

The Revenge of the Agagite

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[0 : 00] Good. Well, please do turn your Bibles to Esther 411, so page 411 in the Blue Vista Bibles there.

411. Well, can I want to welcome you to our Wednesday afternoon service here. You're very welcome indeed, particularly if you're visiting for the first time. My name is Paul Brennan, one of the ministers here in the church, and through the month of February, we'll be looking at the book of Esther together. There's lots to get through. We'll be reading fairly long chunks, so we don't normally get around to doing that on a Wednesday, but I thought it'd be good if we can do some narrative and have a bit of time in the book of Esther. Now, just before Christmas, I think the start of December, we did Esther 1 and 2, so if you were here, you might remember. So we're going to pick it up in Esther chapter 3 this afternoon. So Esther chapter 1 and 2 really sets the scene, and it introduces us to the key characters, and it introduces us to the setting. And in the book of Esther, God's people are in exile. They're living in the Persian Empire a long way from home, and so the book of Esther is really about how God's people are living in exile under what we will find out are desperate circumstances. So Esther chapter 3, and before we read this, I'm going to pray.

So let's pray. Father, we do thank you for this opportunity to gather here this afternoon, and we pray and ask that as we spend time in your word that you would build us up as we meet you in your word. Would you encourage us? Would you challenge us? Would you rebuke us? Would you remind us above all that we belong to you in Christ, and that in him we are unshakable?

So Lord, draw near to us now and help us to live in light of your word, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Okay, let's read Esther chapter 3, page 411.

After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him.

[2 : 26] 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.

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, 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.

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.

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, before Haman day after day. And they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. Then 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 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 in the king's treasuries.

So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, the money is given to you, the people also to do with them as seems good to you. Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month and an edict according to all that Haman commander was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of 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. 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 month, 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 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.

[5 : 54] Now, can you imagine, as a Christian, waking up each morning knowing that there is a chance you may be killed because you love Jesus? That, for many Christians, is their reality today.

That is the reality they face tomorrow morning. Listen to this from a recent editorial from the Barnabas Fund magazine. Here's what it says.

As the Lord promised, the Christian faith is now far more widespread than in the time of the apostles, and the gospel message has reached the furthest corners of the earth.

But the 21st century global church continues to endure at least as much hostility, hatred, and outright persecution as its first century forebear.

There is nothing new under the sun, and hostility, Christians experience today, is not new. Many Christians around the world this very day are fearing for their lives.

[7 : 08] It's nothing new. And in fact, we have here in Esther just another manifestation of the ancient hostility that God's people face and have always faced.

That was a terrible reality for the Jews living in the Persian Empire waking up on the 14th day of the first month of the 12th year of King Ahasuerus as that edict was delivered to their town.

Our chapter, chapter 3 of Esther, shows us the reality of the age-old conflict between God's people and the great enemy.

In chapters 1 and 2, which we saw before Christmas, we were introduced to the key characters in the story. The king, King Ahasuerus, very powerful. Remember, he ruled over the whole kingdom of Persia, which stretched from northern India all the way to North Africa.

Huge empire. But he is betrayed in such a way in chapters 1 and 2 that we're invited to laugh at him. He's almost a ridiculous figure, prone to moments of rashness, and we're shown behind the veil of the power that seems so ridiculously powerful, but it's really just a sham.

[8 : 28] So we're introduced to the king. We're also introduced to Mordecai. He's a Jew living in exile in the Persian Empire, and he's a civil servant working there in the citadel.

But there's also Esther, Mordecai's cousin. And in chapter 2, we saw that she won the empire-wide Miss Persia contest. She finds herself as the new queen of Persia, an undercover Jew there in the heart of the empire.

But things take a very dark turn for God's people here in chapter 3. This is where the drama really begins to unfold, as the enemy rears his head.

So three things we learn in this chapter about the great enemy of God's people. So first, in verses 1 to 6, we see that it's an ancient enemy.

We see here the reality of constant warfare for God's people. Look at verse 1. After these things, the king promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him.

