

The Enemy Roars and Prowls (Esther 3:1-15) - 02.23.20 - Kevin P. Larson - KarisChurch.org

Maybe you're here today, and you say, "Yeah, I'm a follower of Jesus. Yes." That's great. Glad to hear it. That's what I'd say, too. But what would you say - what would I say - if everything around us crumbled? What, then, would you lean on?

I'm pumped to be in the new Omotara MC. It's a new group affiliated with our college ministry, Missio Dei. It meets in our home. So if you're a student, definitely consider coming out on Wednesday nights at 7 and joining us. But our leader Gbenga hails from Nigeria, as you might know. And that nation isn't an easy place for Christians right now. It's been fairly divided for sometime - made up of roughly half Christians and half Muslims. But a group of Muslim extremists, terrorists for sure - called Boko Haram - is determined to stamp out all non-Muslims and even nominal Muslims. I see it online all the time. And occasionally, I ask Gbenga about it.

The other night, he talked about how that militant group often lurks dangerously close to his hometown. How his family once had to flee when Boko Haram attacked a military base there. How it's not uncommon for them to kidnap young men and force them into their service. That's, in fact, part of the reason why Gbenga's parents sent him off to college here. Now that's not our experience here in America. But what if that became the case? If we lived day to day in fear that we'd be killed for our faith? It happens all over Africa - definitely in other parts of the world. If that was America, how would we deal with it? What, then, would we lean on?

We've already seen this happen with celebrities, public officials. Things are going great. They're at the top of their game. Someone finds out what they believe. They're suddenly fired. Or ostracized, at least. Canceled by everyone. Christian, does that seem really that far-fetched, even for us? You work at the university. You hold to traditional, biblical teachings on gender. You're not shoving them down your coworkers' throats. But people find out. And you're out. There's no longer room for you. What, then are you going to lean on?

We've been walking through the Old Testament book of Esther here on Sunday mornings. Every good story has a crisis point. And that's where we find ourselves today. The people of God, the Jews, suddenly find themselves in grave danger. And there are things they should have remembered. Truths that we see hints of in **chapter 3**. That they should have leaned on. But first, let's look at the crisis and how they got to this place.

Esther 1 and 2

The Jews have been removed and scattered from their homeland. They didn't obey God's rules. They paid the price for it. Some of them are far away from Jerusalem in a city called Susa. It's one of the capitals of the Persian Empire. The king, a man named Ahasuerus or Xerxes, is power-hungry and sex-obsessed. He throws this massive party to show off for the masses and to recruit more support for his continuing war on Greece. Several drinks in, he has this idea to call his wife, the Queen, and have her parade herself before all his male guests. In just her crown.

Vashti the Queen refuses. And this enrages the king. His advisors counsel him not to leave that defiance unpunished. The queen is deposed. And, sometime later, after another military defeat and no doubt many drinks in the tank, he agrees to their plan to find a new queen. They'll search the kingdom far and wide for the most beautiful virgins. They'll bring them in, give them beauty treatments, and then have a beauty/sex contest for the ages. The winner will be the new queen. And somehow a beautiful young woman named Esther, who's secretly a Jew, becomes that queen. Soon after, her uncle, a man named Mordecai, who had taken her in, a government official of some sort, overhears a plot to assassinate the king.

He tells it to Esther. She shares it with the king. Those traitors are then executed. We end **chapter 2** with Esther in the palace and her uncle expecting a big reward.

Chapter 3

But **chapter 3** doesn't begin the way we'd expect. We're reminded of the reality of injustice in our fallen world. Maybe you've been passed over for a promotion, missed out on a scholarship, found yourself on the bench, when you think you deserved better. The king ends up promoting a man named Haman in **verse 1** - not Mordecai. And that turns out to be a very bad thing for that Jew, and the nation as a whole, as we'll soon see.

In **verses 2 through 4**, we see Mordecai refusing to acknowledge Haman and respect him in his new, elevated position. The other servants of the king keep badgering him, telling him to bow, asking him why he won't. Mordecai refuses, only revealing to them it has something to do with the fact that he's a Jew.

In **verses 5 and 6**, Haman gets wind of this, and he loses his mind. We see the destructiveness of pride. In Haman, who can't handle even one person not affirming him. He commits to killing all of those of Jewish heritage. In Mordecai, who will not salute someone in a position of authority over him. He ends up putting all of his people in danger.

