



JESUS DIED A BETTER DEATH

Part 4 of Esther

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Esther 2:19–3:15 | October 07, 2012

SINS, MISTAKES, AND TRAGEDIES

Our lives are marked by three things: sins, mistakes, and tragedies. These complicate our life, sometimes to the point of discouragement or despair. Sins, meaning the sins that we commit against others, the sins that they commit against us, or perhaps even sins that someone commits that aren't against us, but they affect us.

Mistakes being not violations of God's laws, but just bad decisions. You're working for this company and you transfer to this company, and then they downsize and you lost your job, and at the time that you took it, you thought it was a good move, but it ended up being a bad move. You bought a home thinking that the market was strong and then you realized only Jesus is a sure foundation and everything else crumbles, and all of a sudden you're upside down. Those kinds of mistakes—you took the information you had and you made what you thought was a good decision, and then it ended up being a not so good decision.

And thirdly, just tragedies; things that, frankly, we just can't fully explain; the kind of stuff that Paul describes as: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" We don't know what's happening, we don't know why it's happening, we don't know what God is doing, we don't see as God sees. These are painful, hard circumstances, sometimes that we see coming, sometimes we don't see coming at all.

Recently, I was at one of the Mars Hill churches, and on my way in, there was a young woman and a really cute little girl, and they were greeting everyone and handing out some information about Mars Hill. And her husband and that little girl's dad was not there because he died in war, a soldier from Mars Hill Church. It's a tragedy. I won't even pretend to fully explain why that happens. Here's what I do know: when God made the world, it was very good and there was no death, and tragedy happens, and mistakes happen, and sins happen, and it complicates life.

And for you and me, as we open the pages of Scripture, I'd ask you to do that with me now. Go to Esther 2:19. You'll see that the Bible talks a lot about people, because God knows people, and God loves people, and God made people. And God perfectly writes the Scriptures through human authors, and he teaches us about people, sometimes sins, and sometimes mistakes, and sometimes tragedies.

So, one of the things that will help you and me study the Scriptures in general, but in Esther in particular, is looking for the sins, the mistakes, the tragedies, and how they complicate the story and they pain people's lives. And God puts these stories in the Scriptures for our instruction, we're told elsewhere.

COMFORT OVER CHRIST

So, as we pick up the story, and the title of this sermon is, "Jesus Died a Better Death," we're going to pick it up in chapter 2:19. "Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time," So, here are all these women competitors for *The Bachelor: Persia*. Mordecai, her older cousin who adopted her and looked after her as a father figure when her parents died, she was an orphan child, "Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate." And here, this is where politics and business was transacted, and so Mordecai, he has an official governmental position. He works somewhere in the king's government. This is one who is holding some sort of public office.

"Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him." So, at this point, nobody knows that she's Jewish, and these are God's people in the old covenant. Mordecai told her, "Don't let anyone know of our belief in belonging to the God of the Bible. So, you know, don't click that box on your Facebook page. Don't let anybody know. Don't Twitter anything out. Whatever you do, don't let folks know that you believe in the God of the Bible."

Now, let me say, sometimes it's okay to not lead with that. Right? Let's say you're going into a job interview and they say, "Well, tell me about yourself." "I love Jesus. I love Jesus with all my heart. Every day, I read a book about Jesus, and I pray to Jesus, and I sing to Jesus. Do you know Jesus? You need to know Jesus. I'm here to tell you about Jesus." That may explain your unemployment. It's not, sometimes, the best way to lead. Right? Not the best way to lead.

And so I'm not saying that we always need to start with our Christian faith, wear the t-shirt, and start with the slogan, but if your whole life is concealing your relationship with God because you don't want to suffer publicly, you don't want to be mocked, you don't want to be opposed, you don't want anybody to dislike you, then what you worship is not Christ, but ultimately, comfort. And I believe their decision is one of comfort. "If everybody knows what we really believe, some will not like us, and it could hurt our upward mobility. Therefore, let's conceal it."

Some of you have been taught that faith, or religion, or spirituality is a private thing, not a public thing. It's something that you need to hold within you, but not share with others around you. And the God of the Bible, he wants you, if you belong to him, to be public with that faith. Faith must be public. It is never private. We want others to know the God who loves us so that they might love him, and we are a means by which others come to hear about the God of the Bible, and if we conceal our relationship with him, we are being unfaithful to him.

But for so many, their income, their job, their politics, their family, their social network, their relationships, their comfort, and their convenience trump Christ.

And so it is with Esther and Mordecai, and she's taking the instruction of Mordecai. "Don't tell anybody we belong to the God of the Bible." This is like some of you. You don't want to go public with your faith. You don't want to be baptized because that is a public thing. You don't want to get up and take Communion because that is a public thing. When people are badmouthing Christians or Christianity at your place of employment, or your school, or the professor's going after the dumb evangelicals again, you just stay quiet, because, for you, it's comfort over Christ. Mordecai and Esther are like that.

AN ASSASSINATION PLOT

"In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate," so, he's transacting business, two guys we met previously in the book, "Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs—" We'll explain this: A eunuch is, by definition, someone who used to be happy, and—that's the technical definition of a eunuch. And the way it would work is the king had this huge harem with lots of women, and he knew that if he allowed men to work in the presence of these women, many of whom he neglected, never spoke to, didn't even know, well, these men would pursue these women and these women would fall in love with these men.

So, what he would do is he would take and have the men castrated that worked in the presence of the harem. And history records that he would take upwards of five hundred young men a year and have them castrated. It's like being drafted in the military. You now belong to the king, he's called your number, he's going to castrate you, and you're going to work in the palace.

And these two men are eunuchs who are supposed to be guards. So, think of King Xerxes like our president, and these would be his Secret Service detail. Now, what you're going to find is these two guys try and kill him. Well, of course they are. Back to my first point, he made them eunuchs. So, the story continues—I would. Right? "You made me a eunuch, I'm going to kill you." That just seems—anyone should be able to connect those dots. It doesn't take a ton of theological work.

