosity is infringing on human rights and freedom. The world we are in today subscribe to a view that human is the highest form of intelligence and should be allowed to redefine reality for themselves.

[9 : 12] They should be allowed to choose their own pronouns and should not be submitted to the reality that is defined by their creator God. People take it to themselves to be the prosecutor and the judge.

I'm angry enough to kill eye for eye, tooth for tooth. I'll put up with you for now until I hold a more prominent position and have more power.

When that happens, I'll show you who the boss. No gratitude or appreciation towards each other. I was absent a couple of weeks ago.

I was actually working. I drove the dean of Ascension School of Theology from Egypt to do a church visit. And he noticed during the few weeks that he was staying in Sydney, people keep using their horn in traffic all the time.

And he noticed there's a sense of being angry on the road. These two angry officials provide us with contrasts that highlight the beauty of Esther's character.

[10:19] In chapter 2, verse 20, it says, Esther had kept secret his family background and nationality just that Mordecai had told her to do. For she continued to follow Mordecai's instruction as she had done when he was bringing her up.

Esther continued to follow Mordecai's instruction as she had done when he was bringing her up. Becoming a queen did not change how Esther conducted herself, nor her attitude towards Mordecai.

She might have started more with a sense of survival when she stepped in her palace, aiming to be the next queen. We can consider she was doing things against God by going into a beauty pageant or sleeping with a foreign king.

But we are starting also to see how God is changing her and growing her. Her voluntary submission to God's authority of those God put in her life is such a beautiful thing.

It's getting more rare in our current ages. We'll see more of how God transformed Esther as we continue in the next few weeks. God is working in Esther's life, and he's also working all the time to save his people.

[11:35] There's no coincidence under God. Everything under God is for a purpose. Mordecai happened to be sitting at the king's gate while the two king's officials conspired to assassinate the king.

It was no coincidence. Everything is under the sovereignty of God. It was under God's control that Mordecai was there to find out about the plot in verse 22, and in turn tell Queen Esther.

God used Mordecai and Esther to save a foreign king's life. It was not just for immediate deliverance. It will have a greater deliverance later.

God used Esther and Mordecai to save the Gentile king. After only reading three chapters of Esther so far, my impression of King Esther is he would not be my top choice to fit the category of someone to be saved.

He's boastful, excessive, he's a big show-off, has no respect towards women, he's hyper-emotional, and easily angered, easily manipulated.

[13:06] So if God would save even him, there is hope for everyone and anyone, especially King Esther participated in threatening the life of God's people.

The threat towards God's people was brought on by Haman, someone that King Cersie raised to prominent position.

The passage is not explicit with the reason King Cersie left Haman, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor, higher than that of all the other nobles.

We know that Haman is rich from verse 9, and maybe he brought his position with his world. And can also work out roughly how long after Mordecai spoiled the assassination plot, did Haman find favor with the king by comparing the time Esther became queen in 2.16, which say she was taken to King Cersie in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tibet, in the seventh year of his reign, to verse 7 of chapter 3, which refers to the twelve years of King Cersie.

We can assume the refusal of Mordecai to kneel or pay honor to Haman can be up to five years long from Esther become queen.

[14:30] Mordecai is slowly become the dust of Haman's sore eyes. His refusal to kneel and pay honor is a direct challenge to Haman's authority.

I believe it would not be wrong to assume that Mordecai refused to pay him honor because of the first two commands of God's law in the Ten Commandments, which say you shall have no other gods before me and shall not bow down or worship any created things.

So what would you do if you are Mordecai? Would you hold firm to God's command or will you comply with what's demanded of you from the world and pay honor to another human being?

I find it interesting that the royal official at the king's gate were giving Mordecai a tough time day after day. It was them who report him to Haman.

It says in chapter 3, verse 4, therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. Why are they interested to see whether Haman would tolerate Mordecai's behavior or not?

[15:44] What does that have to do with them? Are they trying to assassinate Mordecai's character, trying to cancel him because he's not willing to join the flow?

Isn't that what the world is doing every day to those who stand up for what they believe to be true and right? At the same time, I also wonder why did Mordecai tell Esther to keep her family background and nationality a secret when she became the queen, but not hold back from telling others he is a Jew?

Haman said to the king in chapter 3, verse 8 to 9, There is a certain people dispersed among the people in all the province of your kingdom who kept themselves separate.

Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's law. It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let the decree be issued to destroy them.

I will give 10,000 talents of silver to the king's administrator for the royal treasury. God's people are threatened to be destroyed because they keep themselves separate from others.

[17:03] They hold to a different custom of those of all people. If you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is that what your unbelieving relatives, friends or colleagues said of you?

Would they see a difference in your life that are so glaring at that that cause discomfort in theirs?

I'm not talking about carrying a sense that you are holier than thou or you are the privileged and accepted one where the rest of the world is condemned in the wrong or always putting up a fight to challenge others' authority.

I'm talking about holding on to God's truth and showing love to everyone, being servant of all. loving righteousness, but not in a self-righteous sense.

Jesus called his follower the salt and light of this world when he gave his lesson on the mountain in Matthew 5. Salt is to bring peace and healing to this world.

And he commanded his follower in verse 16 to let your light shine before others that they might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. And he promised that his follower would be persecuted and threatened because that is how the world treated him.

[18:26] He come to that which is his own, but his own did not recognize or receive him. The world rejected Jesus because their deeds were evil. He is a light that come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light and fear that the deed will be exposed so they did not come into the light.

Or are you living in darkness or are you truly living as the light of this world? What is your attitude towards being threatened or persecuted for your faith in Jesus?

Do you consider it blessed to join the millions of people, millions of believers and prophets who stand up for their faith and God's people? Are you compliant and compromising, lady, so to avoid any form of suffering?

Jesus' teaching and encouragement to his followers from his lesson on the mountain are blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for there is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way, they persecute the prophets who were before you.

[19:55] But we should never actively seek persecution, as some religious leaders do in countries that are more restricted to jump up outside support for themselves, seeking earthly reward.

When the life of a foreign king was under threat, God used his people to eliminate the threat and save the king. A king that was put in place by him but did not love his people.

A king that loved the praise of man more than the praise of him. As we come to the end of today's passage, it said, the courier went out, spurred on by the king's command, and on the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa.

The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered. The king and the perpetrator to threaten the lives of God's people having a banquet to sit down and drink, and the city was bewildered and disturbed.

In the coming weeks, we'll see how God turned things around for the benefit of his people. We'll witness how God also turned things upside down. The high will be brought low, and the lowly will be lifted up, for he is the servant God.

[21:17] While you wait to see the deliverance of God, even if you feel threatened, be the salt and light of this world. Let your light shine before others, that they might see your goodies and glorify your Father in heaven.