

Relief From Their Enemies, Peace to All His People
Esther 9-10
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Introduction

The Roman philosopher Cicero in the first-century BC wrote the story of a Sicilian king from hundreds of years earlier, Dionysius. Dionysius was rich and powerful, but he had made many enemies and was constantly paranoid about people trying to assassinate him; he even slept in a bedchamber surrounded by a moat for safety and really only trusted his daughters. One day, the king was flattered by a man named Damocles, who pointed out what a wonderful life he had. King Dionysius replied that if he was so envious of his life, would he like to experience it for a time? Damocles said that he would, so he was given a golden couch and a host of servants to wait on him and get him anything that he wished. Damocles enjoyed this life for a time until he noticed that hanging from the ceiling right above the golden couch was a razor-sharp sword, held up with only a single strand of horsehair. Damocles decided that he would no longer like to “enjoy” his king’s privileged life. The “Sword of Damocles” has come to describe any situation where violence and death are hanging over people’s heads. President Kennedy used it in a speech about the Cold War: “Every man, woman, and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness.”¹

This morning’s text has a “Sword of Damocles” hanging over an entire people group. The Jews living in Persia in the 5th century BC had been targeted by a royal edict to be murdered by their neighbors and fellow countrymen on a specific date. Royal edicts were irrevocable, unchangeable, so the only hope that the Jews had was that one of their own was living in the palace, Queen Esther. The last few chapters saw Esther expose the author of this wicked edict, Haman, which led to his death sentence by the king, and then the writing of a new edict authorizing the Jews to defend themselves. But it’s not until this chapter that we see whether the Jews survived the date of their planned execution – would the Sword of Damocles drop on them, or would they avoid it? The first sixteen verses of the chapter tell us about the two

I. Days of Warfare (9:1-16)

¹ Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. ² The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. ³ All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. ⁴ For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. ⁵ The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. ⁶ In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, ⁷ and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha ⁸ and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha ⁹ and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, ¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder. ¹¹ That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. ¹² And the king said to Queen Esther, “In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of

¹ <https://www.history.com/news/what-was-the-sword-of-damocles>

Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled.”¹³ And Esther said, “If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows.”¹⁴ So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged.¹⁵ The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.¹⁶ Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

We finally see that this terrible plot of Haman’s to kill all the Jews backfired in a big way. This whole book is about how God reversed things that had been put in motion to threaten His people, and that reversal is seen in verse one, that the “*Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.*” So, apparently it wasn’t just Haman who hated the Jews, there were a lot of other Persian citizens who shared that hatred apparently. Even though verse 2 says that “*the fear of them had fallen on all peoples,*” there were still those who wanted to attack them. You would really have to hate the Jews if you were still intent on killing them and carrying out that dreadful decree after you saw the counter-decree that they could defend themselves. Remember that the Jews were not waging an offensive war here but defending themselves against anyone who came out against them. Also remember that the last chapter said that the edict for the Jews to defend themselves had gone out in the third month of the year, and the day of bloodshed was in the twelfth month. So the citizens of the kingdom had nine months to choose a side and weigh the wisdom of attacking people who were now armed and aided by all the government officials, as verse 3 informs us.

Starting in verse 6, we get casualty reports: the Jews defended themselves and killed 500 men (including the 10 sons of Haman) in the capital city of Susa on the first day, then 300 the next day. In the other 126 provinces, the Jews killed 75,000 people. It’s a civil war that the king just sat out and waited for the results to come in. Now, you may think that Esther went too far in not only having Haman’s sons killed, but also asking that they be hanged on the gallows. But this was an ancient convention of warfare that was a sign to everyone of victory, even looking to avoid further bloodshed by intimidating anyone who was still intent on opposing the Jews.² Haman’s sons would not have been innocent bystanders, they would have shared their father’s allegiances. Christopher Ash comments that, “had they not shared their father’s values, they would have needed to do what Ruth the Moabite did and leave their father’s house to demonstrate their change of allegiance.”³ They did not, so they were then the Jews greatest enemies.

Why didn’t the Jews take the plunder from the enemies that they killed which the edict permitted? The text doesn’t really say, but I can only guess that it was to counter the original accusation made by Haman about them - that they were a people who did not keep the laws of the kingdom. Controlling themselves, not plundering their enemies, showed people that they were law-abiding and not motivated by greed, only by self-preservation. The next sixteen verses move onto

II. Days of Celebration (9:17-32)

¹⁷ This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁸ But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month

² L. Allen and T. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 258.

