

To Bow or Not?

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[0 : 00] Esther chapter 3, verse 2, And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage, and the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, Why do you transgress the king's command? And when they spoke to him day after day, and he would not listen to them, they told Haman in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury, but he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone.

And so as they made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

I want to start off this evening with an apology, well a half apology, for the kind of rambling way in which I try to talk our way through chapter 2.

I don't apologize when I see things in the Bible that remind us of the world that we live in, because the Bible alerts us to the influences of a world that is fallen. And these influences are the same today, many of them anyway, as they were in the days of the Bible. And the Bible is our guide, our guide and our warning and our encouragement and our instruction.

And even in places like this, in Esther, we can see things and recognize things that we know only too well. However, I afforded myself the luxury of a detour, which sounded, I think, more like the kind of lectures that I used to give our teenage daughters rather than a sermon. We left the story last week with Ahasuerus choosing Esther to be his queen. You remember how he had put out an order throughout the whole of his empire, and he gathered together all those who were qualified, and by that I mean qualified by looking the part on the outside. And they were to be gathered into the palace, and they were from all of those contestants. He was going to choose the girl that he thought was most attractive and who won his heart. And we remember how in chapter 2, we saw that Esther was that girl. He clearly fell in love with her. I like to think that she won his favor not so much by what she was on the outside, but what she was on the inside. We read there that she won the favor of all who saw her. And I like to think that that was due to her upbringing and her knowledge of the living and the true God, which definitely affects a person's character. Your character will be changed, and it will be different when you know the Lord and when you follow Him.

[3 : 23] There's not much said, of course, about Esther. In fact, there's nothing said about Esther's relationship to the Lord. We don't know what kind of a person she was spiritually. We just do not know. I hate to disappoint you in this, because throughout the centuries, people have assumed, I think, too much from the story of Esther. I just want to go on what is told us. And if that conflicts with our classic, our typical impression, well, so be it. We have to learn to only, to draw our conclusions only from what is there in the Bible, and we are not told anything about Esther. As far as we know, she was a character who was brought up in a very devout way by her cousin Mordecai, but we don't know anything more about him but that he was a devout Jewish person, a person who at least knew the law of God, the Word of God, and that definitely had an effect on his character and her character. And it's his character that we're going to be looking at a little bit later on. But what I should have come on to last week, and what I failed to do, was to fail, was to see the contrast between the way in which Ahasuerus chose his bride, the wrong way, the superficial way, the one which does not require love as it really should be, and the way in which God has loved people who were unattractive to him. Ahasuerus' command was,

I want all the nice ones, the very best on the outside. It didn't seem to matter to him from what we read here, what they were on the inside, but he had the pick, he had his choice. And of course, that's the prerogative of the king. The king can pretty much do as he wants. But yet, when you set

over against that, when you contrast the way in which God has acted in the New Testament, when he chose people who would be his own, chose people to love and to bring into his palace, and into his kingdom, it was the bad people that he chose. It was the unattractive people. People like you and people like me, people who had rebelled against him and who had nothing in common with a holy God. Why should he have so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life? Why? What did he see in me that he loved me and gave himself for me? There was nothing in me. There wasn't anything attractive in me. What did he see in you?

Nothing. We cannot say there isn't a single person tonight that can say, I know why God loved me. I can see, I can understand how much of his love I deserve by my life or my character or by nature. I can understand why God would choose me and bring me into his kingdom. In fact, if you say that this evening, then you're not there at all because grace means, God's grace means that he loved those who were loveless, unlovely, ugly on the inside. And we're not talking anymore of what we are on the outside. That doesn't matter to God. What matters to God is what we are on the inside and none of us, we were, we were wretches. We were sunk in sin and misery and rebellion against God. And that rebellion can take place in all kinds of different ways. For some, it's pride. For some, it's addiction. For some, it's covetousness. For some, it's stubbornness. It's unbelief, refusal to come to him. For other ones, it's lust. For other ones, it's, it's, at least in their hearts, they're thieving. You know what we are in our hearts. You ask yourself tonight, what am I really like? Don't listen to, don't listen to what you would like to be like, but listen to the way in which your life compares with what God wants you to be. Measure your life against the life of Jesus. We're looking at that this morning on how

Jesus lived a perfect life and what it must have been like to be with him. It would have shown you up for everything that you are. Every single flaw it would have shown you if you were in his company.

