

Pride and Prejudice in Persia

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[0 : 00] Thank you. Privilege to worship together. Take out your Bible, please, and you can head on over to the book of Esther. And we're going to start today in Esther chapter 2.

And we're going to work our way down through Esther chapter 3. So we're going to start right at the end of chapter 2, and then we're going to work down through Esther chapter 3.

And Sarah, please come and read this first portion. This is Esther chapter 2, beginning at verse number 19, and Sarah's going to read down through verse number 23.

Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Esther had not made known her kindred or her people as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.

In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthon and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

[1 : 19] And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther. And Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. And when the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows.

And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king. Thank you. Father, thank you for your kindness to gather us together this morning for worship.

Thank you for each of these dear ones who is here, both to lift their voices and to join with other followers of Jesus in praise and worship and adoration.

And also to sit under the preaching of the word, to encourage each other in our faith, to build each other up, to challenge and exhort one another to greater Christ likeness and a more passionate zeal for the gospel.

Father, we're grateful to be gathered together. We're grateful to have this time of worship, and we're grateful for your word. Please help us as we now give our attention to the preaching of your word.

[2 : 26] Please watch over me and keep me faithful. Guide the things that I think that I should say and help me to say those things that you want us to hear.

Help us to see you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit more clearly today to love you more and to trust you more as a result of this time together in this text.

We ask these things for your glory and our good in the name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Unexpected plot twists make for great storytelling.

Think about Luke Skywalker hanging on that, I don't know what you call it, that post. He's hanging, that sounds like he's being executed.

That's not quite accurate, but I think you know the scene I'm talking about. He's hanging on that post, and think about Darth Vader saying to him, I am your father.

[3 : 30] And suddenly the whole storyline shifts, and we have to rethink what we thought we knew about these characters. Do you remember the way that you felt at the end if you happened to watch The Sixth Sense, and you are replaying every scene now, trying to reorganize this entire movie with this twist that you receive at the end of the movie?

Think about Snape killing Dumbledore despite making the unbreakable oath, the unbreakable vow. Think about the implications of Bilbo Baggins disappearing.

Was that a big spoiler alert? That's a bonus scene.

My apologies. Think about Bilbo Baggins disappearing from his birthday party.

Now, if you only watched the movie, you wouldn't know that. But if you just saw the movie, and you're like, what just happened here? If you had read the books before that, you would know what had happened. These plot twists make for great storytelling.

[5 : 00] And the book of Esther is full of these types of plot twists. In fact, I'm reading a book that's just called Reversals, and it's about Esther. King Ahasuerus is wealthy and powerful and generous, but his beautiful queen defies him.

The queen is deposed, leaving the king lonely and alone. But then a new queen is crowned, Esther. Today's text, I think, is perhaps the darkest plot twist in the book of Esther.

And yet, there is encouragement here for God's people living in the darkest time in history.

About five years have passed since Esther's coronation. Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate. Now, we might hear that and sort of naturally think that this means he is a beggar, because he is sitting at the king's gate.

And that is really not further from the truth. Mordecai is actually part of the king's staff. That's what it means to sit at the king's gate. He has a role in the administration.

[6 : 15] It might be similar to how you might say, this person has an office in the White House, near the Oval Office. We know what that means. So, Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate.

And if you're paying attention, if you were paying attention what Sarah was reading, in verse 21, Mordecai is minding the king's business, and he overhears two of the king's security detail talking. I call these two bigger than and T-Rex. These were part of the king's secret service. They were guarding the threshold.

They were responsible for who gets in to see the king. That also means that they have access to the king. Now, we use this phrase, lay hands on, and we might use that in like a commissioning of a missionary, or an installation of an elder, or maybe if someone is sick, and we gather around that person, and we lay hands on them, and we use it in a very loving, kind way.

But when we see this in the Old Testament, they do not want to commission or bless the king. They want to lay their hands on him. That means they intend to assassinate the king. Kids, you know what assassinate means?

[7 : 32] Okay, that means they're going to kill the king. Okay. Mordecai reports this plot to Esther. Esther reveals it to the king, being very careful to give Mordecai credit.

An investigation occurs. The plot is exposed, and the plotters are executed for treason. And Mordecai's decisive response, perhaps putting his own life on the line, saves the king's life, and this is recorded in the king's record book.

Now, Persian kings are historically known for immediately and generously rewarding those who do good to them. You should recall that Ahasuerus just forgave taxes and gave generous gifts across the empire after the installation, after Esther's coronation.

