

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-43 Jews in Persia Are Threatened

Hatred does terrible things to people. Have you ever hated someone so much that you wanted to kill them? It still happens today as it happened centuries ago in Persia.

Some years before Nehemiah and Ezra's time, Jewish exiles in Persia were almost wiped out. Thousands of them were living here and there in the Persian empire, though many exiles had gone back to Judah. This was an early example in history of a government's attacking Jews for no reason other than prejudice. Some leaders hated Jews for being different—different food, different holidays, and a different God.

The king of Persia at that time was Ahasuerus. The Greek writers called him Xerxes. His son was the later king who supported Nehemiah and Ezra's return to Judah to help the Jews. Xerxes was powerful and rich, and had a large harem of wives.

One of the Jewish exiles in the capital city was Mordecai. He held an important position in the king's government, much like Daniel before him, and Nehemiah and Ezra some years later. While doing his job, Mordecai heard about two Persian officers who guarded Xerxes' palace. They became angry with the king and plotted to assassinate him. Mordecai got word about the plot to the king through the queen. Xerxes investigated, identified the assassins, and had them executed. Mordecai's name was listed in the official report about the plot.

One of the king's favorite officials was Haman. He had given him the highest position in the government. He ordered everyone to bow down before Haman when he walked by. But Mordecai would not kneel down or honor Haman. Some officials noticed this and asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command about Haman?"

They watched Mordecai day after day, and he didn't bow when Haman walked by. They decided to tell Haman about him. They knew Mordecai was a Jewish man, and they wanted to find out if Haman would tolerate such behavior. Haman became enraged the next time Mordecai refused to bow before him. He decided to have him killed—but not just Mordecai alone. Haman decided that all Jews throughout the empire should be wiped out.

Now Xerxes and his royal court were quite superstitious. To choose the date for anything important, they cast lots. It was Haman's turn to cast the lot, and it fell on the 13th day of the last month of the next year. Haman was in the same room as Xerxes, so he decided to propose his murderous plan. "There are Jewish people everywhere in your kingdom, O King. They keep themselves separate. Their customs are different, and they do not obey the king's laws. You should not tolerate them. If it pleases the king, you could issue a decree to have them destroyed. I'll place many tons of silver in the treasury, if you will do it" (Est 3:3-9).

The king agreed with Haman's plan, and gave him his royal ring to seal the bargain. "Keep your money," he told Haman, "and do whatever you please with these Jewish people." As long as Xerxes received his share of Jewish plunder, he would permit Haman's plot to proceed.

A few days later Haman summoned the royal scribes. They wrote out the decree of the king in the letters of each province and the language of each group of people in the empire. The decrees went out under the authority of Xerxes, sealed with his royal ring. He sent the decrees out to

regional leaders, provincial governors, and nobles of the various peoples. The decree ordered the killing of all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day. The chosen day was the 13th day of the last month—a lucky day chosen by lot.

News of the decree spread rapidly. Mordecai heard about it and was shocked. No one had attacked the Jews before during their exile in Persia. This was new and terrifying. He expressed his grief publicly. He tore his robe, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the streets, wailing loudly and bitterly. He couldn't go to his usual place of work, because he wasn't dressed properly. In every province in the empire, Jews were mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing. Many put on sackcloth and ashes, as did Mordecai.

The survival of the Jewish people in Persia was in danger. They had only a few months to live before the day of doom—the 13th day of the last month.

Moses said that “Yahweh’s portion is his people, Jacob is his allotted inheritance. In a desert land he found him...He shielded him and cared for him. He guarded him as the apple of his eye—his favorite, his own” (Deut 32:10). Paul taught that God still loved the Jewish people and would one day take away their sins (Rom 11:27). Haman’s plot to kill the Jews was about to fail, because God rescued his people.

This story is **important** because it shows what a tyrant Xerxes was. It also shows how superstitious the Persian officials were. Why annihilate an entire people because of the offence of one man? Haman’s injured pride was the reason.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that Jewish people throughout the empire were threatened because of the offended pride of one powerful man. God was preparing Mordecai, however, to be an agent of deliverance for God’s people.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. Why was Haman in an important position to hurt the Jewish people? [Pause]
A. If you said, “He was the favorite advisor of a powerful tyrant and full of hate at the disrespect of Mordecai,” you are correct.
2. Why was Mordecai in an important position to help the Jewish people? [Pause]
A. If you answered, “He was a godly man, he had influence in the government, and had uncovered a plot to assassinate the king,” you answered correctly.
3. Why did Haman want to kill all Jews? [Pause]
A. If you said, “He was angry at Mordecai, and he accused all Jews of being traitors because they kept themselves apart from their neighbors and worshiped the one true God,” you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to it at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. God is love, the opposite of hate. Jesus commands us to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37-39). There can be no room for even a little hate in a believer’s life. Tell someone else the story of Haman in your own words as you remember it. Agree with that person to ask God to remove all hate from your hearts.