In **verse 7**, we see Haman - with his servants - casting "**pur**" - or lots - really they're dice. They're seeking guidance from the "gods" as to the best time to put this strange nation of people to death. We see the tragedy of idolatry here. They do this in the first month. The dice rolls points to the twelfth month. As the time to do this evil deed.

In **verses 8 through 11**, we see Haman take this plan to the king. He bends and twists the truth, making the Jews seem more dangerous and defiant than they really are. "They don't deserve to live, O King. They're not good for society, O King." We see the cruelty of prejudice here.

Haman offers the king money - at a time when bank accounts are dry - likely cash he'll take from those he'll kill. And the king goes along with the plan. He takes off his ring. He hands it to Haman. Giving him the authority to act. And the evil Haman runs out. And the King doesn't realize - he's just thrown a death sentence at his lovely new queen.

In **verses 12-15**, the decrees hits the press. The death sentence gets distributed. A day will come. The Jews will be plundered. They'll be executed. Good Persians are to turn against them. This is distributed across the great empire. **Verse 15** closes with the king and Haman sitting down for a drink. And the city of Susa completely freaking out. We see the inevitability of corruption in a fallen world. Imagine how you and I would feel if this news circulated throughout our land. What could God's people, the Jews, here possibly lean on? They needed something. And quick.

Genocide Here and Now

What comes to your mind when you hear this story read and recounted? Nazi Germany, right? As well, as all the other threats against Israel, throughout history and into today.

I'll tell you what else I think of, when I hear of mass amounts of people being killed in the year ahead. It's abortion. As unpopular as that is to bring up. The most recent tally from the Guttmacher Institute lists over 862,000 annually in America. That's over 2,300 per day.

Here's another thing that comes to mind. And it's not much more popular to talk about than that. Immigration. Large populations of people - many of them refugees - who aren't welcomed in our country. Minorities many wish would just go home, or disappear.

We could choose to be like so many in Germany back in that day. And go with the flow. And keep our mouths closed. Or we could stand up for life. And cry out for the oppressed. And welcome the weak, the vulnerable into our homes and cities. And make people mad - on both the right and the left - in doing that. But that's not really where I want to focus our time today.

Esther 3 Today

Here's how I think it best applies to us - in a couple of ways. **First, the persecution of God's people.** The Jews are under attack here in Susa back in late fifth century B.C. In modern-day Iran. The early Christians were under attack back in the 1st century. In the Roman Empire. And this is the experience of Christ-followers all over the world, even today. In places like Burkina Faso - where 24 people were gunned down and 18 wounded - just this past week.

Hear the words of Haman back in **verse 8** again.

Esth. 3:8 ..."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."

These were words used to describe the Jews. They're eerily similar to those spoken later of the early church. If they're said of us, and that talk turns to walk, what will we do? What will we lean on?

Here's another key application. **Second, the spiritual assault of Satan.** People today mock the idea of God. They especially laugh at the concept of demons. But the Bible describes the enemy of God's people - both then and now - coming at us, trying to destroy our souls.

Maybe you've heard of the concept of hard power and soft power. I remember being traumatized as a young person by the 1984 film *Red Dawn*. It was the cold war days. And the thought of Russians parachuting out of planes and attacking my high school with machine guns was frightening. That's hard power. Tanks and guns and bad guys trying to destroy your body.

But soft power is of a different kind. I love listening to this podcast with Mark Sayers and John Mark Comer. Sayers was recently talking about how Russia is now engaged in a different kind of warfare. Bringing confusion and chaos to America today. They talk about Russian computers programmed to send us ads or links, based on our search histories, right at our most vulnerable times, hitting on our deepest desires and fears. They talk about Facebook groups - one for alt-right racists, another for black lives matter - both originating from St. Petersburg, Russia - both posted and developed solely to sow chaos and rage and fear.

1 Peter 5:8 tells us, ***"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*** Sometimes that looks like soldiers with machetes. Sometimes it looks like tweets or memes. Satan seeks to discourage us. He tries to distract us. He preys on our disordered desires. He feeds us lies. That soft power is the biggest threat to us today. But it may not always be that way.

Now to really understand what happens in **chapter 3**, and to fully grasp how to apply it today, we have to look at the family backgrounds of the two men revealed in this text. This explains why Mordecai really refuses to bow to Haman the horrible, as well as why Haman really wants to destroy Mordecai and his people.