So he's a generous king. He cancels April 15th and sets up a new Christmas. Calls it Esther Day. It's, he's a very generous guy. So since Mordecai saves the king's life, we expect that he will be richly rewarded for this.

But instead, the plot twists. Chapter three and verse number one. After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted, who do we expect to read here?

[8 : 55] Mordecai. We expect Mordecai, who just saved the king's life, to be promoted. After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman. Who dis?

Haman, the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him and all the king's servant who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to the king, to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him, but Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.

How do you recognize a villain? In Toy Story, the skull on the black t-shirt that Sid wears, this is a dead giveaway, right?

We know this guy is not someone that you should be dealing with. Or how about Jafar's staff in Aladdin, remember?

And it has the serpent on the top of the staff and you're like, I don't even have to be a Bible student to know this guy is bad, bad news. Something similar happens here in 3.1.

[10 : 13] The author introduces Haman as the Agagite and this is a signal to Jewish readers that this guy is trouble from the moment that you walked in.

Here's the problem. Agag was the king of the Amalekites. And the Amalekites were the first people group that attacked the Jews as they are leaving Egypt.

After being delivered from Egypt and going through all of that drama in the first chapters of the book of Exodus, as they are making their way out into the wilderness, the Amalekites come and in an

unprovoked attack assault God's people.

Later in their history, God commanded King Saul to destroy the Amalekites as punishment for this unprovoked attack. But Saul, the son of Kish, disobeys God and does not execute King Agag.

So, just like we do not need to see Darth Vader's red lightsaber to know that he is the bad guy in Star Wars, when the author introduces this man, Haman, as the Agagite, we know he's the villain.

[11 : 39] And this is a problem because the king likes Haman. Did you notice that in your Bible? Well, verse number one, he promotes and he advances him.

Also, verse number one, very interesting, he gives him a throne. And again, in verse number one, he ranks him above the king's cabinet, who we met in chapter one.

And all of the other royal officials are ordered to show Haman respect by bowing down to him. And they all do this, except for our guy Mordecai.

Mordecai refuses to bow. Verse number three, then 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 or would be tolerated, might be clearer.

[12 : 37] 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. Again, this is not a blessing. He is disdaining to kill 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.

Now, it seems like Haman doesn't initially notice that Mordecai is not bowing. But then, when the other officials can't get an acceptable answer out of Mordecai for why he refuses to bow, they approach Haman to see if Haman is going to tolerate this insolence, this lack of respect.

Haman, of course, is furious. As villains will be, right? His pride is wounded. And this centuries-old animosity between the Amalekites and the Jews explodes like a big pimple on your nose.

[14 : 12] Haman is not going to settle for punishing Mordecai. No, he plots the murder of every single Jew in the entire Persian Empire.

And the first step is to decide when this genocide is going to occur. And he's going to decide this by practicing divination or by rolling dice. The scripture calls it casting per.

Look at verse number seven. In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast per.

That is, they cast lots. They rolled the dice before Haman day after day and they cast it month after month until the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.

So they're rolling the dice to figure out when are we going to kill all of the Jews? Then, Haman said to King Ahasuerus, verse eight, there is, there is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces in your kingdom.

[15 : 19] 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.

If 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.

Now, don't forget this. In chapter one, the king was manipulated by his desire for power and in chapter two, the king was again manipulated this time by his lust for pleasure and here in chapter three, Haman again manipulates this king by appealing to his pride.

It's interesting to me that Haman is the one who has the pride problem. He can't overlook a single official in the entire of the king's court not bowing down to him.

Haman's the one who has the wounded pride and yet he projects his wounded pride onto the king and then plays the king like a fiddle. Look at verse eight.

[16 : 35] Look at how he flatters the king. Verse eight, your kingdom, the king's laws, the king's profit and then in verse nine, if it please the king, the king's business, the king's treasuries.

He's just flattering him. He's playing on his pride. Haman tells the king, it is not to the king's profit to tolerate these people.

In other words, it's not in your best interest. So then we should ask, then why do you feel the need to give a bribe? I mean, if it's not in the king's best interest, then let that stand.

But Haman knows that he's lying. And so he offers this bribe. And speaking of this bribe, 10,000 talents of silver.

Do you know how much silver that is? It's 300 tons of silver. Do you know what weighs 300 tons? A 747.

[17 : 43] 747. 747. This bribe is so large that it represents two-thirds of the entire empire's gross domestic product.

In other words, Haman doesn't have the money. He doesn't have the money. He can't pay this bribe.

Some say that Haman intends to pay this bribe to the king by collecting all the plunder of the murdered Jews, who are apparently wealthy enough that he could collect all of this.

