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## ESTHER 3

### Esther Series

Now we come to that important time where we open God's word. So turn on your Bibles or open your Bibles, whatever you do to get them available to you, and look at Esther 3.

We are in this book of Esther at this very important place where at the end of chapter 2 everything is going great. You've got the king is happy because he's found a new queen. Queen Esther is on the throne. You've got Mordecai who's been given a job in sitting at the city gates as a leader there and he's just foiled the plan of these guys who want to kill the king. So the bad guys are dead, Mordecai's in a good place, and we come to what seems to be rather peaceful time in the kingdom. But then we enter chapter 3 and in chapter 3 we come to the villain.

Let's look at chapter 3. Although it's the villain in the negative part of the story, the teaching today is actually kind of fun because of the things that we're going to see come out of this. So look with me at Esther 3:1.

*After these events...* The words *after these events* tie us back into the end of chapter 2 where Mordecai foiled the plan of the bad guys who wanted to somehow overthrow the king and kill him. So we tied right into those words. *After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman.* Whoa. Wait a minute. It just happened that Mordecai did some great things and it says that it was recorded in the book. But it was not recognized. He was not affirmed for that. But now in the next verse it says, *After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman (a different guy) son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.*

Here's a very bad guy. Haman is the villain of the story. Haman is the guy who is going to tell the king, "King, let's exterminate the Jews and I'll pay for it singlehandedly." He's a very rich man, powerful man, and he is a bad guy. That's who he is in this whole story.

Mordecai is a good guy. Mordecai saves the king's life. Mordecai gets no honor at all and here the bad guy, Haman, gets a lot of honor.

The obvious thing that happens in many of our lives when we see that and we find ourselves in similar situations like that, we say, "It's not fair." Sometimes we look at the challenges we face in life, the challenges in our own situations and we start comparing ourselves to others or what we wish we could have. So we end up saying, "That's not fair."

When we start comparing ourselves to others we sometimes can feel superior to others and say, “Wow, look at what I have compared to those other people.” Or when we get less, we might say, “Oh man. Look at those other people. They get more than I do.” That comparison process is what’s damaging for our spiritual lives and for who we are because we are not designed to compare ourselves to others. We are designed to run the race before God as an individual race. Not just say, “I’m a little bit ahead of that guy,” but our eyes are fixed on Jesus, not fixed on who we’re passing in the passing lane.

God has designed it for us to be sensitive to what He is doing and what He wants to do in our hearts, what He wants to do in our lives.

You might say, “My neighbor has five cars. He’s fixing up cars. He’s got all these cars. I have one car and I can’t even keep it running! It’s not fair.”

“I know a guy’s who’s got a business,” you might say, “And he’s a crook, but his business is thriving. I’m having trouble making ends meet. It’s not fair.”

That statement of unfairness when we start to feel that, we need to go to the book of Esther because that’s the beauty of this book. The book of Esther is going to help us see that God has something big planned. It pulls back the veil so we can see what’s going on behind the scenes.

The kind of message of grace here that God has of not trying to balance the scales and make everything equal, it’s hard for some to accept. There are some people who say, “I’ve worked hard and because I worked hard then I ought to be able to see the fruits of my labor.” Or others who say, “I know I’ve dug a big pit in my life and I’m working myself out. I’m almost out of there.” And then God forgives the person who has a big pit and the person who has a small pit.

We all have a pit that we’ve dug of sin and God wants to do something inside of our hearts and bring us and He calls that grace. Then He forgives the huge debt that we have. He forgives us of all of the things that are going on in our hearts. That’s good news for ordinary people. But for people who have worked hard and say, “I’m almost out of the pit,” they feel like, “That’s not fair. I’ve had to do all of this.”

You see, we need to understand God’s grace and how powerful it is and what God has given to us. When we understand that then this idea of not being fair drifts off because now it’s just me and God and what God is doing. I have struggles in my life and God promises that He gives us the grace to deal with our problems. He doesn’t give us the grace to deal with someone else’s problems; He gives us the grace to deal with ours. That is grace.

Grace is not fairness. Grace is grace. God gives that to us and He offers that generosity to each one of us, that grace that He wants us to have. We need to understand that. When we start comparing ourselves to others we get ourselves into trouble.

Here are some principles to remember. Principle number one: God doesn’t always reward everyone the same way. Principle number two: God doesn’t always reward everyone in the same time.

The story of Esther reveals that God's sense of fairness definitely doesn't have to do with treating people equally. God has this sense of sovereignty and working out the dimensions of things that are going on and it's a powerful story. We like this kind of story because the good guys win in the end.

