

The Enemies of the Lord and of his People (Part 1)

Exegetical Big Idea: God's people face extinction, but God never abandons his people.

Homiletical Big Idea: **God is never far from his people, no matter how bad it gets.**

Fallen Condition Focus: Without the faithfulness of God and the resurrection of Jesus, Christians have no hope for survival and nowhere to turn in our time of need.

Background:

Today we come to the crux of the book. This chapter in Esther is probably the most well-known. In fact this chapter is a basic summary of the whole book, namely that the Jews face extinction, and Esther needs to step up and save them. The most well-known verse of this book comes out of this chapter. It's the verse of course where Mordecai tells Esther, "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

So this is the point in the book where the rubber meets the road. The writer, like all biblical writers really, it's a master story teller. Generally speaking, the first half of the book is dedicated to setting up events. There's foreshadowing and obscure little details in the narrative that you only see later why the author put them in. Today in this chapter, all that set up pays off.

Intro:

There once was a woman who was married to a man. Her husband loved her and her her husband, but she was filled with grief because she had no children. Now the man was also married to another woman, not a good thing or a righteous thing but it was common nonetheless. Now his second wife did have children, but she was a mean-spirited woman and year after year this second wife would ridicule and mock the first wife because she had no children. Well every year, the man would take his whole family and travel up to a town called Shiloh and offer sacrifices to the LORD and celebrate. One year the woman who was barren and so full of grief would go to the tabernacle and weep and wail before the LORD and plead with God to give her a child. Well the priest saw this and, he wasn't a good priest, did not recognize that she was weeping before the LORD and chastised her and thought she had too much to drink. She told him about her sad situation and he had compassion on her said "may the Lord grant you what you have asked of him". Well that year, the woman finally became pregnant and gave birth to a boy, and full of joy returned to the house of the LORD the next year to tell the priest what had happened. Her name was Hannah, and she named the boy "Samuel", which means "Heard by God". You can read the story for yourself in 1 Samuel chapter 1. In all her weeping and wailing, the LORD was never far from Hannah, though she likely felt most days as if her prayers were blocked by her ceiling.

I don't know if you've ever been in a situation like Hannah, where you were so sorrowful in your heart and you cried out to the LORD day after day, maybe year after year as Hannah did, but you felt as if your prayers were blocked by your ceiling, and that God was busy far off somewhere else worrying himself with something much more important.

In this book that mentions God not even once, we come to a chapter where God's people are faced with their imminent extinction. They respond with weeping and wailing and fasting and we can't help but ask the question "Does God hear them?" "Is God going to do anything?" "Does God care?"

Now we have the luxury of knowing the rest of the story, but in that moment in history, you'd have to be wondering to yourself if you're a Jew "Where is God?"

Today I want to take a look at Esther 3 and help us to see that:

God is never far from his people, no matter how bad it gets

(Verses 1-5) **God hears his people's plight,**

So last chapter we learned of the plan of Haman to destroy the Jews. He brought his plan to the king, and the king foolishly and hastily agreed to let Haman have free reign over it all. The plan was of course to annihilate the entire Jewish population, in all the land of Persia, on a single day, and to plunder everything they had. This would of course include the Jews in Susa, like Mordecai and Esther, and even the Jews who had already returned to the land of Israel, since that land was also under Persian rule.

Well Mordecai of course learns of this. And quite obviously he is devastated. He tears his clothes and puts ashes on his head and mourns and wails loudly we are told. I can't imagine the devastation that he feels getting this news. The closest that I think I can compare it to was receiving the news when I was a young teenager that my dad had had a heart attack and was in the hospital. I had come back from a day of skiing with friends of the family and I was sat down with my brother who was with me and we were told of this news. Obviously we were devastated. Maybe you've been through something similar. But of course that's on a personal level, this news takes on a whole new level of devastation because his whole people group is going to be wiped out. And I can't help but think that he felt some level of responsibility of this, after all, this came about because of his failure to show honour to Haman. I don't know this for sure but I can only imagine so.

