

So, Esther has become Queen Esther. Her way to queendom had been through the king's harem. The king had sexually sampled the large number of beautiful women and Esther had been the one he had chosen to be his Queen. Esther was a Jew and following her older cousin's command she had kept her Jewishness hidden. At this point neither of them are shining lights of faithfulness to Israel's God. They do not compare well to Daniel and his three friends who refused to hide their Jewish identity and their allegiance to the God of Israel. But still God is going to use them to save his people from genocide. Also, he is going to enable them to grow in faithfulness to him. This is an encouragement to us because it shows us once again how God works through people who are weak and flawed.

The part of the story we will consider this morning, tells us how the Jewish people came to be threatened with extermination. By the end of this chapter a law will have been made instructing all the people in the realm to kill all the Jews – "young and old, woman and children" - on a certain day in the future. Since King Ahasuerus ruled over a vast empire which included Jerusalem and every other place that Jews lived, this meant that the entire Jewish people was threatened. And this means that God's plan of salvation for the world was threatened because God had ordained that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through the Jews. Jesus Christ, who would be the Jew through whom the world would be blessed, was destined to be born of the Jewish nation. And so, this threat to exterminate the entire Jewish people was a Satanic threat to God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. That is what is at stake in this story. This story is about how God preserved his people that through them he would work out his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.

In the story told in Esther we are given a birds-eye view of how God works through seemingly random circumstances and directs them to bless his people. God's name is not mentioned in the book of Esther, but the book is about how God is directing events to deliver his people from the threat of extermination. And by seeing that we can see how God works in our lives to work everything together for our good and to bring us into his heavenly kingdom.

Verses 19-23 of chapter 2 describe how Mordecai foiled a plot to assassinate king Ahasuerus. Mordecai is Queen Esther's older cousin who had become like a father to her after her parents had died. He is a Jew. He is described as sitting at the king's gate. The king's gate was an administrative building at the entrance to the city. Mordechai was some kind of bureaucrat in the service of the king. He heard about a plot to assassinate the king and told Queen Esther about it. She told the king, mentioning Mordecai as the informer. The king investigated, found Mordecai's intel to be true, the men were executed by impaling them on a stake and the matter was recorded "in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king."

This will become important later on in the story and it shows us how God is at work in the circumstances in our lives working toward certain goals or outcomes. What is striking at this point is that Mordecai was not rewarded by the king. It would have been normal practice for the king to reward someone who had just saved his life, perhaps with a promotion. But that reward is conspicuous by its absence.

Instead, someone else is promoted. That was what we read of in the first verse of chapter 3. "After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the Son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him." We would have expected to read of Mordecai being promoted in this spot, but instead we read of Haman's promotion. Why Mordecai is overlooked, and Haman is promoted is not mentioned. It does not reflect well on the king.

The fact that Haman is a Agagite is very important. He was descendant of king Agag, the Amalekite king who King Saul failed to execute at the Lord's command. There is a bit of history here that we need to understand.

Remember the story when Israel was travelling through the wilderness and they were attacked? That is the story where Joshua is leading the fighting and Moses is sitting on a hill watching with Aaron and Hur at his side. Whenever Moses' hand was held up the Israelites would be winning and whenever Moses' got tired and let his hand down the attackers would be winning. Then Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands until the battle was won. Those attackers were the Amalekites. And in connection with this event God told Moses, Exodus 17:14-16, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.... The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Fast forward to the days of King Saul. Through Samuel the prophet, God tells King Saul to destroy the Amalekites because of what they did to his people back in the wilderness. "Thus, says the LORD of hosts, I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Samuel 15:2-3). This was God's judgment upon a wicked people who were sworn enemies of the people of God. King Saul failed to follow the Lord's command fully. He did not kill King Agag and took as plunder the best of the sheep and cattle. Samuel rebukes King Saul for failing to obey the Lord's command concerning the Amalekites, tells him that he will lose the kingdom because of that and then Samuel kills king Agag himself.

Haman is descended from this King Agag. And Mordecai is descended from King Saul. According to Esther 2:5 Mordecai was descended from Kish, a Benjaminite, who was King Saul's father. As soon as we read that Haman was an Agagite we understand that here is an enemy of God's people. Here is a man who belongs to the Amalekites who had been cursed by God because of how they had treated the people of Israel in the wilderness. One author sums up the significance of this. "By using this term, [Agagite], the author is characterizing him as anti-Semitic, an enemy of the Jews. The original readers would have understood this one clue as introducing yet another episode of the age-old conflict between Israel and the powers that sought to destroy her." (Karen Jobs, 120-121)

So, Haman the Agagite is promoted to second-in-command in the Persian empire. And King Ahasuerus commanded that the people bow down to him and pay him homage when he passed by. That was not

unusual. It was normal practice to acknowledge high-ranking officials in this way. Later on, in the story Queen Esther will bow before King Ahasuerus. The Jews had no issue with this practice. It was similar to bowing or curtsying for the Queen today. It was a way of showing honor to some high-ranking person – a way of showing honor to whom honor is due.

