

The Revenge of the Agagite

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[0 : 00] We turn now to our Bible reading for the evening and we are in the book of Esther, which you will find on page 411. Last week we began a little series in the book of Esther looking at chapters 1 and 2 and we are really introduced to the main characters in the story.

The plot doesn't really get going until tonight. So last week we were hearing about the king, King Ahasuerus, a very, very powerful king reigning over most of the known world at the time. But he's a king who is a brutal dictator. As we saw last time, he dismissed his wife, the queen, at the slightest refusal and then began the empire-wide search for a new queen.

And that is where Esther arrives onto the scene. And her uncle, Mordecai, you see at the end of chapter 2, Mordecai spoils a plot against the king. And Mordecai and Esther are Jews living in a foreign land, living in the Persian Empire. And this is a book all about the plight of God's people as they live in exile. So we pick up the story here in chapter 3. So Esther chapter 3 in verse 1.

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

And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.

[1 : 59] 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 where the 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 purr. That is, they cast lots, probably dice type objects. And they cast purr 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 to the king's profit to tolerate them.

[3 : 32] So, 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. 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 it 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 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. 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. A copy of the documents 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.

Amen. May God bless to us his word this evening. Well, please do turn back to Esther chapter 3, which we read a little earlier in the service.

Esther chapter 3. Now, can you imagine, as a Christian, waking up each morning knowing that there is a chance that you may be killed because you love Jesus.

That is the reality for many Christians today. That is the reality they face tomorrow morning. Listen to this from the editorial of the latest Barnabas Fund magazine.

[6 : 26] 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 church continues to endure at least as much hostility, hatred, and outright persecution as its first century forebear.

Christians today are the target of many different types of persecution, with converts, children, women, and those in full-time ministry often being especially singled out.

Authorities in countries where Christians are persecuted frequently go to great lengths to stop believers having access to the Bible and to deter evangelism and conversion.

The initial decades of this century have seen a sharp rise in ideologically driven persecution, directed via more ideologies and religions than the early church contended with.

[7 : 28] Radical forms of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as the domineering resurgence of secular humanism, are all channels of persecution, particularly in countries where Christians are a despised minority.

That was last month in the Barnabas Fund. There is nothing new under the sun. And hostility to Christians is nothing new.

In fact, we see another manifestation of that ancient hostility in our chapter in Esther this evening. Our chapter shows us the reality of the age-old conflict between God's people and the great enemy.

And it was a terrible reality for the Jews living in the Persian Empire. Can you imagine them waking up on the 14th day of the first month of the 12th year of King Ahasuerus?

Let's pick up the story here in chapter 3. Last week, as I said earlier, we were introduced to the key characters. The king, powerful but brutal, and portrayed in such a way that we're invited to laugh at him.

[8 : 45] He's almost ridiculous. It's the emperor has no clothes, according to the Old Testament. And we're also introduced to Mordecai. He's a Jew living in the Persian Empire, an exile.

He's likely a civil servant. And then also we're introduced to Esther, his cousin, who wins the empire-wide Miss Persia contest and finds herself as the new queen.

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

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

We see here the reality of constant warfare for God's people. Look down at verse 1. After these things, the king promoted Haman, the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah.

[9 : 53] And he advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman. For the king had so commanded concerning him.

But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. Now, you would have expected, having read the end of chapter 2, when Mordecai uncovers that plot and he saves the king's life, you would expect him to be the one being promoted, wouldn't you?

He just saved the king's life. You'd expect Mordecai to be the one getting the accolade to get the promotion. But instead, sometime later, we read here about Haman being promoted to the position of prime minister in the empire.

He reported only to the king. Now, is Mordecai's refusal to bow down, is that due to his being overlooked, do you think? Well, the text doesn't tell us.

But we are given pretty strong clues which suggest his refusal is due to other reasons. Just note how Haman is introduced. Look there in verse 1.