"Two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus." Ahasuerus is his Persian name, Xerxes is his Greek name. And this is a very significant issue in the ancient world. Those who were closest to the king were the most likely to betray the king. Ultimately, King Xerxes is gonna die at the hands of servants who are close to him.

So it is in our day. If you're in leadership in business, if you're in leadership in ministry, if you're in leadership in government, the most likely people to betray you are those closest to you. They can get jealous of your success, they can second guess your decisions, they can want to share in your glory, they can be manipulated by others, those who are critical, or have cash payouts, or want something to benefit you if you will just undermine them.

Two things: number one, for those of you who are leaders, be careful whom you entrust and allow close to you. Number two, if you are someone who is in a position near those who are in leadership, make sure you always guard your heart and your motives, and that you don't just do what's in self-interest, but do what's in God's interest.

Well, the situation here is one where now his life is in danger. This is an assassination plot. This would be the lead story on CNN. This would be international news. This is the most powerful man on earth, and there's a plot for his execution and his murder. "And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai." So, Mordecai finds out. Somehow, he overhears. How many of you, if you were Mordecai, you'd just let it go. You're like, "He's kind of nasty. He slept with my adopted daughter. You're going to kill him? Okay."

Mordecai has a decision. Is he going to do a good thing for a bad man? Xerxes is a bad man. Will Mordecai do a good thing for a bad man? Will he say something and spare his life or will he continue to remain silent and allow Xerxes to be executed, to be murdered?

Well, here's what he does. Verse 22: "He told it to Queen Esther." His adoptive daughter that he raised is queen, and he tells her, "There's an assassination hit out on your husband." "And Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai." "Where did you learn this?" "I learned this from Mordecai."

"When the affair was investigated." So, they go out and research it. And this is treason. Any of you with a military background, you know how serious this is. Trying to kill a commanding officer, let alone a president, a king. It's investigated. Is this true? "It was found to be so." It's all true. The assassination attempt was uncovered.

"So, the men were both hanged on the gallows." We'll come back to that in a moment. "And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king." The reason that the Scriptures include that is it makes it clear that Xerxes knew exactly who was gonna kill him and exactly who saved his life. They bring the entire report. This is like a congressional hearing. They bring the entire report to King Xerxes: "Here was the plot, it was uncovered. Here's all the documentation, here's all the witnesses, here's all the evidence, here was the plan, here was the buyout, here are the bank records, here's the payoff, here it is. And Mordecai is the one who saved your life. He overheard this, he found a back channel of communication, through Esther, so that you could get the truth without notifying those who wanted to kill you, because they would have found out, and they would have hastened the assassination attempt. Mordecai saved your life," and it's all written down in the presence of the king in what they call the chronicles. That's the official records. These are the official court records of the day.

And the two men who plotted the assassination of Xerxes, what happens to them? It says, "They were hanged on the gallows." Now, when we hear this, we can almost picture in our mind's eye, like an old western. Sort of a high platform, everybody's looking, a bunch of ropes with nooses hanging on them. You know, men, tied behind the back and at their ankles with rope, and then the trap door opens, and then they hang. That's not how it worked in Persia. It literally means they were hung on a tree.

And there's a debate, historically, among the theologians and the archeologists, were they impaled or were they crucified? The truth is, crucifixion started at about this time, four or five hundred years before Jesus Christ was born, and it was created by the Persians. Crucifixion was later perfected by the Romans who murdered Jesus by crucifixion. This was a form of state-sponsored terrorism. This is like when a Muslim nation beheads somebody on TV. It's a public spectacle so that everybody knows, "Don't believe what they believe and don't behave how they behave." And the point is, if you sin against a great king, he has a right to crucify you, and this is demonstrated publicly, and everyone sees it.

HAMAN THE AGAGITE

The question remains: what happens to Mordecai? How many of you feel, at this point, Mordecai should get something? A prize, an award, a gold star, a lifetime supply of jellybeans.

Something, right? Yay, Mordecai! They were going to kill the king, they didn't kill the king, the king crucified them. It seems like he should do something nice for you. Right? What does Xerxes do? Nothing. Nothing.

Chapter 3, verse 1, "After these things." Five years later. Some of you are like, "Well, he didn't have time to go to the store." Five years. He could have gotten him something at the mall. "Hey, thanks for letting me breathe." Five years. But this is Xerxes. He's this guy we see over, and over, and over. He is self-consumed; he's not others-concerned. He's self-consumed; he's not others-concerned.

"After these things King Ahasuerus promoted—" Oh! Somebody's going to get a promotion. How many of you think, maybe, perchance, hypothetically, Mordecai should be considered? No. How many of you have this boss? Like, I could save their life and get demoted. It's biblical. It's right here. That's how bosses are.

"After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite." You just know this is going to be a bad guy. His name just sounds like a mouthful of gravel. The Agagite. It just sounds—Agagite. "We're the Agagites!" You can just tell, this guy's—yeah, he's not good. "Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha." And as I always say, the Bible words are hard. Read them fast, read them confident, read them loud, no one knows how to pronounce them. They'll assume you nailed it. Little Bible reading tip for you. "And advanced him and set his throne," he got a throne, "above all the officials who were with him."

Now, the Jews would have heard this. They would have said, "The Agagites! The Agagites! They're our enemies!" In the Old Testament, when God newly forms the nation of Israel, the first people to attack them, to basically be terrorists against them, to try and destroy and obliterate them: the Agagites. So, all of a sudden, you've got Mordecai saving Xerxes' life, and his new boss is Haman the Agagite. You see the tension in this story?

