

Let It Be Decreed That They Be Destroyed
Esther 2:19-3:15
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CenterPoint Church

Read Esther 2:19-3:15

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4b)

Introduction

Tom Hanks is easily one of the most accomplished and famous actors in all of Hollywood. He won back-to-back Oscars in the 90s for his roles in *Forrest Gump* and *Philadelphia*, and has been acting in hit movies since the eighties. He has had success in comedies, dramas, war movies, Christmas movies, biopics, and just about every genre of movie as an actor, not to mention his successes as a producer. It might surprise you to know that he still feels like he does not have the qualifications to be where he is. He wonders if he will be discovered as a fraud, which must be mind-blowing to every other actor out there.

Tina Fey has had an amazing career as an actress, writer, show runner, and producer. Yet she, like Tom Hanks, also struggles with what's called "imposter syndrome." Even though she has achieved great success in Hollywood, she admits that she fluctuates between feeling good about her career and feeling like a fraud. She has said that "it feels like it takes one second to go from complete egomania to total self-doubt."¹

Kylie Minogue, who has been making music and winning awards since the late eighties, "admitted... that she's not good at dealing with criticism. The singer values what her fans have to say and will keep making music as long as they want her to, but she doesn't like reading negative critiques in the press. She stated, 'it cuts like a knife if I read a bad review.'"²

These highly accomplished entertainers remind us that no matter how famous you are, no matter how much you've accomplished and been rewarded by your peers and your fans, you are always prone to self-doubt and insecurity. We'd all like to think that there is a level of success where you become immune to criticism and become completely confident, but I think that deep down we're all fragile and easily wounded. We all know the truth that you can hear dozens of people praising you, but it just takes one person ripping you with criticism to bring you down. And that's what we find as we come to our text in Esther. One man was so highly favored and praised in the kingdom where he served in the second-highest seat of government, but all it took was one person's disrespect to destroy his ego. He couldn't handle it, he had to have praise and honor from every citizen that he was over. And when that didn't happen, he became murderously angry.

Before that happens, though, let's read the last five verses of chapter 2 to see

I. A Threat to the King's Life (2:19-23)

¹⁹ Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. ²⁰ Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. ²¹ In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold,

¹ <https://www.thethings.com/x-celebrities-that-struggle-with-imposter-syndrome/>

² <https://www.girlstalkinsmack.com/8-celebrities-cant-handle-criticism/>

became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ²² And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. ²³ When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

We may be tempted to think that the phrase “*Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate*” means that he was either begging or loitering there. But the king’s gate does not refer to a fenced area, it was actually a large building at the entrance of the palace where legal matters and commerce were worked out, so Mordecai worked there as a palace administrator.³ He became aware of a plot against the king’s life, he was well-connected and well-informed in his position. So he passed on his information to Esther. If you’ve missed the last two sermons, Esther is his younger cousin that he made his adopted daughter after she was orphaned, and she has become the new queen of Persia. Esther took that information straight to the king, giving Mordecai the proper credit.

Now, no king can allow threats to his life to go unanswered, particularly by two servants who were inside the palace. So Ahasuerus dealt with them swiftly and severely, having them “*hanged on the gallows*” is how the ESV and most other Bible versions translate it. Some commentators insist, though, that the Hebrew is written in a way that indicates that they were impaled on poles not hung with ropes. Either way, their lives were ended in a brutal fashion. We find out in verse 23 that there was somebody in the palace who wrote it all down, keeping a record of the king’s reign. This incident establishes three things, and all three foreshadow what is to come later:

- 1) Mordecai is a man who is committed to saving lives
- 2) Enemies of the king get hanged (or impaled)
- 3) The palace keep records of things that happen

We start the third chapter meeting a new person in the narrative and getting to know his character.

II. A Threat to Haman’s Pride (3:1-6)

¹After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. ²And all the king’s servants who were at the king’s gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. ³Then the king’s servants who were at the king’s gate said to Mordecai, “Why do you transgress the king’s command?” ⁴And when they spoke to him 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. ⁵And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. ⁶But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Where we were expecting Mordecai to be honored by the king because of his reporting the assassination plot, instead we meet the villain of the story, Haman, who got promoted by the king, raised to be his right-hand man. Everyone was expected to bow to him, just like they would the king. But one man who wouldn’t bow down to Haman was Mordecai. Which absolutely infuriated Haman; in chapter 5, Haman will come out and say that he couldn’t enjoy all the prestige and honors that he had as long as he knew Mordecai was out there refusing to bow to him. That’s a pretty fragile ego, wouldn’t you say? The entire kingdom, every single person under him, bowed to him except for one random Jew. Haman’s anger made him not just want to kill Mordecai, but his whole tribe of people, so he set his sights on destroying the Jews.

³ Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence: The Gospel According to Esther* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), p. 58.

That seems like blowing things totally out of proportion, right? One act of disrespect brings Haman to want to murder an entire people group. Thankfully, the writer of Esther has done us a favor in identifying Haman as an Agagite. Now that may totally baffle you as to why that would be important, but if we think back to 1 Samuel 15, we'll find out why this is significant. The prophet Samuel had given King Saul the Lord's instructions to completely destroy the Amalekites and their King Agag. I know that that is very troubling to people that God would have the Israelites wipe out a group of people. We don't have enough time to thoroughly discuss this except to say that God had judged the Amalekites as wicked, and rather than destroying them Himself, He used the Israelites as His hand of judgment. But that's not the important part; the key part is that Saul decided to spare King Agag. Essentially, King Saul only obeyed God partially, and it was part of the reason that God took the throne away from him.

Back to Esther: if you remember Mordecai's introduction from the beginning of chapter 2, we found out that he was a descendant of King Saul. So, essentially because Saul did not obey God completely, the descendant of that wicked king Agag is now ready to murder the descendants of Saul. Mordecai refused to answer the other servants who kept asking him, "What's your deal, why don't you bow to Haman?" He didn't explain himself, so we are left to guess; my best guess is that these two men knew they were cultural enemies, so they became personal enemies as well. So what looks like a massive overreaction to a personal slight is actually Haman deciding that he will solve the Jewish-Amalekite historic conflict once and for all.⁴

The last nine verses record his plan,

III. A Threat to all the Jews (vv. 7-15)

⁷ In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. ⁸ Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. ⁹ If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." ¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you." ¹² Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring.

¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

If you were here two weeks ago for my first sermon on Esther, you'll remember that I talked about the Feast of Purim and the meaning of the word Pur, which is casting lots, the ancient version of

⁴ Christopher Ash, *Teaching Ruth & Esther: From Text to Message* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021), pp. 193-96.

throwing dice. We see it in verse 7: Haman cast Pur to find out which date they should set aside to wipe out all the Jews, and it eventually landed on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. So now he had the date picked, but he couldn't move forward with his evil plans until he got the king on board. He had to manipulate and play on the king's fears in order to convince him to sign the Jews' death warrant. He painted a sinister picture of a people group that was scattered throughout the nation that kept different laws than the Persian ones. He implied that they were dangerous, and it would be better that they be wiped out than be allowed to make trouble for the king. This was partially true of the Jews - they did not immediately assimilate into the cultures they found themselves in, but that did not mean that they were a threat. If anything, the king's life had just been saved by a Jew. But Haman painted them in the worst possible light, saying they were not worth the king's tolerating them. He didn't mention his personal anger with Mordecai nor his people's historic feud with the Jewish people. And then on top of the fear, Haman appealed to the king's greed. He offered to pay 10,000 talents of silver to get this done; that was a massive sum.⁵ Keep in mind that Persia had just lost a war, so I'm sure the king was thinking that he could really use that money. It's unlikely that Haman had that kind of money, but perhaps he assumed that he would be able to take that money from the Jewish homes after they were dead.

There's a saying in coaching attributed to an NFL coach like Bill Parcells or Bill Belichick: "If you're listening to the fans it won't be long before you're sitting with them." It's a reminder that coaches, and really all leaders, need to do what they think is best, even when it's unpopular. You don't show true leadership by following the latest opinion polls or trying to take the path of least resistance/criticism. You lead by listening, learning, thinking, and then forging ahead with what you decide is the best path. King Ahasuerus hadn't really learned the art of leadership. He just waited for someone to hand him an idea that sounded good, no matter how many people it would destroy. He went farther than just saying yes to Haman's plans, he completely handed control of major decisions to him. Handing him his signet ring in verse 10 was giving him a blank check to do whatever he wanted with royal approval attached. You'll notice that Ahasuerus didn't even bother to find out who this group of people was, didn't ask for any evidence they were a threat, he just gave Haman the green light to go ahead and do it.

Keep in mind that neither of them knew that the queen was a Jew and would be a victim of this genocide. The chapter started with Mordecai and Esther working together to save the king's life, but the tables have turned so that the king has promoted someone who was seeking to take their lives. That would be another literary technique called dramatic irony. The chapter closes with the King and Haman sharing a nice bottle of wine while the whole capital city was in an uproar. The ESV says that Susa was "*thrown into confusion*," other translations say "*was bewildered*." But in the palace, it's happy hour.

