

Lesson 10: Esther 9:5 – 10:3 & Ezra 7:1-5

Verses 5-15

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 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.

Verses 5-15 are the climax of the book of Esther. The reason that the events in this book occurred was that the Jewish people could survive, and these verses present the details of their survival.

Verse 5 tells us that the Jews did as they pleased. That phrase is important because it highlights the reversal between this outcome and the original edict by Haman. Haman had been told by the king that he could do as he pleased with the Jews (3:11), but in the end it was the Jews who did as they pleased with the Persians who attacked them.

That only 500 men in Susa were killed by the Jews tells us that most Persians (at least in Susa) did not attack the Jews. (A total of 500 was not a large percentage of the population, but later we will see that 75,000 were killed elsewhere.) These 500 may have been led by the 10 sons of Haman who are named in verses 7-9, and who were also killed by the Jews.

In the earliest Hebrew texts, the sons of Haman are listed in two parallel columns, and rabbis and commentators have speculated

about it ever since. Some suggest that was the way they were hanged on the gallows. Others suggest it shows that God's enemies had been set apart for destruction. A similar arrangement of names is found in the list of conquered Canaanite kings in Joshua 12:9-24. "It is as if the author wants the reader to ponder each name, for with each death comes the final blow to Haman's pride."

The author unexpectedly tells us three times that the Jews did not lay their hand on any plunder. (It is unexpected because the edict—written by Mordecai(!)—specifically allowed for it.)

But it was very important to the author that the Jews did not take any plunder. Why? First, it was important for the Persians to know that the Jews were simply defending themselves – they, unlike Haman, were not motivated by material gain. In short, it would show that God's people were distinctive – something that God's people today would be wise to seek as well.

"The deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies would not go unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoil. The very novelty of such self-denial would be remarked upon and remembered and taken as proof of the upright motives of the Jewish communities."

Second, in not taking plunder the Jews were fulfilling God's command to Saul regarding the Amalekites, and, unlike Saul, they would not disobey that command by taking plunder. You can also read about Achan in Joshua 7 and how he brought destruction on the people by keeping plunder. The Jews were learning from their past mistakes – something else God's people today would be wise to do. The Jews of Persia obeyed where King Saul had disobeyed.

The king informs Esther about the 500 deaths in Susa and the deaths of Haman's 10 sons, and he wonders what must have taken place in other provinces. He also asks Esther what she wants now – although this time there is no mention of half his kingdom. Some suggest the king's question should be read, "Surely in light of what you have achieved, you can't want anything more!" But she does.

Esther's response has caused some controversy among commentators. She asks the king to let the fighting continue for another day, and she asks that the bodies of Haman's 10 dead sons be hanged on the gallows for all to see. One very harsh commentator writes that "for this horrible request no justification can be found."

Another almost equally harsh writes that her request here is primarily responsible for her reputation as “a deceitful and bloodthirsty woman” and that “such a reputation certainly has some justification.”

After all, under Haman’s original decree the Persians could not lawfully have attacked the Jews on the second day, and so the Jews did not need to defend themselves on that day. Why did Esther request that the fighting continue?

Had Esther turned vindictive? She provides no justification to the king for the request, and she makes no mention of the welfare of her people. Mordecai is not mentioned as being in on this request, which suggests Esther was acting on her own. Had the power gone to her head? What was Esther thinking? As usual, we are not told.

One commentator suggests that Esther was simply being a wise and prudent leader and that her second day request was “punitive and precautionary, eliminating opponents who might cause problems in the future.”

Those who believe Esther is a work of fiction argue that the second day of killing serves merely to explain the second day of the Purim feast. But if that were true, why would the author choose an explanation that to many seems to impugn Esther and cast the Jews in as bad a light as the Persians? On the other hand, if it was widely known that Queen Esther had ordered a second day of fighting, then the author could hardly have left it out.

Most likely Esther’s second day of fighting had an explanation that has not been revealed to us. Haman had been a very powerful person in the empire, and he may yet have had allies in the empire just waiting for their opportunity to carry out his evil plans. It may be telling that part of her request was that the bodies of the 10 sons of Haman be publicly exposed to serve, no doubt, as a warning to others.

One thing is for certain—Esther hated what God hated. And there might be a good lesson in that for us. Yes, there are things that God hates. And, yes, as the children of God, we should hate them as well. To love what God hates is the worst sort of disloyalty.

On the second day of fighting, 300 additional men are killed in Susa. This second day of fighting explains why the feast of Purim is celebrated on two consecutive days. During the time between the testaments, the Jews referred to this second day as “Mordecai Day” (which is odd because Esther was the one who requested it!).

Verses 16-17

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. 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.

The king's question in verse 12 is answered in verse 16 – 75,000 Persians were killed by the Jews in all the king's provinces. That number seems very high. It is possible that the word translated “thousands” may have meant families or clans, which, if so, would mean that the total number was much less than 75,000. Also, the Septuagint has 15,000 in place of 75,000.

