

Esther Chapter Three

Read Esther 3:1-4

- **Refuse to bow down to anyone or anything but Jesus.**
 - Haman was an Agagite, who was a descendant of the Amalekites, ancient enemies of the Jewish people. Not only that, but he was elevated to a god-like status in Persia, so that people had to bow down when he passed by. But Mordecai refused to do this because he believed that only his king, Yahweh, was worthy of that kind of devotion. This refusal to bow under pressure forced him to explain why he refused to do this - he told them he was a Jew.
 - Today, we must refuse to bow down to anything or anyone that people treat as something ultimate or divine. Jesus is our Lord - he alone is ultimate and divine. He alone is worthy of our worship. Of course, this refusal to bow down to such things will mean that, from time to time, we will need to explain why we refuse to bow down. We can then use this as an opportunity to share our faith in God. In the early church their summarising creed was simply 'Jesus is Lord.' This simple claim was scandalous, because the common expression of the day was, 'Caesar is Lord.' To give our primary allegiance to Jesus alone will get us into trouble at times.

Read Esther 3:5-6

- **Small resentments can become deep prejudices.**
 - Resentment against one person easily leads to generalised prejudice and hatred against others like them. We see this in these verses. Haman was humiliated by Mordecai. Instead of letting it go, he began to hate and resent him. Haman's hatred and resentment then grew from hatred against just Mordecai, into a full genocidal hatred against all Jews.
 - Still today, we can be tempted to use one bad experience with a person of a certain culture or race group, and instead of forgiving them, hold it against them in resentment. Over time this unchecked resentment can begin to shape how we see other people like them. Prejudice takes root, and given enough time a hatred or even murderous intent towards all people like them. Hebrews 12:15 speaks of how, if we miss the grace of God, a root of bitterness can begin to grow in our lives that eventually infects others and leads to more trouble. As God's people, we must not miss the grace of God when we have a bad experience with anyone. Rather, by God's grace, we must let it go and refuse any temptations toward prejudice.

Read Esther 3:7-15

- **Our times are in God's hands.**
 - The book of Esther records dates carefully. The incident with Vashti happened in 435 BC (1:3). Esther became queen in 431 BC (2:16). Then Haman plotted the Jewish destruction in 427 BC (3:7). Haman, being suspicious threw a dice ('pur') to see which month of the year to kill the Jews. It fell on the twelfth month (3:3) a full eleven months later. This is very relevant, because had it been sooner, the genocidal decree would not have been able to be overthrown (later in the story), and the Jews would not have been able to defend themselves. The Jews would later recognise the hand of God in that dice-throw - and would have an annual day called 'Purim' (from 'pur' which means lot or dice) to celebrate the way God would deliver them in this time.
 - Our times are in God's hands (Psalm 31:5). God is sovereign. He is in control of the times. Just when Haman was planning in time to kill the Jews, God was planning in time to save them. We can trust a God who so powerfully rules over time.
 - Verse 15 reveals that this genocide plan impacted people differently: the king is ignorant of what he's doing. Haman is filled with hatred. The people are bewildered. But God is in control. The events of our lives impact God differently to how they impact us, because God can look into the future and see how everything concludes.

Esther Chapter Four

Read Esther 4:1-11

- **God will allow us to face great challenges from time to time.**
 - The decree was sent out. In the twelfth month, all Jews would be exterminated. Mordecai was deeply shaken by the news (v1). So were all the Jews everywhere (v3). Although Mordecai wanted to be able to do something about it instantly, he was delayed by not being able to get to Esther for a while (v2-5). Eventually, he did get through to her (v6-9). No doubt she was deeply challenged too. But she received an even greater challenge than anyone else to overcome - Mordecai had told her to approach the king and ask for mercy (v8). Esther knew that this bold act might just cost her her life (v11).
 - From time to time we can expect to face great challenges ourselves. These challenges are never easy. We see God allowing this to happen to Joseph, who is abruptly taken to Egypt. We see this happening to Moses who is suddenly sent to the wilderness in Midian. We see it happen to David as first Saul and then his son, Absalom, hunt him down, causing him to flee. We see it happening

to all the major leaders of the early church.

