

Once upon a time there was a grand chess master who would play anyone who wished to test their skill, from novice to expert. One day, a young man sat opposite the grand master – determined to beat him. The young man made his first move and the master smiled. Obviously, the young man had been studying the game of chess for it was a well-known move he had made, but it was a move easily countered by the master. With each move the young man made, the master responded with great wisdom, and soon the young man was checkmate. They played again and again – each time the young man tried different moves and different strategies, but each time, the chess master won easily.

When imagining how God can be said to be in control of this world, some people view God as a puppeteer, where we are dangling from His invisible strings – always doing exactly what God wants – but that view clearly robs us of our freewill. On the other end of the spectrum, some imagine God as being nothing but a spectator, seated in some heavenly audience, merely watching us as we run amuck down here doing our own thing, but that view fails to acknowledge God’s involvement in this world. So, both views really miss the mark.

*It is true that God does what He wants, when He wants, and how He wants because He is God. God is in absolute control and yet, He gave people the capacity to freely choose. It’s a paradox and it begs the question – **how can God be in control of everything, and yet we have the freedom to make their own decisions?***

I know this is a theological stretch when addressing the topic of God’s sovereignty and providence, but perhaps the image of a chess game between a grand chess master and a novice will help us with this paradox.

In the game, the novice moves his pieces around the board as he freely chooses. He follows some basic strategies he has learned about the game, and some of his moves are thoughtful and surprisingly good, whereas others are foolish.

The master on the other hand is wise, He knows it all, and nothing surprises Him – in fact, he knows the move the novice is going to make before he even makes it. For the master, there’s no guesswork and there’s no need to anticipate the next move of the novice, for the master has already seen it played out in his mind, and without even knowing it, the master skillfully weaves the novice’s moves into his own game plan where the final outcome is never in doubt – checkmate.

This morning, we are continuing through the book of **Esther**, where like a grand chess master, God is weaving the freewill decisions and the actions and the events

of people, of novices into His own divine game plan where the outcome is never in doubt.

If you remember, Esther was an orphaned girl of Jewish exiles who was raised by her older cousin Mordecai. As a young woman, she was taken against her will for a beauty pageant and placed in a harem for the purpose of pleasing King Ahasuerus, and as we left off last week, amongst all the other beautiful women, Esther found favor with the king and she was crowned by him as the new queen of Persia.

It's a great story involving Esther – whose Persian name means *star*, but now the story takes an interesting twist – and cousin Mordecai now finds himself in the starring role.

So, let's pick up where we left off last week. If you have your Bible, turn to **Esther 2** and we will begin with **verse 19**. We are told,

19 When the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 Esther had not yet made known her kindred or her people, even as Mordecai had commanded her; for Esther did what Mordecai told her as she had done when under his care.

Apparently having a cousin as the queen has some great perks, for we are told that Mordecai is now **sitting at the king's gate** which was an important place mentioned throughout the Old Testament.

As you might imagine, the gate was a massive structure through which people constantly flowed in and out, and because there was so much activity at the gate, it naturally became the place where people gathered. As a result, public meetings were held there, it was a place where business transactions occurred, where legal agreements and judgments were made, and it was a place where news was shared.

If you remember, it was at the gate where Abraham purchased a cave to use as a tomb for his wife Sarah who had passed away. In the book of **Ruth**, it was at the gate where Boaz went to negotiate with another relative for the hand of Ruth, and it was at the gate where Absalom sat to give advice and slowly turned the hearts of the people from his father King David toward himself so as to lead a rebellion.

So, the gate was an important place – it was a natural hub for the city – a *park bench* for some to hear the latest news and gossip, and a *town hall* for others to meet with someone from the government – and it's here, in some official capacity, that Mordecai was seated in the city of Susa, and on the screen, there is a picture of the palace in Susa with the king's gate.

In preparation for my message, I learned that excavations of Susa began in the mid-1800's, and in 1970, archaeologists discovered the very king's gate we are talking about. On one side of the gate was a bridge that crossed a moat, and on the other side of the gate was the king's royal palace. So, all public access to the palace was controlled at the gate – and it was a massive gate.

According to archaeologists, it measured 130 feet wide, it was approximately 100 feet thick, and it was estimated to be 30 to 50 feet high. This gate also had recessed rooms built within in its structure for guards and other officials to use, and Mordecai is assigned to this gate – a place which serves as the setting for the twist in the story, and before we move on, it's also important to take note that Esther continues to keep her Jewish family history a secret. Although she is the Queen of Persia, she continues to follow the instructions of her father-figure Mordecai.

Okay, let's continue beginning with **verse 21**.

