

PENTECOST 8 - JULY 19, 2026

Esther 3:1-15

We need to summarize what happened in the first two chapters of the book of Esther which we began a couple of weeks ago. If you don't remember, the book opens with a portrait of a foolish and hedonistic king of Persia, Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes), who throws a party that lasts six months. Now that's a long party! When his queen, Vashti, refuses to parade herself before his drunken guests, this foolish and impulsive king is persuaded by his officials to banish her and do an empire-wide search for a new queen.

Xerxes ordered a beauty pageant to select a new queen. Many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa. Esther, a beautiful Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai, was chosen, but Mordecai advises Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity. God's plan: put Esther in the important position of queen, making her available when the Jews were in danger as they were subject to many invasions and foreign rule.

Esther's true importance was not her great beauty. Cruel and unjust people can also be attractive. Her value to Both God and the Jewish population was her bravery in face of brutality and death. Esther became Ahasuerus' (Xerxes') most important wife, above lesser wives and concubines. In honour of the new queen, a banquet was proclaimed, lasting an entire month.

The king's gate, located in the eastern wall, was the main entrance to the upper city. Rooms were built into the wall on either side of the gate, and could be used for meetings or to house the troops. Many of the king's administrators also lived in the king's gate.

The gate was a place to conduct business and legal proceedings. Mordecai may have held a position of authority in the king's service, at the gate. While sitting at the gate, he overheard two of the officers planning to assassinate the king. Mordecai reported the plot to Queen Esther. She told the king, letting him know the information came from Mordecai, without letting the king know he was her cousin or that he was Jewish. Upon investigating the story, the king found it to be true. The officials were executed. This event will become important later in the story.

Enter Haman, the real villain of the story. The king honoured Haman, elevating him higher than other nobles. He became the king's right-hand man. Haman was an Amelekite, a nomadic people descended from Esau and enemies of the Jewish descendants of Isaac. Unwisely, the king appointed Haman as the second-in-command. In Persian society, kneeling, bowing and prostration were common ways for people of lower ranks to show respect to their superiors. The Jewish Mordecai, being loyal to God, refused to pay homage to a pagan Amelekite.

Haman was ready to fight anyone he thought was not exhibiting proper

respect. Jews bowed down before God, not men or idols. What seems like foolishness and disregard for his own safety was really a demonstration of his faith in God, the final authority in all things. He worshipped God and God alone. Mordecai was God's servant and did what was right, even though his actions endangered his life. The servants were concerned for Mordecai's safety. They tried to persuade him to obey, but he refused.

Haman had not noticed Mordecai's refusal until he was told. Jews were forbidden to give divine honour to a human being. For Haman, this was not a good excuse to be dishonoured. The genocidal Haman was filled with prejudice and bigotry against the Jews in general, and Mordecai in particular.

Haman transferred his hatred of Mordecai to all Jewish people. Angered because Mordecai refused to bow down to him, Haman determined to annihilate all the Jews. This was a bitter long-standing blood feud between the Jews and Amalekites that began during the Exodus from Egypt and continued for many centuries. Haman was an Amalekite.

Both the Law Code of Hammurabi and scripture taught the concept of proportional retribution. The punishment had to be equal to the crime. Haman's plan to murder all the Israelites because one Jew had offended him was obviously disproportionate.

Haman was the first person recorded in the Bible to plan the genocide of all the Jews in the Kingdom. Haman planned the attack to take place in eleven months, enough time for Mordecai to contact Esther who would make her plea to the king for the lives of the condemned Jews.

Haman told the king that the Jews did not blend in with other Persian captors. They kept separateness and refused to allow their faith and culture to be diluted by foreign gods and idols. Devout Jews avoided anything non-Jewish. This helped them to survive no matter where they were. Haman was cunning and malevolent. His goal was to convince the king that the Jewish people were disloyal. The king was selfish and felt everything and everyone existed for his benefit and pleasure, just like the incident with Queen Vashti. Haman said the Jews' insubordination was a major problem. The king would do anything for compliance or obedience to the laws or customs.

Haman offered the king a bribe and persuaded the king to sign a decree to execute all the Jews. Xerxes gave Haman his signet ring and told him to keep the money. Haman could use the ring as an act of trust and friendship. It gave Haman limitless power and vast authority, transferring power from the king to Haman.

On the eve of Passover, Xerxes, under the influence of Haman, issued an empire-wide command to kill all the Jewish men, women and children any way they chose. They could steal the properties of the dead Jews as

a reward. The people of Susa, pagan and Jews alike, were astounded by the proclamation. Many had Jewish friends, family members, and associates. They were horrified at the planned genocide. Most were loyal to the Jews and opposed to Haman.

Without fully understanding Haman's motives, the king gave him authority to issue the decree. This decision placed the Jewish people in immediate danger throughout the empire. This reminds leaders that they should seek wisdom before making important decisions.

As Esther learns of the decree, her journey from passive observer to active participant begins, hinting at the transformative power of courage and agency in the face of systemic oppression.

Haman's edict was sent to all parts of the kingdom. Persians who intermarried and had children were also in danger. The Jews were still under bondage so they could not leave without permission from the king.

This story exposes the vulnerability of minority groups facing powerful individuals and the potential for their persecution. Throughout history, minority groups have faced bigotry, hatred, vulnerability, discrimination, not just long ago, but also in recent history. We remember the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda, in Gaza, our own Indigenous populations, the Roma or gypsies, and many more horrible events.

Growing up in the diverse city of Toronto, we heard many slanderous names for various immigrant groups on the school playground and the neighbourhood. We had Waps, Pakees, Krauts, Yips, communists, and numerous other derogatory names or comments. There was hatred for black people, Irish people, and other ethnic groups.

