

The Struggle for Power

by Ray C. Stedman

If you had a map of Iran, the ancient country of Persia, you would mark the capital of that country as a city called Teheran. If you were in Teheran and drove west on the great highway to Baghdad, about 65 miles from the city of Hamadan you would find, out on the plain, a great solitary rock rising up. It is called the Rock of Behistun and rises up about seventeen hundred feet above the plain. Five hundred feet above the level of the plain is a great area that has been cleared off and smoothed away, and on that rock are carved inscriptions placed there by Darius the Great, one of the ancient kings of Persia. In three different languages he tells us about his reign and the glory of his kingdom. He begins by giving his genealogy: He says that his father was named Cyrus, known to history as Cyrus the Great. Many of you will recognize that name. His grandfather was named Arsamies, also known as Astyages and Cambyses in secular history. It is this Arsemias who is the king called Ahasuerus in the book of Esther in our Bible.

This rock, standing yet on the plain of Iran, is a living testimony to the authentic history of the book. Do I sound like I have been there? Well, I have traveled around the world many times by means of the *National Geographic Magazine*, and there have been some very interesting pictures of this great rock and the inscriptions on it which have appeared there.

In the latter part of the reign of King Arsamies or Astyages or Ahasuerus (as you have it in Esther), this man was privileged by God to be the one

who issued the decree to build and restore the city of Jerusalem. The decree was given to a young man in his court who was his cupbearer, named Nehemiah, and it was Nehemiah who began the work of restoration.

In the book of Daniel we read of a certain Darius the Mede who besieged the city of Babylon in the days of Belshazzar, the king. On the fateful night when Belshazzar gave a great feast for all his nobles and they were celebrating in a drunken revelry within the banquet halls, a hand came out and wrote upon the wall, *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* – “Numbered, Numbered, Weighed, and Wanting.” Daniel interpreted that as the sentence of God to remove the kingdom from Belshazzar. That night, we read, Darius the Mede, otherwise known as Astyages, Arsamies, or Ahasuerus, took the kingdom and became the king of Babylon. This man is very often in the pages of Scripture.

He was a young man of about eighteen years of age when the events of the book of Esther begin. Vashti was his queen, a woman of the Lydian line, and, as we read in the first chapter of Esther, he deposed his queen in a fit of anger and for three lonely years lived without a queen. But, when he was twenty-one, by the grace of God, he found and married a young Jewess, named Esther, who had been one of the captives brought from the city of Jerusalem. Her cousin, Mordecai, became a judge in the city of Susa, the capital of Media and uncovered a plot against the king's life. This is the point to which we have traced the story of this book of Esther.

We have found this is not simply a story out of the dust of the long forgotten past, interesting as it may be. Really, this is your life!

- You are the king, which reaches out to influence all those who have contact with you.
- You have great influence in this empire.
- You are its king, and, if you are a Christian, you too have found a new queen when your spirit was made alive in Jesus Christ.

In that place of new communion, you have sensed the influence of the Holy Spirit who has caused to be recorded in a book the whole story of the plot of the evil one against your life.

You can see how aptly this story of Esther retraces the story of your life.

We have reached the place in the book of Esther, at the close of the first two chapters, which represents all that most Christians know about the Christian life. They have accepted Christ so many years ago; they have been born again; they feel that they have been left here to struggle on the best they can until the Lord comes or they are called to be with him – and they are trying to make the best of it until that time. This is all they know. Christianity, to them, is receiving Christ, being born again, and trying to do the best they can from there on. Now, if this were all there were to the Christian experience, then the book of Esther would end at Chapter 2. But it doesn't. It goes on to teach some very important truths.

I talked recently with a woman, the wife of a Protestant minister, whose husband had faithfully preached throughout his ministry that Jesus Christ died to save men from sin and who had proclaimed the gospel invitation to receive him and life would begin anew; but he had never learned any more of the Christian life than that, and as a result of his ignorance of what the Word of God says about Christian life beyond conversion, his ministry was falling apart and his home was breaking up.

The rest of the book of Esther magnificently sets forth the unveiling of the process of evil in human life, and the way God works to deliver us from it.

We can pick up the story in Chapter 3 with **the revelation of the conflict within:**

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance. Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was filled with fury. {Est 3:1-5 RSV}

Mordecai we know, but who is Haman? He's suddenly introduced into the record here. What is behind the immediate antagonism that we find between Mordecai and Haman in the story? We get a clue in the parentage that's given for this man. He was Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite. What is an Agagite? Here we will need to do a little detective work.

If you haven't learned the extreme excitement of studying your Bible as though you were Perry Mason, you've missed a great deal of life. You need to do much detective work in studying the Bible.