²¹ In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ²² But the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. ²³ Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

In those days – the days when everyone including the king now seems to be happy, Mordecai overhears a plot at the king's gate involving two of the **king's officials**. For whatever reason, they are not happy, they're angry – they're angry with the king and they want to kill him.

We are told that Mordecai tells his cousin **Queen Esther** of this plot he hears about, and she in turn alerts the king, giving credit for uncovering the plot to Mordecai. According to this passage, the allegations were thoroughly investigated and the plot against the king was real, and as a consequence, the culprits involved in the plot were executed – **hanged on a gallows**, which may be a little misleading.

When we typically think of being hanged on a gallows, we think of someone being hanged by the neck with a rope, but *gallows* literally means *tree*, and the idea that they were hanged on a tree probably refers to impalement on a sharpened wooden stake which was a common practice in the Persian Empire, but just so you know, it could just as well refer to crucifixion, as the first recorded crucifixion was carried out by King Darius – the father of King Ahasuerus.

Anyway – all of this – the assassination plot, Mordecai’s involvement in saving the king, and the execution was all written down by the king’s scribe who chronicled everything for the royal record.

Now what happened here may not seem like a big deal at the moment, but remember, God is working behind the scenes – He’s working behind what is seen, and this will become a big deal when God determines the time is right.

So, that brings us to **Chapter 3**, where we are introduced to a new character in this story that’s getting even more interesting. Let’s continue with **verse 1**.

¹After these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who were with him.

After a few years, after Esther is crowned as queen, after the assassination plot, after Mordecai saved the king’s life, after all these things had occurred – it’s **Haman** not Mordecai who is exalted. Mordecai is apparently overlooked and forgotten. He did the right thing, and yet there’s no recognition, there’s no reward, not even a *thank you* – all the while, this guy Haman, who apparently does nothing, comes out of nowhere, and moves up the ranks to become the chief of staff – the number two guy in the Persian Empire. That doesn’t seem very fair God – what’s up with that, and oh by the way, **who’s this guy Haman anyway?**

At this point, we don’t know much about Haman. His Persian name means “*magnificent*” and in some respects, as we will learn later, his name speaks to his character for he thinks *he’s all that plus a bag of chips*. Haman is a very proud and privileged man, and now – a very powerful man because he has the king’s ear.

Haman, as we will see later, embodies everything that God hates in a person. In **Proverbs 6:16-19**, reading from the NIV, we are told,

***¹⁶ There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to Him:
¹⁷ haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, ¹⁹ a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.***

This describes Haman to a “T” – he’s a wicked man, he’s nothing but trouble, and we are told that Haman is an **Agagite**.

Okay, let’s pick up beginning with **verse 2**.

² All the king’s servants who were at the king’s gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him.

But Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage. ³ Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why are you transgressing the king's command?" ⁴ Now it was when they had spoken daily to him and he would not listen to them, that they told Haman to see whether Mordecai's reason would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew.

In this passage, it would appear that Mordecai knows something about Haman we don't, for we are told that Mordecai will not bow before Haman.

I find it interesting that Mordecai was willing to save a pagan king but he's unwilling to bow before Haman – and just so you know, this act of bowing is not referring to false worship, instead as a common practice in that culture, this bowing was only meant as a sign of respect towards another. This act would be similar to a person in the military who salutes another of higher rank merely out of respect for their rank.

So, this act of bowing was a sign of respect – but Mordecai does not respect Haman and he won't bow.

Mordecai is stubborn, he seems to be the only holdout at the gate, and the other servants of the king take notice of it. They call him out, on a daily basis, but Mordecai will not bow before Haman. Even against the peer pressure – even in violation of the king's command – he will not bow, and then Mordecai openly discloses his reason – something that's been hidden all along – he is a **Jew**.

Now, I need to explain what I think is really happening here because there is more to this than first meets the eye.

Turn with me to **Exodus 17**, and we will begin with **verse 8**. We are told,

⁸ Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim. ⁹ So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand."

¹⁰ Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹ So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. ¹² But Moses' hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands were steady until the sun set. ¹³ So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites made their exodus out of Egypt, and after their jaw-dropping experience at the Red Sea, they continue on their journey

through a hostile and harsh wilderness towards the Promised Land – but then, out of nowhere, the Amalekites attacked the weary Israelites from behind – from the rear, **and who would be at the rear?** The women and children, the elderly, the injured, and the sick. It was a situation where the strong took advantage of the weak.

Well, Moses goes to a hilltop to oversee what was happening, while Joshua and his fighting men took on the Amalekites, and as long as Moses held up the **staff of God** in his hands, the Israelites were winning, but when his hands became heavy and Moses lowered the staff, the Amalekites gained the upper hand.

