

## **Esther chapters 3-4 - The World that left God out In the right place at the right time**

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Last week, we started a series about the book of Esther. We found a world that left God out. Esther chapters 1 and 2 describe the extravagant splendour of King Ahasuerus' palace and the indulgent feast that he hosted. We were introduced to Esther when the king held a beauty contest to choose a new queen after he became displeased with Vashti. The first two chapters of Esther are striking because of the absence of any mention of God. That's true of the whole book, but it seems particularly noticeable in the descriptions of the lavish plans of Ahasuerus at the beginning of the book.

However absent God seems to be in the story told in the first two chapters of Esther, He was at work behind the scenes. By the end of chapter 2 Ahasuerus had chosen Esther as his queen. Nothing particularly unusual about that we might think. But as we think about chapters 3 and 4 today, we'll start to see how God had a plan in it all. We'll have to look carefully as God is still not mentioned in these chapters. In fact, He's not mentioned at all in the book of Esther. But we'll see event after event that definitely suggest that God had a plan in it all. They might appear as coincidences on their own. But as we read the whole of the book of Esther, we begin to realise that these apparent coincidences were in fact the movement of God in all the circumstances surrounding King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther.

The title for our series in Esther is "the world that left God out", so as we go through each chapter, we'll see lessons about how to live faithfully for God in a world that leaves Him out. Although this story happened around 2500 years ago, we'll see lessons for us today. Because we, like Esther, live in a world that largely leaves God out of its life. As Christians, we might be tempted to change our beliefs and adapt our practices to fit in with the prevailing culture. Or we might be tempted to run away and find a sort of holy bubble where we can live in blissful ignorance to the world around us. But neither is God's way. There is a way to live faithfully for God even when the people around us leave Him out of their thinking and out of their lives. I'd like us to see four reminders for God's people in Esther 3 and 4.

1. Faithful living might not always lead to immediate blessing (2:21-3:1).
2. Don't look for happiness in status and position. (3:2-11).
3. God's past deliverance is an encouragement to keep trusting Him (3:12-15).
4. God will win, will we be on His side? (4:13-16).

### **1. Faithful living might not always lead to immediate blessing (2:21-3:1)**

At the end of chapter 2 we get one of those apparent coincidences that occur frequently in the book of Esther. Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, an indication that he held some sort of official role in Susa. Whilst sitting in the king's gate, he just happened to overhear a plot to kill the king. Mordecai reported this to Esther, who in turn passed on the news to the king, at the same

time ensuring that Mordecai got the credit. How remarkable that Mordecai just happened to be in the right place at the right time! Or was God pulling the strings behind the scenes to prepare the way for later events in the story?

Then as we move into the start of chapter 3, we read “After these things King Ahasuerus promoted...” What might we expect to read next? After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Mordecai above all the princes? That would certainly be understandable given what we’ve just read at the end of chapter 2 wouldn’t it! But that’s not what we read is it. Instead we read that King Ahasuerus promoted “Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite” over all the princes. It seems like Mordecai was forgotten about. Some thanks for saving the king’s life, you might think! Mordecai had done everything he was supposed to have done. He had been a good citizen and saved the king’s life. You might have thought that as a captive in a foreign land, under the rule of a tyrant king, he had reason to keep quiet about this threat. But he acted rightly and reported the threat.

Interestingly, Jeremiah warned the people of Israel that they would be taken into captivity and told them how they should live whilst in captivity. Listen to what he says in Jeremiah 29:4-7,

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.”

They were to engage with the cities they were taken to. They were to pray for them. They were to go about normal life whilst in captivity. They were there for the long haul. Interestingly, sometimes we talk about Christians as being God’s people in a foreign land. I think Jeremiah’s advice might be pretty good for us. Do we seek for the peace of our cities? Do we pray to the Lord for the people where we live? Might He burden our hearts to do so more from now on?

Anyway, Mordecai did as he was supposed to do as a loyal citizen, but the king forgot all about it. What can we learn? Mainly that faithful living might not always lead to immediate blessing. I know some people teach that if you trust Jesus and live rightly things will go well for you, but the Bible doesn’t teach that. In fact, the plain teaching of the New Testament is that by living faithfully for God, you’re more likely to end up like Mordecai, overlooked and unnoticed. Don’t lose heart about that. Keep on living faithfully and righteously. Keep on being honest at work. Keep on paying your taxes like you’re supposed to. Keep on doing good and seeking the good of those around you. You might not get noticed. You might not get thanked. You might be overlooked for promotions in favour of someone who employs more devious means to get noticed. You might end up poorer than people who cheat the system. But God notices! He sees all and He rewards in His own time. For Mordecai, we’ll discover that in God’s perfect timing, Mordecai was remembered and rewarded. That might happen for us. Or it might not.

