

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 11/23/14
Esther 3 “When Powerful People Hate God’s People”**
Series: “When God Seems Distant”¹

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Main Idea: In Esther 3, God recorded a story about a man who tried to eliminate His people. It's a story that teaches us important lessons about God and about ourselves.

- I. Let's consider the story.
 - A. Scene #1: Haman received a promotion (1-4).
 1. Xerxes honored Haman (1).
 2. Mordecai refused to do so (2).
 3. The problem had to do with the past (3-4).
 - B. Scene #2: Haman devised a plot (5-11).
 1. It started with anger against one person (5).
 2. It turned into hatred against a whole race (6).
 3. It incorporated superstition (7).
 4. It put on a deceptive front (8-9).
 5. It resulted in great injustice (10-11).
 - C. Scene #3: Haman issued a proclamation (12-15).
 1. The Jews would be annihilated.
 2. The blood bath would occur in eleven months.
- II. Let's consider the significance.
 - A. We learn about the depravity of sinful man.
 1. Apart from grace we all are self-seeking.
 2. In the end, we are self-destructing.
 - B. We learn why we need a Savior.
 1. He's the only hope for the sinner.
 2. He's the only hope for the world.
 - C. We learn that we are living in a world that hates God.
 - D. We learn that God can use even the world's hatred to accomplish His plan.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 2

As we open God's Word this morning, we're going to consider a not so pleasant, yet relevant subject. Hence, the title I've chosen. *When Powerful People Hate God's People*.

There's a lot of hatred in the world today directed towards the people of God. In reality, this is nothing new.

Ever heard of *Yad Vashem*. It's a Hebrew phrase taken from Isaiah 56:5 meaning "a memorial and a name." It's also the name of the main Holocaust monument in present day Jerusalem.

I remember the sickening feeling I experienced when I visited Yad Vashem. I saw a pile of eyeglasses that had been taken from Jewish victims before their execution. I saw evidence of how the Nazis robbed helpless Jews of all their valuables--even the gold fillings from their teeth--before exterminating them without mercy.

Yad Vashem is a vivid illustration of the depravity of the human race. It's a memorial that forces us to remember a chapter from the past we'd rather forget.

Four thousand years ago, God chose a man named Abraham, and formed a covenant with him and his descendants. He turned Abraham's family into a chosen nation and promised through that nation to send the hope of all nations into the world, Jesus the Messiah.

Sadly, the chosen nation rejected its Messiah, and crucified Him. But God's commitment to Israel has not wavered. In the first century He redeemed a remnant of Jews and began to build the church, grafting into the church a people from all the nations.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Esther series at WBC in 1999.

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” the disciples asked Jesus in Acts 1:6.

“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

“Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in,” explains Paul in Romans 11:25-26. “And so all Israel will be saved.”

So God is not finished with Israel. Sadly, that’s not the case with so many. The fact is, there’s a long history to Anti-Semitism in this world.²

Certainly the most notorious example happened in the 1930s and 40s.. Nazi propaganda stated that the human race must be "purified" by ridding it of the Jews. The "final solution" to the Jewish "problem" was camps, gas chambers, and crematoria. Between the years of 1933 and 1945, some six million Jews were killed.

But Anti-Semitism didn't begin with Adolph Hitler. As we move back on the timeline we come to the latter part of the nineteenth century. The largest Jewish population in the world--six million--was in czarist Russia. A series of vicious pogroms left thousands dead. As a result Jews fled from Europe, and between 1880 and 1910 more than two million Jews immigrated to America.

Go back further. In the seventeenth century, a bloody revolt against the Cossacks occurred in Poland (1648-58). Caught in the middle, about half a million Jews were killed.

Prior to that was the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. Sadly, in the name of Christ, thousands of Jews were tortured, burnt at the stake, and forced to convert. In Germany one generation later, Luther issued a series of caustic pamphlets attacking Jews, writing, "Let us drive them out of the country for all time."