Not only that, he gets a throne. You're poor, you sit on the floor. It's going okay, you get a chair. Once you get a throne, it's going pretty good for you. He gets a throne. He gets a little throne. He's like a little king. He's like a little god, Haman is. "Here's my throne." He rules over it. And now Mordecai, as a governmental official, and a citizen of Persia, he's under Haman the Agagite, the enemy of God's people who've been trying to destroy God's people for generations.

"And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage." Okay, here's the problem. Haman sits on his throne and says, "Everybody who comes before me, bow." Mordecai is present, and he doesn't bow, and it's going to be an awkward moment, right? A whole bunch of people bowing, Mordecai... just giving the stink eye to Haman. You know? "I'm not bowing. I'm not bowing." He's up on his tip-toes like, "I'm anti-bowing. I am not bowing."

And all the other guys are looking like, "Oh, really? What happens if you don't bow?" They're all wondering, because now, Haman's being publicly opposed. He's being publicly ridiculed. He's being publicly undermined. It's defiance.

Now, I'm not sure that this is a good move by Mordecai. You can discuss this in your Community Group, your women's Bible study. You can debate it. Some would say, "Well, he wanted to be worshiped as a god." I don't think so. In that day, politically, you would bow. In some Asian cultures you still bow, right? It's just a sign of respect. In the military, you salute. Someone comes across, a higher-ranking official, you salute. It's a sign of respect. Even if you don't really appreciate the person, you salute the uniform. You respect the chain of command. In British culture, you come before the queen, you bow, you curtsy, whatever the case may be. It's just a sign of respect.

Here, Mordecai, all of a sudden, he's gotten tough. Up until this point, he's a jellyfish. No vertebrae at all in this guy. He's just a total coward. My view. He doesn't tell anybody, "I belong to the God of the Bible." They come along and say, "Hey, we'd like your probably teenage, adopted daughter to go to the spa for a year at the Playboy Mansion and sleep with the king." And he doesn't say anything, doesn't do anything, doesn't fight it, goes along with it. Now, it says that he's worried, and he checks on her every day. So he's sort of a Nervous Nellie, all right, but he's not really a Courageous Cam. He doesn't really do anything.

And all of a sudden he's like, "That's it! I'm gonna make my stand here on the bowing! You can sleep with her, but bowing, that's the line." It's a weird place to draw the line, right? It's a weird place to draw the line. It's a weird place. The sleeping with my teenage girl, that's where I draw the line! He's like, "Oh, that's not a problem, but this bowing thing, I can't do that."

So, he picks a really weird place to sort of—and some guys are like that. Like, you're never tough, and then you get tough at the wrong time. And we're sort of glad about that, but you've still got to work on your timing. Wrong time. Here's tough guy Mordecai. A little rap for you. It's free. You're welcome. Tough guy Mordecai, he's going to stand up to Haman the Horrible.

So what's Haman going to do now? What would you do? You're the boss, you sit on a throne, you rule and reign, and one guy just keeps—his whole life is just flicking you. Just flicking you. You been in a car with kids? You been that kid? You're doing a road trip your parents. You're like, "They won't stop flipping flicking me! They're always flicking me. They keep flicking me." Mordecai's a flicker. He just keeps flicking. "I'm not bowing. I'm not bowing. Didn't bow yesterday, not going to bow today. See you tomorrow! Guess who's not bowing?"

It gets to the point where Haman, he's starting to go crazy. He's starting to go nuts. Now Mordecai's a rock in his shoe. He's waking up in the morning, "Oh, I'm going to see him. I'm going to see him today. He's not going to bow. He's not going to bow. Man, this guy's driving me crazy. He's frustrating me." What's he going to do?

Verse 3: "Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, 'Why do you transgress the king's command?'" Uh-oh. Now it's escalated. You're not just disobeying Haman. The king Xerxes, the guy who thinks that the sun speaks through him, high self-esteem in that guy, called himself king of kings, lord of lords. Sound familiar? That guy, Xerxes, he's the one who said that everybody needs to bow down to Haman. "Mordecai, when you don't bow down to Haman, you're disobeying Xerxes, the lord."

"Why do you transgress the king's command?" And they spoke to him," what? "Day after day." Mordecai is holding his ground. "And he would not listen to them, and they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew." All of a sudden, he pulls out his religious beliefs, totally for his own game. "How come you won't bow down?" "I'm Jewish. I'm Jewish. I forgot to tell you guys that for, I don't know, forty years. Whoops. I'm Jewish."

How many of you are that way? You're like drunken thief, you know, and all of a sudden your friends want to do something terrible and you're like, "I'm a Christian." They're like,

“What? What kind of Christian are you?” “I’m the hypocritical kind. We’re a huge denomination.” And how many of you are like that? You keep your faith a private matter until it benefits you, and then all of a sudden you’re really committed.

Up until this point, he’s living in Persia. He’s not supposed to be. He doesn’t tell anybody he loves the God of the Bible. There’s no evidence that he prayed, read the Scripture, tithed, went to the temple, offered a sacrifice, sang a song. He doesn’t defend the honor of his adoptive daughter. He’s eating the king’s food. “Do you want a ham sandwich?” “Yeah, can I get some bacon on that?”

He’s a total compromised hypocrite, and then as soon as they’re like, “Well, you’re going to get in trouble.” “I’m Jewish, do I get the ‘get out of jail free’ card? I have religious convictions.” And let me ask you this: how many of you, you really don’t love God, you really don’t walk with God, but you’ll pull out the card when it’s for your convenience? That’s what he does. “I’m Jewish, does that help?”

Well, let’s see. Verse 5: “And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him—” How many of you, you’re like Haman? You just can’t let it go. Like, Haman’s life is going good, right? He’s got a throne, he’s ruling and reigning, everybody bows down to him except for one guy. What does he become obsessed with? One guy. We get like that, don’t we? Everything in life is great except for one thing, and that’s what we obsess over. That’s what we freak out about. That’s who we’re frustrated by.