Either way, the news destroys him. And he drops into utter despair. And he's not alone. All throughout the kingdom Jews weep and mourn. Esther is told of Mordecai's state and she sends him some new clothes to cheer him up, you know, in case he is going through some kind of monetary trouble. But of course he doesn't accept them and Esther needs to know why. More on that in a few minutes.

But what happens next might seem to be one of those verses that we read just to move on to the other, but when we stop and look at it for a moment, we see that it's just as important as any verse in Scripture.

In verse 2 we are told that Mordecai went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. What is this all about?

The King does not want to hear mourning, or see sadness, so he prohibits anyone in mourning from entering his inner court. Xerxes lives in luxury and decadence, he doesn't want the "Debbie Downers" ruining his day. The message is clear, "you deal with whatever it is that's making you sad, and when you clean yourself up, then you can come into my kingdom"

As we know, we have to read between the lines to see God at work in the book of Esther because the author doesn't explicitly speak about God at all in the book, although he is nonetheless present through it all. One thread throughout this book that becomes more and more clear, is the difference between

the sovereign that is seen, and the Sovereign that isn't. It's weaved all throughout this book. As we look at Xerxes and his kingship and power, we see that at every turn, he is *different* that YHWH and his sovereignty. Next time you read through this book think of how Xerxes is like an opposite figure to YHWH.

How different our God is, who welcomes the needy, the sick, the broken hearted, the sorrowful. Our God couldn't be more different than king Xerxes, our God *wants* the weary to come to him.

[I am often guilty of trailing off in my mind and thinking of something else when Alana is speaking to me. It's a regular occurrence at our house that we'll be talking and something will grab my attention or she'll say something that will get me thinking of something else. A few minutes after the conversation I'll ask her a question and she'll reply "I literally just told you that 2 minutes ago". She is gracious and forgiving and I'm thankful for that, and I'm trying to change, I really am]

But our God's not like that. God hears the prayers of his people and we always have his full attention.

After all, what is Jesus' invitation to the weary and heaven laden? To come to him, and he will give rest.

Jesus doesn't want us to "fix whatever it is that's causing distress, and *then* come to me" No, Jesus welcomes the broken hearted into his arms. Why? Because Jesus IS the answer to sadness and sorrow.

In the Revelation of Jesus that John records, John sees an angel who holds a censor, and the smoke from the censor rises to the LORD. This is a picture of the prayers of God's people. Every prayer from every one of God's children reach his ears.

We don't see that of course. But we need to be assured from Scripture that this is the case.

How comforting it is to know that our prayers and petitions and our mourning and sadness all go up as fragrance before God. He hears them, and through the pages of Scripture we are reminded again and again that he hold his children tightly in his grip, and nothing can pry open those hands.

One of my favourite Psalms is Psalm 113. It calls on God's people to praise him because of his mighty deeds and his awesome stature. But then, just as you're reading and start to think "does this God who has glory above the heavens have any concern for miniscule little me?" we read "he raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap.

God is never far from his people, no matter how bad it gets

6-8 God's people have real enemies with real plans.

So as we said before Esther tries to lift the spirits of Mordecai by sending him some clothes. He doesn't accept them, which is obvious because it's not that he is lacking in any monetary sense. The situation that he is in is much more dire than that. So she sends one of her servants to figure out why Mordecai is in mourning.

Mordecai then recounts the situation with real specificity, and gives Hathach a copy of the edict. It sounds like it was posted around the city as a sort of flyer or something.

So the question is, why do we as a reader need this part? We already had special access into the king's throne room as Haman and Xerxes are having their conversation and making the plans. We already know all this. Why not just say "after the edict was announced, Mordecai tried to persuade Esther to help"?

We should realize that biblical author's repeat things for a reason. They are master story tellers, and no detail is unimportant.

I think we are supposed to read this, not from Haman's perspective, as we already have, but from Mordecai and Esther's perspective. I think we are supposed to read this and be drawn into the reality of the situation. In the previous chapter, it's a conversation and a decree, in this chapter however, actual Jews are actually reading about their actual extinction.

We are supposed to read it and go "yup, it's exactly as it sounds, there doesn't seem to be any way out of this for the Jews"

You know for the church in Canada who has really not faced harsh systematic persecution (except for Quebec a few decades ago) it's hard for us to really *feel* what is happening here.

