

In Every City There Was Gladness and Joy
Esther 8
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Read Esther 8

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
(Hebrews 4:12)

Introduction

In Rwanda in the early 1990s, tensions had flared back up between two groups of people with a short history of conflict, the Hutus and the Tutsis. As the movie *Hotel Rwanda* illustrated, an outsider couldn't even tell the difference between a Hutu and a Tutsi, but their Belgian occupiers had pitted the two groups against each other, despite the fact that they had historically peacefully co-existed in the area. The Hutus began to be stirred up by a national suspicion and resentment of their Tutsi neighbors, and when the plane carrying the Rwandan president was shot down, the country became a killing field. Even Hutus who had previously been friends with their Tutsi neighbors took guns and machetes to participate in the killings that lasted around 100 days, with around 800,000 people killed.¹ It was a horrific chapter in African history that shocked the world. But this was hardly the first time this kind of genocide had broken out in an area, where neighbor killed neighbor based solely on their ethnic identity. The book of Esther has a ticking clock on an event where anyone in the nation could kill any Jews that they found on a specific day, the thirteenth day of Adar, as the wicked scheme of Haman awaited its fulfillment. If nothing changed and no one intervened, the Jews would be slain in the same way that the Tutsis were.

You may have missed one or more of the Esther sermons or lost track of some of the details of the story, so let's do a quick review of this book:

-It begins with the king of the mighty empire of Persia named Ahasuerus or Xerxes. In the early years of his reign, in between military campaigns, he got rid of his queen in a fit of rage.

-The search for a new queen brought hundreds of young virgins to the palace for the king to find one that pleased him. The woman chosen to be the new queen was a young, Jewish orphan named Esther who had been taken in by her cousin, Mordecai. He urged her to keep her Jewish identity a secret even as she was celebrated as the new queen.

-Mordecai saved the king's life by exposing a plot against him, but he was never rewarded. Instead, the king promoted a man named Haman to be his right-hand man. Haman's people, the Amalekites, were historic enemies of the Jews, and so after feeling insulted by Mordecai, Haman decided to take out his wrath on Mordecai's people, writing up a royal decree to have the Jews killed on a specific day.

-When Mordecai found out about the genocide plans, he urged Esther to intervene. After some reluctance, she did, boldly going into the king's presence for which she could have been killed. But the king was again pleased with her and offered to give her anything she desired. She asked him and Haman to attend two feasts that she had prepared.

-In between feasts, Haman decided that Mordecai had to die immediately, so he had a gallows constructed and was about to ask the king to sign-off on Mordecai's death sentence. But the

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/africa/rwandan-genocide>

king had just been reminded that Mordecai had saved his life, so instead of hanging Mordecai, Haman had to parade him around the city in royal robes on a royal horse.

-At the second feast, Esther revealed that she herself was Jewish and targeted for execution, all because of Haman's actions. The king became angry and sent Haman to be impaled on the very gallows that he had built. We pick up the story today immediately after that death sentence:

I. Pleading with the King (vv. 1-6)

¹ On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. ² And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. ³ Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. ⁴ When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. ⁵ And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. ⁶ For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?"

The first two verses here continue the amazing reversal of everything evil that Haman had plotted. Everything that belonged to Haman was given to Esther, who passed it on to Mordecai. Even the royal signet ring that Haman had been given by the king was taken from him and handed to Mordecai. It's as if someone has plotted to kill you, and rather than a judge just sending him to prison, he has him executed and gives you his house and possessions. Justice doesn't really work like that these days. But the king of Persia made big, grand decisions when he was moved to action, and Mordecai certainly benefited. Of course, Mordecai has been a loyal citizen and employee of the palace, and has now uncovered and stopped two different assassination plots: one against the king and one against the queen! He certainly deserves rewards. Beyond that, there's great irony that money that was once to be given for the destruction of the Jews (remember that Haman had promised to pay the king 10,000 talents of silver) was now in the possession of a Jew.