[7 : 54] Well, if you really want to know what you're like tonight, then you go to the gospels and you measure your own life against Jesus because that is the standard that God demands of everyone. And every one of us will have to say, I'm failed. I failed. I haven't made it. And yet God loved that world.

A world full of unbelief and blasphemy and disobedience and doing everything that was right in our own eyes. And he loved the unlovely and took us. What does the psalm say? It says, he took me from a fearful pit and from the miry clay and set my feet on a rock. Was that an attractive person? Were we attractive to him when he found us? No, we weren't. And the second thing that I compare here is, or perhaps it's more of a similarity, I suppose, is the fact that God has brought such people and he has changed us and he has placed upon us the clothes, the royal clothes that he wants. And of course, I'm again not talking about the outside, I'm talking about the inside. The Bible talks about how God has clothed us with the garments of righteousness. He has made us his own. He has called us his own. John said, behold, what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called sons of God. Now, Hazoverus, he was selective in his love. He chose one to be elevated above everyone else. But God, when he called us all together, he loves us all equally. He loves his people, those he has redeemed and purchased and bought with a price. He loves us with an extraordinary love and a love that will not let you go and a love that will not go away and a love that he will not turn his back upon. I have loved you, he says, with an everlasting love. Can't help comparing also the way in which Esther was taken into the palace. And she was taken into his presence and then she was put away again.

Later on in the story, we'll read how obvious it is that Esther was not the only, she was used by the king just whenever he felt like it. Whenever he wanted her to come into his presence, he would call for her. In fact, if she came into his presence without that invitation, then she might be put to death. Is that the way God deals with us this evening? Is that the way? Are we just simply, is God selective in his love towards his people? No, he's not. We can come into God's presence at any time. The problem is not whether God will welcome us. The problem is whether we're too distracted with other things to enjoy the company of God and to come close to him. Because when we come, have you ever, have we stopped and thought about what we're doing when we're praying to God, when we're worshiping God?

I know that we're in God's presence all the time. I know there isn't a moment, but that God is not there. And yet when we're worshiping him, we're coming to meet with him in a very special way. Do

you know the privilege that it is to worship God, to come into the, we're not, we're not invited into the queen's presence, but we are invited tonight into the king's presence. And I wonder how many of us, myself included, realize what a great privilege that is.

[11:31] And so I can't help both comparing and contrasting how Ahasuerus shows his bride from those who were lovely to the way in which God chose his bride from those who were ugly and unworthy and sinful and lost and condemned as sinners in his sight. Never, ever lose sight of the privilege that is yours. If you're a Christian, if you're following Jesus, you are, we are more privileged than anyone else in all the world. And if you're not a Christian, then come and enjoy and experience God's love for yourself. Why are you staying on the outside? Why do you prefer to be on the outside rather than to be in? So it's not a competition like Ahasuerus. God is not choosing the best. He's choosing the worst. So if you are the worst this evening, if that's what you know you are, then that's what qualifies you to come and be and believe in him and trust in him and confess your sin.

You know the one barrier that there is to whether or not you're on the outside or on the inside of his kingdom? And that's yourself. You would have to die to come into his kingdom.

When a person comes, takes that step of faith, that faith means that the person I once was has to disappear, has to be buried. The Ivor Martin that once was is gone, dead and buried.

And the person I now am is the new creation. Behold, says, if any man is in Christ, says Paul, he is a new creation. The old things are passed away and the old things have become new.

And the story then turns, of course, to the king's gate, to the place where Mordecai was, the cousin of Esther, the person who had brought her up. And he seems to have had some kind of official position in the king's service. We don't know whether that was because she arranged for that to take place or whatever. We don't know. But during the course of his duty, he got to hear of this plot at the end of chapter 2 by Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who were seeking to lay hold, to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. They were plotting to take his life. We don't know anything about the plot, why it was, or what had possessed these two men. But Mordecai, he took it upon himself to report this, presumably through Esther. It got to the king and these two men were hanged as a result.

[14:17] And what, the way the story then turns is that all that happened as a consequence of Mordecai's faithfulness was that his action was written in the book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king.

