

The Book of Esther, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Haman's Plot Against the Jews

Esther 3:1-15

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson sets two unseen forces against each other. On the surface a proud official is offended by an old man's refusal to bow, and a death sentence follows. Underneath, an ancient hatred against God's covenant people surges up once more, threatening to wipe out the very line through whom the Promised Seed would come. The doctrinal stakes are enormous: if Haman succeeds, the redemptive thread running from Abraham toward the Christ is severed. The chapter wants us to feel the weight of that danger soberly, including the horror of a planned genocide, so that we never treat sin, pride, or hatred of God's people as small things.

At the same time the chapter is a sustained lesson in the providence of God. His name is never mentioned, no miracle interrupts the scheme, and the lot, the bribe, and the irrevocable decree all seem to fall on the side of evil. Yet the reader who knows the rest of the story knows that the people are not destroyed. The teaching aim is to help the class trust the God whose hand is real even when it is hidden, who governs even casting of lots and the hearts of kings, and who preserved His people across the centuries to bring forth the Redeemer in the fullness of time.

Formationally, we want every student to leave with two things pressed into the heart. First, the courage of Mordecai, the willingness to stand when bowing would be easier, refusing to make idols of powerful men. Second, a settled trust that when evil seems ascendant and circumstances seem sealed, God has not abandoned His own. We draw timeless lessons of faithful, trusting obedience and point, where it is natural, to the cross and empty tomb where the deepest plot against God's purpose was turned into our salvation.

Question 1

Student Question:

Haman's fury moved from one man, Mordecai, to a plan to destroy an entire people. What does this escalation reveal about the nature of pride and unchecked anger, and how does Scripture warn us about where these sins lead (Proverbs 16:18; James 1:14-15)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter opens with a promotion that should make us uneasy: after these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite and set his seat above all the princes. We are not told why. Mordecai had just saved the king's life in chapter 2, and yet it is Haman, not Mordecai, who is exalted. From the very first verse the world looks tilted, with the wrong man rising. This is the soil in which the rest of the chapter grows.

The title Agagite is not incidental. Agag was the king of the Amalekites in the days of Saul (1 Samuel 15), and the Amalekites were marked as enemies of God's people from the wilderness onward (Exodus 17:8–16; Deuteronomy 25:17–19). By calling Haman an Agagite, the writer signals that this is not merely office politics. An ancient hostility, older than either man, is stirring again. The reader is meant to recognize a recurring pattern: hatred aimed at the people through whom God is working His salvation.

Notice also that the king's command flowed downward like water: all the king's servants that were in the king's gate bowed and revered Haman, for the king had so commanded. Conformity is easy when it is decreed from above and practiced by everyone around you. The pressure to bend is rarely a single dramatic threat; it is usually the quiet, cumulative weight of everyone else already bowing. Into that pressure walks one man who will not.

We should resist the urge to rush past the ordinariness of evil's beginnings here. A promotion, a court custom, a daily act of homage at the gate. Nothing yet looks monstrous. But the seeds of one of the darkest plots in Scripture are already in the ground. Faithfulness will have to be exercised in the small, daily theater of the king's gate before it is ever tested on the grand stage.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The authority of the Old Testament for our instruction (Romans 15:4); the Agagite background is not trivia but theology.
- God's providence is at work even when the wrong man is exalted and the righteous seem overlooked.
- The reality of an ongoing enmity against God's covenant people, ultimately against His redemptive purpose.
- Conformity to ungodly expectation is often driven by command from above and the example of the crowd, not by a single threat.

Discussion Prompts

- Why do you think the writer is careful to label Haman an Agagite rather than simply a high official?
- When have you felt the quiet pressure to go along simply because everyone else was already going along?
- What does it do to our trust in God to see the wrong person rewarded and the faithful one passed over?

Question 2

Student Question:

Have you ever let a personal offense grow far larger in your heart than it deserved? What happened, and what would it have looked like to stop it early?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 2 gives us the hinge of the whole book: Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. Everyone else at the gate complied. Mordecai did not. The text does not pause to explain his reasons in detail, which has led readers to wonder whether this was stubbornness, ethnic pride, or genuine faith. The clues, especially the Agagite label and the answer Mordecai gives in verse 4 that he was a Jew, point toward conviction rooted in his identity as one of God's people.