³ Christopher Ash, *Teaching Esther & Ruth: From Text to Message* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021), p. 257.

of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another. ²⁰ And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, ²² as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor. ²³ So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. ²⁴ For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. ²⁵ But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, ²⁸ that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants. ²⁹ Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. ³⁰ Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, ³¹ that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. ³² The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

In my introductory sermon on the book of Esther I talked about how it was written to explain why the Jews celebrate Purim every year; here are the details. Verses 27-28 emphasize how “*they obligated themselves and their offspring... without fail... keep these two days... at the time appointed every year... remembered and kept throughout every generation... Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration... cease among their descendants.*” The people realized how monumental these events were and they never wanted them to be forgotten. Next year, in 2023, starting at sundown on Monday, March 6 and going through sundown of March 7, Jews around the world will worship and celebrate Purim. Many will prepare for the day by fasting and being solemn, then the actual day is a great celebration of joy. They will read the book of Esther and hiss and jeer every time Haman’s name is read; the kids will dress up in costumes and perhaps reenact the events; they’ll feast and drink fine wine, and lastly, they’ll give gifts to the poor. Purim has endured and been celebrated for the past 2,500 years.

One of the songs that they sing at the Feast of Purim says: “All the world was struck with amazement when Haman’s Pur became our Purim.”⁴ Verse 24 reminds us where the name came from – because Haman cast Pur to determine the date on which all the Jews would be killed. That’s a strange thing to focus on, isn’t it? Naming your celebration on the lots that were cast for a slaughter that never happened. It’s a bit of thumbing of the nose at Haman, of ridiculing him, right? It’s also a way of saying that Haman’s leaving things to the power of random chance was no match for the power of the God who worked behind the scenes to reverse everything in the story and make sure that the thirteenth day of Adar was not a defeat of His people, but a victory for them. God alone determines the lot of His people.

⁴ Timothy Cain, *The God of Great Reversals: The Gospel in the Book of Esther* (self-published, 2016), p. 163.

The last chapter is the shortest one, with three verses describing how the Jews had

III. Days of Peace (10:1-3)

¹ King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. ² And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? ³ For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.

Why does this book end with the note that the king imposed taxes on all the land? Maybe to remind us that nothing is certain except death and taxes? To show us that Ahasuerus really hasn't changed at all? Everything around him has changed, the Jews have come through an amazing ordeal, but he needs his tax money to make up for the money he didn't get from Haman? Perhaps it's just a reminder that life goes on; even after amazing moves of God, there was still a pagan king running Persia. Mordecai's leadership is summarized in verse 3 – "*he was great among the Jews*" and popular with them because he "*sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace.*" This book reminds us that God's people can be faithful to Him and still serve pagan governments and kings, something we see in the stories of men like Joseph and Daniel. Mordecai "*sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people,*" which is a beautiful picture of someone whom Jesus would commend with "*blessed are the peacemakers.*" A lot of blood had to be shed to get to that peace, sometimes that's how world events play out, but that blood was shed in self-defense and protection of the innocent who had been targeted for death.

Conclusion

So what's the message of all of this? "Merry Christmas, now go kill all of your enemies"? As we think through these events in light of the New Testament, the new covenant, we know that the real war, as Ephesians 6:12 says, is not "*against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*" Right after that verse is the listing of the armor of God: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. You don't need armor if you're a non-combatant, right? If Paul is urging us to put on the whole armor of God, then he is calling us to be ready to participate in the battle. We fight the schemes of the devil and we fight against temptation, our own flesh. As the Puritan author, John Owens, said, "Be killing sin or sin will be killing you." He had a fancy theological word for putting sin to death: mortification. We should not get comfortable with our sins, we should not rationalize them or excuse them in ourselves, we should put them to death. 1 Timothy 6:11-12a: "*But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith.*"

If you remember, last week I started the sermon talking about the genocide that happened in Rwanda in the mid-1990s. A friend of ours from our church in Virginia, Catherine Larson, wrote a book called *As We Forgive: Stories of Reconciliation from Rwanda*. One of the stories is of Rosaria, a pregnant Tutsi woman who lived in the town of Nyamata. She was attacked by Hutu men with machetes, thrown into a pile of bodies, and left for dead. But she and her unborn baby survived, though she saw her dead son among the bodies. She hid for weeks, reciting the words of Psalm 63 to herself, and was eventually rescued and taken to a hospital. Fast-forward a decade to a series of meetings that took place called the Umuvumu Tree Project that had the goal of creating a place where Hutu murderers could offer apologies and some form of restitution to their Tutsi neighbors. Rosaria sat on one side of the meetings listening when a man named Saveri approached her and said, "I am the one who murdered your sister and her children, I am begging you to forgive me."