[9 : 41] And all the king's servants, they bowed down to him for the king and commanded it. But Mordecai, he did not bow down or pay homage. Now, why did Mordecai do that?

Why did Mordecai refuse to bow down to Haman the Agagite? Now, the text doesn't tell us on the face of it, does it? But we're given plenty of clues which suggest his refusal is to do with a very long-running feud.

Note how Haman is introduced. Haman the Agagite. Now, we often overlook the names that are given to people in the Bible.

We perhaps read them a bit like a surname, don't we? Like, my surname's Brennan, and your name might be Smith. We often read it like that, like a surname. But there's more to it. In Old Testament narrative, the things that are mentioned when a character is introduced is often key to understanding their role in the story.

And so when we read that Haman was an Agagite, all sorts of alarm bells start to ring. Okay, work with me here. Switch on. Full concentration.

[10:56] So Agag. So Haman is an Agagite. He's related to Agag. Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time of King Saul.

He was the very first king of Israel. Now, these Amalekites, who Agag was king of, these Amalekites, they were an ancient enemy of God's people.

You can read about them. The origins of this conflict all the way back in Exodus, chapter 17. Many hundreds of years before these events. And in that chapter, you discover that the very first people to attack God's people as they came out from Egypt all those years of slavery, the very first people to attack them were the Amalekites.

They were the people that first fought God's people after their slavery. Now, at the end of that description in Exodus, you read this. It says, The Lord will have war with Amalek, with the Amalekites, from generation to generation.

The Lord declares right the way back there in Exodus that there was to be a lasting enmity, a lasting battle between God's people and the Amalekites.

[12:11] Fast forward hundreds of years, and King Saul is given an explicit instruction to wipe out the Amalekites and their king, King Agag. But Saul fails.

He doesn't do it. But he spares King Agag. And so, that conflict endures, and it crops up here in Exodus, chapter 3. And so, for Mordecai, who we've already been told is part of Saul's family, for him to be told to bow down to Haman and Agagite, well, it's just too much for him.

He cannot bear to bow down to a relation of the Agagites. Do you see? The Agagites, they were sworn enemies of God's covenant people.

And that explains Haman's extraordinary reaction to Mordecai here. Look at verse 5. Haman refuses to bow down, and when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury.

It's an extraordinary reaction. But he wasn't just satisfied to be angry at Mordecai.

[13:28] Look at the second half of verse 6. Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

It seems, doesn't it, an utterly ridiculous overreaction. Because one man refuses to bow down to me, I'm going to annihilate a whole people group.

To seek to destroy a whole group of people, because one man refuses to bow down, it just seems extraordinary. And it is extraordinary if we don't grasp the deep roots of this hostility.

This is an ancient enemy. This stretches way back. But it's even older than the Amalekites taking on God's people as they leave Egypt. There is a hidden spiritual conflict that has been going on since the very beginning of the world.

And Haman's enmity towards God's people was merely the latest manifestation of Satan's ongoing warfare against the people of God. What did God say to the serpent all the way back there in Genesis 3?

[14:38] He said, I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. Enmity. A state of active hostility or opposition.

That's what God promised right the way back. And the Bible teaches that this enmity, this hostility, will endure. The New Testament affirms this again and again, doesn't it?

Just read your New Testament. It's everywhere. And it will continue to rage until Christ returns and brings the final judgment. So the experience of God's people here in chapter 3, Haman, the enemy of the Jews, it's not unusual.

It's all the way through the Bible. It's all the way through history for God's people. There will always be enmity. And so if you're a Christian here this afternoon, you need to know that that is the reality. We do have an enemy, a real enemy, an ancient enemy. So don't be surprised if things are tough for God's people. We're rather to expect it.

[15:51] We're to be realistic about it. It's just how it is. But if you're here this afternoon and you wouldn't describe yourself at the moment as a follower of Jesus, perhaps you're looking in, then you also need to know that this is the reality.

