

I Will Put Enmity Between You

Esther

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Bible Text: Esther 3; 1 Samuel 15:1-23

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I would like us this morning to continue our study in the book of Esther and focus upon the whole of this chapter but if there is one verse in particular to which I would draw your attention it is verse 4, "And when they spoke to Mordecai day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew." Just that simple statement: he had told them that he was a Jew. How often is it the case that we can read through the portion of God's word which we have allocated to ourselves for any particular day and having read it countless times in the past, God in his own way brings it to our attention so that we are compelled to reflect upon it further, that it is more than just the reading, it becomes the opportunity for deeper meditation. You may have, indeed, read this portion of God's word oftentimes in the past and not paused to think about that simple statement: he had told them that he was a Jew. It seems simple and straightforward, after all, he was a Jew and what is so remarkable about that?

Well, if you're looking at your bulletins, you will see that I make reference and perhaps you have already seen the reference there to an earlier chapter to be found in Scripture. It comes from the opening book of Scripture, from Genesis, right at the very beginning when our first parents fell into sin and God brings his judgment to bear, first of all upon the serpent and in the curse that is pronounced upon the serpent: God declared that he would put enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman. Now, we could, of course, reflect upon how it is not unusual to find those who will have a great abhorrence of snakes and anything that remotely looks reptilian, in fact and of course, we might trace something of that loathing to that curse. But if we were to stop there, we would have greatly undervalued the text. The text is not primarily talking about how some individuals might not care to handle snakes much as the enmity that is between the enemy of our souls and God's people and that enmity we see recorded upon the pages of Scripture ever after. You cannot read the Old Testament account without seeing the enmity that is borne towards God's people and towards those who would live holy lives.

So, as we take up the story of Esther, we do not find it strange if we are reading and examining this particular portion of God's word in the light of the whole of the teaching of Scripture for we find that the people of God often face difficulties and persecutions. It was not for nothing that we read together from the Gospel of Christ by Mark in which Jesus even at the very point which he is bringing forth the multiple blessings of the

Gospel, will also point his hearers to the fact that with those blessings will come persecutions. Well, that is the context in which I would set this third chapter of Esther as we see the story unfolding and the particular hatred which Haman has towards God's people.

We read together from 1 Samuel 15 and we see how God has appointed a day of judgment for the Amalekites and the king of the Amalekites is one Agag whom Saul has not put to death as he was commanded to do and such was the seriousness of the offense before God that Saul has the kingdom removed from him. "It is better to obey than to give sacrifices." There was a presumption in the heart of Saul that he knew better, "I thought it would be better to offer these herds in sacrifice than to do what God had called me to do." How many times, perhaps unthinkingly, do we fall into the selfsame trap that though the word of God seems utterly clear to us, we have a better idea than God and we presume to make decisions which it is not our authority to take? We make those decisions without reflecting upon what God would have us do.

It's at this point, then, in the story that Haman makes his appearance. The fact that he is an Agagite, in other words, he is a direct descendent of the king of the Amalekites is not coincidental. He is the enemy of God's people; going back generations, his people have been the enemy of God's people. Mordecai has not sought out this difficulty. The difficulties which he is facing have been brought upon him by the ungodly actions of someone else. We have here presented before us someone who stands as representative of the enemy of God's people and he is determined to work ill towards Mordecai personally but has extended that to the whole of God's people.

Well, what we make of Haman as he is presented to us upon the pages of Scripture, well, in the New Testament we're told that we will recognize an individual by his fruits. Well, what of the fruits that we see coming from Haman? His success has gone to his head. He wants others to recognize the position that he holds, not merely in terms of the respect due to someone who holds high office, such respect is legitimate and appropriate. If we were in the presence of our President, we should rightly give him the respect to which his office entitles him, whatever our particular view of his politics or of his decisions. That is not the point. We are called upon by the word of God to, in New Testament terms, honor the king to which we would translate it honor the President.

So Haman, being effectively Prime Minister to King Ahasuerus is entitled to respect but he goes beyond the legitimate respect due to his office and wants those who are around him basically to bow down and worship him. Herodotus apparently, so I am told, puts forth the idea that Ahasuerus, he calls him Xerxes, that his Prime Minister, Haman, created a silver statue to which he expected others to worship. I think I said Herodotus, it wasn't Herodotus, it was one of the rabbis said that but it is without scriptural foundation so I wouldn't necessarily put too much trust in that. But it's an indication that Haman wanted to be worshiped rather than just respected. He wanted to receive an almost godlike status in the community.

