

A Feast for Evil

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[0 : 0 0] So last week we noted that feasts appear throughout Esther. We're now into episode two of the story this afternoon, and it is the darkest part of the narrative.

It ends with the king and Haman drinking, toasting Haman's planned genocide of God's people. It is a feast for evil, a moment where it seems that darkness reigns.

I've been rereading Lord of the Rings over the past few months, and there's a really chilling moment in the third book when the Lord of the Nazgul, the Dark Lord's chief commander, walks through the broken gates of a city and confronts Gandalf the wizard.

Old fool, he says, this is my hour. Do you not know death when you see it? Die now and curse in vain. It's a really dark moment, and it reminds me of this episode in Esther, a moment where all hope has faded and evil prepares to feast on its prey, the hour of darkness.

And Jesus himself said something really similar whenever he was arrested. This is your hour when darkness reigns. Now we said last week that the question that Esther poses is, is God still there?

[1 : 2 4] And that's why we've titled our series, Is God Still There? And at no point in the Christian's life will this question seem more relevant and critical than the times when darkness reigns and the enemy's hour has come.

Is God still there in the feast for evil? We have two points, the invisible heroes and the visible villain. It's dark and it's a heavy part of the story, so I hope you bear with it.

In darkness we're revealed and our allegiances are laid bare. Now this section of Esther forces us to confront the reality of the darkness and the presence of the enemy.

So let's dive into our first point, the invisible heroes. This episode doesn't begin with the enemy, he comes later. It actually picks up where we left off with our heroes, Esther and Mordecai.

Not all heroes wear capes, but they do often have secret identities. We saw last week that Esther, and presumably Mordecai, had been hiding their identity. Mordecai demanded that Esther keep her Jewishness hidden.

[2 : 3 3] This is repeated here in chapter 2, verse 20. Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do.

This is quite important to recognize. Our author is repeating that Esther kept her identity as one of God's people, a closely guarded secret. And at Mordecai's insistence no less.

And given how Mordecai reacts to Haman in the next chapter, literally verses on from this, it's really interesting that the author emphasizes the fact that Mordecai made Esther hide her Jewishness.

For the moment, although Esther belongs to God's people, this fact is hidden. The core of her identity and who she is, is for the moment, invisible.

Now it's in the section that we learn a bit more about Mordecai. In verse 19, we're told that when the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.

[3 : 34] No one's super sure what the second assembly of the virgins was, but when it happened, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. And this isn't our writer telling us where Mordecai liked to sit whenever the king's harem were on display.

Not at all. Well, rather, to sit at the king's gate was a way of saying that you were involved in the planning and the running of the kingdom. Mordecai is, in effect, a civil servant in the Persian Empire.

And while he's working, he comes across a nugget of crucial information. Two of the guards in the palace are plotting to kill King Xerxes. Interestingly, long after the story of Esther, Xerxes would be killed in a successful assassination attempt.

But this one is foiled because Mordecai tells Esther, who's then able to tell the king. And the result is in verse 23. When the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles.

All this was recorded in the book of the Annals in the presence of the king. Now, the Persians were historically really concerned about rewarding people who performed deeds or services that were quite worthy of recognition.

[4 : 45] So, as readers, what we would expect is that Mordecai would receive some kind of reward. But he doesn't. The next chapter should begin with Mordecai being recognized and honored.

Instead, it begins with a new character, Haman, being honored. After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman, son of Hamadatha the Agigite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.

Mordecai saved the king, but his discovery's been largely forgotten. Now, my surname, Trimble, apparently comes from the Scottish surname Turnbull. And the Turnbull clan motto is, I save the king, which is quite cool.

As the story goes, one of Robert the Bruce's soldiers saved the Bruce from a charging bull, grabbed it by the horns, and literally turned it away. Hence the name, Turnbull. So he was rewarded with a new name and with lands, all because he saved the king.

By contrast, Mordecai gets nothing. His recognition is, for now, literally consigned to the history books. And the author of Esther wants us to feel the shock of Haman's rise to power, when we would expect Mordecai to be receiving some kind of honor or adulation.