Bowing as ordinary social courtesy was common in the ancient world, and Scripture records the faithful bowing before kings and elders without sin. So the issue is likely not bowing as such, but the kind of homage demanded for this particular man, an Amalekite enemy of God's people, perhaps homage that approached the reverence due to God alone. Mordecai discerned a line he would not cross, even when no one else seemed to see a line at all.

This is the moral center of the lesson. There is a courage that is loud and a courage that is quiet, and Mordecai's is the quiet kind. He does not organize a protest. He does not lecture the other servants. He simply will not perform the act. Faithfulness often looks less like a dramatic stand and more like a steady refusal to do the one thing conscience forbids.

We can also feel the cost building. The other servants notice, and they begin to press him daily (verse 3–4). Conviction that stands out invites scrutiny, and scrutiny invites pressure. Long before Haman ever sees him, Mordecai is already paying for his faithfulness in the small currency of daily questioning and discomfort.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discerning when honoring a human being would cross into honoring him as God alone deserves.
- Godly conviction versus mere stubbornness; the difference lies in loyalty to God, not in pride of self.
- Quiet, non-dramatic faithfulness as a genuine and often costly form of courage.
- The principle of obeying God rather than men when the two conflict (compare Acts 5:29).
- Refusing the idolatry of men, that is, declining to give a person the place that belongs to God.

Discussion Prompts

- What evidence in the text suggests Mordecai's refusal was conviction rather than stubbornness?
- Where is the line for you between properly honoring authority and improperly worshiping it?
- What is one quiet refusal God may be asking of you that no one would applaud?

Question 3

Student Question:

Mordecai would not bow to Haman, very likely because such homage belonged to God and because of the old enmity between Israel and the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15). When does honoring a human being cross the line into the idolatry of men, and how do we honor authority without worshiping it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mordecai's fellow servants do not let his refusal pass. Day after day they ask him why he transgresses the king's commandment, and when he will not yield, they tell Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew (verse 4). His Jewishness is offered as the explanation. His faith and his refusal are bound together.

There is something painfully human in these servants. They are not described as cruel, only as curious and then as informers. They want to see whether Mordecai's stand will hold up. Their report to Haman is the spark that touches off the fire. Often it is not the great enemies but the watching bystanders, the ones who report and repeat, who set tragedy in motion. We should examine which role we tend to play.

The phrase he had told them that he was a Jew matters. Mordecai did not hide his identity. In a hostile empire, where being a Jew would soon be a death sentence, he had already let his loyalty be known. His refusal to bow was not a sudden eccentricity but the consistent fruit of an openly held faith. Costly faithfulness in the moment usually grows out of an unhidden identity over time.

Here the chapter quietly raises a question that will haunt the whole book: what does it mean to belong visibly to God's people in a world that does not honor God? Mordecai answers with his life, not just his lips. His public identity sets the terms for everything that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of the bystander who reports and repeats, helping evil along without ever striking a blow.
- Open, unhidden identification with God's people, even when it is costly or dangerous.
- Consistency between what we profess and how we act under pressure.
- How faithful witness can provoke hostility from those who feel rebuked by it.

Discussion Prompts

- Are you more like Mordecai who stands, or like the servants who watch and report? Be honest about your default.
- In what settings do you tend to keep your faith hidden, and why?
- How does living an openly God-belonging life now prepare you for a costly moment later?

Question 4

Student Question:

Whose approval do you find yourself craving most, and how does that craving sometimes pull you toward compromise?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath (verse 5). The proud man has been wounded in the one place pride cannot bear to be touched: in front of others, by someone who will not flatter him. All the bowing of all the other servants cannot soothe him, because pride is a cup with a hole in the bottom. It can never be filled.

Then comes the horrifying turn of verse 6: he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone. One man's defiance is too small a target. Haman determined to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai. This is the logic of sin run to its end. A bruised ego decides that a single death will not satisfy it; it wants a whole people erased.

We must treat this soberly. This is a plan for genocide, the deliberate destruction of men, women, and children because of who they are. Scripture does not flinch from naming such evil, and neither should we. The chapter forces us to look at how monstrous a thing pride and hatred can become when they are fed rather than starved, when they are given power rather than checked.