There is a poem on which I was compelled to study at school and, boys and girls, if you find yourself in an English literature class and being compelled to do a particular poem, well, you have my sympathy. I had that when I was a youth as well. But who knows what benefit it may accrue to you in later years. Well, "Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" has a couple of lines but he talks about, he reflects upon those who are buried there,

"Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood."

Well, what is he saying? Here is somebody who lived and died in obscurity and according to Gray, though I would question his historicity, Cromwell was guilty of his country's blood. Well, better to live and die in obscurity than to rise to a place of prominence and abuse that authority. Better for Haman never to have lived than to have been the enemy of God's people.

Now, I want to pause there and just reflect upon that for a moment. What's happening with Haman? Was Haman corrupted by his office? Whether perhaps we might take that reading from what we have but is it not also the case that what happens is the sins to which we are prone find an expression through the offices that we hold. In other words, the Haman that we're seeing is not suddenly and radically changed because he becomes Prime Minister. He was really like that all along. It's just that he didn't have the opportunity to hatch out his evil plans against the people of God but now he was in a position of power. Now he could do what was in his heart to do. Perhaps we should at times stop and bless the Lord that he has not given us what our hearts desire. Perhaps if God had entrusted to us that great wealth which we after the flesh do so eagerly desire, perhaps if God had given us that success in our business or in the field of sport or whatever else, perhaps that achievement would have been our own undoing. Better for Haman to have remained a lower-level administrator in the court of King Ahasuerus than to have risen to a place of prominence where all the corruptions of his heart are able to give vent. Our prayer should be, "Lord, give me what I can handle and if I cannot handle great wealth or success, withhold it from me. I'd rather be Mordecai walking about at the entrance gate than Haman on his raised up throne. I'd rather have the benediction of my God in a lowly office than the acclaim of men and those who so foolishly are willing to give me that godlike obeisance which Haman desired."

What we see in Haman then is a man who has grown proud and his vanity has been offended and lest we think that this is a story so that we can point the finger at Haman, our question in our own mind as we read of those who have fallen into sin is: Lord, am I guilty, at least in some measure, of exactly the same sins that I see so clearly depicted upon the pages of Scripture? Haman was offended because he was not getting his own way. "Who is this Mordecai to resist my will?" He had an inflated opinion of himself. And just in case you think that you're not capable of such pride, has it not been your experience even as a school child that in listening to some lesson, your automatic conclusion is that the teacher has got something wrong? The teacher may have been teaching that course for 20 or 30 years, that teacher may be old enough to be your

grandmother but you're convinced in your own mind that the teacher has got it wrong and your first inclination is to say, "Teacher, you've got it wrong." What is that but pride? You're just being introduced to a subject and yet you know better than your teacher. You see, even children are not immune to that. None of us is immune to that and what we see in Mordecai is the same temptation that is just exaggerated by his office.

Well, that wounded pride gives rise to a malice which is all but unparalleled in the ancient world. Really, we have to think of the last century before we see anything committed or proposed on this same kind of scale. Ahasuerus was the provider of the ultimate solution, the final solution for the Jews thousands of years before the Nazi party put into effect their pogrom. A malice not only against Mordecai but against his people. That's where our text really is the key to understanding what really is going on in this chapter: for he has said to them that he was a Jew. The Scriptures are often, almost always, very economical with what they set before us. You can draw out from the verse the sort of conversation that as Mordecai passes by, Mordecai refuses to bow but there are those who say, "Mordecai, why are you not doing what everybody else is doing?" "Well, I'm a Jew. We don't do that thing. I'm a Jew. I worship the one true and living God and I worship him alone. I can't worship Haman. I can't pretend that he has godlike status. I am a Jew."

Now, if you were following closely in Scripture you, of course you see that Haman did not know about that directly. It was brought to his attention. There are echoes there of the story of Daniel where we see Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refuse to bow down and worship the statue of Nebuchadnezzar. Does Nebuchadnezzar know that of himself? No, there were those who made sure that Nebuchadnezzar got to hear that. When Daniel refused to pray, was that known to the king? No, others made sure that the king got to hear about it. In other words, there are always those who are willing to be the intermediary to cause trouble, as it were, and to go to others and say, "Do you know what Mordecai is doing?" Mordecai did not go looking for trouble but trouble found him anyway.

But there's one further thing that we see in Haman, we see that he's an exceedingly superstitious man. He casts lots. He does it day after day, month after month, a full 12 months goes by in order that he should wait the auspicious day. In other words, he's reading the horoscope page of the Susa Gazette to find out when the best day is for hatching out his plot. For each of those days, Haman through his lower level individuals, is harassing Mordecai day after day. "Why aren't you doing this, Mordecai? Why aren't you doing this, Mordecai? Why aren't you doing this, Mordecai?" Day after day.