So, Moses had a couple of guys help him hold up his hands and Joshua eventually overwhelmed and defeated the Amalekites; however, from generation to generation, the Amalekites would remain enemies of God's people.

Then there came a time about 400 years later, when King Saul – the first king of Israel led his soldiers into battle against the Amalekites. The Amalekites would finally get what's coming to them for their sneak attack against the Israelites in the wilderness, and we are told in **1 Samuel 15**,

¹Then Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen to the words of the Lord. ²Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. ³Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

The prophet Samuel told King Saul to **utterly destroy** the Amalekites – everyone and everything that breathed was to be killed. This might sound harsh, but the Amalekites hated God, they were enemies of God's people, they were a vicious and violent bunch who wanted to exterminate the Jews, and for hundreds of years, they were given the opportunity by God to repent from their wicked ways – yet repentance seemed to be out of the question for these people. God is patient, but His patience with wickedness is not everlasting, and His character demands that He ultimately punish it.

So, King Saul led his army into battle against the Amalekites in the southern region of Judah, and Saul was victorious over them – in fact, he even captures the Amalekite king called Agag.

Saul had won the battle against Agag, but he lost with God, for in his disobedience, Saul saved the best of the livestock and he spared Agag – probably so he could personally gloat by parading him around as a captive. King Saul disobeyed God’s command clearly given to him by the prophet Samuel, so Samuel takes matters into his own hands and chopped King Agag into pieces.

Speaking of pieces, are you putting the pieces together?

If you recall from last week, we learned this about Mordecai in **Chapter 2 verse 5**,

Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.

Mordecai was from the tribe of **Benjamin**, and his great grandfather was named **Kish**, and the name Kish may have been a common name in that tribe, because hundreds of years earlier, there was another man named Kish – also from the tribe of Benjamin and he was the father of King Saul. Mordecai was a Jew, connected by blood to King Saul – the very first king of Israel.

Haman on the other hand, is an Agagite, and he’s connected by blood to King Agag – a descendant of the Amalekites.

It would seem that Mordecai was aware of this family history, and he will not bow to this Amalekite, and this disrespect was reported to Haman. It’s also reported to Haman that Mordecai was a Jew, and once again, after 600 years, the flames are fanned for a blood feud between these two ancient enemies.

It’s a feud that will grow like a cancer as we will see beginning with **verse 5**.

⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage. ⁶ But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him who the people of Mordecai were; therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Haman, who has been alerted to Mordecai’s disrespect, is now watching him like a hawk when he goes through the king’s gate, and when Mordecai does not bow, Haman burns with a quiet rage. He’s filled with wrath, and he has options to deal with it.

Haman could ignore Mordecai and just shrug it off. He could take an official stance and report the violation to the king where the king could imprison Mordecai or even execute him, but none of those options were not good enough for Haman. Punishing Mordecai alone would not satisfy Haman’s hatred. He wanted more, he

wanted revenge, he wanted to see the extermination of all of Mordecai's people – all the Jews living under Persian rule, and that would include the Jews who resided in the Promised Land.

Haman is the number two man in the Persian Empire, he has the king's ear, he's powerful, and his decisions and actions are not questioned. He hates the Jews – like Hitler, he's a tool of Satan, and from our vantage point, things look really bad – things seem hopeless for God's people.

There is a painting that once hung in the Louvre in Paris, painted by Friedrich Moritz Retzsch. The name of the painting was called "The Chess Players" but it later became known as "Checkmate."

The painting depicts two chess players. One player is Satan, who is grinning from ear-to-ear in arrogance and confidence, and the other player is a young man who looks cornered and beaten. It's looks hopeless for the young man – it's checkmate – there's no escape – and at stake is his very soul.

Many years later, in 1861, a famous American grand chess master by the name of Paul Morphy came across a reproduction of the painting at a social gathering in Richmond, VA. Because Morphy was such a world-famous chess player, the guests – who also liked the game of chess, asked him to look at the painting and to assess the young man's situation. At first glance, when Morphy looked at the position of the chess pieces in the painting, he agreed with the consensus that the young man's position was hopeless. He had lost the game. It was checkmate.

Then the conversation at the social gathering turned to other topics, but Morphy remained glued to the painting, and after some time, a chess board was set up in the same configuration as the painting. Then Morphy told the guests, he would take the young man's place in the painting because he noticed something surprising. According to this grand chess master, the king still had one more move, and this move would ultimately make the young man the winner of the game.

My friends, no matter how hard and hopeless it may seem at times – our lives and our futures are in the hand of our Master, and the final outcome should never be in doubt – for to those in Jesus Christ – in the end, we win – checkmate.

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