[6 : 07] And to be God's people, in the world but not of the world, means that we won't often be honored for what we do. To be God's people means that very often the self-serving and the ambitious receive glory and honor and praise from their peers.

Those who look out for number one will be the ones who receive the promotion and the reward. The world doesn't always work the way it should. Kindness and goodness do not always go rewarded or recognized.

The world, more often than not, looks after its own. The Haman's, the Xerxes. The prophet Jeremiah, writing not long before the events of this book, asked God, Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why do all the faithless live at ease? And being a Christian means that we have to live in this world where wickedness does prosper. For a time. And step one to understanding that this is not evidence of God's absence is recognizing that God is still in control.

As the story of Esther is going to show us, the fact that Mordecai's deeds were forgotten actually had a purpose in God's plan. To save his people from genocide. God is still there.

[7 : 23] Now the genocide of God's people is of course Haman's big plan. And this brings us to our second and larger point. If our heroes are invisible in the world, well our villain is really very visible.

Every story needs a villain. And Haman is pretty much as villainous as they come. His villainy and desire to destroy the Jews in Persia seems to stem from Mordecai's stubborn refusal to bow down to him.

If we're going to understand what our author is telling us in this episode, we're going to need to understand why Mordecai takes so much offense at this idea of bowing before Haman. When Mordecai was introduced back in chapter 2 verse 5, he was described like this.

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai, the son of Jer, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish. Now we get Haman in chapter 3 verse 1.

He's described like this. Haman, son of Hamadatha, the Agagite. Now I don't know how well you know your family history. Obviously I've got that quite fun Turnbull story. In the Bible, family history can be often quite important.

[8 : 36] If we were going to take Mordecai and Haman onto an episode of Who Do You Think You Are, we'd discover that Mordecai's family and Haman's family have a shared history.

This is why our author is telling us details about their family tree. He's showing us that Mordecai and Haman are locked into a conflict that has in fact been going on for generations.

Haman was an Agagite. Agag was the king of the Amalekites. And the Amalekites had the not terribly good distinction of being the first group to try and destroy God's people after they had escaped from slavery in Egypt.

And we're told in Exodus 17 that the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation. Fast forward a little bit in the Bible story and we get the reign of Saul, the very first king of Israel.

He was from the tribe of Benjamin, like Mordecai. His father was named Kish, like Mordecai's grandfather. See, our writer's trying to get us to see those parallels.

[9 : 43] King Saul was at war with the Amalekites and failed to destroy and kill their king Agag. And for failing to obey God in this, he in the end lost his throne.

So what are writers telling us is that this is not a new conflict. Mordecai doesn't bow because Haman is an Agagite. Now, we could discuss the rights and wrongs of Mordecai's response.

Interestingly, the writer doesn't comment on whether Haman was right not to bow. What he is trying to show is that this is not a new conflict. It is, in fact, the continuation of a very old one.

However, what's really interesting is that up until now, Mordecai has been making a really big deal of Esther keeping her identity a secret. Now, look at verse 3. Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, Why did you disobey the king's command?

Day after day, they spoke to him, but he refused to comply. Therefore, they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated. For he had told them he was a Jew.

[10 : 49] Mordecai, who has been really harping on at Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity, makes his Jewishness very clear to the other royal officials. And they tell Haman about his behavior because he is a Jew.

What seems to have happened is that Haman's rise has been the occasion for Mordecai to stand by his Jewish identity. The Agagites were God's enemies.

And although he may have counseled secrecy to Esther, this he cannot give assent to. In the rise of darkness, Mordecai's allegiance to God and his people is very much revealed.

And the result is in verse 5. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai.

Instead, Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes, which would extend even to Jerusalem and Israel.

[11 : 53] In a way, this seems like a vindication of Mordecai's reaction. Haman is evil to the core and is an enemy of God's people.