I want to suggest that the good guys don't always win in the end that we would like them to. Sometimes it looks like we're not winning. This story is for us. It's a valuable story.

Let's go onto verse 2. *All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.*

It said that Haman wore a triangular hat. That's tradition. It's not in the Bible. It says that he wore this triangular hat and he was the kind of guy that really liked people to say, "Yes, sir." "Call me 'sir.'" He liked that people would bow down to him. He gloried in that kind of experience.

If you remember that Mordecai had told Esther, "Don't tell about your heritage," you may think that Mordecai in that situation was afraid or that he didn't have enough courage or didn't have enough conviction to stand up for what's right. That's not the case. We see that here Mordecai takes a stand, he does do the right thing. I'm sure it's because he made a decision earlier, much earlier, in his life that he would do what's right and he would not do the wrong thing, especially in this particular area.

Maybe he thought of the Ten Commandments. In the Ten Commandments it says this: *You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*

Maybe he was just reflecting on the Ten Commandments and that became a conviction of his. Or maybe he thought back on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; three brave friends that were in the same part of the world, remember, just a few years earlier, and they took a stand and they wouldn't bow down. I don't know what he's remembering, but he made a commitment early in his life, "I'm not going to do that." He determined that he would not bow down.

Young people, I just want to suggest this to you. You will be faced with convictions or challenges in your life at different times. One of the greatest things you could do is make a commitment now, right now, to say, "I'm going to serve the Lord." Because you'll face those times then when the questions are out there and you'll have already made the decision. You'll have the confidence inside that made that commitment early in your life so that when that time comes and the temptation is there to sacrifice your commitment for some other benefit, you will be able to trust the Lord and give yourself to Him.

Mordecai was a man of character and a man of wisdom.

Let's go to verse 3. *Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do 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.*

It's interesting to me that when there's a confrontation – I think this is just a good principle, a wisdom principle that you want to consider in your life. I learned this years ago – a public confrontation between me and someone else of some kind, that the most important thing that I need to consider is not the person I'm dealing with because I may never convince that person that they're wrong. I may never be able to help them see the error of their ways. But there are other people watching.

That's what's going on here. There are other people watching Mordecai. What's going to happen in this situation? The decisions we make if we have a confrontation in a certain situation we need to recognize that what I'm about to do with this person, there are other people watching me. Maybe it's your children watching you. They're watching you to see how you handle a challenging experience. Maybe it's on Facebook. You've got to know people are watching Facebook. They're making decisions about you, they're considering you.

It's interesting to me. I tell young people, "You're trying to get a job? You might want to look at your Facebook because employers like to look at Facebook and see how they're doing! If they can check you out on Facebook, they'll learn a lot about your character, they'll learn a lot about who you are."

Other people are watching you and so you want to be sensitive to that. You want to be careful what kinds of things you do in the midst of that.

Verse 5: *When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged.*

Why is it that the people who have the most in life, they have the most wealth, they have the most power, are the ones who have significant problems or issues in their life? You hear about a sports figure who gets irritated with someone else and punches him out. You hear about a movie star who has to check into a rehab because of a cocaine addiction. Why is it that people who have so much often find themselves in significant issues?

Haman had a problem. He had a problem that's going to create some significant problems for him. It's also going to set the stage for what's going to happen in the rest of the book.

He gets upset because Mordecai won't bow down to him. It ruins his day and he can't deal with it. He's got to do something about it. One guy won't bow down so he starts planning revenge.

Look at verse 6. *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.*

Revenge does that to you. Revenge gives you the desire to expand on the damage that you'll do to other people. That's what he wants to do. We have to be really careful about revenge. It's a dangerous thing. He wants to kill everybody now. It's a weakness of Haman that's going to set up the whole predicament that we're going to see for the whole book as we go further.

*Verse 7: In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, the pur (that is, the lot) was cast in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar.*

Now the pur is the lot. It's like casting the lot, rolling a dice, or drawing straws or something like that. So they would throw it so somehow it would come up and somehow they would know the answer to the question in order to determine. Maybe they'd have a bunch of the different months there and they throw the stones on there and wherever they landed that would be the month that they would choose. I'm not sure how it would all work.

We don't know exactly what it is, but we do know that it had to do with fate or chance. That's what it was. And so they would often use the lot of the rolling of the dice kind of thing as an example of chance. But because they believe in a God who's in control of everything they knew that casting the lot wasn't just up to the percentages. It was God who was in control of the lot.