Hitler and the Nazis took years to grow in their hatred and violence towards the Jews. They started just by making them wear badges identifying themselves as Jews, then they made them move to one area of the city, then they started taking away their businesses, eventually deporting them to concentration camps before trying to completely exterminate them. Here Haman had put together a plan that would wipe out the Jews in one day. That day, the thirteenth day of Adar, happened to also be the day before Passover, so there is deep irony that a celebration of the Jews deliverance from an old enemy, Egypt, would be preempted by their being annihilated by a new enemy.⁶

⁵ Ray Stedman, *For Such a Time as This* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 2010), p. 49.

⁶ Gregory, p. 64.

Conclusion

Thinking about this whole passage: Tim Keller made the observation that “Haman is the most vivid and sustained case study of everything the Bible says about pride and humility, and what happens to people who let pride rage unchecked.”⁷ What does the Bible say? A few verses:

Proverbs 16:19 – “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*”

Proverbs 16:5 – “*Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not go unpunished.*”

Proverbs 29:23 – “*One’s pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.*”

James 4:6 – “*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*”

This proud man who wanted to destroy God’s people had declared war on God Himself. We’ll have to wait and see whether God brought Haman low, punishing him, and causing him to fall.

Pride comes from two opposite motivations, but really two sides to the same coin: *superiority* – where you’re constantly making sure that you’re doing better than everyone around you so you can look down on them and feel better about yourself, and *inferiority* – where you’re down on yourself; you’re still calculating how you’re doing, you’re still keeping score, you just beat yourself up when you don’t succeed. As we saw with Haman, proud people can’t be criticized, there’s too much at risk; even constructive criticism hurts too deeply. Both types of pride have to beat or hurt others to win. Which is what we see with Haman – he had to destroy other people to make himself feel good. Ultimately, pride says that I am my own god, my own judge. I will justify the way that I live and I will save myself. But pride also constantly reminds you that you’re always falling short: you’ll never accumulate enough or accomplish enough to feel worthy; your kids will never reflect well enough on you, your spouse will never be good enough; feeling good about who you are and what you’ve done never lasts, you always need to keep proving yourself.

It’s a good thing that we can look at Haman and boo and jeer at his ridiculously inflated, but easily wounded, ego. It’s a good thing that we’re better than that and never have to worry about thinking about ourselves too much. We’ve all completely internalized Paul’s admonitions in Philippians 2 to “*do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*” When we became Christians, we automatically became humble people who modelled ourselves after Jesus, right? OK, maybe some of you can join me in admitting that we may not have found complete victory in that area. Pride is one of the most subtle sins, but I recognize it all over my life. Maybe you can identify with this quote from Ben Franklin:

“In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride.

Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself... even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.”⁸

A proud Christian should be an oxymoron. A Scottish pastor named Andrew Murray said, “Pride renders faith impossible. Salvation comes through a cross and a crucified Christ in the Spirit of His cross. Salvation is... delight and participation in the humility of Jesus.”⁹ Christians should be the most humble people that you meet. Our understanding of salvation is that God saved us for His own reasons and through His own actions. We call it *unmerited favor* and *undeserved grace* because there is nothing that we do to earn or deserve God’s forgiveness and eternal life. He chose us and saved us completely outside of anything we’ve done to be worthy of that. We are only worthy

⁷ Tim Keller’s podcast “The Man the King Delights to Honor”

⁸ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1959), p. 88.

⁹ Andrew Murray, *Humility* (Springdale, PA: Whitaker, 1982), p. 69.

because of Christ's work on our behalf. That should absolutely humble us. And yet, Tim Keller again: "what happens when you bring a proud person to church? Do they repent and see their folly of their arrogance? Sometimes. But more often when a proud person comes to faith in Jesus, he just becomes a very proud Christian, and starts keeping score in a different way - 'I'm more holy and disciplined than everyone else' ... And then you become a Pharisee."¹⁰

You might have heard this saying, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking about yourself less." It's investing in other people, it's seeking first the kingdom, not my emotional and psychological needs. It's finding joy and identity in Christ, and then having an accurate and sober assessment of yourself so that you're not bragging but you're also not hiding your talents. We should all know the ways that God has gifted us, what we're good at, and seek to develop those things and use them in His kingdom.

The most freeing thing in the world is to admit how messed up, weak, and sinful you are. Coming to a place of brokenness and honesty is where you can then accept the good things that God has for you. That's the place where you can understand what Jesus did on your behalf. Jesus left His throne in heaven to become a human being in the ultimate act of humility. He suffered every kind of insult and indignity while He was on this earth. He could have been like Haman, looking to strike back at those who disrespected and hurt Him. But instead, He allowed Himself to be put to death in the most humiliating and painful form of execution, crucifixion, because of His love for His people. He gave Himself up for proud, self-centered people like you and me, so that we would become new creations, righteous in God's sight, destined for eternal life. May we rejoice in our unworthiness and thank Him that He has made us worthy, Amen.

Benediction

Psalm 121:7-8 - *"The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."*

¹⁰ Keller.