But Mordecai refuses to show this honor to Haman. Some fellow servants notice and ask him why. He is disobeying the command of the king. Haman does not offer an explanation. They continue to ask, and he continues to refuse to answer. Finally, they tell Haman. The fact that Haman was a Jew had something to do with them not willing to let the matter rest. Haman is furious. We are told that he was not content to punish Mordecai. He decided to figure out a way to kill all the Jews throughout the kingdom. That such a plan is even conceivable suggests that the Jewish people were not popular among the people.

Verse 7 describes some kind of practice by which Haman and his officials sought to determine the best date to schedule the extermination of the Jews. The text says that they cast “Pur” and then explains that that means that they were casting lots. So, something like throwing dice – probably to have their gods choose the most suitable day. The thirteenth day of the twelve month is chosen.

The Haman goes to the king. And this is what he says, verses 8-9, “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. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10000 talents into the hands of those who have charge of the king’s business, that they may put it into the king’s treasuries.”

A mixture of truth and lies. The Jewish people were different. But they had been commanded by God to be good citizens. Jeremiah taught the Jewish people in exile “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in his welfare you will find your welfare.” Mordecai had demonstrated his loyalty to the king in informing Queen Esther of the plot to kill the king. The Jewish people were different. They had many religious laws that seemed strange to outsiders. But God had told them to seek the welfare of the cities where they lived in exile. They were law-abiding citizens.

But Haman described them as a people who did not obey the king’s laws. And King Ahasuerus gives Haman a free hand to execute his plan to destroy the Jewish people. He gives him his signet ring which he could use to authenticate laws in the name of the king. Haman promises the king 10,000 talents of silver which would be stolen from the Jews. The king tells Haman to use it as he sees fit. The king says, “The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.”

The story has been leading up to this. The king is not a man of character. He seems hardly interested in ruling. He does whatever his advisors suggest without thinking – without investigation. Here he gives Haman the go-

ahead to annihilate a whole race of people. Hundreds of thousands of people will be slaughtered. King Ahasuerus asks no questions, does not try to understand what is behind this request.

So, the plan is put in motion by Haman. The king's scribes are summoned. Official documents are drafted - sealed with the king's signet ring and sent throughout the realm. The edit is written on the thirteenth day of the first month. The day for the execution of a whole nation is set for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

The last sentence of the chapter says. "And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion." The king and Haman are unconcerned. But many of the people of the city were confused - disturbed. It seems that not everyone hated the Jews and did not relish the thought of participating in the slaughter of a whole nation.

So, what are we to make of this? What does this chapter of God's word say to us today? Let's first think about Mordecai's refusal to bow down and pay homage Haman. That is what set the whole thing off. Mordecai, of course, could not have known where his refusal to honor Haman would lead, but on the face of it, it does not seem justified. There was nothing wrong with bowing down to high-ranking people per se.

But it is the fact that Haman was an Agagite that made it necessary for Haman to refuse to honor him by bowing down. The author of the story refers to this Haman as the Agagite a number of times. He is highlighting this fact. This is very important. His man belonged to a people who were under God's judgment for what they had done against Israel in the wilderness. And God had specifically commanded his people to blot out their memory from the earth. Deuteronomy 25:17-19, ¹⁷"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, ¹⁸how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. ¹⁹Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget."

Given what God had commanded Israel concerning the Amalekites, Mordecai would have been going against the clear word of God had he bowed down and honored Haman the Agagite. Mordecai had no problem honoring King Ahasuerus because of his office, but he had a direct word from God concerning the Amalekites. Mordecai's ancestor King Saul had lost his kingdom because he had failed to fully execute God's judgment on the Amalekites. By making these connections with Israel's earlier history with the Amalekites, the author is making it clear that Mordecai was in the right by refusing to give homage to Haman even though the consequences of that were terrible.

This was a case of civil disobedience. It was a command from the king that all the king's servants bow down and pay homage to Haman. There was nothing wrong with that command in general. Mordecai refused to obey that command. The author is telling us that it was right for Mordecai to disobey that law by telling us that Haman was a Agagite – an Amalekite – a member of a people whom God had cursed. It would have been

wrong for Haman to honor such a man. The author of the story makes this clear by reminding us of God's curse upon the Amalekites.

The Bible teaches that it is God's will that we submit to legitimate authority. The fifth commandment, the command that we honor our parents, is about honoring the authorities that God places over us. Submitting to the authorities that God places over us is an important part of the obedient life. But there is a time when it is right to disobey and that is when an authority commands something that is clearly contrary to God's will. The instances of civil disobedience in the Bible are all instances where it is very clear that obedience would be sinful. In the book of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to obey the king's command to bow down to an idol. To obey that command would clearly violate the first and second commandments. In the book of Acts, when the Peter and John insisted on obeying God rather than man, they had been told by the authorities that they must not teach in Jesus' name. Had Peter and John obeyed the authorities they would have been going against the clear command of Jesus. (Acts 5:27-32). These are the kinds of examples that the Bible gives us of legitimate and necessary civil disobedience.