- Like them, we must learn to face these challenges in such a way that 'we do not fear bad news, but rather keep trusting in the Lord, keeping our heart steady' (Psalm 112:7).
- Mordecai certainly didn't respond like this, but we can with the help of God. Sometimes, as happened with Esther, one challenge will lead to an even greater challenge. The point of all these challenges is that they drive us into a deeper dependence on God, and they give God the chance to reveal his sustaining and intervening grace to us.

Read Esther 4:12-14

- **God will often match our reluctance with his persistence.**
 - Esther was reluctant to do God's will (v10-11). But Mordecai persisted in urging her to do it. He gave her three reasons to act. First, she and her immediate family were in danger. Second, she would miss the honour of being used by God and he would use someone else to bring deliverance. Third, this was the very reason God had placed her in the palace, in her royal position as Queen of Persia.
 - Sometimes we may sense what God wants us to do, but may then make excuses for why we will not do it. Patiently, God will often respond to this by continuing to urge us. He may try to overcome our reluctance with reason too. As Mordecai did with Esther, he may remind us of the price of disobedience. He may remind us of how, if we turn this chance to partner with him down, he will be forced to find another. He may remind us that 'our whole lives have been a straight line heading in this direction', that he has sovereignly prepared us, and orchestrated circumstances, just so that we can partner with him in overcoming this particular challenge. Many people who have been used powerfully by God in the past have gone through a season of resisting the call of God on their lives, but God persisted in the call and eventually they submitted themselves to God.
- **We need the wisdom of trusted shepherds in tumultuous times.**
 - Mordecai spoke God's word to Esther. He affirmed what God's will was. He insisted that God had a plan for her. He gave her a wise directive for her life, and how to handle the situation. (In verses 15-17 we will see that she listens to his counsel.)
 - Today, in challenging times we tend to take the option that guarantees immediate relief. For this reason, stress has a way of making us make bad decisions. That is why it is a good life-principle to commit to never making major decisions when under great pressure. We need to learn to seek the counsel of a person who knows us, and who can discern the call of God on our lives. In a church context, this person is very often one of the shepherd-

leaders with whom we have some kind of relationship (Hebrews 13:17). We generally should not ask them to make the decision for us, but we should seek their perspective so as to make a wiser decision ourselves. Then we should, like Esther did, discern whether we hear God speaking to us in their words.

Read Esther 4:15-17

- **True obedience leaves the outcome to God.**
 - Esther became convinced that it really was the will of God to approach Xerxes. Although she knew that God wanted her to do this, God had not told her what results to expect. She chose to do it anyway, regardless of the outcome, saying, 'If I perish, I perish' (v16).
 - Today, we often put a condition on our obedience to God. We say, 'I will obey you, if you promise to guarantee some positive results.' We may specify what those results are. But this is not faith-based obedience at all. This is an attempt to manipulate God. We must learn to trust and obey God in such a way that we leave the outcomes to him. We should pray, 'God, even if it costs me my life, I will trust you and obey you.' We must learn to do the will of God - and leave the results in his hands. This is what a life of faith is all about.
- **Desperate situations call for a deeper dependence on God.**
 - The Jews were facing a probable extermination. Instead of stepping into problem-solving mode, we, like them, should step into prayerful-dependence mode. This is one major reason God allows us to face troubles - it brings us to our knees before him.
 - In this case, the Jews' dependency on God is seen in their willingness to fast. Fasting is one way of increasing both our humility and dependence on God. It affirms that our lives and futures are ultimately in the hands of God.

