



ROLLING HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

the plot | esther chapters 3 & 4 | 04/15/2018

Main Point

How we act when we aren't acknowledged reveals the motivation of our hearts.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When you accomplish something and it goes unnoticed, are you usually relieved or bothered?

Explain.

When have you experienced the truth of the statement, "Doing right is its own reward"?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how important of a factor is the underlying motivation for your words and actions? Do you take into account your motivations before doing or saying something?

Explain.

REMEMBER THIS IS A GUIDE. THE GOAL IS NOT TO GET THROUGH ALL OF THE MATERIAL, BUT TO FACILITATE A GREAT DISCUSSION.

| Have a volunteer READ ESTHER 3:1-6.

The text doesn't clearly explain why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, other than his explanation that he was a Jew. Regardless, what opinions do people have about Christians that might cause them to disdain us or our convictions?

What does a person's underlying motivation have to do with his/her efforts to bridge that gap of understanding about obeying God?

How can we seek to bridge that gap in a way that Mordecai didn't seem to bother with?

Why do you think Haman responded so angrily to Mordecai's refusal?

What examples of pride do you see in this passage? What examples of prejudice do you see?

Mordecai found himself in trouble because of his refusal to bow to Haman, the head of King Ahasuerus's officials. Filled with pride, Haman responded to this slight by plotting to destroy the Jewish people. Pastor William noted, "In Mordecai's pride, Haman's prejudice was revealed. Haman disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone." In his efforts of retaliation, Haman's prejudice against the Jews was revealed.

| Have a volunteer READ ESTHER 3:7-15.

What did Haman's motives lead him to do?

Have you ever responded disproportionately to a situation because of pride? What about prejudice? Explain.

Agree or disagree: "Your actions impact the world's perception of Christians." Explain.

How could the questions, "What is my prize? Why am I doing it?" have changed Mordecai's words or actions in this story? What about Haman's?

Haman could not stand the thought of losing the approval of the people, so he promised Ahasuerus 10,000 talents of silver in exchange for writing an unchangeable new law. Haman's request was granted by Ahasuerus, who gave him his signet ring. With that ring, Haman had the power to carry out his planned extermination of the Jews. Ahasuerus's seemingly casual endorsement proved chilling in its consequences. King Ahasuerus never bothered to ask the identity of the ethnic group that Haman planned to destroy.

One of the simplest reasons why fearing the Lord is the opposite of being wise in our own eyes is because when we fear the Lord, our focus is on Him. And when our focus is on the Lord, we will see clearly just how great and wise He is and how small and foolish we are. There is nothing that helps with humility like a clear glimpse of God. Seeing Him reminds us of our place.

What are some signs a person's motivation is something other than the pursuit of Jesus?

| Have a volunteer READ ESTHER 4:1-11.

How hopeless did the situation seem to the Jews?

Why would Mordecai, who had wanted Esther to gain the position of queen so badly, ask her to risk her position and life now?

The edict meant certain death. The Jews weren't just threatened with persecution by the government; they faced the threat of mass murder. Esther was their only hope. The problem was that Esther, too, faced possible death just by trying to speak to the king about the matter. From every earthly angle, it was a lose-lose situation.

What internal conflicts must Esther have been feeling as she watched her people from the king's palace?

| Have a volunteer READ ESTHER 4:12-14.

In your own words, what did Mordecai say to Esther?

How does verse 14 apply to every Christian in the world today?

Share of a situation where you faced the choice of keeping silent or being a part of God's purposes.

Four challenges in this verse: 1. Don't forget who you are. 2. Don't forget who placed you where you are. 3. God will accomplish His purposes. 4. God wants to use you. God put us where we are for His purposes, and He wants to use us for such a time as this. His purposes will be accomplished one way or another, but He invites us to be a part of them. His invitation applies to us every day, not just when we're hopeless with one last shot. We need to live in a way where we take the risks necessary to enact the changes God wants in the world.