But then the reader has to remember that the edict of Haman lived beyond his death, it was still in effect. So if nothing changed, the entire population of Jews living in the 127 provinces of Persia would still be dead very soon, no matter how much property and income had just changed hands, and regardless of whether the original author of the edict, Haman, was still alive. So Esther wept and pleaded for her people, telling the king that she could not bear to see them destroyed. We are reminded that Esther had no power because the king had to extend his golden scepter to her again to allow her to approach him and speak. She still used wise words of diplomacy in the midst of her tears – *"if I please the king... if it seems right... if I have found favor."* She specifically doesn't ask the king to change the law but to *"revoke the letters devised by Haman."*

I want us to think about this a little: It seems from the wording that Esther and Mordecai would not be targets of execution, that they would survive because she spoke of witnessing the calamity and destruction of her people. So there is Esther, who has just been given everything that belonged to Haman. She was already the queen and surrounded with wealth and luxury, now she has added a considerable amount to what she already could count as her own. She set Mordecai, her adoptive father, over Haman's estate. And what I couldn't stop thinking of is that the two of them could have just enjoyed those luxuries for the rest of their days. They had more than enough to keep themselves well-fed and protected and living the high life, as long as they kept in the good graces of the king. But Esther could not just sit back and enjoy her life while her people died. And I see in

that a picture of us as believers. We have been saved through the work of Christ, but it's so easy for us to be happy and content about that, and then to retreat to our houses and live lives of luxury and ease while people around us die spiritually. Esther wept and pleaded on behalf of her people – how often do we weep and pray to the Lord for the salvation of our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers? We are eternally secure, but does it move us that they will perish and spend eternity separated from God in agony when they die?

One of the last scenes in the film *Schindler's List* stuck with me more than anything else in the film. Oskar Schindler helped save hundreds of Jews from being killed by bribing the Nazis to allow him to put them to work in his factories. Near the end of the movie, a large group of those that he saved gather around him to thank him, and they present him with a gold ring. Schindler is overwhelmed, dropping the ring, sobbing, exclaiming that he could have done more. He could have sold his car or his gold pin and saved more people, but he didn't. Those around him attempt to console him by pointing out all that he did do, but he is so upset that he can't be consoled. Tim Keller said that the reason Schindler is not comforted is that he is right and he knows it: he could have done more, but he didn't. He is haunted by this truth, and no one can change his mind or his heart.² We all can do more. It haunts me sometimes that I can look back over my life and see that I could have done so much more for the Lord; that there were times that I hesitated or was too lazy or self-centered that I missed amazing opportunities to love people and share the Gospel with them. We can all take on regret and harbor great guilt that we didn't do enough. The trick is finding balance in challenging ourselves to step out in faith and do the things that are possible, but not take on the weight of the world and continually despair at our failings. The Good Samaritan didn't save every wounded traveler, but he did save the one that he came across. May God give us strength and courage to help those that we can.

The next eight verses map out a plan to get around this irreversible edict, as Mordecai and Esther will be

II. Writing in the Name of the King (vv. 7-14)

⁷ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. ⁸ But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." ⁹ The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. ¹⁰ And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, ¹¹ saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, ¹² on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. ¹³ A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. ¹⁴ So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.

² Eric McLaughlin's article "When Bleeding Hearts Break," *Christianity Today*, July/August 2022, p. 62.

The King gave in to his queen's pleas and instructed Esther and Mordecai to "*write as you please with regard to the Jews.*" In other words, do whatever you can to save them; figure out your own way out of this predicament. Just remember that we can't undo the order to destroy them; it's out of my hands, it's irrevocable. Ahasuerus is not what we would call a stickler for the details. Or in political speak, he is not what they call a "policy wonk," someone who studies and develops strategies. He doesn't really care what these edicts say. As long as the people around him are happy and make him happy, they can decree whatever they want in his name. Which was terrible when it was deceitful Haman doing it, but wonderful now that it's honest and godly Mordecai doing the writing.

Mordecai's edict was a complete reversal of Haman's, including giving the Jews permission to plunder their enemies. But this one was only given for self-defense; the Jews could not go around killing and plundering anyone that they wanted. They could only take vengeance on anyone who initiated violence against them, those who attacked them first. Every province got copies in every language of every people group in the kingdom. The Jews had not been saved yet, but they had been given what by any definition would be called "a fighting chance."