Esther Chapter Five

Read Esther 5:1-3

- **Faith, not fear, should determine our actions.**
 - Esther must have felt great fear - since she had not seen the king in over 30 days. And she knew that approaching the king in his inner courts without his invitation was deadly (see 4:11). But she also knew that God was with her, and that God wanted her to do this. She had also experienced his previous provision on her behalf, and must have taken this as encouragement that he would carry on helping her. Esther had reason for fear. But she also had

reason for faith. And her faith prevailed over her fear, so that she stepped out boldly in faith, despite the feelings of fear.

- When God asks us to do something which we know may have a negative backlash, it can lead to great fear. But we need to reassure ourselves that we can trust God to look after us. He would not be so cruel as to lead us somewhere and then leave us on our own. Rather where he guides us, he also provides for us. And we need to let this faith in God, not the fear in the situation, influence our actions. We need to feel the fear, and obey God anyway.
- **Approach the King through prayer.**
 - These three verses provide a picture of a powerful New Testament truth: it depicts the invitation that God gives to the bride of Christ, to come to him boldly in prayer. We notice a few insights into prayer from these verses:
 - *Know who you are in Christ.* Esther put on her royal robes (v1), which affirmed that she belonged to the king as his queen. We too, must not forget who we are. We belong to Christ. This is a key to effective prayer.
 - *Approach God confidently appealing to his mercy.* Esther did not wait for the king to come to her, but rather approached him. The king then held out his golden sceptre which represented his mercy. She stepped out and touched it. Like Esther, we need to 'approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy' (Hebrews 4:16). We must never approach God on the basis of what we deserve, but rather on the basis of his mercy, which we can never deserve. Our confidence is not in our own abilities or our own righteousness - but in God's undeserved kindness, compassion and extravagant generosity.
 - *Be intimate with God.* Esther approached the king in his inner court. This is a picture of how we need to become familiar with the very presence of God. We are called to intimacy and worship. God is our lover and our king and he longs for us to draw close to him.
 - *Honour God with the largeness of your requests.* The king offered Esther anything - up to half of his kingdom (v3). We need to pray God-sized prayers, because (as we will see as the story unfolds) God is greatly glorified through the answering of God-sized prayers.
 - *Pray for others.* Esther was not mainly concerned for herself, but rather for all the Jews. Similarly, we must not just pray for ourselves, but must be ready to pray for other people. This way we live and pray beyond ourselves, enlarging our hearts for others, and joining God in changing others and the world.
 - *See prayer as a form of 'reigning with Christ'.* Through these few verses we can see how the queen co-reigned the nation with her husband. Similarly, Romans 5:17 tells us that we are being trained to reign with Christ in this life. It is in prayer that we change the world and - as scandalous as this may sound - get to co-reign with

Christ in the shaping of lives and events.

Read Esther 5:4-8

- **Learn to discern between God's movements and his moments.**
 - Esther knew that God was at work in the situation. The word to describe how God is moving, or what God is doing in the shaping of circumstances is the word 'providence'. Esther was learning to patiently and wisely co-operate with 'providence'. Instead of just coming out and asking the king to rescue the Jews she moved slowly, patiently and tactfully. She invited the king and Haman to a banquet (v4), and then to a second one (v8). The king would have understood that she was setting him up for a big request, and the longer she kept him waiting, the more receptive he became. Esther correctly perceived that God was 'moving' in a certain direction - to rescue the Jews. But she also correctly perceived that the time was not yet right.
 - Like Esther, we need to learn how to wisely and patiently co-operate with God. Just because we sense God's movements does not mean we correctly have sensed the right moment. Timing is key in the life of serving God. We should pray, 'God help me to tell the difference between your movements and your moments. Just because I sense you're doing something, does not mean the time for action or fulfilment has yet come.'

