

The Antagonist Arises

Call to Worship: Psalm 29

Hymn #-

1st Scripture: 1 Samuel 15

Hymn #-

2nd Scripture: Esther 3

Hymn #-

Introduction:

It was in the third year of King Ahasuerus's reign that Queen Vashti had stood him up in front of all of the people, leading to her deposition as queen (Esther 1:3). And it was in the seventh year of his reign that Esther was made queen in Vashti's place (Esther 2:16). In two chapters, four years of history have quickly past, and though the great bulk of that history is left unrecorded (at least in the Bible), we have found God beginning to speak to us, moving in the direction of revealing His sovereign glory in the upcoming deliverance of His people.

This morning, we fast forward another five years, into the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus's reign, where we will be brought to the scene of the great conflict, which the people of God, the Jews, will face, leading to their great and divinely appointed deliverance through Esther. Nine years have passed since Queen Vashti was removed, and that event set the stage for all of this. Nine years of eating, drinking, sleeping, working; nine years of daily living have past for all people, as God was unfolding the working out of His deliverance unto the praise of His glory. Indeed, history moves on, but only unto the unfolding of God's divine will. And this is the case for all ages in all of history. This is the case for us, brethren. As I have been saying over and over, Esther gives us a clear and wonderful portrayal of God's timing, and we don't want to miss it. We must always carry our daily events into the big picture of God's revealed will, so that we might be comforted in His sovereignty and grace, without getting swept away in the confusion and whirlwind of "current affairs." Proverbs 3:25-26 states the matter so well, "Do not be afraid of sudden terror, nor of trouble from the wicked when it comes; for the Lord will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from being caught." And of course, this follows right on the heels of Proverbs 3:5-6, which states, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."

Such texts are geared to a people who realize that while we can, by faith, grasp the revealed will of God, the working out of that will, in time and space, can often be very undiscernible. This is evident in the nine (+) year spread of the events of Esther.

This morning, we are introduced to the antagonist of our story, Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And though he is seated in a position of great power, like Pharaoh, what Haman fails to realize is that God has raised him up for a divine purpose, namely, for the glorification of God's great Name! What Haman will mean for evil, God will mean for good. Well then, let us consider a general summary of the events found here in Esther 3.

I. A Summary of the Events of Esther 3

At some point in time, after Esther was made queen, the king promotes a man named Haman, up to a position that is above all of the princes. We are not told of why Haman received this promotion. In fact, this is the first time we are even introduced to him. Suffice it to say, that the king must have been very impressed with Haman, if he advanced him to such a high position. That said, what we are told about Haman here is very significant. Haman was an Agagite, and this would have rung loudly in the ears of the Jews of that day. For Agag was the former king of the Amalekites, who were a cursed people in the sight of God. The Amalekites had a very well known history of enmity with the Jews because of this. This enmity began back in Exodus 17:8ff, when the Israelites, under the leadership of Moses, were traveling in the wilderness, heading toward the Promised Land.

The Amalekites not only failed to fear the true and living God (after all that had happened in the redemption of Israel out of Egypt), but furthermore, they attacked those Israelites who were in the rear ranks; those who were weary or straggling behind, when Israel made its way through the wilderness. This ultimately led to the war, which the Amalekites started with Israel, recorded in Exodus 17 (Moses holding his arms up while Joshua fought, Aaron and Hur supported Moses hands, Israel defeated the Amalekites). At the end of that battle, the Lord made this statement concerning the Amalekites, "...the Lord has sworn: the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:16). This was personal, from the Lord's standpoint. The Amalekites were a cursed people because of this. Notice, in Deuteronomy

25:17-19, Moses reiterates this reality to the second generation of Israelites, who were preparing to enter the Promised Land.

"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget."

And it was during the reign of King Saul, that this proclamation was to meet its ultimate fulfillment. We read this in our first Scripture reading. Saul was there commanded to "kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:3). Amalek was under the curse; the most severe form of judgment imaginable, and yet, Saul failed to obey God, allowing King Agag to live, while keeping some of the best animals (sheep, oxen, lambs...etc) alive. For this reason, Saul was rejected (by God) as king (1 Sam. 15:10ff). Following this, Samuel has Agag brought out, and he himself hacks Agag to pieces before the Lord (vs. 33).