In **Esther 3:1**, Haman is called an ***"Agagite."*** Mordecai, over in **chapter 2**, and **verse 5**, is called a ***"son of Kish, a Benjamite."*** Haman, as an Agagite, is a descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites, who were descendants of Amalek.

Now, back in the day, the Israelites, beyond the Exodus, en route to the Promised Land, tired and vulnerable, immediately encounter the Amalekites at Rephidim. They attack God's people. Well, Joshua leads them to victory. But the Lord says this to Moses in **Exodus 17**.

Ex. 17:14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

Ex. 17:15 And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner,

Ex. 17:16 saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Later, in **1 Samuel 14 and 15**, Israel's first king has another run in with the Amalekites - again the ancestors of Haman. The Lord tells Saul - as an act of God's judgment - to wipe out the Amalekites completely. However, Saul disobeys. He spares their king - named Agag. He keeps some of the spoil. And the Lord is not pleased.

Mordecai's ancestor fails to destroy Amalek, as told. Therefore, Mordecai isn't about to give respect to his ancient enemy, and he isn't going to do what his ancestor did and dishonor God and sell out.

This also explains why Haman is angry. He is called in **verse 10**, as well as four other times in Esther, the **"enemy of the Jews."** He is an Amalekite trying to destroy the people of God. But all of this goes back even before Amalek and Joshua and Saul. Back to Jacob and Esau. To Cain and Abel. Back even to the very beginning.

To **Genesis 3:15**. Right after the fall. God curses the serpent who had tempted Adam and Eve, and said, **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."** Esau, Amalek, Agag, and Haman are all a part of the seed of the serpent that attempts to wipe out God's people and to destroy the seed of the woman, the Messiah.

So Haman is not just another bad guy. He is the pawn of the evil one, the serpent, of Satan. He is an old enemy with a new name. Haman stands as another in the long line of those that have tried to destroy the people of God and His gospel. So whether it's hard power - a sword - or soft power - a keyboard - this is just part of a conflict that has been going on forever and ever.

How will we stand? What will we lean on? Well, in this passage there are a couple of hints. Of two ideas that can make all the difference. Things that will support us in a time of crisis. In the roll of the dice. And what numbers are rolled.

Two Truths for Their Life and Ours

Truth one: God's really on the throne. Even when He seems silent. He's truly the King. He's the one reigning. We have to lean on this truth. Here in **chapter 3**, the "**pur**" are cast. The dice are rolled. We see that again in **verse 7**. Part of the reason this book was written was to remind God's people of that day. To institute a feast called Purim that we see in **chapter 9**. Where they'd celebrate the time when it looked like "no dice," but the Lord was really on a roll.

God seemed absent. He seemed silent. But really he was at work. Even in the roll of the dice. Nothing was happening that He didn't want to happen. He's the one ruling here. Over what we might call chance, or coincidence. Haman and his boys are shooting dice, thinking the gods are guiding them in what to do. They don't know the half of it. **Proverbs 16:33** reminds us, "**The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.**" The snake-eyes or whatever Haman rolls - that doesn't come by luck. And neither does anything else that happens here.

That also includes the presence of leaders like Haman. And Ahasuerus here. **Verse 1** talks about Haman being "**promoted**" and "**advanced**" and "**set... above all.**" But it's not really the king of Persia doing that. It's the king of the world.

Proverbs 21:1 puts it like this: *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will."* What He chooses to do. And how he's even there. Both come by the Lord. It's why we have this complicated relationship with rulers in this day. We are called to **"be subject"** to them (**1 Peter 2:13; Romans 13:1**) in one sense. While at some times we have to resist them when they go against the King of Kings. We'll see that next week.

But we must recognize rulers are on the throne because God puts them there. And their actions - even if evil - are somehow permitted by the good, wise providence of God. In **verse 11**, the king gives the ring to Haman. But it's really God making the decision. The king tells Haman to do with them whatever he wants. But it's really what the Lord wants that's gonna get done. They are not that king's to give! Haman's in that seat, and it couldn't look worse for God's people. But God's got a plan. He rules over rulers. And over dice rolls.

Now you know I'm gonna say this. I don't think Satan wants anything more than to mess with our heads and hearts heading into an election year. To get us all worked up. And forget who's in charge. He rules over poorly-coded voting apps. Hanging chads don't happen apart from Him. And no one gets into that house or that seat apart from His sovereign plan.