Read Esther 5:9-14

- **Prosperity can make us proud.**
 - Haman was an example of a man who was greatly prosperous. He had lots of friends (v10), wealth, honour and sons. He was even the king's favourite (v11). But his prosperity had resulted in pride and arrogance in his life. His happiness was really a kind of drunken self-glory. The moment someone did not bow before him, his high spirits turned into rage (v9). He boasted about all his possessions (v11). He boasted about his seemingly bright future - he was sure that it would only get brighter and brighter (v12). He delighted in the thought of the death of his enemies (v14). He battled to enjoy himself because of just one person who failed to honour him (v13). Haman had wrongly interpreted his prosperity as 'God being for me'. But as we see in this story, God was not for him at all. God was against him. Haman was just too proud to notice that.
 - Prosperity can have that same effect on our lives. It can lead to us becoming arrogant, intoxicated by our own self-glory, deeply offended when someone doesn't like or honour us, boasting about what we have, boasting about tomorrow (which James 4:14-16 warns against), and even wrongly assuming that our prosperity is a

sure sign that God is for us. We must remember that 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble' (James 4:6). God sometimes allows proud people to prosper, but the prosperity of the proud will eventually destroy them, and it will not last into eternity. Those of us who have lots of friends, honour, wealth, family - let us freshly humble ourselves before God.

Esther Chapter Six

Read Esther 6:1-2

- **God can reach any person at any time.**
 - The people of God were praying for deliverance. Esther was soon to make her request. And, behind the scenes, God was at work. Here Xerxes 'just happens' to not be able to sleep. He 'just happens' to ask for the chronicles of his reign. He 'just happens' to read about Mordecai's unrewarded deed of loyalty. This was not a co-incidence, this was a God-incidence. This will, as we will soon see in the following verses, ultimately lead to the rescuing of the Jews.
 - This is a picture of how God's power to answer our prayers is inexhaustible, and his creativity in doing so is unlimited. He can get through to any person at any time, without them even realising it. As we pray, God can answer our prayer in the most surprising of ways. He can soften the hardest heart, and he can move people to co-operate with himself, without them even knowing it. As with Xerxes, he can do all this with and through people who are not even Christians.

Read Esther 6:3-14

- **God will eventually humble the self-exalted.**
 - The king was wondering how he should honour Mordecai (v3). At that very moment Haman was fantasising about ways he himself could receive even more public honour. Incurably self-absorbed, Haman thought the king was wanting to honour him, so he suggested ways to honour people (all the time thinking he would be honoured in this way). But Haman's plan totally back-fired (v10). His enemy, Mordecai, was honoured instead of him. He was thoroughly humbled - so much so that even his family started backing off from him, and declaring his defeat (v12-14). The very people who had been praising him the previous day (see 5:11,12) were now ashamed to even be associated with him.
 - Haman was a self-exalted man. God had been resisting his pride. Eventually, when Haman had reached the heights of self-infatuation, God brought him low. Haman was not prepared to

- humble himself, so God humbled him in a very public arena.
- God still resists the proud. God still humbles the self-exalted, and if not in this lifetime, he will certainly do so at Judgement Day.
 - **God will eventually exalt the humble.**
 - Mordecai had been greatly loyal to the king, even saving his life (2:21-22), but had never been honoured or rewarded for it. Although he never grasped for it, and although it took its time in coming, he was eventually highly honoured and richly rewarded (v 10-11). He got to share in the king's glory and all the people got to hear of what he had done. He went from having a death-sentence hanging over his head to having the king's royal robe hanging over his body (v8). He went from being cursed by Haman to being praised by Haman (against Haman's will of course) (v11).
 - God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5). Jesus often said that ultimately 'God will exalt the humble, and humble the exalted'. These verses powerfully depict this truth. Already in this life, when God so chooses, God will honour those who have been loyal to him, and have remained humble. The honour we receive in public will not last (even Mordecai went back to the king's gate in verse 12). God has hard-wired us with a desire to experience honour. After all, we were created to be crowned with glory and honour (Psalm 8). Hebrews 2:10 tells us that 'Christ will bring many sons to glory'. If we have been faithful, loyal and humble toward God in this life, he will share some of his glory and honour with us 'on that day'. We will experience so much more than what even Mordecai experienced - we will receive the honour of the King of Kings.