This mistrust, and even hatred, wasn't just about name-calling. It played out in the school yards. Many of the ethnic groups hated each other. So the hatred wasn't just between native Canadians and the others. There was plenty of it within the ethnic population itself. Antisemitism also existed. When university students weren't accepted into a certain university, it was because the Jews got all the spots. There were two markets in Toronto at the time: Kensington, with primarily Jewish vendors, and St. Lawrence, with non-Jewish vendors. These markets were often referred to as the Jewish market, or the Christian market. Where would you want to shop?

Things started to change probably under Pierre Trudeau and his push of multiculturalism. Back sometime in the 1960's, I was part of a multicultural committee that started a week-long event called "Caravan," which lasted for a number of years. Every ethnic group was invited to join. The event was to highlight the culture of each group. Based in either community halls or churches, the event allowed each group to display their traditional foods, music, singers and dancers.

Tickets (“passports”) were sold, which allowed people to visit each location and ethnic group all week, taste their food, and enjoy the entertainment. This culminated in Expo 67, where the Ontario pavilion highlighted its support of ethnic Ontarians by showing the music and dancing in performances of the various ethnic groups. This definitely diluted the hatred, mistrust, and suspicion of our ethnic neighbours.

Recently we have seen this hatred exploited in the U.S., which doesn’t believe in diversity, as thousands of immigrants, refugees, migrants and others have been deported (not even to their own countries) or jailed and families separated. Children were picked up from schools and taken away. They have been described in many derogatory terms such as murderers, criminals, and rapists.

The events in the book of Esther, lay the groundwork for the epic struggle between good and evil, serving as a reminder of the fragile balance between power and morality in any society. Think of the powers and control exhibited by dictatorships around the world: Russia, China, North Korea, Congo, Venezuela, Cuba, and, now, even the U.S.

We are reminded that positions of authority reveal a person’s character. True leadership should reflect humility and dependence upon God, rather than selfish ambition. We are encouraged to remain faithful to God even when obedience makes us unpopular.

We are reminded that unchecked anger can quickly lead to sinful actions. A humble heart seeks God's wisdom rather than allowing resentment to take control. We can see the anger in the American president, the Israeli leaders, the Iranian leaders, and Russian leaders, where anger has led to sinful or immoral actions and wars. That sin often grows when it is left unchecked. Pride, hatred, and revenge never remain small but continue to spread destructive consequences.

We are called to trust God's sovereignty. What appears random from a human perspective always remains under God's perfect authority. God reminds us to pursue honesty and integrity. Deception may achieve temporary success, but truth ultimately prevails. Many people thrive on deception. It wasn't that long ago that Sudanese immigrants were accused of killing and eating family pets. There are many stories of deception in search of control and power. We are reminded that sinful decisions often bring suffering to others. God calls His people to seek justice, compassion, and wisdom in every circumstance.

What have we learned from Xerxes and Haman?

1. Pride can lead to devastating consequences

Haman's promotion should have produced gratitude, but instead it fuelled his pride. When Mordecai refused to bow, his wounded ego quickly developed into hatred and revenge.

Pride often causes people to elevate themselves while despising others. Left unchecked, it can lead to destructive choices that affect countless lives. We can apply this lesson by cultivating humility and remembering that every blessing comes from God rather than personal achievement. We are encouraged to guard our hearts against pride before it grows into greater sin.

2. Faithfulness sometimes requires standing alone

Mordecai refused to bow even though everyone else obeyed the king's command. His conviction was rooted in faithfulness rather than public opinion. Obeying God is not always easy, especially when it brings criticism or opposition. Yet faithful obedience honours Him regardless of the outcome.

My grandfather was an example of obedience to God and courage. Living under a communist regime meant that bibles and religious symbols were forbidden. Homes were regularly checked for obedience. But, my grandfather refused to remove his Bible, crosses and other religious symbols, even it meant that his life would be in danger. His neighbours warned him that they were out to get him. So he packed his family and escaped.

We can apply this truth by remaining committed to biblical convictions even when we face pressure to compromise, encouraging us to value

God's approval above human acceptance.

3. God remains sovereign during times of crisis

Although our reading ends with the Jewish people facing great danger, God's providence had not disappeared. He was already preparing the events that would bring deliverance. Difficult circumstances never mean that God has abandoned His people.

God's plans continue unfolding even when they cannot yet be seen. We should seek God's wisdom during seasons of uncertainty and refuse to lose hope, remembering that God is always in control.

4. Hatred destroys both individuals and communities

Haman allowed bitterness toward one man to become hatred against an entire nation. His sinful attitude produced fear, injustice, and suffering for countless innocent people. Hatred blinds judgment and leads people away from God's righteousness. Love, forgiveness, and humility reflect God's character instead. We should be forgiving others quickly and refusing to allow resentment to grow, as we pursue peace and reconciliation whenever possible.

5. Wise decisions require discernment

King Ahasuerus accepted Haman's proposal without fully investigating the facts. His lack of discernment contributed to a dangerous decree affecting the entire empire. God values wisdom and careful judgment, especially when decisions influence the lives of others. Discernment protects against unnecessary harm. We should seek God's guidance, examining the facts carefully, and making decisions prayerfully, relying upon God's wisdom instead of acting hastily.

This is great advice for all leaders at every level: national, municipal and even churches. God challenges us to be humble, just and act with wisdom. Above all, we need to prayerfully trust God with our whole hearts and lives.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O God of our Hearts, You yearn to be so close to us that we can know you in every breath, in every hope, in every relationship. Meet us here today and teach us to recognize the covenant of justice, peace and love you have written on our hearts. So may our desires become your desires, our work become your work, and our community the place where you are sought and found. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**