

Truth for Today

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Character lessons from Esther: Haman - pride and its penalties

Good morning. We are continuing with our series on 'Character lessons from the book of Esther'. This morning's character is the man Haman, his pride and its consequences. Haman comes onto the scene in the book of Esther at Esther 3. But before we look at the detail to deal with Haman we need to consider his background and origin.

Background

Haman, whose name means magnificent, is mentioned over 50 times in the book of Esther, so he is a very prominent character. His father's name is Hammedatha (Esther 3:1) meaning 'overtop' or one who aspires to be greater than all. Finally, Haman is an Agagite (Esther 3:1), a member of the royal family and rulers of the Amalekite nation.

Amalek is a grandson of Esau, Genesis 36:12. Esau was the founding father of the Edomite nation and Amalek appears to have formed his own nation but with the same national characteristics as the Edomites, that of hatred towards Israel. In Exodus 17 we have a major battle recorded between Israel and Amalek. It is in Exodus 17:16 that we have the solemn statement from the LORD, "*The LORD has sworn: the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.*" Also in Numbers 24:7 where Balaam continues prophesying concerning Israel, "*His king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.*"

There is one more scripture that I would like to draw attention to and it is 1 Samuel 15. In this chapter King Saul had been sent by Samuel to attack King Agag and the Amalekites, to utterly destroy them. But Saul failed in this venture which resulted in God removing the royal line from Saul. God would choose another to be king, that is David.

With this enmity between the two nations we can start to understand the bitter hatred between Haman and Mordecai. Mordecai was the guardian of his young cousin Esther, the new Queen, see Esther 2:7.

Haman's rise to power

As we commence Esther 3 we find that Haman is promoted to the highest position in the court of King Ahasuerus, the husband of Esther. Let us read Esther 3:1-2, "*After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. And all the king's servants who were within the king's gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage.*"

Because of the historical issues between Amalek and Israel we can now understand why Mordecai refuses to bow and do homage to Haman. To do so would be disobedience to God's stated opposition to Amalek.

The conflict begins

It was Mordecai's custom to sit at the king's gate. No doubt his main reason would be in case Esther required his assistance in anyway although no one knew the connection between him and Esther. The king's servants at the gate respected Mordecai because of his previous assistance to foil an attempt on the king's life, see Esther 2:19-23). But this new predicament causes Mordecai to explain that as a Jew he could not and would not bow down to Haman. It is possible that these servants should have taken action but were obviously hesitant to do so. They approach Haman to see if this was an allowable situation.

Let us read Esther 3:5-6: "*When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. But he spurned to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus - the people of Mordecai.*" Although this situation causes anger in Haman, he also sees an opportunity to seek revenge upon Jews in the kingdom of Ahasuerus. Haman would know that the Jews were the enemies of his nation and had suffered greatly in the past with many defeats. No doubt fuelled by pride in thinking that being second to the king he was in an unassailable position and could, with care, do what he liked, subject to gaining the king's approval. This needed careful planning and he needed a bait for the king, and what better bait than money to enhance the king's wealth. The

first part of the plan is to paint a bad picture of the Jews, rebellious and detrimental to the king. They are the wrong kind of people to have scattered around the kingdom and by implication they might side with future enemies of the king. Esther 3:8 states, *"Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other peoples, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain.'"* Haman presents the problem but immediately provides a solution, Esther 3:9, *"If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries."* As it turns out the king is not too interested in the money but more interested in ridding himself of potential danger. So the king's decision is given, Esther 3:10-11: *"So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, 'The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you.'"*

In all this we can see how Haman is a picture of Satan. Some of what Haman says about the Jews is true but he implies that they do not obey the king's laws which would be untrue. If it was true, then Mordecai would not have saved the life of the king. Therefore, once the seed of rebellion was sown in the mind of the king then the ring of authority is handed over to Haman and he is told to keep the money and do whatever he likes with this people, the Jews. The next part of the plan is to exterminate the Jews. Letters of authority, sealed with the king's ring, are sent throughout the kingdom; the destruction is to be coordinated on the same day. As these letters go out, they are to be read to the whole population. This destruction is even to be executed in the capital Shushan, where the king resides.

Let us read Esther 3:15, *"The couriers went out, hastened by the king's command; and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan the citadel. So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed."* It becomes obvious from this verse that the king has been duped because the people in Shushan are perplexed about the intended destruction of the Jews. It must have been obvious to them that the Jews were law abiding, but who would dare criticise the king's command!

The impact of the king's decree

The devastating impact that this decree has upon the Jewish people is best described by referring to the opening verses of Esther 4. *"When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went as far as the front of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province where the king's command and decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes"* (Esther 4:1-3).

From these verses we can see that the Jews were in mourning for their own death, they were devastated. However, it is in Esther 4 that we start to see how God has been working behind the scenes in order to put Esther into a place of great affection to the king. His love for Esther far outweighs the delegated authority that Haman has been given, although this is not yet manifested. This love is a little picture of God's love for His people in every dispensation.

Esther 4 is largely a dialogue between Esther and Mordecai. Esther appears to be unaware of the decree and so at first seeks to provide suitable clothing for Mordecai if he is to take his place at the king's gate (Esther 4:1-4). The communications between Esther and Mordecai take place through an intermediary, namely Hatach (Esther 4:5-17), one of the king's officials, who had been appointed to take care of Esther's requirements as Queen. It is probable that Hatach would realise the connection between Esther and Mordecai and would realise that, as a Jewess, Esther was also in danger. It is interesting that Hatach gives no advice to Esther and it is not until the end of Esther 7 that another official, Harbonah by name, volunteers information to the king (see Esther 7:9). These trusted officials had a measure of responsibility but there were boundaries as to their behaviour and service in the palace.

