

Series Story of Esther

This Message #7

Scripture Esther chapters 9-10

Today we will conclude our series on the Book of Esther. The last two chapters of the story describe the deliverance of the Jews from their enemies and the institution of the Jewish festival known as Purim.

There is a gap of eight months between chapters eight and nine. The story does not give any details about activities during this interval, but we can assume the Jews made very thorough preparations to defend themselves. The Haman edict allowed enemies to attack, and the Mordecai edict permitted the Jews to retaliate against their attackers.

Read Esther 9:1-16

These verses indicate that the Jews were successful in repulsing their enemies. The Jews were organized in all the cities of the Persian empire, and they gained the upper hand over all those who hated them. They struck down all their enemies with the sword.

There were a couple of reasons for the success of the Jews. First, “the people of all the nationalities were afraid of them” because “no one could stand against them.” Collectively, the Jews were a small people group of third generation immigrants widely scattered throughout the Persian empire. Generally speaking, the Jews were not soldiers and fighters. Professionally, they were mostly artisans and small business operators, so what accounted for the success with which they defended themselves?

We have to once again look behind the physical realities to see God at work. There are several passages in the Old Testament which help us to understand God's commitment to protect His people. Immediately after the exodus from Egypt, God began to give a series of promises to the Israelites, saying to them, "I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run" (*Exodus 23:27*). On another occasion He said, "No man will be able to stand against you. The LORD your God, as he promised you, will put the terror and fear of you on the whole land, wherever you go" (*Deuteronomy 11:25*).

Those promises were among many such promises intended to encourage the Israelites to be faithful to God and to trust Him in all circumstances. Unfortunately, the Jews were not always faithful, but even during their times of disobedience, God could not abandon them because His plans for the salvation of humanity depended on the preservation of the Jews as a distinct ethnic group. We have previously mentioned the fact that the Messiah would be a Jew, born into the tribe of Judah.

There is nothing in the Esther story to indicate that the Jews in exile in Persia remembered the promises given to their forefathers or cried out to God to spare their lives, but God was there behind the scenes because He was obligated to protect and preserve His people in order that His purposes might be fulfilled. God was the One who helped the Jews to be good fighters and to make their enemies fearful and hesitant to attack them.

There is a second reason for the success of the Jews in defending themselves. Verse 3 explains that the non-Jewish leaders in the empire helped the Jews "because the fear of Mordecai had seized them." Mordecai had become "prominent in the palace. His reputation spread throughout the provinces. He had become more and more powerful." These nobles, the satraps, governors and administrators, were able to recognize the shift in the political winds, and they did not want to do anything that would offend the king, or to be on the bad side of the king's new prime minister, especially a prime minister who was a Jew. We don't know how these many political and civil leaders helped the Jews, but at least they were not supporting the attackers.

The killing of enemies in the citadel of Susa was unique and unexpected. The citadel refers to the palace complex, which was the royal walled fortress adjacent to the city. The fact that the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men within the citadel indicates that there were a lot of Haman loyalists in close proximity to the king, including the ten sons of Haman. I don't think the king was unhappy when he reported to the queen, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel." These would have been men who resented the ousting of Haman and been a threat to the king.

Because the threats inside the palace were eliminated, and because the edict of Esther and Mordecai had worked out in a way which was beneficial to the king, he was willing to extend more privileges to her — to grant any additional requests she would have. Esther was aware that there were still some enemies left in the city of Susa so she requested that the Jews be given permission for an additional day in which to destroy their enemies.

She also requested that Haman's ten sons be displayed on gallows. These ten men were already dead, so what was the reason for hanging them? Hanging represented the ultimate dishonor and indignity and contempt that could be shown to an enemy. The king granted Esther's request. Thus there was the public humiliation of the memory of Haman. Another 300 enemies were killed during the second day in Susa. The total number of enemies killed throughout the empire was 75,000.