There's more. In the Middle Ages were largely ostracized by the "Christian" culture. Seeking to avoid social and economic pressure, they lived behind ghetto walls. They were required to wear a distinctive hat or patch sewn on their clothing. They were accused of having a peculiar smell, in contrast to the "odor of sanctity." They were maligned as "Christ-killers." The First Crusade (1096) resulted in numerous mass suicides as Jews sought to avoid forced baptism. Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from France in 1306, and from cities in Spain, Germany, and Austria in the following years.

It's a tragic fact that the spirit of Anti-Semitism has often been promoted by professing Christians. In 321 Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Jews were forbidden to make converts, serve in the military, or hold any high office.

Keep going back and you come to the second century A.D. Roman emperor Hadrian issued edicts forbidding the practice of Judaism (117-38). Rabbi Akiba was tortured to death by the Romans who stripped his flesh from his body with iron combs.

In A.D. 70, the Romans decimated the city of Jerusalem and flattened the temple. As a result Jews fled for their lives.

That wasn't the first time Gentile hands desecrated the holy temple. In the second century B.C. Antiochus IV Epiphanes sacrificed a pig on the altar and sprinkled its blood on Jewish scrolls. In addition, Jewish blood was spilt.

Indeed, the history of Anti-Semitism is *long*.

²See the article "Anti-Semitism" by M. R. Wilson, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by W. Elwell, p. 61.

You didn't come this morning for a history lesson, and I didn't come to give you one. But, as Oliver Wendell Homes, Jr. once said, "A page of history is worth a volume of logic."

In His Word God gave us a book which shows what He thinks of Anti-Semitism. Long before Hitler, there was Haman, a wicked man we meet first in Esther 3.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Why do I need to know about this 2500 year old event anyway?" It's been rightly observed that those who disregard the past are bound to repeat it.³ But more importantly, in Esther 3, the Spirit of God recorded a story that teaches us some vital lessons about God and about ourselves.

I. Let's consider the story.

Chapter three begins, "After these events." What events? The bizarre incidents of the first two chapters.

King Xerxes took the throne of the vast Medo-Persian Empire in 486 BC. In his third year he threw a couple of parties, the latter of which just happened to result in the banishment of his queen, Vashti. Four years later, an orphan girl named Esther just happened to win a kingdom-wide beauty contest, and became Xerxes' new queen.

Her cousin, Mordecai, was given a good job at the king's gate. One day he just happened to uncover an assassination plot against the king, but his act of loyalty just happened to be overlooked by Xerxes.

Of course, things don't just happen in this world. Never. That's the point of the book of Esther. Though God is not mentioned in the book, He's there orchestrating every detail for His glory and the good of His people.

So by the time Esther 3 begins, Vashti is out, Esther is in, and Mordecai has been slighted. The third chapter involves three scenes.

A. Scene #1: Haman received a promotion (1-4). Here's how it happened. Notice verse 1, "After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles."

So as our story begins...

1. *Xerxes honored Haman (1).* Haman will turn out to be the villain of the book of Esther. In his introduction, he's called an Agagite. Is that significant? Do you remember meeting the Agagites anywhere else in the Bible? It's quite likely the Agagites were the descendants of Agag, king of Amalek, the pagan ruler we read about in 1 Samuel 15. The Agagites (or Amalekites) had waylaid the Israelites while en route to the Promised Land (Ex. 17:8-13). Later, God commanded King Saul to totally destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3).

Tragically, Saul disobeyed. If Saul had done what God commanded him to do in the eleventh century B.C., God's people wouldn't have faced the threat of Haman in the fifth century.

Sin is like that. When we compromise, there will be consequences. Always.

J. Vernon McGee comments, "God could see down through history and He knew what was coming. Saul's failure to exterminate the Agagites would have led to the extermination of his own people, but for the providence of God. Again, God is behind the scenes, keeping watch over His own."⁴

³ George Santayana

⁴ J. Vernon McGee, p. 62.

Notice the text again, "After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman." Do you see the irony? The king owed his life to Mordecai, but he promoted Haman. How high? To a seat of honor higher than all the other royal officials. In essence, Haman became the king's prime minister. For reasons we're not told, Xerxes honored Haman.

What we are told is this...

2. *Mordecai refused to do so (2)*. Listen to verse 2, "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."