“Haman was filled with fury.” He’s not happy. He is angry. “But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone.” Haman’s thinking, “I want to kill that guy, but I don’t want to do it with my hands. I’ve got to get somebody else involved.” How many of you are like that? You don’t like them, but you don’t talk to them, you talk about them. You don’t want to deal with them, so you send somebody else to deal with them.

He’s this real passive-aggressive character. He won’t just walk up to Mordecai and have the conflict. He’s going to build an entire case and create an entire scenario where he can destroy him without getting his hands dirty. Leaders, we’ve got to be careful we don’t act like this. We’re all prone to it, that we take offense at one person, and rather than dealing with them, we plot against them.

“So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy,” what? “All the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.” “I won’t bow down.” “Then I will kill you, and everyone else who’s like you.” It sort of backfired on Mordecai, right? He was thinking pulling out his religion card would save his life. Now it’s going to cost everyone else their life. “Oh, you’re a Jew? Then I hate Jews!” Haman becomes the first Hitler. This is a plot for genocide. He’s going to destroy an entire community of people, primarily because they’re God’s covenant people.

See, the names change but the script doesn’t. Satan writes it, hands it to Haman. “Hate God’s people, the Jews, seek to commit genocide, and destroy them.” Years later, Hitler comes along and Satan hands him the same script. “Hate the Jews, plan genocide, use the government, try to destroy them all.” You need to know that there is a continual conflict between God and Satan, and God’s people and Satan’s people, and Satan sometimes empowers people to try and destroy God’s people. And here, it happens in the days of Mordecai.

How many of you are horrified that a government could send forth a decree for the execution of an innocent people? And how many of you know we don’t have the moral high ground in a nation that has sanctioned the murder of the unborn? We take life every week; we do it legally, but it’s not holy.

You and I need to be very careful when we read the Scriptures, that we don’t come to them with a haughty, religious, self-righteous high ground. We’re no better than the Persians. They would slaughter innocent people who hadn’t done anything, and we do as well, and they can’t vote, so it doesn’t bother us. We’ve got to be very careful if we’re going to condemn holocausts that we condemn all holocausts, not just the ones that are apart from our watch.

WHO WOULD YOU KILL IF YOU COULD?

To this day, on Purim, the Jewish holiday, they read this story, and Haman is jeered and hissed. He’s a man who is despised by the Jewish people. Now, in reading this, again, we can read it religiously. “Haman’s an awful man. Thank you Lord, I’m better than Haman.” Or I can ask you a very difficult question. “Who would you kill if you could?” Don’t say it, especially if they came to church with you.

If I came to you and I said, “You know, the Lord told me you get to whack one person.” You get a—so here’s the card, and it just says, you know, “From the Lord, one free whacking,” and then there was a blank line—you got to write in anybody’s name you wanted. Would you or would you not write somebody’s name down? Some of you say, “Well, they deserve it, so it’s not a bad—”

Jesus says in Matthew 5 that murder and hatred are on the same highway, one’s just further down the road, that when we hate someone, we commit murder in our heart against them. The difference is, sometimes, Haman had the legal ability to kill, and we lack the legal ability to kill, so we have murder in our heart that doesn’t quite extend to our hands. Who do you hate? If you could, who would you kill? Who would you kill?

Again, Haman’s in a position where if he hates you, he could kill you, punish you. We hate people, we punish them, and we tend to cause those who are close to them, family, friends, coworkers, neighbors to suffer with them as additional punishment of them. And when we seek that kind of vengeance, we’re practicing the same attitude and disposition as Haman.

Again, friends, I love you, I’m your pastor, but I want us to be very careful when we read the Scriptures that every time we see a bad guy, we realize that’s either us, or apart from the grace of God, it could be.

The story continues. “In the first month,” verse 7, “which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus.” All of this is historical. It shows that God works in history. He works in people’s lives. He works in nations. It’s not just therapy, good ideas on how to live a better life. It’s not just philosophy, speculation about life and God. It’s theology, God revealing himself in history to peoples, times, places.

“They cast Pur (that is, they cast lots).” You’re going to hear later in the book that Esther institutes the feast of Purim, and it is named after this. And here, it means the casting of lots, and this is divination. In that day, these men, like Haman—he’s not an atheist. He’s very spiritual, but he worships a god other than the God of the Bible.

You need to know that spirituality is a very dangerous thing. Now, they won't tell you that. They'll tell you that spirituality's a good thing, but when we're talking about spirits, we're talking about angels and demons, clean and unclean spirits, holy and unholy spirits, obedient and disobedient spirits, and to open yourself up to the spirit realm is to potentially open yourself up to the demonic.

And what he's doing here in the casting of lots is he's asking the spirit realm, and the spirits, and the demons: guide the dice, make the decisions, put together the plan for the destruction of God's people. Satan is always involved. Paul says it this way in Ephesians 6: Our battle, our war is not against flesh and blood but powers, principalities, and spirits. Haman is no victim, but he's empowered by Satan and demons who are helping to organize a plan for the destruction of God's people.

It's not enough to be spiritual, friends. In fact, spirituality can be the most dangerous thing of all. If it's not from Christ, if it's not for Christ, if it's not through Christ, if it's not to Christ, then it's to be condemned. And he is here practicing divination.

HOW ARE YOU LAZY AND GREEDY LIKE XERXES?

"And they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar." So, they're asking the demonic realm to put together a plan for the genocide of God's people. "Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "'There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom.'" Big problem. It's everywhere. "Their laws are different from those of every other people." They have this thing called the Scriptures. "And they do not keep the king's laws." They're kind of like Vashti. Sometimes they say no. "So that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them." And this isn't good for you, King. I'm just looking out for you. "If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed."

So, here's the plan. "I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." I'm going to make you a lot of money and get rid of your problem. "So the king took his signet ring," this is power of attorney, "from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, 'The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.'"