The man is an Agagite. That means he is a descendant of a man named Agag. Where do you find Agag in the Scriptures? In the fifteenth chapter of First Samuel, we have the account of how King Saul, the first king of Israel, was ordered by Samuel, the prophet of God, to mount an expedition against the Amalekites, and we read in Chapter 15:

And Samuel said to Saul, "The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore hearken to the words of the LORD: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do

not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.” {1 Sam 15:1-3 RSV}

And so Saul gathered the people and went down to battle, and we read in Verse 8:

And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword, but Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was goods and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed. {1 Sam 15:8-10 RSV}

Because of this failure Samuel was sent of God to tell Saul that the kingdom was to be taken from him and given to another since he had refused to obey the command of God to destroy Agag, the king of the Amalekites.

If we trace further back, we discover that Amalek was the enemy of Israel when they came through the wilderness on the way from Egypt into Canaan. In the seventeenth chapter of the book of Exodus we read concerning Amalek, these words:

Then came Amalek and fought with Israel at Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, “Choose for us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.” So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat upon it, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD is my Ban-

ner, saying, “A hand upon the banner of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.” {Exod 17:8-16 RSV}

Going back even farther you will discover that Amalek was the grandson of Esau, that Esau of whom God said, “Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated,” {Mal 1:2b-3a}. All through the Bible, Amalek, Agag, and the descendants of Esau picture to us an enemy that oppose all that God would do. Now there’s such a principle of evil at work in every human heart. In the kingdom over which you reign, there is a Haman who is an Agagite.

Just as the solar system is a vastly expanded duplicate of what goes on in the atom, so, in effect, the history of the world is a vastly expanded duplicate of what goes on in an individual human life. In every life there is this satanic principle at work. It is called in the New Testament, “the flesh.” It lives for but one purpose, reflected here in the story of Esther – in order to exalt itself. It never enjoys life more than when people are bowing and scraping in front of it. It is forever seeking status and position in the eyes of others.

You know well this feeling, don’t you? It appears to us as a trusted friend, just as Haman appeared to King Ahasuerus as one he could trust. And yet Haman’s true purpose was to advance himself and to see that everyone bowed low before him. So we treat this strange invader in our lives as though he were a friend – we promote him and advance him. Isn’t it interesting that we are not ashamed of our pride? We boast of it, we trust it, we regard it as an essential to life. We think that this principle, which demands that we think of ourselves first, is the very essence of living – if this were destroyed, we would lose all. Thus we may recognize the Haman in our lives.

Now within the Christian, Haman has an implacable enemy – it is Mordecai, the Holy Spirit. The New Testament says, “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh and these are contrary the one to the other,” {Gal 5:17a KJV}. There never can be peace, for God has said he will make war against Amalek from generation to generation. He will never make peace with him. “The flesh cannot please God,” {Rom 8:8b}. There is that within every man which is inherently displeasing to God, no matter how fine it

may appear to us. It cannot please God for God has sworn eternal enmity against it. But, in the Christian heart, the Holy Spirit has landed and gained a bridgehead for one purpose only, that he might oppose this diabolical, satanic influence within us which so subtly and cleverly deceives us, deludes us, and destroys us. He has come in order that we might have deliverance from this traitorous friend. This is what we have pictured for us so clearly in the story of Haman, Mordecai, and Ahasuerus.

Now, the presence of the Spirit in the heart of man arouses the flesh to an explosion of fury. Have you discovered that? Have you found that when you became a Christian, you had more trouble than you ever had before? Before your conversion, life went along fairly smoothly, but the minute you became a Christian you found yourself in the center of a vast and swirling torment. You were seemingly torn in several directions at once. This is a result of the fury that is aroused in Haman when Mordecai refuses to bow before him – “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh,” {Gal 5:17a KJV}.

If this pride – the flesh – is not your friend, but rather a subtle, crafty enemy as this book says, then the most important thing in your Christian life is to learn to recognize how he works, for you never can win the battle against him unless you know his tactics. There is no possibility of victory without this. Paul says, “We are not ignorant of his devices,” {2 Cor 2:11b KJV}. We know how he works and we can thus call upon all the overpowering, conquering influence of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

So, in Verses 6-9 of this chapter, we have reviewed for us, **the strategy of the enemy**. Haman is determined now to gain full control of the king and yet he must do this without making the king suspicious of what he’s up to.