And so, brethren, when we are told here in Esther that Haman was from the lineage of Agag, bells and whistles are meant to go off in our minds. Haman was of the cursed Amalekites, who were under the judgment of God. What follows in the narrative (and perhaps in the rest of the Book) can only be understood in this light.

Having exalted Haman to the seat above his princes, King Ahasuerus then orders his servants (who were within the king's gate) to bow and pay homage to Haman, whenever they see him pass. However, we are told at the end of verse 2, that Mordecai (who was also often within the king's gate, checking on the welfare of Esther) refused to bow or pay homage to Haman. The king's servants obviously pick up on this, and confront Mordecai concerning the matter. After speaking to Mordecai for several days, Mordecai had done exactly what he had told Esther not to do; he informed the king's servants that he was a Jew, and that this was the reason he could not honor Haman in this way.

Now, before we move any further, brethren, it is important for us to understand something here. Mordecai was not refusing to bow and pay homage to Haman because he recognized such an act, as an act of worship. In other words, idolatry was not the issue here. It was not uncommon or necessarily wrong, to bow in respect before royalty. Doing such a thing did not necessarily indicate an act of worship. Mordecai's main concern here had to do with all that we have just gone over concerning the curse that was upon the Amalekites. It was Haman's Amalekite lineage that compelled Mordecai to disobey even the king's command, refusing to pay homage to Haman, the Agagite. To pay homage to an Amalekite would have been a clear violation of God's command. And so, Mordecai chose to honor God over and above the king. You see, if it were King Ahasuerus or even some other royal official, Mordecai would probably have had no problem bowing in reverence and honor. Haman was an Agagite, another reason why he is given the label in verse 10, "Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews." And so, understanding a bit of the historical enmity between the Amalekites and the Jews, and God's curse upon the Amalekites, helps to shed much light on all that is happening here. It also gives us a sense about where this is going and what we might expect will happen to Haman and his sons.

Well, needless to say, the king's servants report Mordecai's disobedience to Haman, conveying Mordecai's excuse for not bowing because of his Jewish heritage, to see if Haman would let this fly. And of course, as we would expect, Haman becomes enraged...but his wrath is not only directed toward Mordecai. Haman wants to develop a plot to annihilate all Jews. And he is willing to take the time to patiently work toward this end. And so, he works out a devious plan.

However, destroying an entire race of people is no small matter, and so, beginning in the first month of the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, Haman participates in the superstitious act of casting "Pur" (or lots), to determine the precise date that he should have the Jews destroyed. Casting Pur (rolling the dice, as it were) will ensure and guarantee the success of his rather large endeavor. And the lot fell on the twelfth month.

We will find the word "Pur" here, to be very significant at the end of the Book. In fact, that is where the term "Purim" comes from, in the "Feast of Purim," which the Jews celebrate

every year. For, in the casting of lots, Haman had ultimately brought about his own destruction, and the prosperity and deliverance of the Jews against their enemies.

Haman then begins to enact his devious plan by going to the king with a deceptively vague request. [Read verses 8-9]. Notice, how Haman is very vague and deceptive in his request ("a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people of the provinces of your kingdom...their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws"). This is hardly an open and honest assessment of reality. It reminds me of the political ping-pong and "main stream media" spin that is predominant in our day. Haman's description would have you believe that these people (whoever they are), are probably a large minority of rebels, who have no interest in subjecting themselves to the decrees of the king, when in fact, the Jews did honor the king, and outside of committing blatant idolatry, would have only refused to pay homage to someone like Haman, a cursed Amalekite. They were hardly the trouble that suited Haman's description. Needless to say, Haman moves on to say that it would not be fitting for the king to let them remain.

And then, to add a little bribery to the equation, Haman offers a large sum of money (\$10,000) to be put into the king's treasury, part of which, would cover the expense of enacting a plan to destroy these rebels. Haman comes across almost as generous and looking out for the king's interest here. "You know king, these people, they do not obey you and have no interest in subjecting themselves to your rule. They should be destroyed. Look, let me even commit money to the treasury, part of which would serve this purpose, so that no burden is put on the king for this."