Nevertheless, Mordecai's allegiance to his Jewish identity has endangered every single Jew in the Persian Empire. The conflict that has been rumbling on through the ages has been set in motion once again.

And what we need to note is that we are actually part of this conflict too. Not only that, but it's still ongoing. Haman's rise is not just the return of the Amalekites.

Behind his rise is a much more ancient enemy. Behind Haman is the enemy, the devil. Now, that might sound a bit dramatic.

But the story of Esther is part of a much bigger story of which we are a part. And in this story, there is one enemy who has been there from the beginning. We first meet him as a serpent in the Garden of Eden, where he tempted Adam and Eve to sin.

[13 : 00] He hates God and he hates humanity. He hates, in particular, those humans who belong to God. And in the Garden, when sin and death entered the world because of the devil's machinations, God promised that he would put enmity between the serpent's seed and Eve's offspring.

He promised a conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of Eve. The seed of Eve are all those who follow God. The seed of the serpent are all those who follow the serpent's way of sin.

And this is the conflict that we are a part of. It's the conflict that Haman and Mordecai were locked in. There are two camps, the serpent and the Savior.

And if we're following Jesus, well, then we're in the camp of the Savior. But we will always, therefore, be a target for the serpent. And so this is why this episode of Esther is essential for us and humanity as a whole today.

It's a reminder of the presence of darkness in the world and the continued efforts of the serpent to destroy God's people in any way he can. He is the invisible villain behind the visible villainy of Haman.

[14 : 18] And he remains the invisible villain until Jesus returns and destroys him and his villainy completely. Perhaps it seems odd to think about these in supernatural terms.

Perhaps you're not sure if you believe in God and this idea of an ancient enemy. It seems a bit strange. Fair enough. It is strange, at least in our culture. But I would also suggest that it makes the most sense of evil in this world.

Every story has a villain. The villain at the root of them all is the serpent. And there's nothing that the serpent wants more than for God's people to be annihilated.

So if you're here or you're tuning in and you wouldn't really call yourself a Christian, I've got to be honest, this is hardly the greatest advertisement for following Jesus, is it? And maybe you would call yourself a Christian.

Well, now you're just wondering why, if there is in fact an enemy who is out for your destruction. But here's the thing. Following Jesus is absolutely worth it.

[15 : 23] And here's why. Although there is a dangerous enemy, that's only half the story. The wonder of being in Christ, unknown by the God who created the universe, is the other half which makes it all worth it.

And is the very reason that we face an enemy whose very foundation is lies, hatred, and envy. The foundation we find in Christ is love and grace.

And Haman's plotting shows that God is at work even in the midst of a plot to destroy God's people. In verse 7, Haman casts lots to decide which day would be the best day in the sight of his pagan gods to kill the Jews.

As the story goes on, we'll see that the casting of the lot ends up backfiring completely upon Haman. As Proverbs 16 says, the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

So at this point of the story, it really might not look like it. But God is still in control. And that's the crucial point. It doesn't look like it.

[16 : 29] For a time, evil is victorious and evil feasts. Haman tells the king in verse 8, There's a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate.

Their customs are different from all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws. It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. While some of what he says here is true, the heart of his pitch is an absolute lie, isn't it?

Yes, the Jews did have different customs, and they were dispersed throughout the empire. But they didn't keep themselves completely separate. And God's people did obey the laws of the land.

When they went into exile, one of the things that they were told to do was to follow the law. Here's what Jeremiah said to them. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. Jesus, when he was speaking to his enemies, said this. He said, You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires.

[17 : 35] He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Haman, too, is a child of the serpent, has murder on his mind and lies pouring from his lips. Now, the king, as we noted last week, is a moron.

He just accepts Haman's lies as sincerity and gives him the power to do what he likes by giving him his signet ring. Look at verse 10. So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman, son of Hamadatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.

Keep the money, the king said to Haman, and do with the people as you please. Notice that Haman is now not just called the Agagite. He has also been given the title, the enemy of the Jews.

This simply emphasizes what we already know. Haman is the enemy and is a threat to God's people. When the plan is set in motion, it's chilling.