So we have the picture set before us of Haman, a man whose office has gone to his head; and man who is filled with pride; a man who is filled with malice; a man who is simply described in Scripture as the enemy of the Jews. It's against Haman that Mordecai is contrasted. Sure, respect is one thing but worshiping Haman is something totally other. Now, as we contemplate Mordecai, I would lay before you the amazing simplicity of Christian conduct. The amazing simplicity of Christian conduct. But when we think of someone being placed in this sort of a position, how are they to respond? Well, after the

flesh, there are sort of things that a man might think about. He might weight up, for instance, the relative merits of one position over against another. Or he might weigh up the consequences: what's the harm that might be involved in this or that. Or he might be looking for some excuse, an excuse either to go against his own conscience or an excuse that he might present to those who are confronting him. You see how complicated it can get if we are looking for all the different factors and weighing one off against the other. How do you weigh possibility A against possibility B? What is the relative merit of that and how do you weigh one off against the other? What about those things that are on the negative side? How negative is the negative? What excuses can I make to get out of doing something which is uncomfortable for me? Or what excuses can I make to myself in order that I can yield to it and do so in such a way that I can at least to hope to get some sleep at night?

In contrast to that, there is just this amazing simplicity for the Christian. He doesn't have to weigh up the relative authority of King Ahasuerus as opposed to Prime Minister Haman. There is only one question, really that is ultimately important for Mordecai and it is this: what would God have me do? That cuts through a lot of the argumentation. It cuts through a lot of the difficulty. We don't have to weigh up what is more important for the kingdom, for King Ahasuerus or for Haman. But the heart of what Mordecai is saying is this confession, "You asked me why I am not doing what you are requiring of me, it's quite simple, I am a Jew. I am part of the family of God." We would surely in our better moments the same decision. "How do I deal with that difficult entangled web at work when there are so many different and conflicting possibilities that are laid before me? If I say this, then this person is going to be offended. If I say that, then somebody else is going to be offended. If I go this way, then this will have this consequence." And the way in which it is resolved is remarkably simple: what would God have me do? Let the consequences fall out as they may but my conscience is clear before God. I did what God would have me do. Why? Because obedience is better than sacrifice. That was what Saul got wrong. When Saul thought he had a better solution than God, when he was presumptuous, the kingdom was taken away from him. How much simpler if he had just asked himself the question: what would God have me do? In amongst your family and friends, your place of work or wherever tensions might arise, what is it that you should do in that complex series of competing tensions? "I'm a Christian. I will do what God requires of me."

Hebrews 12:14 does say that we should strive for peace with everyone. Mordecai didn't make it the issue, that issue was made an issue for him. Problems can find us out even when we are living peaceable lives and others will make it their business to make sure that those who can cause us grief will get to hear about it.

Well, here's the allegation, "their laws are different," verse 8, "they do not keep the king's laws." These Jews are different. "These Christians are not conforming to society. You ask them what they believe about this or that and you'll find that they are guilty of hate speech for doing something or saying something which is contrary to the received wisdom." We celebrate and rightly so, the liberties which we have in this nation. We give thanks to God for those liberties but what man can bestow, man can take away. Perhaps if

we do not ourselves see it, our children or our grandchildren will see a day when the liberties are curtailed for the sake of some perceived greater good. Do you really think that that is utterly impossible? "Their laws are different. They do not keep the nation's laws. It is not to the President's profit to tolerate them."

Of course, on the other side of the equation, we do have someone like Haman who is willing to give an inordinate sum of money, 10,000 talents. Well, that doesn't mean much to us but if I said 375 tons of silver, then you get an inkling as to how much he was willing to give the king. Well, due to the wonders of the internet, I looked it up on the internet and how much is 375 tons of silver worth? It's about give or take a million or so. \$200 million. No wonder King Ahasuerus was tempted by it. Don't be put off by him saying, "the money is with you." He's not handing it back. This is just sort of a Middle East construction by way in which to say, "Give me the money."

Think about Abraham and Ephron when Sarah died. Here are a couple of verses from Genesis 23. They are talking about where Abraham might bury Sarah. "My lord, listen to me," says Ephron, "a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead. Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver." What's going on in that conversation? Well, you don't come out in your conversation, "How much for the field?" "That will be 400 shekels of silver. Just give me the money and we'll sign the deed." No, no, the Middle Eastern approach, "What is 400?" Well, he's just told you how much he wants for the field. So Abraham measures it. The same sort of Middle Eastern politeness is going on here between Haman and King Ahasuerus. Herodotus does tell us that King Xerxes was very fond of money. He was very avaricious. The possibility of him handing back \$200 million is slim to none. No, the people of God are distinctive and clearly identifiable in the Persian Empire.