1. So his first tactic is to approach with *great subtlety*, and in Verse 6 we read:

But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the

whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. {Est 3:6 RSV}

As a Christian, how long would you entertain the thought of rejecting outright God’s influence in your life? Supposing someone came to you and said “Look! I know you are a Christian, that you have acknowledged Christ as your Lord and Savior, but why don’t you forget the whole thing and throw him overboard. Don’t obey him any longer.” How far would they get with you? How long would you entertain the suggestion that you tell the Holy Spirit to go to hell? That’s what a Christian does when he denies the Holy Spirit in his life! No, the Tempter never starts there, he never suggests this to us at first. He always starts out at the periphery of life, in the area of our attitudes rather than our convictions. He begins with Mordecai’s people, not with Mordecai.

In the Bible, the story of the Jews is the story of God at work among men. The whole purpose of this strange nation is that, in their history, we might see unquestioned evidences of God at work. Therefore, these people represent that which gives evidence to the world of God at work. Now, what in your life gives evidence to the world that God is at work? You will find a list of such evidences in Galatians 5, Verses 22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; {Gal 5:22-23a RSV}

This is the way the world knows whether the Spirit of God is at work in your life, or not. They are not fooled by some outward manifestation of tongues or miracles or gifts. They look for the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit, that which is in accord with the character of God. These are “the people of Mordecai” in my life and yours.

The whole strategy of the flesh is to convince us that these attitudes which mark God at work in us are really not to our advantage, that we would get along much better without them, and that the opposite attitudes are the things

that will really pay off for us. If we can be led to distrust and reject these godly attitudes we will thereby frustrate the work of the Holy Spirit in our life. Haman knows this so he goes after “the people of Mordecai.”

2. To accomplish this aim he brings another weapon to bear – it is *superstition*. Look at Verse 7:

In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is the lot, before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. {Est 3:7 RSV}

What a strange thing to interject here! This casting of lots to determine a lucky day on which to do something was a common practice in oriental kingdoms. It was similar to the practice today of shooting dice in order to determine an appropriate, propitious day. This account does not mean that for a whole year they shook dice in front of Haman. It means that every cast they made stood for a different day. They would cast the dice out and name the cast for a certain day of the calendar year. If it was a propitious number then that day was a lucky day. Thus they went through three hundred and sixty-five casts before this man – a whole year’s time before they found a lucky day, and when they found it, it was in the twelfth month which is the month of Adar.

This is nothing but the rankest superstition! All superstition is a form of fear, and fear is the enemy of faith. Fear is the opposite of faith. Superstition, then, is a sign of distrust of God.

Why is it that whenever we acknowledge that our business has been good, or our health has been good, we like to knock on wood? We really do it to frighten away the jealous spirits which we think may take our prosperity away. We distrust the gods.

It’s strange, isn’t it, how many Christians resort to these superstitious practices? They smile and joke when they do them, but down underneath there is a lingering suspicion that they had better do them or they might bring bad

luck. This is simply fear of the jealousy of God. The tempter has planted in our hearts the feeling that God is not really interested in our welfare, that we must take care of all things ourselves. We have begun to distrust the goodness of God.

Haman knows that if the king can be persuaded to heed this black magic, he has already succeeded in driving a wedge of distrust into his heart.

3. The third weapon with which he attacks the king is an *apparent solicitude*:

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; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not for the king’s profit to tolerate them.” {Est 3:8 RSV}

Now he’s getting to the point.

“If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and 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.” {Est 3:9 RSV}

He has distracted the king’s attention from his true object, has driven a wedge of doubt into his heart, and now he moves in to polish him off. He openly suggests that Mordecai’s people are really unprofitable to the king, but that he, Haman, is ready to make him gloriously rich. He will pay ten million dollars, a staggering sum, into the king’s treasury. This is a very sensitive matter with the king. When you talk about a threat to a king’s throne you are touching something that is very close to his heart. And when, in addition, you infer that you have a plan that will make him more wealthy than ever before, you interest him greatly. This is Haman’s approach. He suggests that the people of Mordecai are really a threat to the king’s liberty, and that if he will

remove them and trust Haman, Haman will make him rich.

Has Haman been talking to you recently?

- Has he, for instance, suggested that keeping your temper and giving a soft answer to those around you never really gets you anywhere, especially where you work? – that it is the fellows who tell everyone off who get the promotions? The ones who are willing to stand up for their rights and not let anyone walk over them, these are the men who get the advances!
- Has he whispered to you that honesty is not really the best policy, at least when it comes to filling out your income tax? After all, what the government doesn't know won't hurt them, and you can save a lot of money by just a few shortcuts.
- Has he suggested to you young people that you can't get good grades in school unless you do like everyone does and cheat a little bit, that it is the ones who are not too holy to fudge a bit that can pull down the grades?
- Has he suggested that love is all right for sentimentalists, but the only way to really defend the faith and the American way of life is to picket those who don't agree with you, and hound them out of town?
- Has he suggested that good manners and courteous words are needed for business and for strangers, but at home you can let your hair down and say what you like, especially to your wife and kids – they will respect you all the more for it?