The writer of the story mentions three times that the Jews did not "lay their hands on the plunder," or possessions of their enemies. This was unusual because it was standard practice for the victors to take the spoils of war. It was also unusual because the Mordecai edict had authorized the Jews to plunder the property of their enemies. It seems that the Jews were only concerned about defending themselves and not enriching themselves at the expense of others.

The next section of chapter 9 explains the beginning of the Jewish traditional celebration of Purim.

Read 9:17-23, 26-28

We can understand the joyous celebrations of the Jewish people. When they were condemned, they fasted and mourned. When they received Mordecai's edict, they became hopeful, although they had no way of knowing to what extent they would have to fight in order to defend themselves. When the day of conflict was over, and the Jews realized that they had defended themselves so decisively, and that they were no longer in any danger of extermination, we can understand their relief from anxiety and their desire for a victory celebration. Perhaps the closest that we as Americans can come to identifying with their emotional feelings was the armistice days after World War II. Maybe some of us remember the exuberance of those days.

The celebration of Purim continues to be a popular major holiday among Jews today. In the Hebrew calendar Purim occurs at the end of February or in early March. The name "Purim" comes from the casting of lots (in Hebrew, the word for "lot" is "pur"). Purim is like a combination of New Year's Eve and Halloween. Children and many adults dress in costumes. For many Jews, the day before Purim is a day of fasting, but Purim itself is a day of feasting and heavy drinking. According to one tradition, on Purim the celebrant should drink until he can no longer distinguish between the phrases "Cursed is Haman" and "Blessed is Mordecai". The story of Esther is read in its entirety. Whenever the name of Haman is mentioned (54 times in all), there are boos and hisses and the sound of noisemakers, called "groggers." As part of the festivities, participants give presents of food to one another and charitable gifts to the poor.

I have given this description of the holiday to point out an important fact: the annual celebration of Purim is secular and established by men, not by God. Verse 27 clearly states that "the Jews took it on themselves to establish the custom." Mordecai was the individual who originally sanctioned this annual celebration.

Furthermore, Purim began as a celebration of human achievement, not God's. Verse 22 states that "the Jews got relief from their enemies." The implication is that they did it through their own efforts. The Jews were not aware that God was the force behind their success. From their standpoint, they were celebrating their victory, not God's. In modern times, the celebration of Purim is noteworthy for its emphasis on self-indulgent behavior, as seen in the consumption of alcohol. Neither in the Old Testament nor in modern times is there a sense of worship and thankfulness to God for His guidance and providence in the lives of celebrants.

We can contrast Purim with the feasts and celebrations that were instituted by God, and here we are going to focus on a little more theology. There were three annual feasts that God established for His chosen people. They were Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Each of these festivals celebrated the grace of God in the lives of the people. Passover was associated with Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Pentecost was a time of joy and thankfulness in recognition of God's harvest blessings. Tabernacles had elements of thanksgiving, but it was also a special time for the people to acknowledge their dependence on God. God and His activities were emphasized during each of these religious festivals.

Purim has never been like the feasts instituted by God. There have never been sacrifices or offerings associated with Purim, nor has there been any acknowledgement of God's help, or worship activity. The celebration of Purim was prescribed by Mordecai, the secular Jew, not God (*see Esther 9:22; see also 9:29-32*). It is perhaps significant that for several hundred years the Jews commonly referred to the 14th of Adar as "Mordecai Day."

Celebrations are useful if we can see beyond their surface activities and recognize the deeper reasons for them. Purim should have been an opportunity for the Jews to reflect on the grace of God, just as our celebration of Easter must be more than dyed eggs and bunnies, and Christmas must be more than shopping and trees and Santa Claus. Unfortunately, the Jews, like too many modern people, were focused on only the surface trappings of the holiday.

Esther and Mordecai should have realized that the providence of God was at work in their lives. God was the One behind the removal of Vashti as queen; and the One who helped Esther to find favor with the king. There was a reason why Mordecai heard about the plot against the king; and there was also a reason for the delay in rewarding Mordecai.