Question: how do you tell the story in such a way that it benefits you? We all do it, right? It starts when you're little. You do something evil against your sibling, they start screaming, you try to run to mom and dad first and tell your version first. Proverbs says it rightly, "Everyone seems right until the other side is heard."

Here's what Haman does: he runs to Xerxes. "Let me explain to you exactly what's going on. There are these people called Jews. They have a book called Scripture. They obey laws they say are from God. They think their God's bigger and better than you, and this is a real problem. I'm here to fix it. Let me destroy them, and I'll plunder them, take all their money." Just like Hitler did. Right? "Get the fillings out of their teeth and melt it down. I'll split it 50/50. I'll give you tax revenue that is equal to 50 percent of the annual income of the entire empire. This is a massive business opportunity. There is profit to be made. All we need to do is kill these evil people and plunder their goods, and I'll split it with you."

And Xerxes doesn't do his homework. Xerxes doesn't get both sides of the story. Xerxes doesn't investigate the facts. Xerxes says, "That's a great plan. Here's the power of attorney. You now have control over their life and death." Sometimes it's really easy to only get partial information, misinformation, and make a decision that affects a lot of people that you don't even know. Deeply convicting and concerning. So, pray for me, and pray for your leaders, and pray for us.

Xerxes doesn't know these people. Xerxes doesn't love these people. Xerxes only gets reports about these people. And here's the truth: leaders get in real trouble when you're only dealing with numbers and not faces. For those of you who are leaders in business, or leaders in politics, or leaders in ministry—God knows numbers. He also sees faces. He loves people, not just crowds. People with faces, and names, and stories. Xerxes doesn't care about people. All he cares about is numbers, and he's willing to reduce the number of people to increase the number of dollars.

This is what we do. Right? Every election year, the signet ring goes on our finger, and the case is made through partial truths. If you have wealth, vote for this person to lower your taxes, more money for you. If you're poor, vote for the other person. They'll tax the rich and give more of the wealth to you. And it's all about misinformation and personal, financial gain. We need to be careful when we read Xerxes that we ask, "How am I like Xerxes or how, apart from the grace of God, could I be like Xerxes?"

You ready for the next hard question? Here it is. How are you lazy and greedy like Xerxes? I didn't ask if. I didn't ask, "Are you hypothetically, potentially inclined toward the direction of laziness and greed like Xerxes?" Because then you would think, "Well, I know someone who is."

We're prone toward laziness. Right? We don't do our homework, we don't research, we don't investigate. Xerxes was told, "They're bad people, they're hurting you, you should destroy them." He said, "Sounds good. Decision." Leaders are not just to make decisions, they're to make the right decisions, and that takes the right information.

And how are we greedy? How many decisions do we make based solely upon, "This will generate more income toward me." Sometimes, the best thing is not what's in our interest but in the interest of others. Does Xerxes need the money? Yes or no? Xerxes doesn't need anything. This guy just threw a six-month open bar party for tens of thousands of people, and then opened a spa for hundreds of women for twelve months. He not only has a palace, he has two! It's like somebody who's got a really nice house and a really nice vacation house. They're doing fine. He's worshiped as a god. This guy has more money than he knows what to do with, but the Bible's right, "He who loves money never has enough."

We need to be careful and cautious and ask, "How are we like Xerxes?" We believe things about people, negative things that are said, criticisms, gossip. We don't even know them. We haven't even checked the facts. Or greed. We make decisions solely based upon the bottom line, not the glory of God and the good of others.

Friends, this is so important. Some of you are leaders in your family. Some of you are leaders in business. Some of you are leaders in ministry. Some of you are leaders in politics. I don't want us to just be a self-righteous, judgmental, hypocritical, moralistic people who say, "Haman's bad. Xerxes is bad. Thank you, God, that I'm good." Say, "You know what? I could be like Haman. I could be like Xerxes. I could get furious with one person, and take my wrath out against them, and punish others just to cause additional suffering. I could be like Xerxes, lazy, not do my homework, just make financial decisions, and hand away authority, and not love and know people, just counting numbers not seeing faces." Deeply convicting for me as your pastor. Man, I don't want to be that, but I know, apart from the grace of God, that's the inclination of every human heart.

"KILL ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE"

So, what's going to happen now? I mean, this is quite a mini-series, right? I mean, you tune in the next week like, "I've got to see what happens. We've got Mordecai, we've got an Agagite, we've got Esther. She still hasn't said or done anything yet. Is she going to be okay? Xerxes just gave away all the authority and power of the kingdom."

Here's the next episode. "Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded." Haman wrote up the policy and the king just signs it—"was written to the king's satraps," these are the provincial rulers, "governors over the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring."

Now, Xerxes rules like a god, and when he says something it's like inerrant Scripture, and so the scribes, they write it down, right? It's like Paul or Moses getting a word from the Lord and writing it down. That's what the scribes here do. "What does the king say? We write it down, word for word." And then they do the same thing we do with the Bible. They translate it into all the languages of the people, because the empire ruled over many nations. And then they created the first postal system. The Pony Express in the U.S. literally borrowed its slogan, its motto, from the Persian mail delivery system. And then, copies are made, and it is sent out for everyone to hear and obey. And like Scripture, it can't be changed. They called it the Laws of the Medes and Persians.

And out goes the decree: "Kill all of God's people." How many of you are expecting God to intervene at this point, a miracle, an angel, a prophet? God doesn't speak. God doesn't act. It just keeps going.

Verse 13: "Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews," all of God's people. Heavy language. Destroy, kill, annihilate, "young and old," little girls with pigtails, little boys who are swimming in the river, toddlers who are learning how to walk, chubby-faced kids who are learning how to speak, and old grandpas who can't even get up and run when the soldiers come, grandpas whose hearing is so bad, they didn't even hear the door get kicked down. Everybody's going to die.