Listen to how Paul puts it when he writes to the Galatians in chapter 6,

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have

opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (vv.7-10).

So, this first part of today’s section reminds us to keep on living faithfully. Faithful living might not always lead to immediate blessing. But, in due season we’ll reap everlasting life! That’s worth having!

## **2. Don’t look for happiness in status and position (3:2-11)**

Let’s read more about Haman in Esther 3:2-11,

“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. Then the king’s servants who were within the king’s gate said to Mordecai, “Why do you transgress the king’s command?” Now it happened, when they spoke to him daily and he would not listen to them, that they told it to Haman, to see whether Mordecai’s words would stand; for Mordecai had told them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. But he disdained 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. In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, the lot), before Haman to determine the day and the month, until it fell on the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 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. 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. 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.””

The man promoted instead of Mordecai was described as an Agagite. If you remember any Old Testament history, you might know that the Agagites were descended from the people of Amalek. The Amalekites were a constant threat to the Jews. This history between the Israelites and the Agagites (or Amalekites) certainly explains some of the tension between Mordecai and Haman described in chapter 3. Haman was infuriated by Mordecai’s refusal to bow down to him. It’s hard to believe. He’d just got the best of promotions. He was second in command to the most powerful king in the world at the time. But he wasn’t happy because he felt he wasn’t getting enough respect and honour. And all this was over one person. It’s not as if there were hordes of people outside his house protesting that they didn’t like him. Haman was “filled with wrath” (verse 5) all because one man refused to bow to him. Mordecai wasn’t making life difficult for Haman or campaigning against him. He simply refused to honour him. That made Haman livid! Haman was so put out by Mordecai’s actions that he devised a plot to get revenge. But, in his mind, revenge against Mordecai would be insufficient. He wanted to wipe out not just Mordecai, but all Mordecai’s people. Look at verse 6. He wanted to destroy all the Jews, not just in Susa but in all the kingdom! Talk about an overreaction. But such were the actions of a man fuelled by his love of power and position.

I don't suppose any of us would be so desperate to gain power and influence that we'd promote a genocide of all nations who stood in our way. But this sad account of Haman serves as a reminder of the failure to find satisfaction in the world that leaves God out. In chapters 1 and 2 we saw that luxury and wealth, sexual satisfaction and pursuing our own doesn't necessarily lead to happiness. Here in chapter 3, Haman is a reminder to us that pursuing power, and influence, and status, won't make us happy either.

Jesus taught us that there were more important things to seek after. Do you remember how He asked, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul" (Mark 8:36). We've seen so far in Esther that one of the features of living in a world that leaves God out, or in Haman's case being actually hostile towards God and His people, is an attempt to find purpose/happiness in things around us. But in Ahasuerus, Vashti, and Haman we've also seen people who, in some sense, had it all but were miserable. Don't be tempted to live like them. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). The Lord Jesus is the source of true satisfaction and joy.

### **3. God's past deliverance is an encouragement to keep trusting Him (3:12-15)**

As we come to the end of chapter 3, we see the news of Haman's plan being spread around the kingdom. Can you imagine how the Jews must have felt as this decree was read all over the province? Listen to verses 12-15 of chapter 3.

"Then the king's scribes were called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and a decree was written according to all that Haman commanded—to the king's satraps, to the governors who were over each province, to the officials of all people, to every province according to its script, and to every people in their language. In the name of King Ahasuerus it was written and sealed with the king's signet ring. And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions. A copy of the document was to be issued as law in every province, being published for all people, that they should be ready for that day. 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."

In an almost ironic sense the writer of Esther records an interesting detail in verse 12. Did you notice the day that the king's scribes were called to write this decree? The thirteenth day of the first month. Probably for most of us, that day doesn't ring any bells. But if you read Exodus 12:18, or Leviticus 23:5, or Numbers 28:16, you'll see that the Passover was celebrated on the fourteenth day of the first month.

The Passover was the Jewish feast that celebrated one of the greatest moments in their history. Under the leadership of Moses, God had brought the people of Israel out from captivity in Egypt at the start of their journey to the land God had promised to them. It was a feast day of great celebration for the Jewish people. A recognition of God's great deliverance of the nation. But can you picture the scene. Jewish families all around Susa, getting ready to celebrate the Passover. No doubt an exciting time in the house. And then, all of a sudden, on the day before the Passover, they hear of the king's decree. All the Jewish people are to be killed. What a way to kill the celebrations! How did they feel? Pretty awful I imagine. Perhaps, it's perhaps a bit like discovering on Christmas Eve that the UK was to be invaded and the likelihood was that many of us would be killed in the forthcoming war.