In your own life, what does the phrase, "For such a time as this" make you think about?

| Have a volunteer READ ESTHER 4:15-17.

By saying, "If I perish, I perish," what was Esther indicating about her understanding of her role in this situation?

Esther had decided, "This is worth my life." Nothing in this world is going to happen unless somebody lays it on the line. You can blog all you want, but nothing is gonna happen until somebody takes a risk.

Name something you have come to understand is worse than dying. How does this understanding motivate you to action?

Why are many believers more concerned about their comfort and security than they are about the desperate needs of the world?

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Why should Christians have zero tolerance for prejudice in their hearts? What are some examples of ways we allow prejudice to motivate us?

How can you guard against pride in your life? How can you guard against prejudice? Give specific examples.

It is not enough just to identify a wrong motivation—we must do something about it. Why must a right motivation replace a wrong one? With what can you replace your pride? your prejudice?

Why do you think God has placed you where you are, with your specific background and influence?

How does answering the above question impact your purpose on a daily basis?

What are you living for right now? What would you say we are living for as a group? If that needs to change, what steps do we need to take to make that happen?

Pray

Thank God for the place He has put you, the background He has given you, and the influence you have. Invite Him to strengthen you to live courageously with the understanding that your responsibility is to use everything to fulfill His purposes.

Commentary

| esther 3:1-15

3:1-6. This section is a critical part of the narrative that introduces the last protagonist in the story (Haman) and the conflict that now dominates the narrative (threat to the Jews). The initial incident that sparked the conflict was Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. A Jewish person was not forbidden by Scripture or cultural custom to bow down to a person in authority, but Mordecai, who presumably bowed down to the king and to other officials, repeatedly (vv. 2-4) refused to bow down to Haman. One of the most plausible explanations for Mordecai's refusal relates to Haman's name: "Haman... the Agagite." While Mordecai was possibly from the line of King Saul (see 2:5-7), Haman was a descendant of Agag (1Sam 15:8-33), the leader of the Amalekites. King Saul's disobedience in sparing King Agag (1Sam 15:8-9) resulted in Samuel's announcement that the Lord had taken the kingdom away from him and by extension his descendants (1Sam 15:27). Possibly this ancient enmity explains Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman the Agagite.

3:7. The "Pur" appears to derive from the Akkadian term *puru* meaning a "lot" or "fate." Presumably Haman wanted his astrologers or diviners to pick the most propitious date to launch his vengeance against Mordecai and his people. The month that was identified by lot was the month of Adar (normally March-April).

3:8-9. Haman cleverly began his presentation to Ahasuerus by starting with the truth ("There is one ethnic group, scattered throughout the peoples") and ending with a lie ("they do not obey the king's laws"). His offer to give the crown 375 tons of silver to pay for an empire-wide extermination may have encouraged Ahasuerus, whose coffers had been depleted by the war with the Greeks. The magnitude of the gift is apparent if one uses Herotodus' estimation of the income of the Persian king; such a gift from Haman would represent over half of the annual income of the Persian Empire. Yet it appears that the king may have refused the offer (v. 11), although both Mordecai and Esther assumed the king accepted it (4:7; 7:4).

3:10-11. Haman's request was granted by Ahasuerus, who gave him his signet ring, used by the king to put his official wax seal on a state document. With that ring, Haman now had the power to carry out his planned extermination. Ahasuerus's almost casual endorsement was chilling in its consequences. King Ahasuerus never even bothered to ask the identity of the ethnic group that Haman planned to destroy. The money is given to you may indicate that the king refused Haman's offer of "375 tons of silver" (v. 9).

3:12-15. The instructions were clear: all young and old, women and children were to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated (v. 13). The terrible decree was to be executed 11 months later, on the thirteenth day of Adar. Critics charge that such a decree that would be implemented almost a year later is ludicrous, since people would have had ample time to flee. But the Jews were dispossessed exiles whose lives depended on the king's good pleasure. Had they picked up to flee, undoubtedly the genocide would have been triggered early, for their fleeing would have been seen as an attempt to evade the king's decree.