This is what you'd be signing up for if you begin to follow Jesus. You are stepping into the line of fire. If you follow Jesus, you're stepping into this ancient conflict.

So there's the first thing we learn in this chapter. There is an ancient enemy. It's the reality of constant warfare for God's people that will endure until Christ returns.

That's the first thing. Second, looking at verse 7 to the end, this enemy is ancient but it's also a cunning enemy. We see in these verses the deceitful plotting against God's people. Haman is determined, isn't he? He's determined not just to destroy Mordecai but his whole people. And now he begins to play the political game.

[17:03] And with cunning and deceit he plots the downfall of the Jews. Look at verse 7. In the first month of the twelfth year of the king he cast lots. These are probably dice-like objects.

And they would cast the lots until it would become clear which day they were to plan the destruction. And the lot falls on the twelfth month, the month of Adar.

That was the day that would be set for the destruction of the Jews. And so Haman now goes about getting the king on board.

And that shouldn't really prove too difficult a task. We've seen already in the first two chapters that the king despite all his power he's really quite malleable. Whatever his advisors suggest he tends to go with.

And so Haman approaches the king and seeks to manipulate him to his own ends. He mixes truths and half-truths and fake news and he gets the king on board beginning from verse 8.

[18:10] Look at how he goes about it. There is a certain people scattered abroad dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. He doesn't even give them a name.

He's very vague isn't it that there's a certain people. He doesn't say who. He's vague. He's deceptive. And he creates in the mind of the king a perceived significant threat.

They're everywhere he says. They're scattered all over your kingdom. It never occurs to the king to ask who they are. It's astonishing isn't it? Haman goes on.

Their laws are different. They don't keep the king's laws. He personalizes it. He says they disobey you oh king. But no evidence. The only thing he's got going is the fact that one man refused to bow down to him.

But again there's no inquiry from the king. And then comes the clincher. Haman asks for permission to destroy all of them.

[19:13] This whole people group he wants to destroy them and in return he promises the king cold hard cash. And this isn't just a small bribe on the side.

Look at verse 9. This is 10,000 talents of silver. And according to the commentators that would amount to about half of the annual HMRC tax receipts for the Persian Empire.

That was a lot of money. Translate that into UK terms half our tax receipts last year would be around 300 billion pounds. So this is a big chunk of money that he's promising to give to the king. And the king to no one's surprise is in. He hands over a signet ring and he gives it to Haman. Verse 10 Haman the Agagite. And note his comment there in verse 10.

The enemy of the Jews. Haman the enemy of the Jews. And Haman well he wastes no time does he?

[20:19] He gathers together the king's communication unit. He issues the decree on the 13th day of the first month which was in fact the eve of Passover.

the timing could not be more cruel could it? The very time that God's people are gathering together to remember God's great deliverance from slavery in Egypt this edict comes out.

And look at the edict verse 13. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy to kill to annihilate all Jews young and old women and children in one day the 13th day of the 12th month.

Just imagine a young Jewish man breaking the news to his wife. What if anything do they tell the children?

There's a date in the diary for their destruction. It's terrifying. Imagine being one of God's people in Persia on that day. And this incident is just one of many which demonstrate that the enemy is at work against God's people.

[21:36] The enemy is set on destroying God's people and seeking to destroy and derail his purposes. The enemy will use and unleash the full force of the power of the world of the greatest nations using for his own purposes the depraved nature of those entrusted with power.

That was the case in Persia. It was the case for first century Christians facing the might of the Roman Empire. It's the case for many today. Just read the latest news from the Barnabas Fund. The enemy is deceitful. He's determined. And we need to be realistic about that. So we have a cunning enemy. But let's not miss the final truth as we step back from this chapter and we see it in

the wider picture of the whole book and indeed the whole Bible.

Yes, God's people have an ancient enemy. We have a cunning enemy. But he is ultimately a subservient enemy. We see that ultimately the terrible hatred of the enemy serves God's purposes for God's people.

One of the great themes of the book of Esther is the providence of God. Nowhere is God mentioned in the whole book. But it is clear as the book unfolds that the writer is demonstrating for his readers the workings of divine providence.