What is worse is that after these things, Haman was elevated and he was promoted to a position that was higher than Mordecai. In fact, it appears to have been the position which is second only to the king himself. Now, once again, I can't help seeing a picture of what it is to live in a fallen and an unpredictable and an often unjust world. Here's Mordecai, and he seems to me to be a picture, a model of the dutiful citizen. And while he doesn't share much with the king, he knows how to respect the king. The Bible tells us that if we are followers of Jesus, we have to be model citizens. Romans in chapter 10, it tells us that we have to give honor where honor is due and that we have to obey the powers that be and the authorities of the land. Paul tells us that, and he tells us, he tells the early church that they must respect the Roman authorities. The Roman authorities weren't even Christian. They didn't recognize and they were responsible for putting to death many of the Christians at that time. And yet, instead of rising up against them, Paul tells them that they have to obey those who have the power and the authority. And we are the same, whether we agree with that or not.

We have to recognize that the authority that is given to governments, whether local or national, is authority that is invested in them by God, is delegated to them by God. Now, they're responsible for the way in which they conduct authority. Government are responsible. The council is responsible for the way in which they conduct their affairs, just as Ahasuerus was. And it appears that Mordecai, in the process of living his life and conducting himself in faithfulness and in diligence, he heard of this plot that was being planned against Ahasuerus. He reported it, quite rightly so, and Ahasuerus had the two perpetrators or the two suspects tried and put to death. Now, here's the thing you would expect, wouldn't you, that Mordecai would have been promoted after that. You would expect that the king surely, I mean, if you were the king, and if you found out that somebody had plotted against you and was reported by someone, someone faithful to you, and your life had been saved, surely you would reward the man who plotted, or rather, who reported the plot against you. But he didn't. It all went quiet.

This was a major, major attempt at the king's life. I mean, this is the king of Persia. Remember how in the very beginning we saw how vast the Persian empire was? He was a superpower. It would be something akin to someone plotting against President Obama. You would expect that if anyone reported that, Obama would give, at least give him some form of recognition. He doesn't. Nothing happens. It's all written. All that happens is, is that it's written in the book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king. Big deal. That's not exactly much of a reward, is it? Probably Mordecai didn't even know that it had been written in the Chronicles in the presence of the king. As far as he was concerned, nothing happened.

[18 : 40] But what really adds insult to injury is what happens next. We don't know how long it took, but what happens next is an absolute disaster. Because instead of Mordecai being promoted, this man Haman was elevated to a position of being the president or the prime minister of the whole empire. After these things, King Ahazuen has promoted Haman, the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, and advanced him to set his throne above all the officials who were with him. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate, bowed down and paid homage to Haman. Doesn't that remind you of the kind of world we live in, in which you might think that you ought to be? How often does this happen in a place of work, for example, where you feel that after so much effort and so much diligence and so much reliability, that you don't feel that you get the recognition that you deserve. And you probably do deserve it.

But what's worse is that very often what happens is that somebody's promoted over you. A person that you know doesn't have the company's interests the way that you do, but that for some other reason that he has the favor of the boss, he gets on well with the boss, maybe they go back together, and there's some other kind of relationship that goes on, and that he gets promoted more than you do, over and above you. And you're virtually having to pay homage to a person who you know doesn't deserve that position. It can happen in all kinds of different places of work or neighborhoods or whatever, government or whatever. Why is this world such an unjust place? A place that doesn't recognize where a service has been done, and you feel hurt by it. And a place where sometimes the very last people that deserve recognition or reward, they are the ones to get it. That is what injustice is all about, and it's part and parcel of life. And I'm sure that many of you have experienced something of that, the turmoil that that causes in your life. And you come to the Lord and you say, why is this happening?

Why is my life going in the opposite direction to what I feel it should be going? Why are things happening that are so frustrating? Well, hindsight is a great thing. You have to read the rest of the book of Esther to discover that God was in all of these details, even in the fact that Mordecai wasn't recognized or promoted for His faithfulness. God is on the throne, which is an encouragement to all of us today as we live and as we try to make our way through a world in which we're trying to conduct ourselves in a faithful, a reliable, and a responsible manner. But things don't always work out the way that we think they're going to work out. God is on the throne. And the fact that it's not working out the way that you hoped or expected, that is God's way of reminding you that over above this world that He is ruling, and He has His plan, and He has His way. You may never see it. But God is on the throne. So when we come to cast out cares upon Him, leave them there. Don't become bitter. The easiest thing in the world for Mordecai to do would have been to become bitter at what happened. And the easiest thing for you and I would be to become bitter as well. Now, which leads us on to the question, of course, when Haman was promoted and when he was made the prime minister, why was it that Mordecai refused to bow down to him? I find this an absolutely fascinating question. And I'm going to leave it with this for the night. I'm just going to spend the next 10 minutes or so talking about why it was.