Has he been talking to you? Does it sound pretty good? Does it sound like it will work, especially when he can show you from your horoscope that this is the day to throw your weight around?

Well, then, take a look at **the program of defeat**.

A. It begins with *decision*:

So the king took his signet ring 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.” {Est 3:10-11 RSV}

Now this is a remarkably accurate revealing of what goes on in our lives when we yield to temptation. It begins with decision. Nothing can be done in your life without the consent of your will! You cannot pass the buck to anyone else. You have the final responsibility for what happens in your life, because nothing can be done, good or evil, apart from the consent of your will. Even though you may be perfectly sincere and confident that you are doing the right thing, as this king was, yet no evil enters your heart that you have not permitted to be there.

Here is another interesting thing revealed. When you make a decision, you hand the authority to act to another! Man can do nothing by himself, the New Testament declares. We are not made to be activists; we are only made to be deciders. We can do nothing ourselves. We decide, as this king did, and then, either Haman acts or the Holy Spirit. Once the decision is made, the power to act passes to another.

There have been many demonstrations of this in our courts, where individuals commit terrible murders, and the jury gives them life imprisonment or a lesser sentence because they feel there is some justification to their pleas that they did not know what they were doing, that they were in the grip of powers and forces greater than they could control. There is some sense in which this is true. But what the juries fail to take into consideration, I believe, is that there is a moment when a man must decide that he will commit himself to forces within him that will act beyond what he desires. After that decision is made he is indeed in the grip of forces that may go far beyond what he wishes, but the decision to permit them to act was his and his alone.

B. Now, the next step is *a widespread involvement* that follows:

Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the princes 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 ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 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. The couriers went in haste by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the capital. {Est 3:12-15a RSV}

You do not act by yourself, in a corner. You can't! What you decide in the depths of your heart affects everyone who knows you. The decision made in secret in the very innermost part of your thinking, sooner or later touches the lives of everyone with whom you have to do. Such a decision reaches out to the uttermost limits of your empire. Your secret thoughts become evident sooner or later. You cannot give yourself to playing with thoughts in secret that do not sooner or later break out in open deeds. The whole of the kingdom is involved in all that the king does!

- C. Then the final step here is one of *delusion*; the last sentence:

And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was perplexed. {Est 3:15b RSV}

The king is quite confident that he has taken a wise step. He's deluded. He's deceived. He thinks he is acting in his own interest. He's grateful to Haman for his obvious concern for his welfare. So, he invites him in to celebrate with a glass of wine or two. But,

outside in the city, there's nothing but confusion and perplexity. No one knows what to do. This strange edict has thrown them into confusion.

Have you ever had a drinking session with yourself to congratulate yourself for the clever way you solved a problem in your life? You've had to cut the corners a bit and maybe you've had to tell off a few people along the way, but you got what you wanted. It is a pretty good feeling, isn't it? You go home and pat yourself on the back and congratulate yourself. You and Haman have a drinking session together. But, when you get around to taking the next step you don't know what to do. You've lost, in some strange way, your sense of direction. You started out well, but before you know it somehow you've gotten distracted, and things are confused, and you don't know what to do next. The only hymn you can think of to sing is, "I'm Nervous in the Service of the King." You become perplexed, confused, distracted.

Like Martha, you remember? When the Lord came to dinner and poor Martha got confused over what to do next. She attempted a dozen different activities at once until she came bursting in and blamed the Lord for the whole thing. And he said to her, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things – but one thing is needful..." {Luke 10:41b-42a KJV}.

Is this where you are living today? Are you, as a Christian, a victim of your own sense of dedication?

- You meant to do right, you tried to do right.
- You thought you were making the right choices on the basis of what would be the right thing to do.
- But it has turned out to be so confusing, so baffling!

The Lord Jesus said, "If your eye be single, your whole body will be filled with light; but if the light which is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness," {cf, Matt 6:22b-23 KJV}.

What darkness many people live in! Christians live right here – defeated, deluded, disappointed –

and they don't know why. But there is a way out. It's provided by the Holy Spirit; this is what he has come to do. When you begin to believe what he tells you about Haman, then you will begin to discover what that way out is!

Prayer:

Our Father, what a revelation this is to us.
How we thank you for an objective light

that shines into the darkness of our own confusion and helps us to see what we are and where we are going and what's happening to us. Thank you for the love that prompted it. You do not leave us to wander blindly about, but bring the light of truth in. You have said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Make us, then, willing to hear, willing to heed, willing to believe, willing to obey. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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