There's a contrast here, isn't there? In verse 1, Xerxes honored Haman. In verse 2, all the civil servants honored Haman. Everyone honored Haman, everyone except Mordecai.

Why not? No doubt, as a person Haman didn't deserve honor as his actions will demonstrate. There's even a hint of his crafty character in verse 2 for we're told the reason people bowed to him was because "the king had commanded this concerning him." You don't need to command respect when it's deserved.

Mordecai refused to honor Haman. Some believe he was motivated by spiritual reasons. In His law God prohibited His people from bowing before any idol or image. Thus, by refusing to bow Mordecai was showing character.

I disagree. I don't think it was character. I get the sense it may have been pride.

God didn't prohibit His people from bowing before civil leaders. David bowed before King Saul (1 Sam. 24:8). Bathsheba bowed before David (1 Kgs. 1:16). Abraham bowed before the Hittites (Gen. 23:7).

True, at times the act of bowing can indicate worship, but not always. Sometimes it merely shows respect—Jacob bowed before Esau (Gen. 33:3). And respect is what God commands His people to show to civil leaders (Rom. 13:1). Both Daniel and Nehemiah exhibited great respect towards pagan rulers.

But respect was something Mordecai refused to give to Haman. And why?

3. *The problem had to do with the past (3-4)*. Oh how the past, when not dealt with God's way, raises its ugly head to bite us! Watch how it happened here. Look at the text,

"Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?"⁴ 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."

In time Mordecai's insubordination caught the attention of his peers. So they asked him about it, "Hey, why don't you bow?" Apparently, he was a man of great courage for the text says that "day after day" he refused to comply. He was no "yes-man!"

We're given a clue at the end of verse 4 as to why Mordecai refused to bow: "he had told them he was a *Jew*." You may recall that back in 2:10 Mordecai expressly forbid Esther to reveal her nationality. But now he goes public with his own background, and seems to use it to justify his refusal to honor his superior.

What's going on here? The whole controversy seems to be linked with the past. Mordecai is a descendant of Benjamin (2:5), while Haman traces his lineage back to Agag (3:1). F. B. Huey suggests what we may have here is the remnant of an ancient feud: "No self-respecting Benjaminite would bow before a descendant of the ancient Amalekite enemy of the Jews."⁵

⁵ F. B. Huey, p. 812.

It's an ugly thing to see people hate each other because they refuse to let go of the past. That kind of hatred destroys families. And communities. It can even destroy a nation.

Maybe Mordecai was operating out of conviction. Maybe he was just being stubborn. It's not always easy to tell the difference. Whichever it was, his actions just about got his people annihilated, humanly speaking, that is.

B. Scene #2: Haman devised a plot (5-11). It was a devious plot, as verses 5-6 explain, "When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged.⁶ 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."

Haman's plot was marked by five ugly characteristics.

1. *It started with anger against one person (5).* At first, apparently, Haman didn't notice Mordecai's disobedience. But after the other officials ratted on their peer, Haman saw it for himself. And He was "enraged."

There are two common, sinful ways of dealing with anger. There's *blowing up*, and there's *clamming up*. Both are unacceptable to God (see Eph 4:25-32). Haman exhibited the latter. Instead of dealing with his anger, he let it fester. He brooded. As the KJV puts it, he was "full of wrath."

Anger itself isn't sin (as Ephesians 4:26 indicates). Anger is merely a God-given emotion which is to be expressed under control, in obedience to God's Word. Which is what Haman *didn't* do. Instead of dealing with his problem with Mordecai in a God-honoring way, he began to conjure up a diabolical plan. It started with anger against one person...

2. *It turned into hatred against a whole race (6).* As the wheels turned in his depraved mind, Haman began to chew on a horrid idea. "Wait a minute! I could get rid of Mordecai, but why stop there? People like Mordecai have no right to live. That's right! That kind of people need to go. So that's what I'll do, get rid of Mordecai's people. I'll be doing society a favor."

Just how extensive would Haman's holocaust be? Verse 6 indicates it would blanket the whole kingdom of Xerxes. Every Jewish man, woman, and child--including the God-fearing Jews back in Israel--would lose their lives.