Eventually Esther is informed in detail of the decree issued by Haman and Mordecai suggests the course of action that can be taken. But it is a serious and dangerous course to take. You can only come into the king's presence if requested and this was true for Esther the Queen as for anyone else! There was one option: to approach the king uninvited by standing in the inner court of the palace. In this way you hope that the king would notice you and beckon you to approach him. Mordecai was suggesting this course of action knowing full well that if the king did not hold out the sceptre, then Esther would be put to death.

Esther, being a godly person, gives the following instruction, *"Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"* So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther commanded him" (Esther 4:16) In this way the Jews were asking help from God before taking any action. To fast effectively is to also meditate and pray. Would God allow Amalek to triumph over His people, even His people who were in captivity because of past disobedience?

Will God intervene?

Although God is not openly referred to in the book of Esther it is very evident that God is active behind the scenes. Esther 5 starts with an interesting opening statement, *“Now it happened on the third day”*. We find in Scripture that the expression *“third day”* or *“three days”* indicates the start of something new or a separation between old and new. Moses said to Pharaoh that the Israelites needed to go a three days’ journey to sacrifice to God (Exodus 3:18) and the Lord Jesus rose on the third day (Luke 24:7, 21; 1 Corinthians 15:4), to mention but two. It is a useful study to look at this thought in the Scriptures.

So it is with Esther that the third day is a defining moment when, after fasting, she would make her way to the inner court. Would the king be gracious to her? I mentioned earlier that the king loved Esther and as soon as the king sees Esther she is beckoned to draw near and present her petition (Esther 5:2). Now we might have thought that this is the moment to expose Haman, but no, Esther asks for the king and Haman to come to a banquet of wine (Esther 5:4). I suppose it was something like afternoon tea! The king is wondering what Queen Esther’s petition might be and Haman is feeling very pleased with himself that he has been invited to this very select banquet. Esther however does not make known her petition to rescue her people, but invites both to another banquet tomorrow (Esther 5:7-8) where her real cause for concern will be brought before the king. What wisdom Esther has in not rushing to the real reason! Was this because of the three days waiting upon God? God’s guiding hand becomes evident.

Because of the invitation to another banquet, God is able to work on the king’s conscience. In the meantime, let us read a few verses together from Esther 5, *“So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with indignation against Mordecai. Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh. Then Haman told them of his great riches, the multitude of his children, everything in which the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and servants of the king. Moreover Haman said, ‘Besides, Queen Esther invited no one but me to come in with the king to the banquet that she prepared; and tomorrow I am again invited by her, along with the king. Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate.’ Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, ‘Let a gallows be made, fifty cubits high, and in the morning suggest to the king that Mordecai be hanged on it; then go merrily with the king to the banquet.’ And the thing pleased Haman; so he had the gallows made”* (Esther 5:9-14). Not only is Haman looking forward to the extermination of the Jews but he also believes that he is now in the highest place of favour and only Mordecai is the fly in the ointment as far as he is concerned. As he boasts to family and friends of his rise in fame, his wife suggests a means to dispose of Mordecai, build gallows!

The downfall begins

The king, having had a sleepless night, discovers that Mordecai has not been rewarded for earlier saving the king’s life from two disgruntled servants who were plotting to murder the king. Haman who had come early the next day to the king’s palace was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is called into the king’s presence where he is asked a question. Let us read the verses from Esther 6: *“So Haman came in, and the king asked him, ‘What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?’ Now Haman thought in his heart, ‘Whom would the king delight to honour more than me?’ And Haman answered the king, ‘For the man whom the king delights to honour, let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head. Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king’s most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honour. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour!’” Then the king said to Haman, ‘Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king’s gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken”* (Esther 6:6-10)

Did Haman manage to keep his face straight? This was a devastating command, the worst possible thing that Haman could imagine. Probably in that split second he envisaged the possibility of all his plans to destroy the Jews coming to an end. Haman carried out the king’s command but with a heavy heart and when he returned home he was as a man in mourning with his head covered, Esther 6:12. His wife, learning of the reversal of fortune, now predicts her husband’s downfall! Haman has no time to think or make plans as the king’s officials arrive to bring him to the banquet prepared by Esther. As yet Haman does not know of the connection between the Queen and Mordecai.

Maybe Haman thought that all was not lost. Here he was still with this high privilege of being at the banquet of Queen Esther and the king. But it is at this very banquet where Esther declares that she and her people are to be destroyed. Let us read from Esther 7 the unfolding of the wicked plot, *“So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther. And on the second day, at the banquet of wine, the king again said to Esther, ‘What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request, up to half the kingdom? It shall be done!’ Then Queen Esther answered and said, ‘If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to*

be annihilated. Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king's loss.' So King Ahasuerus answered and said to Queen Esther, 'Who is he, and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?' And Esther said, 'The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!' So Haman was terrified before the king and queen" (Esther 7:1-6).

The king in anger goes into the garden and when he returns he finds Haman fallen on the couch on which Esther is reclining. This further angers the king who thinks the worst. It is at this point that Harbonah, one of the king's officials states, *"Look! The gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good on the king's behalf, is standing at the house of Haman."* Then the king said, *"Hang him on it!"* So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's wrath subsided" (Esther 7:9-10).

Haman is a picture of Satan, the adversary of God's people. But as we read in Revelation 20:10, *"The devil [that is Satan], who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."* It will be at this point that God will have finally dealt with sin and all rebellion.

In Proverbs 16:18-19 we have this useful word of wisdom, *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud."* Remember Haman!

Thank you for listening, and may the Lord's richest blessing be upon you.

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