The picture of Haman and the king drinking and congratulating themselves on their solution to the problem of the Jews contrasts with the disposition of the city. The impression is that the people in Susa were not in favor of the decree nor did they share Haman's rabid anti-Semitism.

| ESTHER 4:1-17

4:1-3. Mordecai's response to the king's edict was typical for his culture. All who saw him recognized his grief, especially since he cried loudly and bitterly. The term "to cry out" is often used in the Old Testament to describe a heartbroken howl over injustice (Gen 18:20), personal tragedy (2Sam 13:19), or national tragedy (Ezek 9:8). While Mordecai would not get the king's attention, he did get Esther's (Est 4:4), which was crucial. A law prohibiting a mourner to come into the palace is not attested in the ancient sources, but in a similar vein, Nehemiah stated that he had "never been sad" in King Artaxerxes' presence before, and when asked about it by Artaxerxes he "was overwhelmed by fear" (Neh 2:1-2). Mordecai was not alone in his grief. The Jewish people in every province wept and lamented and many lay on sackcloth and ashes. In many ways Mordecai epitomizes, or is representative of, the Jewish people.

4:4-7. The phrase "was overcome with fear" is from a Hebrew verb often translated as "writhe, tremble," occurring often in the context of childbirth. Here it is used to describe intense emotion, and it could be translated as "writhed in anguish" or "was agitated." The name "Hathach" possibly means "courier."

4:8-9. The courier was told to explain the decree. Either Esther was illiterate and the decree had to be read to her, or it was written in Persian and had to be translated into Aramaic. Mordecai was certainly aware of the danger he was putting Esther in by telling her to plead... personally with the king, but their situation was desperate. It is interesting how he emphasized that the Jews were "her people," the same people he had previously commanded her not to identify with (2:10).

4:10-11. Esther's response to Mordecai through Hathach was to remind him that to come to the king unbidden was certain death. Such a law was understandable in the Persian Empire with its long history of political assassinations (in fact Ahasuerus was murdered in his own bed less than ten years later). The one exception to this rule was if the king allowed an uninvited person to approach him, signified by his extending the gold scepter. Some assume that Esther's statement in verse 11 indicated that her absence from her husband was because she had fallen out of favor with him or that his passion for her had waned. Thus, the king might be less likely to respond to her unexpected presence and request. On the other hand, possibly her purpose was only to tell Mordecai that in the normal routine she did not see the king often, and this request would require her to make an unscheduled—and dangerous—visit.

4:13-14. Mordecai's reply to Esther was direct and to the point. Esther had no safe choices. Appearing unbidden before the king could mean death, but remaining silent, when so many servants and eunuchs knew of her connection to Mordecai the Jew, could likewise result in her death once the genocide was carried out.

Mordecai's statement that help would come from another place if Esther remained quiet is intriguing. The most obvious interpretation is to understand the phrase "another place" as a veiled reference to God. Others find it more likely that "another place" refers to a human source of deliverance, possibly Mordecai himself or another well-placed Jewish official similar to Nehemiah, who served Ahasuerus's son (Artaxerxes) as cupbearer. Mordecai and Esther would regard liberation and deliverance, whatever the source, as attributable ultimately to God's providential care for His people. This conclusion is supported by Mordecai's famous suggestion that Esther had come to your royal position "for such a time as this."

4:16. Often in times of crisis God's people would fast and pray, seeking God's help and deliverance (Jdg 20:26; 1Ki 21:9; Jer 36:9). Fasting took on an even more prominent role in the postexilic community (Ezr 8:21-23; Neh 1:4; 9:1-2). But this fast was unusually long, highlighting the severity of the threat to the Jewish people. Esther's last comment to Mordecai in this chapter (If I perish, I perish) is not just resigned fatalism.