Sin is like a festering cancer. It started here with anger against one person, but in time Haman "scorned" the idea of killing only Mordecai. His anger turned into hatred against a whole race.

My friends, our anger is yet another reason why we need a Savior. And praise God, we have one. Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sinful anger, and every other sin, and conquered death to break its grip on us and set us free to live God-pleasing lives.

Notice something else about Haman's plot.

3. *It incorporated superstition (7).* Verse 7, "In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar."

We're given a time indicator. It's Xerxes' *twelfth* year. He deposed Vashti in his third, married Esther in his seventh, indicating Esther's now been in the palace for five years.

In the first month of that year, lots were cast, not by Haman, but for him ("in his presence). "They cast the pur," the text reads--possibly referring to Haman's astrologers.

It's my opinion that Haman was a superstitious man (we'll see another evidence of it when we come to 6:13 in a later study). Granted, God granted the Israelites a legitimate use of the lot in seeking His will (Prov. 16:33). But Haman's not interested in God's will. All he's interested in is finding the *lucky day*. He's looking for an omen. When would *fate* have him carry out his plot.

So in the first month lots were cast. And the lot fell on the *twelfth* month. That's eleven months away, the following February-March. Was that mere coincidence? No. It meant Haman would have to sit on his wicked scheme for almost a year, as we'll see, just the perfect amount of time for God to turn the tables on him!

So now Haman's got a plan and a date. What he needs next is permission, and that, of course, must come from the king. Which brings us to the plot's fourth ugly characteristic.

4. *It put on a deceptive front (8-9)*. Listen to how Haman twists truth in his conversation with Xerxes: "Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws [Is that true? One man didn't bow, and now the whole race is guilty?]; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them.⁹ If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."

Talk about a hidden agenda! Haman doesn't even mention Mordecai. He says, "It's not in the king's best interest to tolerate these people."

Here's a smooth politician. He's got an agenda, and he finds ways to convince others that his agenda is in *their best interest*. Listen. Was Haman really interested in Xerxes' best interests? On the surface, maybe. But what really drove him were his *own* interests.

In verse 9, we see a bit of back-scratching going on. "King, if you sign this bill (and did I mention it's bi-partisan?), I'll make it worth your while. I'll put 10,000 talents of silver in your pocket."

At the time silver was the monetary standard in Persia, and Haman promised his boss 750,000 pounds of it. In today's equivalency, that's *millions* of dollars. There's a sure way to convince your supervisor to endorse a proposal. Tell him it'll pay for itself!

It's not surprising that a plot that was birthed in hatred and baptized with greed...

5. *It resulted in great injustice (10-11)*. Notice Xerxes' response, "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.¹¹ 'Keep the money,' the king said to Haman, 'and do with the people as you please.'"

Xerxes was quite a king, wouldn't you say? The man has very little regard for life. He doesn't even inquire who the people happen to be. He doesn't realize he's just authorized the death of his own wife! He's not interested in justice, only his own interests.

So he hands his signet ring to Haman, thus granting him a blank check to do what he desires. In the NIV he says, "Keep the money." The Hebrew actually reads, "The silver is given to you." It could mean he's telling Haman to forget about the money offer. But the Hebrew could carry this sense, "Well, Haman, it's your money. If you want to spend it that way--by giving it to me--that's all right with me."

We're looking at a case of flat out injustice. The fate of a people being determined by a spiteful prime minister and a self-absorbed dictator.

But wait. Is God hindered when a leader like Xerxes is in office? Does He scratch His head wondering what He's going to do next? Don't believe that for a moment. Even if all we can see is human injustice, know this--God is in control.

You say, "It sure doesn't look like it in Esther 3!" Maybe not, but the story's not over. Just wait until chapter 7.

C. Scene #3: Haman issued a proclamation (12-15). "Then on the thirteenth 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.¹³ 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 little children -- on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.¹⁴ 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 they would be ready for that day.¹⁵ Spurred on by the king's command, the couriers went out, 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."