The chapter closes with

III. Rejoicing for the Actions of the King (vv. 15-17)

¹⁵ Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. ¹⁶ The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. ¹⁷ And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Just four days earlier, Mordecai and all the Jews were wearing sackcloth and ashes, weeping and distressed that their lives would be coming to an end on a fixed day. Now hope has returned that they might survive, so verse 16 says there was light, gladness, joy and honor! We are in the season of Advent, which means "arrival or coming." And we read Scripture verses like Isaiah 9:2 - "*the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,*" that the great hope of the world, the Messiah, the Peace of Peace, is coming in the form of a child to save His people from their sins. That "joy to the world" and "deck the halls" spirit of feasting and rejoicing is seen here as the people know their deliverance has come. Mordecai was honored by both the king and the people of the city, and he was dressed with royal robes and a crown. This man who had been the target of anger in the royal administration and had come so close to being hung on a 75-foot tall gallows was now celebrated for the second time in Susa, and particularly became a hero to his own people.

A story that started with Mordecai telling Esther to hide her Jewish identity comes to a place where verse 17 tells us that many non-Jewish people throughout the country declared themselves Jews. "*Fear of the Jews had fallen on them*" - this is a common theme in the Old Testament after God has saved His people and helped them triumph over their enemies - it happened with Moses in Egypt and among the tribes that surrounded the Israelites in the wilderness. It's what Jeremiah 33:9 declared about Jerusalem from God's perspective: "*And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.*"

Conclusion

One of the main themes of this chapter is Esther interceding for her people. The Israelites didn't just need someone in the palace who was one of them, they needed someone who would be their advocate and plead on their behalf. She is the only one who can save them at this point. Queen Esther has not always acted in the godliest of ways, but here at the end of the story, she points towards the work of Christ for us. Romans 8:34 says that "*Jesus... is at the right hand of God... interceding for us.*" 1 John 2:1 explains that "*we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*" Just like Esther, Jesus goes before the High King of heaven and He pleads for us. His intercession is not based on whether we are worthy, because we are not, but on the basis of His worthiness. He has found favor in the sight of the king, He has pleased the Father with His perfect obedience, and on that basis, God the Father pardons us.

I want to wrap this up thinking about this idea of one law superseding another law.³ The law of gravity is irreversible, is it not? While you're on earth or within earth's orbit, gravity makes everything come down to the ground. So how are we able to fly planes? It's not by repealing the law of gravity, it's by operating under a different law, a law that works despite gravity's pull: the law of aerodynamics. The law of gravity is still in effect, but a greater law overrules it. Here in Esther, the law of the Medes and the Persians said that when a king made a royal decree signed by his signet ring, it was irrevocable. So Haman's edict to kill the Jews was still in effect, it still had to happen. But Esther and Mordecai were able to get around that law by coming up with a new law, that the Jews were authorized to defend themselves and kill their assailants. Now, let's apply that to our spiritual lives: According to the Bible, the law of sin and death says that the soul that sins shall die, and that the wages of sin is death; spiritual, eternal death. Can we reverse that law or get it repealed, and avoid being condemned because of our sin? No, we can't, and God can't cancel it and still be a just God. He has to punish sin, just as every just judge can't turn a blind eye to those who break the law. But God can propose a new law: Romans 8:2 says, "*through Jesus Christ the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*" God overcame the law and the pronouncement of our guilt and death sentence by introducing a new law that anyone who loves His Son and accepts His grace in their lives will be saved eternally! Jesus kept the first law, the moral law, perfectly so that God could enact the second law and Jesus could represent us in His death. The forgiveness of sins and salvation of our souls accomplished in His atoning death is the greater law seen in the New Covenant.

→ To Communion

Next week's text is going to give us a name for the feast and holiday that the Jews commemorated the actions of this book by: Purim. We have a different feast than Purim to celebrate the deliverance of God's people. It's called Communion or the Lord's Supper. Here at CenterPoint we celebrate it monthly, not annually. We celebrate it to remind ourselves of what God did for us way back in our history. That He brought us relief from our enemies, that He has conquered death through His covenant of grace. That Jesus died in our place, interceding for us as our Mediator with God the Father, so that we are spared the sentence death and condemnation of the first law, and are set free by the law of the Spirit of life.

Benediction

Revelation 1:5b-6 – "*To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*"

³ Adapted from Ray C. Stedman, *For Such A Time as This* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 2010), pp. 107-113.