Perhaps the original audience, who like us, is only reading about this after the fact, needs to be reminded of the real threat that took place.

Why do we need to know that real threats exist for the church?

Well for one reason, we need to realize that they exist so that we take them seriously!

Do you know the story of Gedaliah? You'll find it in starting in Jeremiah 40 and it goes for a few chapters. Let me paraphrase it for you now. So the scene is this: Nebuchadnezzar had just taken over Jerusalem, one of the worst days in Israel's history. The city was torched, the people taken captive, and worst of all the temple was destroyed and all the articles taken to Babylon. Now, not everybody was taken captive, Nebuchadnezzar left the poorest of people to stay in the land and work it. But someone had to be in charge of them. The king of Babylon felt it best to leave a guy named Gedaliah in charge. Well when the surrounding nations heard that this "nobody" was left in charge, an Ammonite named Ishmael planned to take him out. Well this plan was not well hidden apparently because Gedaliah's friends found out about and warned him. Do you know Gedaliah's response? He didn't believe them. Twice he was warned, and he did not believe the threat to his life. Well time went by and we read that Ishmael brought ten of his friends to meet Gedaliah. And we are told that they ended up eating together! Gedaliah was so naïve to this threat that he sat and ate with his would-be assassin and ten of his men. Well during the meal, as you may have guessed, Ishmael got up and took the life of Gedaliah. Gedaliah didn't take those threats seriously, and as a result he had no one to save him in his time of need.

Mordecai acts exactly opposite the way Gedaliah does, and he sends evidence to Esther that the threat is real and looming, and he does the only thing he can think of. He asks Esther for help. Now, as we'll see next week this is a suicide mission but nonetheless Mordecai takes the threat seriously.

I hope we understand as a church that real threats exist against us. And I don't say this to fear monger, that's never my intention, but I don't want us to be caught off-guard. Let's not be surprised when culture turns on the church. Let's not be naïve and think that everything will always be easy for us here.

Knowing that threats exist for God's people and taking them seriously leads to something.

Knowing there are real threats to the Church forces us to stay close to the Lord.

[I remember when both of my children were babies, and when they are that young and small everyone wants to hold them. Which is great because it's a nice break. And you know what, newborns, for the most part, don't care whose holding them. They'll fall asleep in anyone's arms really. But a fascinating thing happens as they get older. They start to realize that things are strange in the world, and there are people they don't recognize. So now what happens when we're out and someone they don't recognize starts talking to them, or something startles them? They run to dad or mom. They run to what they know is safety.]

It's the same thing for the Church. If we are not aware that real threats exist, we'll go with anyone, believe anything, and fall for anything. Be lulled to sleep in an enemies arms.

In Revelation 12, John has a vision of a woman who gives birth to a baby boy and this dragon who was waiting to devour the child but the child was taken up into heaven before the beast could do what he had planned. This is a picture of Christ being born and Satan wanting to destroy Christ, but of course he wasn't successful. Christ was raised to life after his death and now reigns in heaven with the Father. And then John says that this dragon went off to make war against the rest of the woman's offspring, meaning the Church. John says in verse 12 "who to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows his time is short."

We have an enemy church, and the bad news is that this enemy is filled with fury towards us. This should cause us to run to Christ who has overcome this enemy, and who holds us safely in his grip. And yes, his time is short and that gives us hope. His doom is certain, but it's exactly because he knows this that he rages against the church.

Thank God we have a saviour who explicitly tells us that in this world we *will* have trouble! But, also to take heart, because he has overcome the world. What does that mean except that we need to stay close to our Lord? He's the only one to overcome the world, I think it's a good idea to stay close to him.

Have you done that this morning? Do you have a fortress to run to for salvation? You think you will be fine on your own, fine, but whether you believe it or not, there is an enemy of your soul and he want the same demise for you that is in store for him, namely, hell. If you haven't run to Christ for salvation, today is the day. Know that no matter how bad life gets or how strong and imminent the threats are, God is close, close is your salvation, and he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Do you know this morning that you have an enemy of your soul? But do you know even more so that God has overcome, and that he is never far from his people?

God is never far from his people, no matter how bad it gets