Now there's a second thing Satan also wants us to forget. In an election year when we can't stand any of the candidates. And on Monday mornings when we're headed out to go to work. **Truth two: He's really for His people.** There's another hint here in the way the dice are rolled. Did you notice that? I sure didn't. **Verse 7** says this original dice rolling by Haman is happening in the **"month of Nisan."** That's the month the Jews are celebrating the Passover. The edict is issued, in fact, says **verse 12**, on the **"thirteenth day of the first month."** That day is in fact the eve of the Passover.

What's the Passover? A long time before, the people of God are slaves in Egypt. It looks like God's promises have failed. But the Lord delivers them with His strong arm. He slays the firstborn of Egypt. The Israelites run free. They get cornered at the Red Sea. The waters part, and they go through on dry land. And their enemies drown.

The Lord gives them this feast, the Passover, to remember that night. So back to Susa in exile. These dice are being rolled during what should have been that festival. The decree is issued, by that wicked Haman, on the eve of actual day. The night before the anniversary of God delivering his people from Egypt. Haman is planning their destruction. God is orchestrating their deliverance. The Lord wants them to see this. He hasn't forgotten them.

There they are, in modern-day Iran, just over 100 miles away from where God first met Abraham and told him He would create a new people through him. Things look bad. Really bleak. But the Lord's just as committed to Israel there as He ever was. And they're soon going to find that out.

But it's interesting. When you get to the New Testament, in **Romans**, you see that God will bring many Jews, in the end times, into His church. But now, the church gathered from every nation makes up the Israel of God. National Israel is no longer the true Israel. Paul says it is ***"those of faith who are the sons of Abraham"*** (Galatians 3:7). He says, ***"if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise"*** (Galatians 3:29). We are His church, the new Israel. And our Lord is fiercely committed to us. He's with us. He's for us.

When persecution heats up. When spiritual warfare intensifies. If we're truly His. If we're in Christ. He is for us. He will deliver us. It brings to mind **Romans chapter 8**. ***"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"***

Rom. 8:37 ¶ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Rom. 8:38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,

Rom. 8:39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So now as Satan, the enemy of God's people, unleashes his attacks on us. As he prowls and roars - like a lion against us, seeking to devour us - as **1 Peter 5:8** puts it, we have to remember that He's for us. For His church. We must remember these words from **Romans 8**. He will keep His chosen people safe and secure.

Living As Gospel Community

Now one thing we've talked about so far in Esther is Israel's failure to live as missional community. They'd not been the light of the world they were created to be. They'd become just like the world around them. That's why they were exiled in the first place. And why things weren't getting any easier for them there.

But today, as we close, I want us to consider how they've failed to live well in gospel community. They are a long way from the Exodus. They're a long way from the Promised Land. We don't know if they are celebrating the Passover or not. But it sure doesn't seem like it. It sure seems like they've forgotten those truths. He's really on the throne. He's really for His people.

I want to close with four reminders as I wrap up this morning. **First, let us remind one another of what's true and real.** Of who God is. Of what He's done. It's easy to hit the snooze on Sunday mornings. Or just turn on Netflix rather than gathering with your MC. "I'll get the podcast. There's always next week." But it's just not the same as hearing your voice blend in with the people of God in song. The sermon is an event. It can't in a sense be recreated. It's an opportunity for God to work. And He does.

Have you ever thought of this? This Supper we're about to partake of is an act of spiritual warfare. You're here, with the saints of God, being reminded of what God has done in the past. You're being encouraged that He's for you. That He'll fully and finally deliver you in the future. We look back to the ultimate Passover. To Christ's death on the cross. His blood shed so we might go free. So we might have eternal life. And proclaim His return. You desperately need these reminders. But don't just come for you. But so you can remind others. The Jews needed Passover. They needed Purim. So do we.

Second, let's allow others to uproot lies in our hearts. Satan is the Father of Lies. That's how **John 8:44** puts it. He wants to convince us that we're in control. That we're king. That's the original lie in the garden. Or that no one is. That we're left to chance. But they're both lies and they kill.

He wants to convince us that God's not good. That He won't do what He says. The Serpent also said that back in Eden. So we have to take care of ourselves. But that will crush us - and those around us. We have to fight against it.