And underneath Haman's personal rage there is the older enmity again. To destroy the people of Mordecai is, whether Haman knows it or not, to strike at the people through whom God had promised to bless all nations, the line that would lead to the Christ. The proud man thinks he is avenging an insult. He is in fact setting himself against the redemptive purpose of God, a battle he cannot win.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The bottomless nature of pride, which no amount of honor from others can satisfy.
- How unchecked anger escalates from personal grievance to monstrous evil (James 1:14–15).
- The sober reality of sin; a planned genocide named plainly as the fruit of a proud, hateful heart.
- Behind human malice, an enmity against God's redemptive purpose itself, ultimately doomed to fail.
- Personal accountability; Haman, not fate, chooses this evil, and he will answer for it.

Discussion Prompts

- Why can no amount of honor from others ever satisfy a proud heart?
- Where do you see, in your own life or our culture, the pattern of a small offense fed into a large hatred?
- How does it change your reading to know Haman is, without realizing it, fighting against God's plan to save the world?

Question 5

Student Question:

Haman the Agagite hated Mordecai the Jew, an echo of an ancient hatred against God's covenant people. Why has the world so often raged against the people through whom God was working out His redemptive plan, and how does this passage fit the larger story that leads to Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 7 slows the action down to show us the casting of the lot: in the first month they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month. Pur is the Persian word, and it gives the Feast of Purim its name (Esther 9:26). Haman is consulting chance, or perhaps his gods, to find the most favorable day to carry out the slaughter. Evil here even has a calendar and a ritual.

There is dark irony in this scene. The lot lands far off, on the twelfth month, which means many months will pass between the decree and the day of destruction. To Haman it may have seemed an auspicious result. To the reader who knows the rest of the story, that long delay is the very window in which deliverance will come. What looked like fate setting the date was in truth providence buying time.

Proverbs 16:33 says the lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD. God is never named in Esther, yet here is the perfect illustration of His unseen rule. Haman casts Pur to serve his hatred; the God he does not acknowledge governs the result for the safety of His people. The hand you cannot see is steadier than the hand that throws the dice.

This is the heart of the book's theology of hidden providence. There is no thundering voice, no parting sea, no fiery furnace. There is only a man casting lots, and a God quietly overruling. For believers who long for dramatic intervention and feel only silence, this verse is a quiet comfort: silence is not the same as absence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereign providence governing even the casting of lots and the affairs of pagans (Proverbs 16:33).
- Providence is real even when God is never named and no miracle is seen.
- The delay set by Pur becomes, in God's hands, the very space for deliverance.

- God's faithfulness to preserve His covenant people for the coming Redeemer.
- How to trust God's hidden working when we long for visible intervention.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Proverbs 16:33 reframe what is actually happening when Haman casts Pur?
- Where in your life have you later seen God's hand in something that felt at the time like mere chance or delay?
- What is the difference between God's silence and God's absence, and how do you tell them apart?

Question 6

Student Question:

When standing with God's people has cost you socially or professionally, how did you respond, and what did you learn about your own courage?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 8 and 9 show us how the lie is constructed and sold. Haman tells the king there is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws. Notice the craft. He never names the Jews. He paints them as faceless, scattered, different, and disloyal. Slander loves the vague, dehumanizing phrase a certain people.

There is a sliver of truth twisted into the lie, which is what makes it dangerous. God's people did have laws that were diverse, distinct from the surrounding nations, because they belonged to the LORD. Haman takes that God-given distinctiveness and repaints it as treason: neither keep they the king's laws. The very holiness that set them apart is recast as a threat to be eliminated.

Then comes the bribe in verse 9: if it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have charge of the business. The sum is staggering, a fortune that hints at the depth of Haman's obsession. He is willing to pay enormous money for the privilege of murder. Hatred, like every idol, will spend whatever it takes.

We should mark how genocide gets approved: a vague accusation, a half-truth about a different people, a financial sweetener, and a king too incurious to ask for a single name. Great evils are often passed not by monsters in a council chamber but by busy men who never bother to check the facts. The machinery of death runs on slander and inattention.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The mechanics of slander; vague, dehumanizing language used to make a people easier to destroy.

- How a half-truth is more dangerous than an outright lie, twisting God-given distinctiveness into a charge of disloyalty.
- The danger of decisions made without inquiry; the king never asks who these people are.
- Hatred as an idol that will spend any amount to be served.
- The believer's call to be distinct and set apart, even when distinctiveness is treated as a threat (compare 1 Peter 2:9–12).

Discussion Prompts

- How does Haman use vague, faceless language to make evil feel reasonable to the king?
- Where have you seen a half-truth do more damage than an obvious lie?
- Are there ways your faith makes you distinct that the world might treat as a threat, and how should you respond?

Question 7

Student Question:

The lot, called Pur, was cast to choose the very day of destruction, and the king's irrevocable decree seemed to seal the matter. Where is God in a chapter where He is never named, and what does Scripture teach about His providence working even through casting of lots and pagan decrees (Proverbs 16:33; Romans 8:28)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 10 is breathtaking in its carelessness: the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. The signet ring was the king's authority, the power to make law that could not be revoked. He hands it over without investigating, without hesitating, without asking the name of the people he is condemning. Absolute power, given away in a careless moment to a man called the Jews' enemy.

Verse 11 deepens the horror with the king's reply: the silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee. The money is waved off as a formality, and an entire people is handed over like property, to do with them as it seemeth good. Human lives, the lives of God's covenant people, are treated as Haman's to dispose of at will. This is what happens when authority is unmoored from justice.

We are watching the abuse of legitimate power. Ahasuerus had real authority, but here he exercises it without inquiry, conscience, or accountability. Scripture honors governing authority as God's servant for good (Romans 13), which makes this scene a portrait of authority betraying its purpose. The ring meant to protect the realm becomes the instrument of mass murder.

And yet, even here, the reader senses a limit the king does not. The people handed over are God's people, and there is a higher King whose ring was never on Ahasuerus's hand. The earthly

throne signs the decree; the heavenly throne is not consulted and will not be overruled. The most powerful man in the world has just made a decision that the unseen God will quietly undo.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The abuse of legitimate authority when it acts without inquiry, conscience, or accountability.
- The God-ordained purpose of government as a servant for good (Romans 13:1–4), here betrayed.
- The treating of human lives as property; the dignity of persons made in God's image trampled.
- Above every earthly throne stands a higher King whose purpose cannot be signed away.
- God's providential limit on the power of even the mightiest ruler.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal about Ahasuerus that he never even asks who these people are?
- How does this scene show the difference between authority used for good and authority abused?
- How does remembering the higher King steady you when earthly powers seem to hold all the cards?

Question 8

Student Question:

When circumstances seem locked, sealed, and beyond changing, what do you actually believe in those moments about God's ability to act? Be honest.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 12 and 13 unleash the full machinery of the empire on the project of death. The king's scribes are called, the decree is written to every province in its own script and language, sealed with the king's ring, and sent by couriers to all corners of the realm. The command is total: to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day. The piling up of the words refuses to let us soften the picture.

Read the words again slowly: young and old, little children and women. The decree is meticulous in its cruelty. It is not aimed at soldiers or rebels but at families, at the elderly and the infant alike. Scripture forces us to look directly at the horror of it, because evil that is sanitized is evil that is excused. The text wants us to grieve, not to glance away.

There is also a chilling efficiency to verse 13: the same day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, and to take the spoil of them for a prey. The slaughter is scheduled, and greed is built into it; the killers may keep the plunder. Hatred has been monetized for everyone, not just for Haman. Evil often recruits the many by promising them a share.

Beneath the human horror, the deepest stakes are redemptive. Were this decree to succeed, the covenant line through which the Messiah would come would be wiped from the earth. The empire's whole apparatus, scribes, couriers, seal, and law, is bent toward severing the thread of salvation history. That it does not succeed is the silent testimony of the chapter that God preserves His people for His promised Redeemer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sober, unsoftened reality of planned genocide; Scripture names the evil plainly.
- How evil recruits the many by appealing to greed (the spoil offered as plunder).
- The redemptive stakes; the threatened destruction of the line through which the Christ would come.
- God's faithful preservation of His covenant people across history for the sake of His promise.
- The contrast between an irrevocable human decree and the unbreakable purpose of God.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the text deliberately list young and old, little children and women, rather than just saying the Jews?
- How does seeing the redemptive stakes change the way you read this threat?
- What does it mean for your faith that no human decree, however total, can finally overrule God's purpose?

Question 9

Student Question:

Haman secured a sentence of death against an innocent people through a bribe, a slander, and the authority of an unwitting king, yet the line through which the Messiah would come was preserved. How does God's hidden but real preservation of His people in Esther help us trust His justice and faithfulness, and how is it ultimately answered in the victory of Christ over those who plotted His death (Acts 2:23-24)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 14 underscores that this is now settled law: a copy of the writing was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day. The decree is not a rumor but a posted, public command, and the people are told to be ready. Months in advance, neighbors throughout the empire are put on notice to prepare for the killing of the Jews. The horror is normalized, scheduled, and announced.

There is a particular cruelty in the long advance warning. The Jews across the empire would now live for nearly a year knowing the date of their planned destruction. Imagine the dread settling over every Jewish household, every Sabbath, every meal, under the shadow of a fixed and lawful day of death. The decree does not just threaten their bodies; it haunts their days.

Humanly speaking, the case is now closed. Under Persian custom a sealed royal decree could not be revoked (compare Esther 8:8). The lot has been cast, the ring has been pressed into the wax, the couriers have ridden out, and the law has been published. Every visible avenue is shut. This is the moment the chapter wants us to feel the full weight of hopelessness, so that we will be amazed by what God does next.

And still, God is not named, and still, God is not absent. The reader is being trained to trust that a sealed human decree is not the last word, even when no escape can be seen. What looks like the end of the story is, in God's hands, the setting of the stage. The faithful are called to hold on precisely when every door appears locked.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The normalizing of evil; horror posted as public, lawful, scheduled command.
- The peculiar cruelty of dread, forcing God's people to live under a known day of death.
- Faith called to trust God's unseen hand precisely when every visible avenue is closed.
- An irrevocable human decree set against the certainty of God's overruling providence.
- Endurance and hope under prolonged threat, not only sudden crisis.

Discussion Prompts

- How might nearly a year of advance warning have tested the faith of God's people day by day?
- When every visible door seems locked, what have you found helps you keep trusting God?
- Why does the chapter let the situation look completely hopeless before any deliverance appears?

Question 10

Student Question:

Mordecai stood while everyone else bowed. Name one specific situation this week where Jesus is calling you to a quiet, costly faithfulness, and what would it look like for you to stand?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends with one of the most haunting contrasts in Scripture, verse 15: the posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed. Two pictures hang side by side. Powerful men raising their cups, and a whole city sick with confusion and dread.

The king and Haman sat down to drink. They have just signed away an entire people, and now they relax over wine, untroubled, congratulating themselves. This is the cold heart of evil: it can

plot mass murder and then sit down to a pleasant evening. The distance between their comfort and their cruelty is a portrait of the conscience that has gone numb to what it has done.

But the city Shushan was perplexed. The very capital, presumably full of ordinary people who sense that something monstrous has happened, is thrown into bewilderment. Even those untouched by the decree feel that the moral order has been violated. There is a witness, however inarticulate, in the troubled conscience of a city, that this is not how things ought to be.

Here the lesson lands. To every human eye, evil has won the day and is toasting its victory. But the chapter has been quietly teaching us to look past the wine cups to the unseen God who is not perplexed at all. Centuries later, another scene would echo this one, when rulers thought they had triumphed and sat secure, having put the Lord of glory to death. Yet God raised Him up, having loosed the pains of death (Acts 2:23-24). The plotters drink while God works, and God always has the last word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The numbed conscience of evil; the ability to plot murder and then feast in comfort.
- The troubled conscience of the city as a witness that God's moral order has been violated.
- The contrast between the apparent triumph of evil and the hidden, certain working of God.
- God's justice and faithfulness, unseen in the moment but never defeated.
- The ultimate answer to every plot against God's purpose in the death and resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:23-24).

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell us about evil that the king and Haman could sit down to drink right after sealing this decree?
- Why do you think even the wider city was perplexed, though most were not the intended victims?
- How does the resurrection of Jesus give you confidence as you face moments when evil seems to be celebrating its victory?