Was it because he'd become bitter? Was it pride on his part? I should have got that job. It was me that found out the plot against the king. It's me that deserves to be elevated. Was it?

[23 : 28] Was it become the root of bitterness I'd taken in? You can imagine it. Maybe I would have been like that. I don't know. Was it envy or covetousness? Was it that deep-seated dislike of a man who had been recognized more than him? Well, apparently, scholars have been battling this question for ages and for years as to why was it that Mordecai refused? It seems to be an awful drastic thing to do because here's a man who's quite happy to honor the king. The king isn't Jewish. The king didn't worship the living and the true God. So, it's not because Mordecai was of a different religious persuasion than rather Haman was of a different religious persuasion because he was obviously quite happy to be a good faithful servant of the king. So, why was it then that Mordecai,

and what we're going to find out here is that it gets right to the root of the Old Testament. It goes all the way back, way to the beginning of and the promise that was given by God to the serpent that there would be enmity way back in the garden. There would be enmity between her seed and the serpent's seed and the woman's seed, but I'm going, I'm jumping the gun. Let's take it, let's take it very slowly. Why was it? Was he unreasonable?

I don't believe so. I believe that the root of Mordecai's refusal lay in who Haman was. It wasn't the fact that he was promoted against him, but it lay in who Haman was. What does this chapter tell us about Haman? It tells us that he was an Agagite. Now, that's very significant because Agag was a king that lived hundreds of years before, and he was the king at the time of Saul, the king, and he was the king of the Amalekites. So, Agag was an Amalekite. So, Haman was, in actual fact, an Amalekite. Who were the Amalekites?

The Amalekites date their history all the way back to Esau. Amalekites. So, Amalekite was, in trying to bring out the people that Jacob had been Isaac. They're actually related to each other. Haman and Mordecai, their genealogy goes all the way back to Isaac. They're related to each other. But those two sons, Esau and Jacob, were very different. Jacob was a man who loved the Lord and a man who took God seriously, a man who lived by faith. He didn't always do the right thing, but he lived by faith. Esau had no time for the Lord.

Neither did his family. Neither did his descendants after him. In fact, they grew up to hate God and to hate everything that he was doing and to hate his people. So, hundreds of years later, when the children, try and get this, when the children of Israel, Moses took them out of Egypt, we read that in Exodus chapter 17, when Moses took the children of Israel out of Egypt, one of the first things that happened to them in the wilderness was that the Amalekites came to attack them.

For no reason, except blind hatred against the Israelites for who they were.

[27 : 22] And the Israelites fought against them. We read about it. That's why we read in Exodus chapter 17, you remember that incident where there was the war and where Aaron went up the mountain and he held his hands up. And as long as Aaron held up his hands, the war was being won by Israel. As soon as Aaron let his hands down, then the war was being won by Amalek. And so it was that at the end of the day, of course, Israel won. But God, and this is the key, God cursed the Amalekites.

He cursed the whole nation because they were enemies of Israel. And it wasn't an ethnic problem, it was a spiritual problem. They hated the Israelites because they hated God. You see, this is going deeper than culture. This is actually a spiritual problem. Now, later on in Saul's day, Saul was commanded to destroy the Amalekites. But he refused. He didn't. He failed to destroy the Amalekites. And God was angry with them for doing that because it was God's command. It was God who condemned the Amalekites. And Saul let them live. Here was a people who were the avowed enemies of the Israelites. They're not just a people who dislike the Israelites. This is not just racism.

This is a spiritual hatred because these people hate everything that the Israelites stand for. And there was conflict all the way through the Old Testament between the Israelites and between the Edomites. That's what they were. They were the Edomites. The sons, the daughters, the children of Edom.

And they were asking Mordecai to bow down to Haman was something similar to asking Benjamin Netanyahu to bow down to Khaled Meshal, the leader of Hamas. I'm just giving you a modern example.