[11 : 08] Haman, the Agagite. Now, we can often overlook the names given to people in the Bible. Perhaps we read them a bit like a surname. But in Old Testament narrative, the characteristic described when a character is introduced is 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. Now, you need to work with me here, okay? You switched on. Brains engaged.

Here we go. So, Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time of Saul, the first king of Israel. Now, these Amalekites, they were ancient enemies of God's people.

Keep a finger in Esther chapter 3 and turn back to the book of Exodus. So, the second book of the Bible, Exodus and chapter 17. This is the only bit of page clicking we'll do.

So, Exodus chapter 17. And look there at verse 8. Page 59 for using one of the church visitor Bibles.

[12 : 18] So, Exodus 17 and verse 8. The people of God, the Israelites, have fled from slavery in Egypt. That's just happened.

And then here we read in Exodus chapter 17, verse 8. Then Amalek, the Amalekites, they came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

Now, look on there to verse 14. Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book and recited in the ears of Joshua that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord. The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

So, there we read about that ancient conflict. And Moses declaring that there was to be lasting enmity between God's people and the Amalekites.

[13 : 29] Now, fast forward hundreds of years. And King Saul, he is given a very clear instruction from the Lord to utterly wipe out the Amalekites and their king, King Agag.

But Saul fails to do that. Saul doesn't wipe out all the Amalekites. He spares King Agag. And so, for Mordecai, who we've already seen is part of King Saul's family, for him to be told he has to bow down to Haman, part of King Agag's family, well, that is just too much.

The Agagites, they were sworn enemies of the covenant people of God. It's like a ranger supporter being told to bow down to a Celtic supporter.

Great animosity. And it goes back generations. And this explains Haman's extraordinary reaction to Mordecai. Look at verse 5.

Haman is absolutely filled with fury. He wasn't just satisfied to be angry at Mordecai. 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.

[14 : 46] Now, that seems an unbelievable overreaction, doesn't it? To seek to destroy an entire community of believers because one man refused to bow down to him, it's extraordinary, isn't it?

It is extraordinary if we don't grasp the deep roots of the hostility. This is an ancient enemy. 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 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 serpents back in Genesis chapter 3? He said, I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring.

The Lord said there will be enmity. That is a state of ongoing hostility and opposition. That is what God promised between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

[16 : 02] And the Bible teaches that this enmity, this conflict, this warfare, it will endure. And the experience of Mordecai and all God's people living then in the Persian Empire, that has been the experience of God's people in all ages.

And it will continue to be the earthly experience of God's people because we are engaged in an ancient battle against real spiritual enemies. A battle that sometimes bubbles up onto the stage of human history.

And it will continue until Christ returns and brings that final judgment. And so we see in this episode here in Esther chapter 3, we see that the security of God's people, it is fragile as they live under the world rulers then and today because there is an ancient enemy.

That is the reality. So if you are a Christian here tonight, you need to know that that is the reality.

We do have a real enemy, an ancient enemy. So don't be surprised if things are tough for us as God's people.

[17 : 23] Rather, we are to expect it, to be realistic about it. Those words I read from the Barnabas Fund, they are shocking and sad, but we shouldn't in a sense be surprised.

This is how it is for God's people until Christ comes back. But if you are here tonight and you wouldn't describe yourself as a follower of Jesus, perhaps you are looking in, then you also need to know that this is the reality.

This is what you would be signing up for if you begin to follow Jesus. You are stepping into the firing line. That is the reality. But there is, as we'll see in a few moments, there is real comfort in the midst of that battle.

So there is the first thing we learn here in our passage tonight, an ancient enemy. We see here the reality of constant warfare for God's people.

Second then, looking at verse 7 to the end, here is our second heading, a cunning enemy. We have an ancient enemy, but he is also a cunning enemy.

[18 : 33] We see here the deceitful plotting against God's people. So Haman, the Agagite, that long ancient enemy of God's people, Haman has determined not simply to seek to destroy Mordecai because he refused to bow down, but his whole people.