How would you have responded? Could you have forgiven this man who murdered your loved ones in cold blood? Many of the victims at those meetings vented their rage against their loved ones' killers, hurling insults and refusing to forgive. But Rosaria replied softly, "I forgive you if you have sincerely confessed your sin before God and truly changed, then I forgive you." Saveri said, "Thank you, I don't deserve this. I'm so sorry. Thank you." In the years following that meeting, Saveri was able to participate in a program to build Rosaria a new home and then help her plant her crops.⁵

While we can understand the self-defense that the Jewish people had been authorized to exercise in this story, the greater gospel impulse is to forgive our enemies. Yes, we should protect our loved ones wherever and however we can, but Esther points us to the greater deliverance through the great Deliverer. Verse 22 of chapter 9 said that "*the Jews got relief from their enemies.*" That is a theme we see throughout the Old Testament – God's people overcame their enemies, but new ones always came. Moses defeated Egypt, Joshua defeated many tribes around the Promised Land, the Judges defeated the Philistines, and then the Kings waged war against rival nations. Peace never lasted long. Not until the Prince of Peace showed up. When Jesus came, everyone thought He would bring them relief from their enemies. They kept waiting for Him to fight and defeat Rome. But instead, Jesus died on a cross, where He forgave His enemies and died in their place. In Esther, the Jews had to fight and defeat their enemies (to the glory of God). But Jesus died to defeat enmity (hatred, hostility). It's the only way to stop the back and forth of fighting and revenge. God in Christ has forgiven us every sin we've ever committed and will ever commit. That can empower us to forgive every act of evil, anger, hatred, or violence directed towards us and our loved ones.

The other big lesson from the Book of Esther is related to this huge string of coincidences that all led to the Jewish people being saved:

- King Ahasaurus got drunk and got mad at his queen; if that didn't happen Vashti would have remained queen and Esther wouldn't have been in the position she was.
- Esther had to be beautiful and please the king more than the hundreds of other women to be in the position that she was in.
- Mordecai had to overhear the plot of the two men who wanted to kill the king.
- The King forgot that Mordecai hadn't been honored, but one night it just "happened" that he couldn't sleep so he had the records read to him reminding him. And Mordecai was honored in the middle of the plot against his people.
- Haman entered right as the king was wondering how to honor Mordecai.
- The king's reentry right as Haman was falling on Esther on the couch.

We don't necessarily see God's hand at each stop along the way. A king getting drunk, a future queen being brought for a one-night stand, a forgetful king with insomnia, you don't necessarily see God in each of these. But the cumulative weight of all these "coincidences" shows a God who moves behind the scenes.⁶ Again, the author of Esther never mentions God or draws attention to supernatural events, but the events play out in a way that even the characters themselves know that something more than random chance and natural causes are at work. Mark Dever contends that Esther "is one of the longest sustained meditations on the sovereignty and providence of God in the whole Bible. It is really just one long narrative illustration of Romans 8:28, "*that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those are called according to His purpose.*"⁷

⁵ Catherine Claire Larson, *As We Forgive: Stories of Reconciliation from Rwanda* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 30-43.

⁶ Tim Keller's podcast "The Silent Sovereignty of God" from July 22, 2022.

⁷ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), p. 454.

In other words, we see God working through everyday actions and choices. There is no parting of a sea, no sending an angel to put people to death, no saving people who have been thrown into a furnace or a lion's den – nothing miraculous from God's hand. Perhaps that helps us identify with it better as we live out our days without the benefit of divine miracles and interventions to guide and save us. As Barry Webb says: "God is present even when he is most absent; when there are no miracles, dreams, or visions, no charismatic leaders, no prophets to interpret what is happening, and not even any explicit God-talk... Those whom he saved by signs and wonders at the exodus he continues to save through his hidden, providential control of their history."⁸ We don't always see God's hand moving, but we trust His Father's heart of love for us, His children. We are guaranteed to suffer in this life, but our suffering has a purpose. Even our deaths are not in vain, as we are brought to our eternal home to the glory of God.

So, as we look at our own lives and how we worry and are anxious and afraid of the future, we should ask ourselves what that says about our faith. Why are we so troubled and so easily filled with doubt? Why is it so hard to trust God with our problems, with our marriages, with our kids, or with our futures? God knows every hair on your head, Jesus told us, He will take care of you. God will accomplish His purposes in this world and in your life. It may be slow, it may be imperceptible, it may involve a whole series of insignificant circumstances, but it will be certain.⁹ That should give us the courage that Esther and Mordecai showed to step out in faith and boldness to live as ambassadors for Christ, His hands and feet in ministry, light in this dark world. Amen, let's pray.

Benediction

Colossians 1:11-14 – *"May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."*

⁸ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), pp. 124-5.

⁹ Adapted from Dave Silvernail's Sermon "The Man Who Would Be King," Oct. 24, 2010, found at potomachills.org.