It's satanic, it's demonic. God brings life, Satan brings death. This is evil unvarnished and evil unmasked, through a man who's unrepentant, and that's all that it takes.

"Women and children, in one day." One day. Xerxes has the largest army in the history of the world. Herodotus, the Greek historian, says it was at least a few hundred thousand soldiers, maybe a few million, and the decree comes to the commanders and to the generals: "Grab your weapons, go find babies, little girls, boys, grandmas and grandpas, pregnant women. Slaughter them all."

People are not good by nature. People are not morally upright and devout by nature. This is the human heart, untethered from the restraining grace of God.

"The thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods." That's how he's going to pay off Xerxes. He's going to kill them, take all their stuff, and give a percentage of it to the king.

"A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day." They announced it in advance. Can you imagine the terror and the horror? "It's coming, the execution of all of us." See, friends, we die a little bit at a time, but we're all going to die, and we tend not to live under the horror and the terror of it until people die all at once. That's why disasters and tragedies, they grip international attention and focus. There are funerals every day, but when there are mass graves, it gets our attention.

"The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to," what? What do they sit down to do, Mars Hill? To have a drink. It's the same thing that a lot of guys do after they close a big deal in business, and they haven't really prayed about it or considered the implications on others. Just have a drink. "What a great day. Boy, we really made some money today. We are so rich. We are so powerful. Yeah, we destroyed some people, but I'll drink to that." Friends, there's nothing wrong with making money. There's something horribly wrong in making money by destroying innocent people. And they sit down to have a drink.

"But the city of Susa was thrown into confusion." What this means is as the citizens heard, those who were not Jewish, many were revolted. They said, "We love these people. They're our neighbors, they're our friends, they're our coworkers. These are decent neighbors. These are good citizens."

Mars Hill, may we live in such a way that when persecution or opposition comes against Christianity, that those who are non-Christian would say, "Wait, they love the whole city. They serve the whole city. They cared about everybody," because we're made in the image and likeness of God. We don't agree with them and we don't worship the same God, but we don't want them to die. They love us and we love them." God's people are to live lovingly in the culture in such a way that even the non-Christians know that God loves them because we love them.

This is so important. We don't just love Christians, we love non-Christians too. We don't just love those who love our God, we love those who will even worship false gods. And yes, I said false. But we can disagree in such a loving way that we're a blessing to the city and we're a blessing to others, and they know we love them even if we disagree with them. And so uproar came through Susa. May it always be that way with us. May those who disagree with us be silenced by others who disagree with us but have been well-loved by us.

FIFTEEN THINGS THAT SHOULDN'T BE

Now, I told you at the beginning of the sermon, three things painfully mark our lives. Do you remember them? Sins, mistakes, tragedies. They are everywhere in this story. Fifteen things I'll share with you, some are sins, some are mistakes, some are tragedies, some are combinations of two or three. Here's the big idea: it shouldn't be happening. It shouldn't be like this. Just like our world, just like your life, it shouldn't be like that. It's wrong. It's not right.

Number one: generations prior to Esther, God's people should not have continued in sin so that they were exiled. The whole reason they're in Persia is this: generations prior—and here's the truth. Sometimes the stuff of your life that is most painful was made generations before you were born, but it implicates and affects you.

Generations prior, they were sinning against God, so God had them exiled to Babylon. Had they not sinned against the Lord, they wouldn't have been exiled to Babylon. The Jews weren't supposed to be here in the first place. They're supposed to be in Jerusalem. They're here because of unrepentant sin. Had they not sinned, they wouldn't be here.

So it is with us, right? How many of you, the hard, difficult, arduous, painful circumstances of your life, your parents' sin, your grandparents' sin, your great-great-grandparents'

sin, your sin got you in a place you're not supposed to be in the first place?

Number two: once freed, all of God's people should have obeyed Isaiah and returned to Jerusalem. The Bible says that a king, Cyrus, came along, and he liberated the captives from Babylon. He was not a godly man, but he was a man with a conscience who didn't believe that one person should own another. He opposed slavery.

And as soon as there was liberation for the Babylonian captives, God spoke through Isaiah and said, "Go home. Go to Jerusalem. Rebuild the city and the temple." That's literally where God's presence would be. "Return to the Lord." Isaiah commanded it. Some obeyed it. You'll read about them in the book of Nehemiah and the book of Ezra. He is a contemporary to Esther, and those are the people who went back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. They went back to the Lord.

This tells us what happens to those who disobeyed. They didn't go home, they didn't obey Isaiah, and it's been some, I think, forty or fifty years. They shouldn't even be there.

Number three: the death of Esther's parents was tragic. We know not how they died, but anytime there's a child who loses both mother and father, through sickness, through war, through famine, whatever the case may be, through tragedy, it's devastating. I've got five kids. I can't imagine my kids without Grace and me, let alone my daughters. It's a tragedy.

Number four: Esther and Mordecai should have been walking faithfully with God. Thus far, in the Bible, we don't see them praying, reading Scripture, tithes, offerings, sacrifices, going to Jerusalem, talking to God, obeying the dietary laws, maintaining sexual purity. Nothing! Nothing. They're not walking with God. There's no indication. All those who are walking with God walked to Jerusalem. Those who didn't walk with God stayed in Persia.

Number five: Esther and Mordecai should not have concealed their faith so long. At some point, they should have gone public. At some point, they just should have said, "We believe in the God of the Bible. We're one of his people." Had they done that, the decree likely would not have gone out to destroy all the Jews, because who's a Jew? Esther, the queen. And if she would have been public with her faith as soon as Haman said, "I'm going to murder all those people," the king would have said, "You can't murder my wife."

Number six: Xerxes should not have divorced his wife, Vashti. He didn't have grounds for divorce. You're drunk, asking your wife to parade before a bunch of drunken soldiers. She says no. You should not divorce her. You should punch yourself in the head for being a complete tool, but you should not divorce your wife. He should have never divorced her. She didn't deserve it. He should have apologized.