And now he plays the political game, and with cunning, he plots the downfall of the Jews. Look at verse 7. In the first month, in the twelfth year of the king, they cast purr.

Purr, that is, they cast lots, they cast dice before Haman. And I think the NIV has a translation right when it says that they cast lots until the twelfth month came up.

That was the one that came up in the end. I don't think they cast lots for twelve months, but that was the one that came up. That was the day that would be set for the destruction of the Jews.

And so Haman, he now goes about getting the king on board. And that shouldn't really prove to be too much of a difficult task. We've seen already in the first couple of chapters that the king is really quite malleable.

[19 : 46] Whatever his advisors suggest, he goes with. And so Haman, mixing truths and half-truths and fake news, gets the king on board, beginning there in verse 8.

Look at what he says. There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in the provinces of your kingdom. He doesn't even mention them by name.

He just says, a certain people. He's vague, deceptive. But he creates in the mind of the king a perceived significant threat.

They're everywhere, says Haman. And it never occurs to the king to even ask who these people are. He doesn't care. Haman goes on. He says their laws are different.

They don't keep the king's laws. And then he personalizes it. He says they don't obey you, O king. But no evidence. Haman doesn't supply any sort of evidence.

[20 : 46] The only evidence we have is that one instance of Mordecai refusing to bow down. That's the disobedience that has got Haman so worked up. But again, no inquiry from the king.

He doesn't ask what laws are being disobeyed. He just doesn't ask. And then comes the clincher. Haman asks for permission to destroy all the Jews.

And in return, he'll give the king cold, hard cash. Now this isn't just a small bribe on the side. This is 10,000 talents of silver.

And that, according to the commentators, would amount to over half the annual HMRC tax receipts for the Persian Empire. That was big money. If you put it in UK terms, it would be over 300 billion pounds.

It's a fairly sizable chunk of money. And the king, he's in. He's happy to go with it. He hands over the signet ring, gives it to Haman, verse 10. And he gives it to Haman, note, verse 10, the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of the Jews.

[21 : 59] The writer spells it out. Haman, the anti-Semite, the enemy of God's people. And Haman wastes no time.

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. The very time when God's people were gathering together to remember God's great deliverance from the slavery in Egypt, you have this edict issued from none other than an Amalekite.

And there we get the edict. Look at verse 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 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?

[23 : 15] Terrifying, isn't it? And this incident, it is just one of many which demonstrate that the enemy is at work in this world against God's people.

The enemy is set on destroying God's people and seeking to derail God's promises. Remember God's promise? He was going to provide a serpent crusher, the seed of a woman.

And here's Haman putting out an edict to destroy all known Jews in all the known world empire. The enemy was seeking to destroy God's plans, derail his promises.

and the enemy will use and unleash the full force of the power of the world using their greatest nations, using for his own purposes the depraved nature of those entrusted with power.

That was the case there in Persia. It was the case for the first century Christians facing the might of the Roman Empire. It's the case for many today.

[24 : 24] Just read the latest news from the Barnabas Fund. The enemy he is deceitful and determined. Now we need to know that and be realistic about it.

But let's not miss the final truth as we step back from the chapter and see it in the wider story of the book and indeed the whole Bible. Yes, God's people have an ancient enemy.

Yes, he's a cunning enemy but he is 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 in the book is God actually mentioned.

But it is clear as the book unfolds that the writer is demonstrating for his readers the working of divine providence. God works mysteriously and patiently behind the scenes bringing about his purposes.

[25 : 36] He is the God who promised his people hundreds of years before. He promised that he would protect them from enemies. In Genesis 12 God said to Abraham that he would bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse.

And so even though there is a mighty force set against God's people a mighty force that co-opted the full power of the Persian Empire against God's covenant people a mighty force that is determined to destroy them even so there is a mightier greater power also at work protecting God's people.

There is a greater power protecting and preserving and saving the Jews from total destruction. That is what happens in the book of Esther. As one commentator writes the Lord will bring a greater good his perfect plan out of all the frustration we feel and out of all the evil we experience God uses even injustice to fulfill his promises to us.