Most Reformed and evangelical church elders and pastors have judged that the government restrictions on gathering and wearing of masks do not justify civil disobedience. There are all kinds of views concerning whether their approach is wise and whether it meets the requirements of the charter of rights for imposing these restrictions on our freedoms. But they are not restricting us from preaching Christ. The situation we are in is not like the situations in the Bible that give us examples of necessary civil disobedience. There is nothing wrong and much right about pointing out instances where the importance of church gathering is not given its due. But the bar Scripture sets for civil disobedience is very high. The government is managing a pandemic. It is not telling to do something that is sinful. Romans 13:1-2 is very clear. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."

But there does come a time when civil disobedience is the right thing to do – when the following a government command would cause us to sin. The examples in Scripture teach us that there does come a time when we must say that we will obey God rather than man. That time may come if we are forbidden by God to teach what the Bible says about homosexuality. There are places in the world today where Christians are forbidden to be Christians or where they are forbidden to preach Christ. And that may come in our part of the world. And the story that is told in our text tells us why. The story that is told in our text illustrates the hatred that the world often has for the people of God.

What an example of hatred! Haman's hatred of the Jewish people is intense. He wants to annihilate the whole race of the Jews. There is something profoundly spiritual going on here. It is a reflection of Satan's hatred for God and his people. This is a reflection of the age-old battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of

the serpent. Just after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, when God was cursing the serpent he said in, Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

There is a profound enmity between the seed of the woman who are the people of God and the seed of the serpent who are the enemies of God and his people. This is the ultimate explanation of Haman's hatred for the Jews. This is ultimate explanation for the persecution of God's people. Satan hates God and his people, and his goal is to annihilate the people of God.

Now we have not experienced the threat of all Christians being wiped out by the government like the Jews did in the time of Esther. There is no plan in the works to kill all the followers of Jesus in Canada. There are Christians who live with that kind of threat especially from Muslim extremist groups. But that does not mean that Satan does not hate us any less. In Haman's hatred of the Jews and his plan to annihilate them we see Satan's constant hatred of God's people and his constant desire to annihilate them. Remember what Paul writes in Ephesians 6:11, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." And Peter in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

What Haman wanted to do to the Jews, Satan wants to do to Christians and persecution is not his only tactic. He also uses temptation. He also uses the allurements of this world. The schemes of the devil are anything that draws us away from God. Whenever he tempts us to sin – to live for the things of this world – to drift away from the Lord and his service, Satan is seeking our spiritual death. His goal is our destruction. The hatred of Hamon for the Jews may look different from Satan's hatred of the followers of Jesus, but it is essentially the same in that it seeks the destruction of God's people.

The Bible calls us as believers to be watchful against the devil's schemes – to put on the whole armor of God – to be soberminded. We must be mindful of the spiritual war that we are in as believers. We must realize what is at stake in this spiritual battle and be fighting the fight of faith.

But the story that is told in the book of Esther is about how God preserved his people. And we can be certain that what God did for the Jews in the story told in Esther, he continues to do for us through Jesus Christ our Saviour and our Lord. Remember Jesus' promise of Matthew 16:18, "... I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." And in John 10:28–29, Jesus says concerning his sheep. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

Verses like these make the same point for NT Christians as the book of Esther made for OT Israel. The people of God are under threat, but God will preserve them. And that is a great comfort for us. Certainly, we are under threat as much as the Jews in this story were under threat. We are hated by Satan as much as the Jews

were hated by Hamon. But Jesus will build his church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And no one will be able to pluck Jesus' sheep out of his hands.

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Table Meditation

The Lord's Supper is about remembering Jesus and his death on the cross and how he gives himself to us in the gospel. It is about confirming his offer of himself to us and about nourishing our faith and obedience.

One of the things that Scripture teaches about Jesus' death is that it was a key factor in breaking Satan's power. Just before he went to the cross Jesus said John 12:31, "³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out." And Hebrews 2:14–15, tells us "¹⁴ that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

Jesus by his death destroyed the one who has the power of death and delivers us from the slavery that comes through the fear of death. Through Jesus' death we are set free from the fear of death because Jesus, by his death, conquered death and so rose from the dead, and we receive life in him.

Jesus, by his death, conquered Satan and delivers us from his power. That is why we are able to resist the schemes of the evil one and fight the fight of faith. The battle is not yet over, but the fundamental victory has been won and that guarantees that the gates of hades will not prevail against the church and that Jesus will keep his own from being snatched out of Jesus' hands.

The Lord's Supper is given to strengthen our faith – our confidence in the salvation that Jesus died to give us. When we receive the bread and the wine by faith, we receive Jesus Christ by faith – the one who died for us and through whom our sins are forgiven, and we are delivered from the power of sin and of Satan. Through trusting in Jesus we receive the strength to resist the schemes of Satan and as Peter tells us 1 Peter 1:5, we "⁵by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