Number seven: Xerxes should not have taken bad counsel, run *The Bachelor of Persia*, turned the palace into the Playboy Mansion, and brought in all the beautiful women to take their virginity, and pick his favorite one. That should have never happened. That's wrong. It's just wrong. Do you see there's a lot of wrong here? The Bible's the most honest book that's ever been written.

Number eight: Mordecai should not have allowed Esther to enter the competition. She's probably a teenager, she has no mom or dad, she's poor. Hundreds of women are going to compete, hundreds of women are going to sleep with the king, and he let her go.

I can tell you, as a dad with daughters, Mordecai's a failure. He didn't say anything; he didn't do anything. Some men's sins are sins of commission. Most men's sins are sins of omission. Guys will say this all the time: "I didn't do anything wrong." Here's the problem: you didn't do anything. You didn't say anything; you didn't do anything.

He's willing to die on the hill of bowing. If you want to die for a noble cause, make it the cause of a young woman and her purity, and her chastity, and her integrity, especially if you've adopted her. Mordecai should have fought for Esther. He should have died for Esther. He should have declared war for Esther.

And men, I'm asking you to do the same thing for your daughters. Love them, serve them, protect them, encourage them, and make sure that just because some guy asks for them, that you're not complicit by permitting the wrong kinds of men to have access to our women, our daughters. She should have never been part of the harem. No way.

Number nine: Esther should have not lost her virginity to a pagan Gentile. Amen? He's maybe fifteen to twenty years older. He mistreats women. He's got an entire harem. She should not have slept with him. I'm not necessarily saying it's entirely her fault. I'm just saying it's wrong. Xerxes shouldn't be a man like that. Mordecai shouldn't be a man who allows that. And yeah, it would have been okay for her to declare war and say no too.

Number ten: you sum it all up, Esther should not be the queen of Persia.

Number eleven: after Mordecai saved the king's life, he should have not been overlooked. He should have been honored, respected, revered, not neglected.

Number twelve: Mordecai probably should have bowed to Haman. You know, a little salute the uniform, little bow of respect and honor as is common in Eastern cultures. Not a big deal. He probably should have bowed.

Number thirteen: Haman should never have been born. Haman should have never been born. Now, theologically, this is true. The book of Esther is subtle, it's quiet, and it whispers a lot of truth. Earlier in the book, we learn that Mordecai was a descendant of someone named Saul, and here we learn that Haman is a descendant of Agag. Well, the Jews would have read this and said, "Well, that's way back in the Old Testament, generations prior."

The Agagites kept trying to destroy and annihilate God's people. They were trying to do the same thing that Haman and Hitler do, and so God told King Saul, "Destroy all the Agagites, kill them all, and don't take any of their plunder." What Saul did was disobey the Lord. He didn't kill them all. He let the Agagite king live, and rather than rejecting all of the wealth, he took it to make himself rich, because even God's people, grievously, can act like Xerxes. It's about the power, and the money, and the comfort, and the control. It's not about the glory of God and the good of others.

So, Mordecai's, I don't know, great-great-great-great-grandfather didn't kill Haman's great-great-great-great-grandfather like the Lord said, so now Haman's going to try and kill Mordecai. Haman should have never been born.

Number fourteen: Haman should not have sought to take out his wrath against one man, Mordecai, on all Jews. That's racism.

And number fifteen: Xerxes should not have given his signet ring, power of attorney, unlimited authority, access to the nuclear button, proverbially speaking, without checking the facts,

doing his own homework, and trusting more than one man's judgment.

It's all wrong. It's all wrong. It's not supposed to be this way. God doesn't show up, God doesn't send a prophet, God doesn't speak from heaven, God doesn't do a miracle. There's no burning bush. There's no evidence that God, in any way, shows up, speaks, or acts. How do we interpret all this data? What do we do with it? What do you do with it?

WHAT SINS, MISTAKES, AND TRAGEDIES ARE RULING YOUR LIFE?

Another question: What sins, mistakes, and tragedies are ruling your life? Your life has been, will be, or is presently in the place of the story of Esther. It's dark. The clouds have rolled in. The fog is thick. God can't be seen. Where are we going? What are we doing? Is there a way out? Is there any hope?

Some of you revisit your life, and you're obsessing over the details. "This was a sin I committed. This was a sin they committed. Man, this goes all the way back to my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents. That was a mistake. I thought it was a good idea. It was a bad idea. That's a tragedy. I can't believe they got cancer. I don't know what happened there."

And you're devastated, and it feels like all of these events of your life, they've overtaken you. It's like your life is this huge river with a strong current toward death, and you're just in it, being drug along, and the decisions are made, and the circumstances are set, and your fate is sealed.

You shouldn't have slept with him, you shouldn't have gotten pregnant, you shouldn't have gotten married, you should have finished college, you shouldn't have resigned the job, you shouldn't have walked away from the Lord, you shouldn't have started drinking that, you shouldn't have started smoking that, you should have never been at the casino. Whatever your thing is, should have never been dating them, should have never stayed with him, should have never put up with that.

All the "What if?", the "How come?", the "Where is he?" And this is where people's lives in the Bible need to be interpreted, as our lives need to be interpreted, through a worldview, a set of presuppositions and assumptions.

So, atheists would come to this text or circumstances in your life and say, "See, there's no God. He doesn't show up, he doesn't act, he doesn't speak. If there is a God, wouldn't he show up and say or do something? He doesn't say or do anything in the whole book of Esther. There's the evidence. There is no God."

The agnostics would come along and say, "There's no proof that there's God. He doesn't speak or show up. We're not willing to go so far as to deny his existence, but if there is a God, there's no evidence that's conclusive. He's not showing up in the Scriptures. He's not showing up in my life. He's not saying or doing anything."