Well, that's the spirit that is set before us. As opposed to just listening to a story which took place long ago and see some parallels there, how are we to improve, as it were, on our understanding and get greater gain? This is more than just an illustration of a not uncommon problem. It's more than just talking about a person who finds himself in the same sort of circumstances as perhaps you and I have found ourselves at times, not to the same extent but this is an edge of the same wedge. This is no accident. Why? "If the world hates you," says Jesus, "know that it has hated me before it hated you." And as we read together from Mark 10, if we follow Jesus we "will receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions."

There are 5 references in the Gospels to those who wanted to destroy Jesus and we find that same theme picked up here in Esther 3, a desire to destroy God's people. But with Jesus, there wasn't some character flaw. There wasn't a character flaw that is being pointed out in Mordecai. The answer may be that as we have experienced persecution ourselves at times, we say, "Well, I can understand why somebody takes against me. After all, I'm far from being perfect and I've annoyed them and they have a right to be annoyed back so I understand why folk take against me." But not with Jesus. There was

no character flaw in him but that didn't stop people from hating him and wanting to destroy him.

We see clearly that the Jews are different. That's the charge that is laid against them: they are not like the other nations. "This is one particular nation that is not like your other nations that you have conquered, O King Ahasuerus." These Christians are not like other people. They are different. We should be different. We are called to be set apart from the world, to be consecrated to God and to be apart from the world. There is a word that Scripture uses for that, it's being holy, but so often we want to be like the world and that's a problem, isn't it? Well, why did the children of Israel come to Samuel and say that they wanted a king? We don't have to guess, it's laid before us in Scripture, "Give us a king so that we can be like other nations. We want to be just like the world. We want to be able to fit in with the world so that we do not appear to them to be any different." And as we examine our own hearts, we recognize that that is a temptation. How tempting it would be for Mordecai to do what everybody else was doing and fit in but he takes the harder route, "I am a Jew. I can't do that."

You want to fit in as well, don't you? You want to fit in with your family who are unbelievers and not seen to be too strange in their view. You don't delight in being odd. Perhaps at your college or your place of work and you're surrounded or at least have in your circle of fellow students or fellow laborers those who are not professing any faith, you want to fit in with them. You don't want to be thought of as different or strange. You don't want to be picked on for being a Christian. You want to lead that quiet life but our calling as Christians is to be more and more like Christ and that means we are destined not to fit in. Now, when those in our place of work, the ungodly, want to lead us astray, we have to say, "I am a Christian," and though we may not voice it to them, we recognize that there has been enmity between the world and God's people even from before our first parents were ejected from the garden of Eden and that has not changed. The temptation may come even from fellow believers who themselves want to fit in with the world. Is it not distressing at times to see that which passes for worship to be so close to being just pure entertainment? The desire is there. We say it not to point the finger because, truth be told, we always want to fit in, to strive for peace with everyone, forgetting how that selfsame verse concludes, "and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord," striving for holiness.

Well, if we see our own weaknesses in Haman, even though we desire to see the strengths of Mordecai, if we see in our fellow believers the temptation too often yielded to, then we should also look at ourselves and be thankful for the one who was completely consecrated to God and set apart from the world, and recognize that it was no flaw character on his part that led to the enmity of those who sought repeatedly to destroy him and that our confidence this day and every day is that because he has lived the holy life entirely consecrated to God and apart from the world, that we have the hope of eternal life. We are weak and weary and if you and I had been in the place of Mordecai, would have felt the temptation, many of us, perhaps even all of us, would have succumbed and certainly would have done aside from the grace of God. Perhaps we are able to say that faced with far less, we have succumbed already but our confidence this morning is in the

Lord Jesus Christ who loved his Father perfectly for us as well as himself. When he tells us that we should love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, strength and mind and our neighbor as ourselves, we are assured that he has done that which he has commanded and for all our failures, our great Redeemer has succeeded.

Let's pray together.

Our gracious God and our heavenly Father, we do thank thee for this portion of thy word from the book of Esther. We see the temptations; we see the wickedness which is native to man's heart. We see all those things which would even tempt us to despair but we do not despair because Christ is our perfect Redeemer. We confess at times that we have not proved as resolute as Mordecai, that when challenged we have succumbed rather than saying simply, "I cannot do this for I am a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ." Forgive us, O God, when we have failed. Forgive us for the sake of thy dear Son who has succeeded in every respect, that his righteousness, his keeping of every commandment is applied to us even as we would lay upon him at the cross our every sin and failure. So bless thy word to our hearts and these things we would ask in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.