[23 : 11] God works mysteriously and patiently behind the scenes to bring about his purposes. He is the God who promised his people hundreds of years before these events that he would protect them from their enemies.

In Genesis 12 he promises to bless those who bless God's people. But he also promises to curse those who curse his people. And so even though there is a mighty force set against God's people a mighty force that has co-opted the full power of the Persian Empire against God's covenant people a mighty force that is determined to destroy them even that is true there is an even greater power also at work protecting preserving and saving the Jews from ultimate destruction. And that's what we see through the book of Esther. Yes the king of Persia is powerful yes Haman has great influence but there is a far greater power at work.

As one commentator writes the Lord will bring a greater good a perfect plan out of all the frustration we feel and out of the evil we experience God uses even injustice to fulfill his promises to us.

And that is just what we see unfolding in the book of Esther. Haman he is dead set isn't he on destroying the Jews but even his actions even the actions of this ancient cunning enemy are the actions of one who is ultimately a subservient enemy.

[24 : 58] Haman doesn't realize it but he is ultimately serving to fulfill God's unseen inscrutable purposes. It's another example isn't it of the words to Joseph who speaking to his brothers who had done terrible things to him here is what Joseph said you meant evil against me but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

isn't the story of Esther another example of the Lord's mysterious providence even Haman's evil actions in the end they do serve God's purposes Haman meant it for evil but God meant it for good and that is true for the one that Haman himself ultimately served.

Satan thought he had struck the ultimate blow to the seed of the woman when he threw the empire this time the Roman one when he nailed Jesus Christ to the cross but even that even that most devastating of blows only served God's purposes that in his death on the cross Jesus brought salvation to millions billions even by dying and paying the price for sin it was not in spite of the greatest injustice and most concerted evil against Jesus that God achieved his work of atonement but through those very acts of injustice and evil God works through the intentional and ignorant hostility of man towards his people he uses it for his own purposes and isn't that just a great encouragement to suffering

Christians today we as his people we can't expect to have any difference as his people we are in the enemy's sight but even if he strikes we know we know that in the end God will use it to bring about ultimate good it is a wonderful comfort to have our eyes open to that truth isn't it that great reality especially in a time of great personal pain and darkness when you're really struggling when you feel the attacks of the enemy to know that however evil things seem to us that God is still at work in it all he is at work performing his wonders bringing about his purposes even in the midst of terrible evil now we may not see what's going on we may not see for a long time what's really happening we may not see what's happening for many years

God's people here in Esther chapter 3 they didn't know the end of the story they didn't know how it ended up in the end they were fearing the worst and we may also not see what's happening for quite some time but many of you here are older saints folk who have for decades walked with the Lord and you will be able to tell others how the Lord has meant even terrible things for good you will perhaps be able to tell others of moments of terrible darkness when you couldn't even see the hands in front of your own face when things seemed hopeless and yet even then the Lord was at work many of you here will have stories you can tell to other younger Christians about how the Lord was at work even in the midst of terrible darkness our enemy he's real but he is ultimately a subservient enemy and ultimately the terrible hatred of the enemy serves God's purposes for his people and so let us each of us in knowledge of that in knowledge that God is working out his plans take great comfort and go on doing the task he's called us to going on speaking his word with all

boldness because that is God's purpose purpose to bring his gospel to the ends of the earth and God was at work here in Esther 3 and following to make sure that purpose didn't falter if Haman's plan succeeded that was the end of the

[29 : 52] Jews but God would not let that happen he will not let his plans and his purposes fail and as his people he has great plans for us he will not let us out of his hand and we can trust him even in the face of our enduring enemy well let's pray shall we as we close Jesus guardian of your flock be our stronghold and our rock so when evil comes we stand shielded by your powerful hands Lord remind us of these truths write them on our hearts so that we may stand firm even in the darkest days help us help us to stand firm and to live by faith for we ask it in Jesus name

Amen Amen