Along would come the deists, like our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, and like many young people today whom the sociologist, Christian Smith, calls moralistic therapeutic deists. "There is a God, but he lives far away and he doesn't want to get involved in our business. It's very messy, and difficult, and complicated, so you're on your own. Good luck. He wants you to do well. He left us a few therapists to give us ideas on how to pick up the mess that we've made, but he's not coming down. He's not getting involved and he's not going to do anything miraculous. He's not going to speak or act. You're on your own." To quote Al Pacino in a great film: "He's an absentee landlord." You're on your own.

Determinists would come along and say, "No, this is all part of his sovereign plan. This is what he wants. Everything that happens is God's will." This is hard Islam or hard Calvinism. God is sovereign, which we believe because the Bible says, but they'll call into question the goodness of God. Not everything that happens is God's will, and sometimes people mean well, but they're not articulate. They'll say things like, "Well, everything happens for a reason." No, some things are wrong.

Now, God can use them for a good reason, but they're wrong things. God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. God is good; he's not evil. God's not in heaven going, "Let's see how many men who think they're god can I hand teenage girls to?" I'm a father. That's not the heart of God the Father. God's not in heaven saying, "Today, my plan is murder of millions, dozens, hundreds, thousands, whatever the case may be, from the Hamans to the Hitlers, people."

People will say, "Well, everything's according to his plan." No, there are rebels who are fighting against his plan and sinners who are sinning against his plan. "Well, everything has a reason." Not everything is God's will, but everything is used for God's will. There's a big difference. There's a big difference. Everyone who sinned, they're responsible for their sin. All the mistakes that were made, they contribute to the complexity. The tragedy that happens is not how it would have been if sin hadn't entered the world and there was no death.

THE PASSOVER LAMB

And there's an intonation of hope, and we miss it because the calendar is different. But here in verse 7 and verse 13 of chapter 3, it gives us some indications of the timing. Haman's decree for the murder of God's people, it is sent forth on the eve of Passover, which goes all the way back to Exodus 12. Different nation: it's not Persia, it's Egypt. Different ruler: it's not Xerxes, it's Pharaoh. But the same thing, there is one who is worshiped like a god, ruling over God's people and abusing them.

And the problem is that God's people are in exile away from home on both accounts, because of their own sin and the discipline of a holy and righteous God. And so they need to deal with their sin that they could be delivered from their slavery, their bondage, their exile. And so the decree is given that death is coming to every home with one exception: those homes that acknowledge their sin and repent of it. And sometimes faith is an inward conviction and sometimes it's an outward action. We know what you believe by how you behave.

And they take, based upon God's commands beginning in Exodus 12, a lamb without spot or blemish, showing sinless. They confess their sins so there's imputation or reckoning, so that their sins go to the animal, and now it becomes a substitute, and then they take the animal and they slaughter it so that the animal dies and the blood is shed, because the wage for sin is death, and the animal dies as the substitute.

And then, in faith, as a demonstration of their faith, they take the blood of the animal, and they cover the doorpost to their home, showing outwardly and publicly, unlike Mordecai and Esther who want to have a private faith. This is a public faith, that we worship the God of the Bible, that we're sinners, that we deserve death, hell, and the wrath of God, and there is a substitute that has shed its blood, paid its life, without spot or blemish, a lamb for us.

And then that night, death comes through the nation, and it brings death to the first-born son in every home with one exception: those homes who are literally covered by the blood of the lamb in faith and repentance.

And the decree from Haman is on the eve of Passover. He's not the first one to try to destroy God's people, and as God delivered them from Egypt, he will deliver them from Persia many years later.

And this is all leaning toward Jesus. The whole Bible's one story with one hero. Jesus comes. Like Mordecai and Esther working together as cousins, Jesus worked with his cousin, John the Baptizer. And when John the Baptizer sees his cousin, Jesus, coming—here's the truth: Jesus is a King, seated on a throne like Xerxes, and he does something that Xerxes never does. He gets off his throne, and he comes into human history, and he humbles himself to not just see numbers but faces. And he loves people, and he serves people, and he knows people.

And God becomes a man, and John looks at Jesus and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." The fulfillment of Passover. This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:7: "Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been slain." Jesus is our Passover, and what happens is Jesus comes, our great King, the greater Xerxes with the greater kingdom, the kingdom of God. And like Mordecai to Haman, we don't bow down to him, and he doesn't act like Haman. He doesn't get proud and arrogant, and he doesn't have angry, vengeful wrath against us. He loves us and he serves us.

And like the two men that we read of in Esther 2–3, we plot the King's murder. We conspire to murder the King of kings. And unlike Xerxes, he doesn't have us crucified. He allows us to crucify him. And our humble, loving, gracious, servant King, who deals with faces and not just numbers, looks people in the eye who have plotted his demise and says, "Father, forgive them." Jesus forgives all the sins, Jesus works out all the mistakes, and Jesus takes the worst tragedy and makes it into the greatest glory. And this whole Book is about him.

Father God, I pray for us as a people. God, we are prone to be like Xerxes: lazy, greedy, self-indulgent. We're prone to be like Haman: consumed by what other people think about us, wanting lots of glory and praise, very angry when we don't get it. Lord, we are prone to be like Esther and Mordecai: a private faith, it's not a public faith, and so it's a hypocritical faith. Lord, we tend to take the moral high ground and look down on nations that slaughter innocents while ours is perhaps the most guilty of ever. Lord Jesus, thank you that you are a King above all kings who sits on a throne above all thrones, and you don't treat us like Xerxes though we've plotted murder against you. You've used your death for our life, and you don't crucify us. You're crucified by us and for us. Lord Jesus, I'm astounded at how bad we are, and how good you are, and I pray for us as a people, that we would keep the Scriptures open, and our hearts open, and our minds open, so that we would know, and love, and serve you as our great King. In Jesus' good name, amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.