And that is what we see unfolding in the book of Esther. Haman is absolutely set on destroying the Jews. That is his mission.

But even his actions even the actions of this ancient cunning enemy are the actions of one who is ultimately a subservient enemy.

[27 : 13] Haman doesn't realize it but he is serving to fulfill God's unseen inscrutable purposes. It's another example isn't it of the words that Joseph spoke.

He spoke to his brothers who had done terrible things to him and Joseph says to them at the end of Genesis 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 serve God's purposes.

Haman meant it for evil but God meant it for good and that is true even for the one that Haman ultimately served.

Satan the great enemy he 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 for in his death on the cross Jesus brought salvation to millions 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 and that is just what the apostle Peter says in Acts 3 as he speaks about the crucifixion of Jesus the apostle Peter says to those listening I know you acted in ignorance as did your rulers but what

[29 : 16] God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets that his Christ would suffer he thus fulfills God works through the intentional and ignorant hostility of man towards his people he uses it for his own purposes and isn't that a great encouragement to suffering Christians today we as his people cannot expect it to have any different can we as his people we are in the enemy sights but even if he strikes we know we know that God will use it to bring about ultimate good it is a wonderful comfort when we have our eyes open to that great truth especially in times of great personal pain and darkness times of real struggle to know that however evil things may seem to be to us that

God is at work in it all he's at work over it all he's performing his wonderful deeds we sung the hymn God Moves in mysterious ways last week and although we're not singing it tonight it speaks so clearly of this great truth listen to the words of the opening verse you fearful saints fresh courage take the clouds you so much dread are big with mercy and shall break with blessings upon your head blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain and that is the destiny of the whole Bible God is at work he is bringing about his purposes even in the midst of terrible evil now we may not see what is going on for some time we may not see what's really happening for many years but speak to an older saint someone who has walked with the

Lord for many decades they will be able to tell you how the Lord meant it for good they will perhaps be able to tell you of moments of terrible darkness when they couldn't even see the hands in front of their own face and yet and yet the Lord was at work and so we can pray with great confidence in the providence of God and along with those early Christians who in Acts 4 had faced terrible persecution imprisonment threats of death they were able to say these words sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them who through the mouth of our father David your servant said by the Holy Spirit why do the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain the kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the

Lord and against his anointed for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus whom you appointed both Herod and Pontius Pilate along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel hand and your plan have predestined to take place and now Lord look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness wouldn't that be a great prayer to pray in the face of real persecution and opposition even the death of Christ that was to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place even those who put Jesus to death they were doing whatever God had planned beforehand our enemy he is real he's an ancient enemy he's a cunning enemy but our enemy is a subservient enemy and ultimately the terrible hatred of the enemy serves

God's purposes for God's people and so let us in knowledge of that in the knowledge that God is working out his plans take comfort and go on as those early Christians we just read about did to go on speaking his word with all boldness because that is God's purpose to bring his gospel to the very ends of the earth so yes we see in Esther chapter three we see the terrible reality of the ancient enemy of God's people yes he's a cunning enemy but he is in the end a subservient enemy even the enemy's most calculated terrifying blows they serve God's purposes and you and I we belong to him we belong to the Lord who knows all things we belong to the

[35 : 02] God whose greatest enemies even his most atrocious acts serve his purposes that's the God we belong to so hear the words of that hymn as we close you fearful saints fresh courage take let's pray our father god we thank you for this book of ester which lifts the lid on the god who is at work behind the scenes even the terrible plans that we read about in chapter three even these served your purposes even the death of christ on the cross served your purposes so lord encourage our hearts in the midst of all that we face day to day encourage us with the truth that behind it all you are at work bringing about your unstoppable purposes for your world and for your people so we thank you that we belong to you and please comfort us comfort us when our knees are knocking when our courage fails would you strengthen us with these truths we ask it in

Jesus name amen