[18 : 39] Listen to the way it's wired in verse 13. This was law.

What? Extermination and annihilation of all God's people. None exempt. Not even the elderly and infirm unable to stand. Not even the toddler unable to understand.

Not even the newborn sleeping in the cot. All were to be exterminated. And what's really sobering is that this is not consigned to Persia and the past.

In 2018, the UK government commissioned a report into worldwide Christian persecution. The final report was published just last year. Let me share some quotes.

Here's one. Various reports have emerged of Christians being executed during the ISIS occupation, including the account of an 80-year-old Assyrian Christian woman being burned to death in Mosul for not following Sharia law.

[19 : 51] And Canon Andrew White's description of four teenagers under the age of 15 being beheaded for refusing to convert. Under the UN definitions of genocide, the report notes that ISIS were responsible for a Christian genocide.

Here's another. This is a direct quote from Boko Haram in 2012. They said, Again, their efforts in Nigeria have also been defined as an act of genocide.

Here's another. Christianity now faces the possibility of being wiped out in parts of the Middle East where its roots go back the farthest. And one final quote from a separate report.

In terms of the number of people involved, the gravity of the crimes committed, and their impact, it is clear that the persecution of Christians is today worse than at any time in history.

With these facts in mind, what this part of Esther is really driving at is the fact that there really is an enemy. The serpent is not sleeping. And arguably, arguably, his poison is doing more damage than at any other time in history.

[21 : 14] This is all extremely sobering and terribly dark, but I make no apologies for it. As those in Christ, or investigate in Christ, the stark realities of being in Christ have to be laid bare.

I'm not expecting that Christians in Scotland are going to experience a genocide like Haman's proposed extermination. But the devil does have other ways of destroying God's people.

Temptation to sin and abandoning Christ. The lie that following Jesus just isn't worth it. The lie that God's just not real anyway. The lie that going your own way is the way to truly enjoy life and its pleasures.

And there may be genuine persecution in different forms. Historically, the treatment of God's people in Britain really goes against the grain. Historically, persecution and rejection is part and parcel of following Jesus.

So the question that remains is, if this is the reality, are we ready to face the enemy? Peter writes, be alert and of sober mind.

[22 : 27] Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him. Standing firm in the faith because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And Paul really helpfully tells us how we can resist the enemy with the strength of Jesus that Jesus gives to us. Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power, he writes in Ephesians.

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Therefore, put on the full armor of God so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground. And after you've done everything, to stand.

So Esther episode two ends with the feast for evil. The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

[23 : 46] It's a proper cliffhanger. The city is confused, the king oblivious, and the enemy victorious. And yet, God is still in control.

And yet, the invisible God is still there. Because that is not the end of the story. That's not where the story finishes.

But I want to finish by returning to Jesus. In the garden as he was arrested, remember how he said, this is your hour, when darkness reigns. Not long after, he would be executed by crucifixion.

The son of God, killed like a common criminal. The serpent, seemingly victorious. If we follow Jesus, we accept that we will face the same enemy who killed him, and the same hour of darkness.

But as we know from Jesus, God was in control, and the hour of darkness paved the way for victory, and the promise of eternal life. And so in light of that, we could say with Paul, be strong in the Lord, and in his mighty power.

[25 : 01] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, it's sobering, and really quite terrifying, to reflect on the fact that we do have an enemy.

And so Father, we pray that you, we would take these words from Esther to heart, and I pray that we would take these words from Paul to heart. Be strong in the Lord, and in his mighty power.

Help us in confidence, every day, to put on the armor of God. To step out knowing that we are engaged in a spiritual war, but to step out knowing that we're on the winning side.

Although there is an enemy, we have you. And Lord, that is such a comfort, and I pray that this week, as we go out, as we serve you, as we seek to make you known in the world, I pray that you would remind us of these truths, and encourage us to keep going for your sake, even though the enemy is very real.

Because we can be strong in you, and in your mighty power, which you give to us. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[26 : 11] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.