If you see in Proverbs 16:33 this describes this whole picture of chance as far as God's concerned. Because there is no luck with God, there is no fate with God, there's no chance with God. It's certain with God. In Proverbs 16:33 it says, *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.*

The point is that God is in control of this whole situation and what's going to happen. That's the whole theme of the book of Esther.

Now out of this particular story of Esther we have a Jewish feast that happens today called Purim. The feast of Purim is one of the fun feasts of Israel. It's a great time for everybody to get together. The next time it will happen is on March 13 and 14 of 2014. They get together and it's a Friday night to Saturday because Friday night is when the Jewish day starts. So it starts on Friday night and goes to Saturday and during that time they'll get together. Most feasts are designed to be a communal experience as is most of the celebrations in Israelite culture, to celebrate as a community.

They'll come together and here's what they'll do. They'll read the Megillah, which is the book of Esther. They'll read it through and every time they get to the name Haman, whenever Haman is read (I thought about doing this with you this morning, but I thought it would be way too distracting) they would have noisemakers that make noise and they would yell out "boo" whenever his name is read as a demonstration of blotting his name out. It's kind of a therapeutic thing for them. As if it says, "God is in control. We have no enemies and we can just yell over his name."

Furthermore, they would get dressed up in costumes for each one of the different characters and they would kind of act out the story of Esther.

Then they would have treats for desserts and those treats were hamantash cookies and these hamantash cookies are triangular cookies shaped like Haman's hat. Hamantash comes from 'Haman's hat' (*tasch*) and so they're called hamantash cookies and they're triangular and they're filled with jelly or some kind of a filling. They're delicious cookies and they would eat those cookies as if they're eating Haman's hat.

It's a fun feast for them and it's just a way of laughing at this idea of luck. Even the name of the feast is Purim because it's after this idea of luck. So it's laughing at the idea of luck because God is in control and we see that in the story here.

It's a very beautiful story here that God is bigger than fate. There may be things like chance that may happen, but God is in control of that chance. I don't even use the word 'luck' or something about being lucky in my vocabulary. I don't even talk about that because I know God is sovereign, God is in control.

Let's read on in the chapter. Verse 8. I'm going to read a big section of this so you get the picture of what's happening.

*Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury."*

*So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."*

*Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring.*

*Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.*

*The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. Notice the summary statement here. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered. Like, "What's going on here?" They're troubled by all of this.*

In order to understand this fully, go back to verse 1 and verse 10. Do you see the description there that Haman is the Agagite? Do you see that word there, Agagite? That means he comes



from Agag. We've got to know who Agag is because the story of Esther does not start here, it starts many, many years earlier with the disobedience of one man. One man who thought he could, when God told him what to do, evaluate God's instruction and think of a better way to do it. He disobeyed in doing so and caused some great trouble for the Israelite people. That man believed he could do something other than what God called him to do and so we ended up with trouble.

The story takes us back to the Amalekites and King Saul. Because King Saul was the first king in Israel. By the way, if you look at Mordecai's history, Mordecai comes from Kish from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul also came from Kish from the tribe of Benjamin. So they have some things in common here. The Amalekites were a terrible people who when the Israelites came out of Egypt and were wandering in the wilderness to get to the Promised Land the Amalekites would come and they would kill the elderly or they would kill the weak. They were vicious people, terrible people. They were the foes of Israel, the long term foes of Israel. Even today the word 'amalek' is associated with evil in Israelite culture.

Israel was plagued by these people and in Joshua's time some revenge was taken, vengeance was taken on these people, but he wasn't able to eradicate them or get rid of them, and so they continued to pester the Israelite people.

So in 1 Samuel, and I'm going to read you 1 Samuel 15, there's a story there about how God decides it's now time, the Amalekites are done, we're going to get rid of them. He goes to Saul and he says to Saul, "I want you to kill these people." And Saul says, "I've got a better idea," and we're going to see what that is. He's even talking himself into disobedience here in the passage. In the midst of that then this guy Agag, the king of the Amalekites, he spares at that moment.

Let's read it in 1 Samuel 15:1. I want you to see this because this is the historical background of now this challenge between Haman, and the evil one, and God and what He's going to do. Let's go back to 1 Samuel 15:1.

*Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'"*

*So Saul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim—two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand from Judah. Saul went to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the ravine. Then he said to the Kenites, "Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites moved away from the Amalekites.*

*Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, near the eastern border of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive (that was not his instructions), and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. That was not the*

instructions that were given to him. *These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.*

*Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, "Saul has gone down to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal."*

*When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."*

*But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"*

*Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."*

*"Enough!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night."*

*"Tell me," Saul replied.*

*Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?"*

*"But I did obey the Lord," Saul said. "I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal."*

*But Samuel replied: Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king."*

First of all, if we just look at 1 Samuel and try to learn a faith lesson for ourselves, we must realize that when God tells us to do something, we must obey Him even though we don't understand, even though we think we have a better idea. "Lord, I've got a better way of solving this problem for you." God says, "No, I want you to obey." It's very important for us to obey because even if we don't understand why, we still want to take the commands of God and obey them and do what He says because God knows far more than we do.

Now we zip ahead several hundred years to a situation. Now we're going to have a faceoff between Haman, the evil guy, and the Jewish people and God, and it's a result of that same thing. You have to understand back in the book of Samuel Samuel's going to kill Agag on the spot



there. But Jewish people believe that he had a son somewhere who continued to have a family and so on, they became the enemies of Israel, and now here they are attacking the Jewish people in a way that wasn't even expected. Totally against what God would have. Painful experience of evil fighting good in the midst of this. This enemy of evil in the past is now coming back to them.

As the story's going to develop we're going to see what God is doing. We're in a difficult place because now this edict has gone out. It's gone out and it can't be reversed because of the laws that they had of the Medes and the Persians. They can't reverse the law. It's gone out and everywhere it's known that on this one day all of the Israelite people will be killed and anybody who kills them can take their plunder. There's reward in it to. If you'll kill your neighbor you can have whatever he has; it's yours.

So this has gone out and you can just imagine. It's that sick feeling you have inside when you get bad news. When you go, "Oh no. I can't believe that's happening." That's the experience going on. That's where we are in the story here.

I want to take you to the other part, the fun part of this story as we go through to the end because we look at this holiday of Purim and we see that in Purim they are rejoicing in God's sovereignty. That's what we need to take out of this.

It may look bleak in your life right now. It may look like things are bad and things are terrible and it looks like we're doomed. We're never going to get out of this, bad things are happening. It's a terrible situation. But we need to know (as we're taught in the book of Esther) that God is in control. He has a queen in the palace and they don't know her heritage yet. God is going to work through that and do some powerful things.

In the next chapter we're going to see that God has revealed her for such a time as this. And you never know in your own life. Bad things may be happening, but God may be doing something very specific in your life for such a time as this. That's where we're going to go next week as we continue on in this passage. We're going to see whatever God is doing, God is working. We want to be working where God is working.

It causes us in our own heart to want to say, "Lord, I trust you. I'm amazed at who you are. I'm amazed at what you do." The essence of worship is saying "wow" when we get a glimpse of that. But sometimes we have to say "wow" by faith because right now it doesn't look like God is working. It looks like He's sleeping or looks like He's not paying attention to me or looks like I'm not in His plan somehow, He forgot about who I am.

If we could see it from God's perspective, we would see the grand scheme of who God is and it causes us to trust Him. It causes us to come before God and say, "God, you are amazing and I am so grateful to be a part of your plan. Lord, I want to serve you. I want to give you all of my heart. I want to obey today. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, but I do know today I need to obey you, I need to do what you want me to do."

When we do, we're reminded of a passage in the Bible in Ephesians 3 about God's love. When Paul writes to the Ephesians he's praying for these people. I pray this prayer for you and I hope you'll pray this prayer for me.

*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.*

Never doubt the fact that God loves you. Never doubt that. His love is so big and you may not be able to see it at the moment, but by faith you trust and recognize that God's love is so deep, it is so high, it is so wide. It causes us to just fall in amazement before Him and to worship Him and to appreciate who He is.

I don't know where you are in your life, but I know that this message is a valuable one that we'll need. You might need it now, you might need it later, but it's a message that we all need in our lives to trust the Lord because life can be challenging and difficult things come. When those things come, what will we do? How will we respond?

We'll see how they respond in the book of Esther next week, but in the meantime our job is to trust the Lord this week in our own hearts. Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] So, Lord, we are amazed. We're amazed that you delight in us, that you love us. We're amazed at how great that love is and how big it is. When we question that love I pray that you would reveal it to us, pour it out in our hearts, and give us the courage to trust you in those difficult times. Lord, we give our hearts to you this week. We ask you to do a deep work inside of us. Take away the things that are hindering that trust. Grow us in that ability to give you honor and glory. Thank you for delighting in us, Lord, and thank you for loving us. We're amazed at that. In Jesus' name, amen.