They are the avowed enemies of Israel. This was a spiritual problem. The problem goes on. There's a verse in Isaiah chapter 62. I'm going to just, because I find this so fascinating, to work through and trace through the history of this conflict. Isaiah chapter 63, where God vows vengeance, final vengeance on Edom, the Amalekites, the sons and the daughters of Esau.

[30 : 17] Who is this, he says, who comes from Edom in crimson garments from Bozrah? He was splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength. It is I speaking in righteousness, says God, mighty to save. And then the question is asked, why is your apparel red and your garments like this who tread in the winepress? And then God says, I have trodden the winepress alone and from the peoples no one was with me. I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath. Their lifeblood spattered on my garments and stained all my apparel. Now, why is he singling out Edom in particular? Well, for this very reason, because throughout the history of the Old Testament, there was conflict between Esau and Jacob. And the Esau, the descendants of Esau

were the ones who continually tried to annihilate the Israelites, not just to kill a few of them. After all, it's only Mordecai that's behaving, misbehaving here. The easiest thing in the world for Haman to do would be to just say, well, put him to death. He could have done that. He could have snapped his fingers and it could have put him to death. But Haman saw this as his opportunity to do what he always wanted to do and to annihilate the people of God. It's the old conflict that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. You remember when Adam and Eve sinned. They ran away from God in guilt and in shame. And

God followed them into the garden and he said, what is this you have done? He spoke to Adam. He spoke to Eve. And then he spoke to the serpent. And then he began with the serpent to issue his judgment against him. And he says, I will put enmity between your seed and the seed of the woman.

And eventually, the seed of the woman would destroy the seed of the serpent. But he says, I will put enmity. There will be enmity from now on between your seed. And here is, at the back of this conflict, Satan. This is a spiritual battle. And Satan is working through the Amalekites, the sons of Esau, all the way through the Old Testament. And in so doing, their attempt is to annihilate. Why were they? Why were they annihilating the children of Israel? Why did they hate the children of Israel so much? Because God had promised that one day his son would be born. And his son would be, the Messiah, would be one of them. He would belong to the Jewish nation.

And in desperation, the Amalekites throughout these centuries are trying to annihilate and put to death not just one person, but the whole of the Jewish race. You know what goes on? I'm just going to stop with this. I hope you're as fascinated as I am with this. I think it's just incredibly interesting. But it goes on. Round about this time, everybody remembers Herod, who tried to kill Jesus at the time he was born. Guess who Herod was? Guess where his ancestry came from? He was an Idumean. The history books tells us that he was an Idumean. Do you know what that is? It means that he came from Idumea or Idumea. Edom. Same family. Same tribe. Exactly the same tribe.

[34 : 05] And what do we find Herod doing? He's trying to annihilate the coming of Jesus Christ into the world for the same reason. Filled with rage. Filled with jealousy. Filled with hatred. An extraordinary hatred. Just like Haman. It's a very, very foolish thing to try and fight God. It's the most foolish thing that you could do. There are various ways, of course, of fighting God. You can do what Haman did and set out to destroy everything that God is doing. Or you can run from him. You can determine within your own heart that you're not going to live for him. I hope there's nobody here this evening that's fighting God. Because that's what this is all about. It's about a spiritual battle in which we know the truth. We know what the truth is. And yet it seems like some people will do anything at all to avoid it, to fight it, to evade it, to get away from God. And sometimes go to the most incredible measures in order to do so. Haman didn't need to eradicate the Jews. He could have put Mordecai to death.

No problem. But he took it into his heart to go against, to oppose what God was doing. And of course, God's on the throne. And so he didn't succeed. And that's what this book is all about. The way in which God intervenes and works through his people and brings about the circumstances to pass. And all we want to do today is to be in the right place at the right time in the hands of God. That's the safest place we can be tonight, in the hands of God. Is that where you are? Have you trusted? Have you believed in Jesus Christ? Are you in the kingdom? Because ultimately, we're in the kingdom of God or else we're not. And if you're not, then you're in the other kingdom. You're ruled by the other power, the power that is opposed to God. He who is not for me is against me. This story, as much as anything else, it sets that out for us, that we're either one or the other. We're either in Jesus or out of Jesus. We're either on his side or not. Which side is it with you? Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you, Lord, for your work.