And yet, even in the irony of this moment, and the great distress it no doubt caused for Jewish families up and down the kingdom, I wonder if the timing of this announcement was a little evidence of the kindness of God working in the background in this story. Why do I say that? Well, what were the Jews busy thinking about at that time of year? God's great deliverance from a foreign power! And what better event to be thinking about as they discovered another great threat to their very existence?

Of course the Jews would have been distressed. The last verse of Esther 3 says, "...the city of Shushan was perplexed", a hint that even the non-Jewish foreigners in the city wondered if they might be next to incur the king's wrath. Chapter 4 shows us how much this decree troubled Mordecai. But I wonder if the timing of this announcement was a message from God as if to say, "Yes, I know you're scared. But I've delivered your people before! I brought them out of Egypt. And I can deliver them again. Things look bleak right now, but don't lose hope! Keep trusting!" It's certainly true as we read chapter 4 that, although Mordecai was troubled by the decree, he seemed to expect deliverance from it somehow or other. Would he have been helped to this conclusion by the reminder of the Passover so soon after the bad news broke?

#### **4. God will win, will we be on His side? (4:13-16)**

I just want to finish off by thinking about Mordecai's expectation of deliverance in chapter 4. God will win. Will we be on His side? The start of the chapter describes the distress Mordecai felt as a result of the decree. And it describes how Esther came to learn of the news. Mordecai advised Esther to go and plead on behalf of her people to the king, but she said she couldn't go into his presence as she hadn't been summoned. The Persian custom was that someone could only go to see the king if he summoned them. They couldn't just rock up and walk into the king's court. What could Esther do? We are running out of time to read the whole of chapter 4, but let's pick up in verse 13. You can read the rest yourself later.

"And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: "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."

Let's look at what Mordecai said in verse 13 and 14 of chapter 4. First, he warned Esther not to think that she would escape simply because she was the queen. Notice what else Mordecai said: "If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place." Mordecai was confident that somehow or other God would deliver His people from the threat of the Amalekites. Surely God would intervene now Haman the Agagite was threatening them?

Maybe Mordecai was familiar with the prophet Joel's prophecy? Why do I say that? Because the way Mordecai is described as responding to the news of the decree in verse 3 "fasting and weeping and wailing" also occurs in Joel 2:12. Joel tells of a terrible coming day of judgment and tells the people to turn to God with all their heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning. Various details are given about how they should return to the Lord and Joel says, "Who knows if He will turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him" (v.14). A number of the actions of Esther and Mordecai in chapter 4 seem to parallel with the repentance described in Joel 2. It's certainly interesting to see the parallels here.

Mordecai certainly seems to be confident that God would intervene somehow, and through some means rescue His people. God was going to win. Mordecai's challenge to Esther was whether she was willing to be on God's side and be the means through which God would deliver His people. Deliverance would definitely come, but Esther would miss out on the deliverance if she didn't act in faith.

Esther responded positively and faithfully. She agreed to go before the king and said, "If I perish, I perish." I've said this was a faithful response, but it doesn't seem to be a very faithful response, does it? She doesn't seem very confident. But the time had come. It had been possible for Esther to hide her faith for a time, but now she needed to make a stand. Was she for the Lord or not? Similarly for us, we might be able to hide our faith for a while, but ultimately we will need to be clear about whether we trust God and will obey Him or not. Esther is an encouragement to me. Why? Because she reminds me that God puts people in the right place at just the right time. What did Mordecai say? "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14). God had arranged circumstances so that she was in the right place at the right time to act to bring about deliverance for her people.

Esther obeyed with no clear revelation from God. She had no scripture promise to cling on to. She seems to have perhaps had very mixed motives. And yet, God used her to deliver His people. Perhaps He could use us despite our ambiguous motives? Perhaps God has put us in the place where we are because He has something for us to do at this time. Will we obey? Are we willing to perish for our faith? Will there be something in our lives this coming week, big or small, of which we might be able to say that God put us there "for such a time as this"?

We don't always see the reasons and consequences of small acts of faith, but God can use them for blessing. Esther's actions in this story led to the protection of the Jewish people. Another Jew from Susa, Nehemiah was used mightily by God in rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. That wouldn't have been possible if all the Jews had been wiped out.

The key lesson of Esther 4 is that, even though God isn't mentioned in the book, He will always accomplish His purposes. The opposition of the world and the half-hearted responses of people won't stop that. Our challenge is to trust Him and follow Him.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Esther 3 and 4, "In the right place at the right time", talk T1328.

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