And then the king, perhaps flattered by Haman's seeming concern for the kingdom, unwisely, without question, hands his signet ring over to Haman, entrusting him to deal with the matter in accordance with his own design. [Read verse 11].

Haman then writes the decree to have every Jew in all of the provinces killed, and their assets plundered. [Read verses 12-15a]. Now brethren, before we finish this summary analysis of chapter three, take note of another worthy note of interest here, involving a divine irony, as it were. Haman has the decree sent out on the thirteenth day of the first month. This was literally the day before the Jews would celebrate the "Passover," that never forgotten, divinely ordained

feast, which represented the Jews speedy deliverance from out of their Egyptian bondage (Ex. 23:5). Could this not have been a divine sign from God, indicating that another divinely ordained deliverance was soon to take place, in light of the present threat brought about by Haman? The decree was formulated on the 13th day of the month, and probably began to make its way out into the provinces on the next day, the 14th day of the first month, which is when the Jews would have begun to celebrate the Passover (at twilight). Indeed, God would step in and bring about deliverance for His people at just the right time, even as He had done in Egypt!

Finally then, the decree goes out, and the devious Haman is drinking with the ignorant king, as these rebels are soon to be permanently dealt with. They are rejoicing (with two very different understandings of the situation), but the rest of the city is perplexed...and rightly so. Anyone who knew the Jews would have indeed been perplexed by this decree. They would have known that something was very wrong with it, because the Jews were no threat to the king and his kingdom at all. And so, confusion overtakes the city, as people are baffled over such a wicked and heinous decree, issued against the Jewish people.

II. Closing Applications

What then can we learn from these things, brethren?

1.) Take note of how Mordecai honored God, even in defiance of the king. This act certainly could have cost him his life, but furthermore, from a pragmatic standpoint, could not some have concluded that he was the very cause of the decree that went out against all of the Jews? Brethren, let us learn from this that while pragmatics do have a proper place in our decision making, pragmatics ought never to be considered when the moral will of God is clearly known. Haman was to blame for the decree that went out against the Jews, and not Mordecai. And in fact, God was sovereignly using Mordecai's disobedience to put His people in great jeopardy, so that, all the more, the glory of God would be magnified in so great a deliverance. Men, women and children; in short, virtually every Jew was on the brink of utter annihilation because Mordecai took a stand on Biblical principles. Pragmatically, this seemed quite foolish and selfish, but from the stand point of God, it was honorable, and God would show His power

through this seemingly impossible circumstance. [Note, the Martyrs of past history and of the present].

2.) Consider the drama of this real-life situation (the decree went out to the provinces). What hope was there for the Jews at this point? Knowing the end of the story, what present events are beyond God's reach for you? Put together any potential future scenario, and see if there is any combination of possibilities that are beyond God's control. Cannot God part the Red Sea, if necessary? Indeed, the enemy sought to reverse the curse, but God steps in and turns it upon the heads of His enemies. Nothing can or ever will, possibly bring about an outcome that disagrees with the divine will of God. God will move mountains, employ large fish, part seas...in short, He will do anything and everything that is necessary to fulfill all His holy will. His promises are all "Yes," and "Amen," in Christ Jesus!

3.) A multi-generational curse was put upon the Amalekites because they took advantage of the weary, weak and straggling Israelites, who lagged behind on the long wilderness journey. Perhaps, you are a suffering Christian, who is finding it very difficult to trudge forward in the journey to glory (maybe you were temporarily overcome with a specific debilitating sin, and are finding it hard to move forward). Know that there is indeed hope in your glorious God. He takes note, and He will ensure that you make it safely home. Keep pressing on! Don't give up or think it is ever too late. For though, the Amalekites attack you in your weakness, God is with you. And it would be better for there to be a millstone tied around the neck of those who afflict you (and that they be cast into the sea), than for them to cause you to stumble. Press on in Christ! Go back to the cross and find renewed strength and vigor in the Gospel of grace!

The Gospel

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25