Proverbs 16:33 states that "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." God selected the date which allowed ample time for all the people and events to fall into place in order that His chosen people would be saved. Those events included the king's sleepless night, and the reading of the particular passage in the history book, and the timely revelations about Haman, and much more. Unfortunately, there were no words of praise to God by Mordecai or Esther for the favorable outcome. They were unaware that God had been guiding in all of these events.

God was at work throughout the story, and yet every character in the story was a free agent, making decisions and choices according to his or her personal ambitions and goals. Not one of the main characters was a model of godly behavior. Xerxes was driven by his physical appetites and often acted in impulsive and uncaring ways. Haman was controlled by his pride and hatred, and acted with self-interest. Mordecai and Esther were ethnic members of God's chosen people but they were living according to the secular standards of Persia. Yet God worked in and through each of these people in order to keep His eternal plan moving forward. God did not noticeably interfere with their lives, nor coerce them in any way. They all acted as if God did not exist, and yet they acted in ways that served to carry out God's eternal purposes.

The story of Esther is a Biblical illustration of how God is sovereignly and invisibly involved in human affairs. His presence is normally hidden to physical eyes, but people who are spiritually alive recognize that God is real and dynamic. The fact that God is working in and through us, is aware of our needs, and leads and guides us through our circumstances should be a great comfort to us. We must not presume to take personal credit for our accomplishments, but we must have an attitude of thankfulness, recognizing that we are recipients of His mercy and grace.

The book of Esther teaches us many wonderful truths about God. From the story we can understand that God is faithful to fulfill His promises. He used Esther and Mordecai to insure the survival of the Jewish people so that the Messiah would eventually come. From the story we learn about God's sovereignty over the affairs of humanity. Whether people are obedient or disobedient, God always wins. Despite the obstacles He always has His way.

From the story we gain insights into God's wise providence. He was the central character in this story although He was never mentioned. Only individuals who have placed their trust in God are able to discern God's handiwork in human history. Individuals who have no spiritual insight tend to view all events as the products of natural forces or great human skill or chance and coincidence. Along with God's providence, we also learn to appreciate His perfect timing. God never panics over human crises and He is never caught off guard by the evil plans of rebellious humans. Discerning readers of the Scriptures recognize how deliberately and thoroughly God "works in all things for the good of those who love him, to those who have been called according to his purpose" (*Romans 8:28*).

We are not competent to discern how God does this, but all believers can be eternally grateful that God watches over them and takes care of them. God wants nothing more from us than that we go on, day by day, living, “by faith,” in Him, and maintaining our confidence “that He who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (*Philippians 1:6*).

God was concerned about His people in the Old Testament – He is even more concerned about His people in the New Testament who have accepted His Son as their Savior and Lord.

Closing Thoughts and Commentary

Who would have thought that a despised Jew from a subjugated race could become the second most powerful man in the Persian empire? It also reveals the sovereignty of God as who would have chosen the flawed Mordecai and Esther to be instruments of deliverance? God is surprising in His choices. He chose a murderer and aged shepherd to deliver His people from Egypt; He chose a rebellious prophet to bring the Gospel of repentance to the city of Nineveh; and He chose a murderer and blasphemer to be the Apostle to the Gentiles.

The amazing preservation by God of His chosen people throughout the centuries is truly a testimony to His Sovereign wisdom and power. One writer put it well, “The maintenance of the Jewish national existence, while they have for ages been scattered among other nations and yet have been perfectly distinct from them, is as strange a thing as a river running through the ocean without its water mingling with the surrounding mass of waters.”

God is always faithful to His covenantal promises. The eighteenth century German emperor, Frederick the Great asked his personal physician, Zimmermann: “Zimmermann, can you name me a single proof of the existence of God?” Zimmermann succinctly replied, “Your Majesty, the Jews!” Throughout the centuries of persecution, discrimination, and genocide, God has preserved His people.