

June 20, 2021 | Esther: Fractured People Flawless God

Week 4 | Esther 3 | “When genocide was called good.”

Announcements:

- Happy Father’s Day!
- Children’s Ministry in-person kickoff next Sunday. Since Sunday, March 22, 2020, our children’s ministry has been putting out online videos for our kids every week. Today marks the 66th and last online video. That’s 66 13-ish minutes long videos. Wow. So awesome! Thank you Mitzi, Stefanie, Sarah, and my wife. Ya’ll did a fantastic job.
- A brief Trustee Meeting after church next week.
- Pray for Bruce, shoulder surgery.

Now, with that out of the way, let's dive into the text.

READ: Esther 3:1-6 (ESV)

¹After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. ²And 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. ³Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, “Why do you transgress the king's command?” ⁴And 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. ⁵And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. ⁶But he **disdained** to lay hands on Mordecai **alone**. So, as they had 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.

Haman being promoted is somewhat ironic. Why? Because who had not one chapter before saved the king’s life? Mordecai. So, while narratively, we would’ve expected Mordecai to get a reward, what really happens is the exact opposite. Without even knowing who Haman is yet, we are already predisposed to not like him. And we may not be alone in that regard.

Interestingly, Xerxes had to decree that all the court officials were to bow down to Haman. Now, this may play into the pomp and circumstance of the Persian court, but it's also possible

that no one would've bowed to Haman otherwise. He apparently was not a very likable dude, as the narrative quickly confirmed for us.¹

Now, while the Persian court was commanded by law to bow to Haman, Mordecai refused. Why? Well, that question has sparked a debate amongst commentators for centuries. Some thought Mordecai himself was too proud or that, as a Jew, it would've been unscriptural to bow before anyone other than God.

However, both of those explanations fail to hold any water. Throughout the Esther narrative, Mordecai will be presented as *the Jew*, bar none. He will be wise and caring. He will be loyal and devout. Nothing in his characterization hints that Mordecai had the character flaw of pride.

What's more, while it is true that Jews were commanded to worship God alone and bowing, or prostration, could be thought of as a form of worship, bowing out of respect to authority or king was not considered worship (cf. I Sam. 24:8; Gen. 23:7). Even today, if you were to travel east, many in the Orient even bow to one another as salutations. It is meaningful, for sure, but no more significant than a curtsy. The same can be said here.

So, if obeisance for a king or authority isn't wrong, why did Mordecai refuse to bow? Was he bitter that he did not get recognized for saving the king's life? No. Mordecai isn't so petty as that. The answer lies in the response he gave to his fellow court officials: he was a Jew. Now, this answer isn't to be read in the religious sense, as if Mordecai was explaining a religious law, he was not allowed to transgress; instead, there was something about his heritage, that is, something about his Jewishness, that prevented him from bowing before Haman. The fact that there is no comment in the text explaining this connection proves that this is the case. A devout Jew reading Esther would hardly need an explanation as to why another Jew would not bow to an ancient and well-known adversary.²

Haman is an Agagite, as the text twice reminds us (cf. vs. 1, 10). And the Agagites were longtime enemies of the Jews (cf. Gen. 14:7 when they were called the Amalekites). In fact, King Saul—Mordecai's ancestor—was supposed to finally end Israel's conflict with the Agagites, but, instead, he ends up befriending their king (cf. I Sam. 15). Now, to us, age-old family feuds seem to be trivial things. But that is a consequence of the time and place we live. Westerners, by and large, put little stock in individual ancestry. But historically, families would often hold grudges

¹ Reid, Debra, *Esther*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Volume 13, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), p. 90.

² Bush, Frederic, *Ruth-Esther*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 9, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1996), p. 379.

against others for centuries and still do.³ One need only look at the conflict in the middle east today to see this reality at work. Now, you can judge Mordecai for not bowing simply because of ethnic differences; but I wonder which of us would judge a Jew today for refusing to show respect to a Nazi. Because, as we saw, Haman wants to exact his revenge on Mordecai by butchering his people. Genocide, it seems, is the only balm to soothe Haman's wounded pride. He is a preening pigeon overly concerned with his image and so, rather than kill Mordecai, which he could've easily have done, Haman casually conceives of mass genocide merely to restore his wounded reputation. Beware, oh Christian, when a tender ego is given power, as a minor offense appears as a major threat.

READ: Esther 3:7-11 (ESV)

⁷In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast **Pur** (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. [5+ years after Esther is made queen.] ⁸Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. ⁹If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." ¹⁰So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you."

Like all good genocidal maniacs, Haman's speech is a master at manipulation. In fact, there are six key aspects to what Haman says: first, Haman conceals the truth; second, he tells Xerxes a truth, then a half-truth, and then a blatant lie; after that, Haman appeals to Xerxes' sense of superiority which then leads to the "enemy of the Jews" sweetening the pot with a bribe. How could the King resist?

First, Haman conceals the identity of the Israelites. "There is a *certain* people...."

³ Firth, David G., *The Message of Esther*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, ILL; Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 2010), p. 61.

Second, the truth: the Jews were scattered throughout the Persian empire. But Haman's intent was to garner fear from Xerxes as if the Jews were everywhere, lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce.

Third, the half-truth: the Jews did have different *religious* customs than the Persians, but this did not conflict with Persian law, as Haman implies. The problem with this is that most Persia was not Persian. The empire was vast and comprised of many cultures with differing customs. This was not new. In fact, the Persians prized themselves on their diversity.