Haman set the plot in motion. He called for the royal secretaries to print up the edict. Then he sent out the Pony Express to take the command to all regions of the empire. It would be the task of the local satraps, governors, and nobles to carry out the orders.

Talk about a nightmare for the second tier government officials! The boss passes the law, and it's up to them to carry it out!

Simply put, the proclamation spelled out two details.

1. *The Jews would be annihilated.* Every one of them. And...

2. *The blood bath would occur in eleven months.* On the thirteenth day of Adar.

The edict was clear. The empire had exactly one month shy of a year to get ready to carry out the most horrendous demonstration of Anti-Semitism the world would ever see.

Now, why did God preserve this account for us? What's the take away for us?

II. Let's consider the significance.

I see four important lessons here.

A. We learn about the depravity of sinful man. I'm intrigued by the final words of the chapter. After the edict was proclaimed verse 15 states, "The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered."

Even a city like Susa that was used to cruel behavior was stunned by this. But not the king and his henchman. How do you explain the actions of men like Haman and Xerxes? How can people be so desensitized to sin? How can you plan a massacre and then drink a toast to it?

The answer is *depravity*. I'm not just talking about Haman and Xerxes now. The Bible teaches that every human being enters this world as a depraved sinner. Psalm 51:5 states, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Psalm 58:3 elaborates, "Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies." In Genesis 8:21 God said of mankind, "Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood."

Depravity doesn't mean that every person is as *bad* as he could be. It does mean we are as *bad off* as we can be. Why? For two reasons.

1. *Apart from grace we are all self-seeking.* We're born that way, and we choose to live that way. We seek to please self.

Mordecai refused to bow. Why? Because of self. Heman turned an interpersonal problem into an international problem. Why? Because of self. Xerxes was more interested in a good drink than justice. Why? Again, because depraved people are self-seeking.

Every part of humanity is marred and twisted by sin. Apart from God's grace, when we look in the mirror we may not see Haman, but we see a self-seeker.

There's a second reason we are as bad off as we can be...

2. *In the end, we are self-destructing.* Instead of submitting to God, we run from Him--to our own harm.

Ralph Barton, one of the top cartoonists, left this note pinned to his pillow before taking his own life: "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up twenty-four hours of the day."⁶

So he self-destructed. But the question is this. Is there hope for depraved sinners? The answer is yes! Which brings us to the second lesson of Esther 3.

B. We learn why we need a Savior. By nature, we are self-focused, depraved sinners. Who can deliver us from the penalty and power of sin? Only Jesus can.

1. *He's the only hope for the sinner.* According to 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Jesus was perfect, yet on the cross God treated Jesus as though He personally had committed every sin that would ever be committed by every person that would ever believe on Him. Jesus became a substitute for sinners.

He died in their place, then He conquered death, and He's alive today. Through Him God offers forgiveness and salvation. He will save you today if you will repent of your sinfulness and put your total trust in Christ. Jesus is the only hope for the sinner.

What's more...

2. *He's the only hope for the world.* According to 1 Corinthians 15, the day is coming when Jesus will return to this earth. He will destroy all dominion, authority, and power. Then He will hand over the kingdom to God the Father (15:24). There will never be another Heman nor Hitler again.

C. We learn that we are living in a world that hates God. That's the fundamental problem of the world. It always has been, since the garden. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first (John 15:18)." The Bible doesn't give pat answers as to why bad things happen to God's people. But it does give *ultimate* answers which help us make sense in the mean time.

Ultimately, the source of Anti-Semitism is satanic. Satan wants to get at God by getting at God's people. In its final form Anti-Semitism will take the form of Anti-Christ.

The problem isn't merely sociological. It's spiritual. Satan hates the people of God because Satan hates God.

The fact is this. We are living in a world that hates the true God. I say *true* because the world will create and applaud *false* gods, but it despises the true God and all associated with Him. But take heart...

D. We learn that God can use even the world's hatred to accomplish His plan. He gave Haman just enough rope to eventually hang himself. Literally. We need to affirm the truth, even in the midst of adversity. God is in control. Therefore, we can and must choose to trust Him.

⁶*Morning Glory*, May 29, 1993