But then that takes us back to the original question. If there's enough Jews that are going to be plundered to make up two-thirds of the empire's revenue, then it is in your profit to keep them around.

It's your best interest to keep all of those Jews in your empire. Haman is manipulating the king, deceiving him. We're supposed to notice Haman's brutality.

[18 : 59] His hatred is not personal. If it were personal, he would deal with Mordecai and that would be the end of the matter. We're supposed to notice his brutality.

We are also supposed to notice the king's foolishness. Haman is clearly deceitful and manipulative, but the king goes ahead and gives Haman his signet ring, which means Haman is now able to act with the king's authority and the empire's resources to exterminate the Jews.

verse number 10. So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadotha, there it is, the enemy of the Jews.

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

Maybe the king is saying, keep your money, or maybe the king is saying, whatever plunder you collect, you distribute it as you see fit. Verse 12.

[20 : 22] 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 and to of all the peoples to every province in its own script and every people in its!

the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 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.

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. Imagine the confusion and the terror that this would cause.

I just don't understand. Because one of the king's officials refuses to bow to another of the king's officials? All of the Jews are going to die?

[22 : 02] I do not understand. By order of the king, we have to kill our neighbor, and the children's teacher, and the person who runs the bakery, and that nice gentleman who's in charge of the market down the street.

I thought that this empire valued the diversity of all of these cultures coming together. people would stop it from ever happening to me?

If the king is this unpredictable and this irrational, and if all of the empire's forces can be put to bear against one group of people, what would ever prevent it from happening to me?

the city of Susa is thrown into confusion, and the king in his pride, and the prime minister in his prejudice, sit down to enjoy a cold beverage.

This is a dark portion in the story of Esther. But it encourages us to remember at least three things.

[23 : 28] First, it encourages us to remember that God's people have a prowling enemy. The scripture calls Haman the agagite, the enemy of the Jews, in verse 10.

And his malice is certainly motivated by the devil himself. Peter describes our enemy this way in 1 Peter chapter 5. Your adversary, the devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for anyone he can devour.

Brothers and sisters, we have a prowling enemy. enemy. He wants to steal everything good and beautiful in your life.

But listen, he is not going to tell you that. No, like Haman, he deceives by appealing to our pride. He tempts with happiness, with power, with popularity, with recognition, with affirmation. He offers justice on your own terms.

[24 : 41] He claims that he can satisfy all of the things that you long for. He flatters you with what you believe you deserve. But as Jesus warns in John chapter 8, the devil's promises are lies.

Like Haman, he cannot deliver on his bribe. Oh, he will make sin enjoyable for the moment. Count on it.

Count on him being able to make sin enjoyable for the moment. But in the end, you will discover that though he promises to give, he always steals.

And though he promises life, he always kills. And though he tempts with everything you desire, he will do everything in his power to destroy your faith, your gospel witness, and everything else that you hold dear.

God's people have a prowling enemy. So what should we do? We should follow Peter's exhortation. We should resist him firm in the faith.

[25 : 55] We should trust God and his promises. We should care for our fellow believers. We should encourage them to also resist the enemy's temptations.

We should press on together in faith. This portion of Esther also encourages us that God's sovereignty is universal.

God's sovereignty is universal. What about when Haman is rolling those dice, dice, or maybe they're rolling the dice in front of him. I'm not sure. It's a little bit ambiguous.

They're rolling the dice. What if Haman's dice land on tomorrow? That would be a problem, wouldn't it? What if they landed on next Wednesday?

Also a pretty significant problem. time for any sort of rescue plan. This is what we read in Proverbs chapter 16 and verse 33.

[27 : 03] The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Lord. This means that our God is so great that he even controls the things that seem to us like they must surely just be random chance.

But they're not. Now it would be terrifying to know that in 11 months you would be dead. That would be terrifying to know.

It would be psychologically traumatizing to have to think about that. But that date also means that Haman has to wait 11 long months.

And despite their execution date being set and despite God not being mentioned in our text, he gives his people hope.

We see this, but it's oh so subtle. We see this in verse number 12. Notice in your Bible. the scribes are summoned on the 13th day of the first month.

[28 : 20] The decree is issued on the 13th of the first month. Do you know what the Jews do on the night of the 13th day of the first month?

They celebrate Passover. Passover. So as this edict of their death comes to them and spreads out throughout the empire, the Jews are already gathering, remembering God's previous deliverance of their nation from the land of Egypt.

Egypt. God gives his people hope. God has rescued us before. That's what we're celebrating tonight.

But what about this decree of death? Yes, but God has delivered us before. And God will deliver us again. this God will deliver them this time too.