Fourth, the blatant lie: contrary to Haman's claim, the Jews readily obeyed Persian law. They were not anarchists. In fact, a Jew, less than a chapter before, had worked to save the life of the King, though Xerxes is so daft that he forgot Mordecai's name even though he himself had the event recorded in the Chronicles of the King (cf. 2:19)!

Fifth, Haman appeals to Xerxes' sense of superiority. "...it is not the king's profit to tolerate them..." In Hebrew, the verbiage and intent of this verse is actually, "The Jews are beneath your *Aryan* prestige, oh King."⁴ Sadly, this would not be the last time the so-called "Aryan" race thought themselves better than the Jews. As we know, Hitler would propagate this philosophy and end up killing over 6 million Jews in his effort to purge the masses of the Jewish infestation in his attempt to create the "Master Race."⁵ What the Nazi's called the 'final solution' for the 'Jewish problem.'

Lastly, let's talk about the bribe. This kind of bribe isn't without a historical parallel. During another season of Xerxes' reign, a guy named Pythius of Lydia offered 33 tons of gold as a "gift," an amount nine times the size of Haman's.⁶ So, really, Haman was getting a good deal here. To understand just how much this bribe is, you must know that one Persian talent weighed a little over 66lbs. Meaning, given that Haman offered 10,000 talents, the sum he was willing to pay Xerxes amounted to 333 tons!⁷ That's not only the weight of seven Boeing 757 airplanes or 3 cruise liners, but it amounted to over two-thirds of the tax revenue collected in Persia in one year.⁸ According to the amount

⁴ Clines, D.J., *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, The New Century Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1984), p. 296.

⁵ Taylor, Alan, "World War II: The Holocaust," October 18, 2011, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2011/10/world-war-ii-the-holocaust/100170/>, [accessed, June 20, 2021].

⁶ Clines (1984), p. 296.

⁷ Bush (1 vx996), p. 381.

⁸ Reid, Debra, *Esther*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Volume 13, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), p. 93.

of taxes the US government collected in 2019, Haman paid 2.3 trillion to kill all the Jews in the Persian empire. And yet, such a large sum did not give Xerxes pause. Like, maybe someone willing to pay so much to kill an entire people group might be trying to hide something? Once again, Xerxes is portrayed as a disinterested monarch who is manipulated by the wills of others, just so long as he's given enough wine and/or money. Indifference can be as useful a tool for evil as blatant hatred and open malice. In this way, Xerxes becomes an accomplice to genocide.

READ: Esther 3:12-15 (ESV)

¹² Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring.¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

There are three things about this last scene that are truly striking.

First, the day the decree was issued (i.e., “the 13th day of the first month”) was also the day right before a Jewish holiday called Passover. Meaning, on the eve of when the Jewish people were to celebrate God’s deliverance they are, once again, threatened by extermination. It leads the reader to wonder, “Will God save the Persian Israelites just as he did those in the Exodus?”⁹

Second, the decree is issued in the passive voice (i.e., “were summoned,” “was written,” “was sent,” “was to be issued,” etc.). Ironic that a decree which legalized the mass genocide of an entire people group—the young and old, men, women, and children too, as well as having their goods “plundered”—would be distributed in such a cold and unfeeling way. Unjust bureaucracy has killed more people throughout the ages than any weapon of war.

⁹ Baldwin, Joyce G., *Esther: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 75.

Lastly, as Xerxes and Haman sat down to drink, the capital city was thrown into confusion. Xerxes was 10,000 talents richer, and Haman would get his massacre. They couldn't have been happier. To them, they must've thought, why not celebrate? But the city, and no doubt the entire Persian empire, were bewildered. The ESV says "confusion," and the KJV says "perplexed," which gives the sense that the city simply misunderstood. Like, they couldn't grasp why such a decree would've been issued. Which, of course, is likely true. But the Hebrew word used to translate "confusion" bears more than a lack of comprehension but expresses grief (cf. Ex. 14:3; Joel 1:18).¹⁰ Susa was not only mentally perplexed, but they were also emotionally distressed over the decree.

So, what's the takeaway?

READ: Esther 3:11

¹¹ And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you."

A worldview devoid of a biblical foundation will regard "good" as evil and "evil" as good.

When we are the arbiters of truth, "good" becomes a relative preference rather than a subjective principle. Ever since the garden, we have looked at what God has called evil and thought of it as "good" (cf. Gen. 3:6). The world believes that good is whatever we want it to be because we define the parameters of our own lives. They think, "No one should tell us how to live or what to do or what not to do. There is no God. We are our own gods!" But there is a harsh warning throughout scripture about perverting God's definitions.

READ: Isaiah 5:20-23 (ESV)

²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! ²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight! ²² Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, ²³ who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!

The degradation of truth is what leads humanity into debauchery and depravity.

READ: Romans 1:28-32 (ESV)

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of

¹⁰ Bush (1996), p. 383.

unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

So, what's the takeaway?

A worldview devoid of a biblical foundation will regard "good" as evil and "evil" as good.

Haman, like Hitler, thought the genocide of an entire people group—the young, old, men, women, and children—and the plunder of their possessions was good. Xerxes gave over the writing of laws by delivering Haman his signet ring and putting his "stamp" of approval on Haman's deeds. How? Because unless a man is beholden to God, they will be accountable only to themselves. And as the 19th-century British politician, Lord Acton famously said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. [Even] great men are almost always bad men." Give an ungodly man power, and he will use it only for himself. What's more, only one being is truly great: the Great I Am. We do well to remember that, though we may be the kings of our own castles, though we may think we are the definers of truth, there will come a day when God will demand an account of the so-called "good" we have wrought in the world.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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TEXT: Esther 3

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: