

## SESSION 2

# STAND WITH CONVICTION

### ▶ **The Point**

It's always right to do the right thing.

### ▶ **The Passage**

Esther 2:21–3:6

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Sometimes it's a hard choice to speak up, even when we know something is wrong. We may even be tempted to remain silent. After all, why risk retribution or losing our position or standing in the church or community?

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, refused the order from a bus driver in Montgomery, Alabama, to give up her seat for a white passenger. It was a simple gesture really, but one that would reverberate around the world and set the tone for the civil rights movement in America. Parks, a devoted follower of Christ, did not have the power to overturn Jim Crow laws or change the minds of those who believed in white supremacy, but she could do this one thing that was in front of her. We can be overwhelmed by the enormity of the injustice around us. Fear or a feeling of inadequacy might even paralyze us, but Mordecai's example shows us the power of doing that one small thing—the *right* thing—that is in front of us.

### ▶ **The Setting**

The events in Esther occurred during the reign of King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes (486–465 BC). The king convened a royal banquet at Susa. When Queen Vashti refused to appear, he dethroned her. Ahasuerus appointed commissioners to assemble beautiful young virgins from whom he might select a new queen. Esther won the king's favor, and he put the royal crown on her head. In obedience to Mordecai, Esther did not reveal her ethnic identity.

# What does the Bible say?

**The King's Gate** (2:21)—Assembling point for officials in the Persian court. In Susa this gate was a huge structure measuring 131 by 92 feet.

**Agagite** (3:1)—Descendant from the Amalekite King Agag. (See 1 Sam. 15:7-33.) Enmity between Israelites and Amalekites may explain Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman.

## **Esther 2:21–3:6**

**2:21** During those days while Mordecai was sitting at the King's Gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the entrance, became infuriated and planned to assassinate King Ahasuerus.

**22** When Mordecai learned of the plot, he reported it to Queen Esther, and she told the king on Mordecai's behalf.

**23** When the report was investigated and verified, both men were hanged on the gallows. This event was recorded in the Historical Record in the king's presence.

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**3:1** After all this took place, King Ahasuerus honored Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite. He promoted him in rank and gave him a higher position than all the other officials.

**2** The entire royal staff at the King's Gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, because the king had commanded this to be done for him. But Mordecai would not bow down or pay homage.

**3** The members of the royal staff at the King's Gate asked Mordecai, "Why are you disobeying the king's command?"

**4** When they had warned him day after day and he still would not listen to them, they told Haman in order to see if Mordecai's actions would be tolerated, since he had told them he was a Jew.

**5** When Haman saw that Mordecai was not bowing down or paying him homage, he was filled with rage.

**6** And when he learned of Mordecai's ethnic identity, it seemed repugnant to Haman to do away with Mordecai alone. He planned to destroy all of Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout Ahasuerus's kingdom.





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## Esther 2:21–23 Commentary

**[Verse 21]** God expects His people to stand against wrong. Verse 21 introduces an element that at first glance appears parenthetical or secondary in the unfolding drama of Esther. Later in the story, however, this event will possess great significance. The focus shifts from Esther to **Mordecai**. In Session 1 we discovered Mordecai means “little man.” Mordecai’s action recorded in Esther 2:21–23 reveals him as anything but “little” in his ethical behavior. On one occasion, when Mordecai was at the **King’s Gate**, he learned of a plot against King Ahasuerus.

**[Verse 22]** How did Mordecai learn of the **plot** against King Ahasuerus? The biblical writer did not specify. Translated very literally the first part of verse 22 reads: “And the word was known to Mordecai.” He may have overheard the two men planning the assassination or someone else may have informed him. In any case, Mordecai possessed some access to the queen as well as to others within the palace complex. The term translated *plot* can convey a wide range of meanings, including “word,” “speech,” “thing,” “matter,” “act,” “event,” “account,” and “reason.” Translators rendered the word at least 80 different ways in the King James Version!

When he learned of the conspiracy, Mordecai **reported** it to Esther. The Hebrew term basically means “to be conspicuous.” Thus it conveys the idea of something being manifest or being in sight. In the form in which the verb appears in Esther 2:22 in the original language it communicates the concept of bringing a matter to light, thus “declaring” or “reporting” it.

Esther 2:22 is a pivotal verse in the book. Mordecai deserved credit both for remaining alert and for maintaining communication with Esther. The queen merited recognition not only for reporting the plot to the king, but also for doing so in the name of Mordecai.

**[Verse 23]** Esther’s **report** regarding the assassination plot **was investigated and verified**. The Hebrew text of this phrase more literally reads: “and the matter was sought out and found out.” The rendering was investigated is appropriate because the Hebrew verb connotes earnest seeking. Careful investigation found or discovered the truth of the report. The investigation not only revealed the assassination plot, but also it established the integrity and truthfulness of Mordecai and Esther.

As a result of the report’s verification, both conspirators **were hanged on the gallows**. The English translation “gallows” refers to the platform on which an individual was hanged. The Hebrew term literally means “tree.” Thus, biblical scholars have suggested that “tree” should be understood in the sense of a stake. The Persians commonly executed individuals by impaling them.

Almost in passing the biblical writer noted that **this event was recorded in the Historical Record**. The Hebrew phrase translated *Historical Record* literally is “book of the matters of the days.” Kings in ancient times kept official court records of events that occurred during their reigns. This seemingly mundane statement regarding the record of an assassination plot will later have tremendous impact on events in the Book of Esther.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## Notes

### Esther 3:1-3

<sup>1</sup> After all this took place, King Ahasuerus honored Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite. He promoted him in rank and gave him a higher position than all the other officials. <sup>2</sup> The entire royal staff at the King's Gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, because the king had commanded this to be done for him. But Mordecai would not bow down or pay homage. <sup>3</sup> The members of the royal staff at the King's Gate asked Mordecai, "Why are you disobeying the king's command?"

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Esther 3:1-3 on page 93 of the PSG.

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from page 93 of the PSG.

- ▶ You would think that after Mordecai helped to save the king's life by thwarting the plot against him, the king would have given Mordecai some kind of special honor. But instead, Ahasuerus promoted Haman.
- ▶ With that honor came the king's command for all the royal officials to acknowledge Haman's position by bowing to him. And that one act brings us back to Mordecai, who refused to bow.

**GUIDE:** Use the first two paragraphs of the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to share background on Haman and the history of the Amalekites.

**DISCUSS: Question #4** on page 93 of the PSG: "What were some possible motivations for Mordecai's refusal to bow?"

**RECAP:** Read the first paragraph after the Scripture on page 94 of the PSG.

Perhaps Mordecai refused to bow because he felt he'd be violating his worship of Yahweh. He would bow before no one but God. However, it was not a violation of the law of God to bow before kings and rulers. Mordecai was no grandstander, though; this was not a publicity stunt. Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman was an act of conscience. He refused to compromise what he believed.

## **Esther 3:1-3 Commentary**

**[Verse 1]** Mordecai's courage challenges us to stand for God in the face of those who oppose Him. Despite Mordecai's heroic act of saving the king's life by reporting an assassination plot against Ahasuerus, Mordecai received no honor on this occasion. In contrast, chapter 3 begins with the notation that **King Ahasuerus honored Haman**. The Hebrew verb literally means "made great" or "magnified." The designation Haman signifies "magnificence." Perhaps that name contributed to his sense of self-importance. The biblical writer identified Haman as the **son of Hammedatha the Agagite**. The term *Agagite* identifies Haman as a descendant of the Amalekite King Agag (see 1 Sam. 15:7-33), who reigned over a longstanding enemy of the Israelites or Jews. Agagite most likely is synonymous with Amalekite. The reference to Haman as the Agagite calls attention to the animosity that existed between the Israelites and the Amalekites. That hostility began when the Israelites fought Amalek in the desert following their exodus from Egypt. (See Ex. 17:8-16.) At that time Moses stated that the Lord would be at war against Amalek for generations. (See v. 16.) Agag reigned over the Amalekites at the same time Saul ruled the Israelites. The Lord directed King Saul, a Benjaminite and the son of Kish, to totally destroy the Amalekites. (See 1 Sam. 15:1-3.) Although Saul failed to carry out the Lord's command, the Israelites defeated the Amalekites on that occasion and the prophet Samuel "hacked Agag to pieces" (v. 33). The fact Mordecai also was a Benjaminite and a descendant of Kish (see Esth. 2:5) sets the stage for Haman's defeat and demise. Ahasuerus **promoted Haman in rank**. The parallel phrase rendered **gave him a higher position** literally reads "set his throne above." The biblical writer used these two similar phrases to emphasize Haman's advancement or promotion.

**[Verse 2]** Although all the king's servants **bowed down and paid homage** to Haman, Mordecai refused to do so. Perhaps the reason Mordecai refused to bow to Haman relates to the longstanding animosity that existed between the Amalekites and the Israelites. No self-respecting Benjaminite would bow to a man who had descended from the ancient Amalekite enemy of God's people. Thus, Mordecai stood up rather than bowed down. Other biblical scholars connect Mordecai's refusal with his religious convictions. These scholars hold that at least in this instance bowing to Haman bordered on recognizing him as divine. Perhaps Mordecai had both political and religious reasons for his refusal to honor Haman.

**[Verse 3]** Royal officials expressed their concern over Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. They questioned Mordecai, **"Why are you disobeying the king's command?"** These royal staff members perceived Mordecai's refusal as disobedience to the king's directive. To them the issue was not that of honoring Haman but rather of obeying Ahasuerus. However, Mordecai likely would not have eventually risen to the royal position of second in command if he had refused to appropriately honor the king.



## Esther 3:4-6

**[Verse 4]** The royal staff repeatedly **warned** Mordecai regarding the consequences of his refusal to pay homage to Haman. Peer pressure, however, failed to change Mordecai's behavior. He resolutely refused to bow to Haman **day after day**. That Mordecai **would not listen to** the officials conveys in the original language the meaning that he would not obey. The Hebrew verb basically means "to hear." It also can carry the connotations of listening or obeying. We use the verb "to hear" in similar fashion in the English language. When my mother said to me as a child, "Do you hear me?" she was not questioning my auditory capability. Rather, she meant that I had better obey her. Mordecai kept refusing to obey the royal staff when they prompted him to bow to Haman. The royal officials next took further action. They informed Haman of Mordecai's refusal **to see if Mordecai's actions would be tolerated**. At this point Haman apparently had not yet observed Mordecai's conduct. Once the officials brought it to Haman's attention, however, Mordecai's refusal to bow became a test case. Perhaps Haman had instructed his royal staff members to watch Mordecai's actions closely. This verse indicates Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman issued from the fact that **he was a Jew**. Mordecai declined to humble himself before a member of a people group that had opposed God's people for centuries.

**[Verse 5]** Mordecai refused to bow to Haman or pay him homage. The verbs translated **bowing down** and **paying ... homage** also appeared in Esther 3:2 to describe the royal staff's recognition of Haman's position of authority. When Haman learned about Mordecai's failure to give Haman the honor to which he felt entitled, Haman **was filled with rage**.

Haman's anger is depicted with a term that comes from a root word meaning "to be hot." The noun typically conveys the sense of an inner, emotional heat in the Old Testament. The same noun appears in Esther 7:7 and 10 to depict Ahasuerus's anger at Haman.

**[Verse 6]** Haman's rage knew no bounds. Once **he learned of Mordecai's ethnic identity**, Haman wrathfully determined not only to get rid of Mordecai, but also to destroy all the Jews under Ahasuerus's rule. The Hebrew verb in the expression **it seemed repugnant** also means "to despise" or "to hold in contempt." It conveys the basic essence of undervaluing or according little value to something or someone. Haman's contempt for the Lord's people revealed his contempt for the Lord as well. Haman resolved to destroy **all ... the Jews** in the kingdom. Haman's lust for power motivated him to plot genocide. The main plot of the book comes to the forefront in Esther 3:6. Here the reader begins to understand why God has brought Esther to the royal position of queen. That the Jew Mordecai stood with conviction and refused to bow to Haman enraged this arrogant official. His quest for control resulted in his hatred not only of Mordecai but also of all who shared Mordecai's ethnic identity. Thus Haman determined to destroy all the Jews. That Esther also was a Jew, a fact of which Haman was unaware at the time, would eventually result in his downfall. Haman would discover his plot could not contend with the sovereign power of God.