Because God's sovereignty is universal, we should continue to trust God even when circumstances seem darker than they have ever been.

[30 : 00] And finally, this portion of Esther reminds us that our God is wise and merciful.

Esther is part of a bigger story. A bigger story about a greater king than Ahasuerus.

This king is the creator of the entire universe. We all live in this king's empire and he is worthy of our worship and he gives good laws to help us flourish but despite his kindness and his provision we rebelled against him.

This king has far more reason to act against us than Ahasuerus has against the Jews. We have committed treason not just once but repeatedly.

We have thoughtlessly broken his law. We claim control over our own lives and then we stubbornly refuse to bow to his authority. We grab glory that belongs rightly to him.

[31 : 10] This king has every reason to treat us like the enemies we are. It is not in this king's best interest to tolerate rebels like us.

And because of our sin our adversary the devil lays claim to our souls. Those people they belong to me but our God says no no you cannot have my people they do not belong to you they are mine but they are rebels the lion roars.

Your holiness demands a decree of death. Yes yes it does.

and our king with eyes full of eternal love says take my son in their place.

He has willingly chosen to receive the punishment that they deserve for their sinful rebellion and Jesus is taken. He is destroyed and killed and annihilated and plundered and he bears the redemptive consequences for the sin of all of his people.

[32 : 37] And through the injustice of the cross God achieves atonement through the bloody death and glorious resurrection of our savior the Lord Jesus Christ.

In stark contrast to King Ahasuerus our God is wise and merciful. Paul says it this way in Romans chapter 3 he is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Both wise and merciful just and the justifier. do you have faith in Jesus?

Is this God who is so wise and so merciful your God? Are you clinging to the Lord Jesus? Have you been justified by God's grace?

Esther is taken. She is beautified and then abused and then discarded by an empire that values power over life.

[33 : 59] What a twist occurs when she is installed as queen. Mordecai's loyalty is overlooked and instead Haman the enemy of God's people rises to prominence and this malicious decree of death looms over the heads of all of the Jews and well confusion and certainly despair permeate every corner of the empire.

The king and Haman toast their power. I don't know if this is the darkest chapter in all of the Old Testament because after all we also did lamentations but I think it's in the top five.

Okay? It's a dark chapter chapter but I am so glad that the darkest moments in history are God's specialty.

The Jews in Persia desperately need a plot twist and the same is true for us. Friend, your darkest moment is not beyond your God's sovereign control.

when something or someone precious is ripped away from you, when your good deeds are overlooked, when you are betrayed or blamed for someone else's wrongdoing, when authority and wisdom as we saw in chapter one are so often dangerously disconnected, when a ruler rises to power who like Haman seems like an enemy of all that you value.

[35 : 38] your pain and your grief and the injustice that you endure, none of it is meaningless. All of it points you to hope outside of yourself and hope that transcends this world's pride and prejudice.

Your enemy wants you to quit. He wants you to believe that God's silence means that he is absent. Your enemy is a liar and a coward.

Do not listen to him. Instead, walk by faith. Trust in Jesus, who sees you, knows you, loves you, and remembers you.

Anchor your hope in your sovereign, wise, merciful king. and as you live under the decree of death and along with all creation, as Paul says in Romans 8, groan, groan for something to be different. Groan for the king to come and make all things new. As you live under the shadow of this decree of death, proclaim the gospel of life.

[36 : 59] Go out into the empire, prayer, bring the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ into the darkness of this world. And let's continue to trust together that God is working even in these darkest moments in history.

Let's pray. Father, as we have already sang together, would you please help us by your sufficient grace and by the presence and power of your Holy Spirit to put our trust in you and to not be shaken.

Would you help us to open our eyes in wonder to see you for who you are?

Father, would you please remind us as we have sang together that our labor is not in vain and that the serpent who now destroys and kills has already himself had his head crushed and will one day be permanently banished from the kingdom, never, never to tempt or taunt or trick your people

again.

Father, we are eager for that day and with creation we groan now. We groan under the weight of the consequences of our own sin and the sins done to us and the sins of others around us and Adam's sin way back in the garden.

[39 : 19] We groan under the consequences and the weight of these sins and yet we remember that for those who are in Christ there is now no condemnation and so we eagerly anticipate the return of our Savior Jesus and look forward to all these dark moments in history having the most amazing plot twists there could ever be.

when it seems that all hope is lost and Jesus returns to swallow up death and to wipe away every tear from our eyes and to establish his kingdom of light and life and love.

Come Lord Jesus until then please keep us faithful. it is in your name that we pray. Amen.