Those lies cling to our hearts. Their roots get entangled around our ventricles. And we need God to yank out those weeds - no matter how much it hurts. And he usually uses people to do that. Beyond these doors, you need to be part of close, Christian community. So people who know you can love you. They can see where you're being misled. And wake you up.

And let me also throw this in there. Whether it's Karis or somewhere else, you need to be a member of a church. You need to commit to a people. And have them make a commitment to you. To love you. But also speak truth to you. It's so easy to pop in and out of churches and never really commit. And leave when things get hard. And never let anyone say anything hard. You still have your options open. But at the end of the day, you're still on your own. And that's where Satan wants you. So He can destroy you.

The Jews here in Susa are freaking out. They've forgotten the truth. They've bought into lies. They've failed each other miserably.

Third, let's help each other store up food for years that are lean. You might know the story of Joseph from the Old Testament. He gets raised to power in Egypt. God reveals to him that seven years of famine are coming. So he leads the Pharaoh to take in taxes that will store up resources to get ready for that day. When the time comes, that nation, the nations of the world, don't starve. They survive.

Jake and Ali Gonzales are with us today. I got to hang with them a bit this week. Several years ago, Jake was an intern with Karis. He was my assistant. He was looking like he was going to go be a part of a church plant in Los Angeles. But then he started feeling funny. He went to urgent care.

A really good nurse rushed him to the ER. And things spiraled downward. To heart failure. Almost certain death. And then a heart transplant. He encouraged me a great deal the other day, talking about what Karis had meant to them. But he also talked about how his time here prepared him for that day. He had come to internalize, to truly believe, truths like we see today. That God rules over the world. That He's committed to His people. So when things got really hard, it wasn't easy. No way. But He clung to the Lord.

That's what I'm talking about here. Maybe things are pretty good for you right now. But either you've just come through a trial, you're in one right now, or one's just right around the corner. Store up food. The Jews should have been in the word of God, celebrating the feasts of God for years and years. So they wouldn't be in this mess. So they'd have hope in the midst of it. Get these truths tangled around your heart in a good way. Get in God's word - in community - as much as you can. Get on your knees in prayer - with your brothers and sisters. Every chance you can. You may not feel desperation now. But one day you will.

Fourth, let's help each other ditch crutches that support those lies. It seems pretty clear that the Jews had gotten pretty comfortable here in Susa. There, in exile, far from their homeland, they had comfort and ease. And they liked it. And we can find ourselves easily in the same place.

It's been common to call Christianity a crutch, right? You can't handle life, so you have this faith to support you. You're weak, otherwise you wouldn't need this Jesus stuff. But here's another way to think about it. Maybe these other things in our lives are crutches. Our jobs. Our looks. Our friends. Our health. Our hobbies. Maybe we're leaning on those things - things that won't last. Maybe we're relying on them because we can't handle sitting in front of the God of the universe. We can't handle what we see looking back at us in the mirror.

I've not been shy about praising Tim Keller's book on marriage. He talks about how we too often either run after exterior beauty or material wealth when we look for a spouse. We look for those things and then think we can build a friendship on top of that. But those things fade. They don't last. And then we're left with nothing. In the same way, we can build our life on things like those. Crutches. They go away. We have nothing. And we can't stand.

It's not just trials that can be our enemies. They can also be comforts. They can be gifts from God or Satan's greatest tools. We must recognize them for what they are. And truly lean on Jesus. Like the old song goes:

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Leaning, leaning,
Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Probably once every three months or so, Joseph Lass's parents come to visit. And it's always an encouragement. If you ever meet his mom, there's a 50/50 chance, when she introduces herself, she'll say something like this, "I'm Eileen. Here's how you can remember my name: 'I lean on Jesus.'" Now I can see teenage Joseph rolling his eyes and running the other way. But I sure wish I could have that truth so much tied to my identity. Wouldn't that be a good thing for all of us? We are those who lean on Jesus?! When the heat gets turned up. When all the crutches get torn away. Where will we lean? Lean on Him.

But also, lean into gospel community. Church is spiritual warfare military base. Let God's people remind you. Uproot lies in your heart. Help you store up truths for the future. Assist you in ditching props that distract you and will one day fail you. And point you to the one who's really on the throne. Who's really for his people. Lean on Him. Lean on them. When you're not strong. And that's ever day, by the way. When our enemy roars and prowls, we must lean on, lean in.