God's people have been saved, and yet God is not mentioned anywhere in the book. The author invites the reader to consider not only *how* God has done it, but *if* God has done it. Yes, the outcome is consistent with God's ancient edict regarding the Agagites, but what was God's role in these events? That is left for the reader to decide. One commentator suggests that not even the author of Esther is certain about God's role in these events. When we consider our own questions about God's providence in our lives and his role in the world around us, we begin to see why Esther is such a modern book. Esther invites us to ponder the nature of faith in a world where God is unseen. It is faith that allows us to see the unseen reality behind the visible events of our day. (Hebrews 11:1) We walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

The day of feasting and gladness in verse 17 is the first Purim celebration. A day of rest had become a day of feasting and joy. In other contexts, God is identified as the giver of rest to his people, but no such credit is given here.

Verses 18-22

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 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.

One reason why Esther was written was to explain the origins of the feast of Purim, and these verses explain when and how that feast was to be celebrated. At this point, the author is looking back on the events in Esther as past history to explain why they practice the feast of Purim as they do. Mordecai and Esther have lived and died, and the great king Xerxes has been assassinated in his bedroom.

One reason that Mordecai wrote the letters in verse 20 was to commend the celebrations and encourage their continuance each year. In the rural towns the Jews celebrated on the 14th day, but in Susa they feasted on the 15th day because they had taken a second day of vengeance.

In verse 20, Mordecai makes a written record of what has happened. We see something similar with regard to the ancient Amalekites. In Exodus 17:14, God said to Moses, "Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Here God is not mentioned, but the written record likewise is done for remembrance and for a memorial.

Verse 22 provides the two main reasons for the feast – relief and reversal. The Jews received relief or rest from their enemies' plans against them, and they experienced a reversal as sorrow became gladness and mourning became a holiday.

In verse 22, we also see that in addition to all of the feasting and gift giving, the Jews gave gifts to the poor. Is there a book in the Bible in which we do not see God's care and concern for the poor? Even here, where God is not mentioned, the poor are remembered. Do we have that same care and concern for the poor?

Verses 23-28

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.

These verses give a summary of the events that lay behind the feast of Purim. With this book, Purim joined the five Jewish feasts that were commanded by Moses. By the time of Jesus, Hanukkah had also been introduced to mark the deliverance of the Jews from the threatened religious and cultural annihilation by the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanies in the second century BC.

The summary in verses 24-25 is interesting, and verse 26 suggests that it was likely included in the letters that Mordecai wrote in verse 20 or in subsequent letters. It is interesting because it is written from a purely Persian perspective. Neither Esther nor Mordecai play a part. Instead, it is the king who saves the day by writing the orders that leads to Haman's downfall and the end of his evil plot. There is no mention of the Jew's military efforts to secure their safety.

The word "purim" in the Old Testament occurs only in Esther. It came into Hebrew as a loanword from the Persians to which the Hebrew plural suffix "im" was added. The first time it was used was in 3:7, where the author also gave the Hebrew equivalent of the word (*goral*). This addition suggests that when Esther was written, the author did not expect all of his readers to be familiar with the word "purim."

Why is the feast called "purim"? Most believe there is a double meaning – which fits well with all of the double events we saw in this book! First, the name is a reminder that the fate of God's people was not to be decided by some pagan's random toss of the dice before his false gods. Second, in Psalm 16:5-6, David said that God had made is lot (*goral*) secure. Thus, the name of the feast recognizes that the fate of God's people is in God's hands – and he makes their way secure.

The Purim festival today is more of a Purim season. It begins with a special Sabbath of Shekels (Shabbat Shekalim) right before the start of the month of Adar. On that day, the readings are focused on the

giving of money. Next, there is the Sabbath of Remembrance (Shabbat Zachor) immediately before the 14th of Adar. On that day, the Jews remember the enmity between themselves and the Amalekites. On the 13th day of Adar, the Jews fast to remember the risk that Esther took on behalf of her people. At the conclusion of the fast, on the eve of Purim, the book of Esther is read in its entirety. On the morning of Purim, the Esther scroll is read again, but this time the mood is much lighter. The children dress up as characters in the event, jokes are told, and songs are sung. Whenever Haman's name is mentioned, children make a loud noise using home-made noisemakers. Two types of gifts are sent: food to family and friends, and charitable donations to the poor. The Talmud prescribes drinking and celebrating on Purim until you can no longer tell the difference between "Mordecai be blessed!" and "Haman be cursed!"

Today, it is only in Jerusalem (a walled city) that Purim is celebrated on the 15th day of Adar. All other Jews celebrate it on the 14th day.

The point of the feast is to serve as a reminder that unexpected reversals do happen in history – and they are more common than not for the people of God. Our fate is not determined by the casting of dice. We are a part of God's eternal plan and eternal purpose, and our fate is in his hands.

The reference in verse 27 to "all who joined them" is another reference to the Persians who became Jews in response to all that they had seen.

Verses 29-32

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 Queen Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

Queen Esther was last mentioned back in verse 13, where she ordered a second day of killing. Verse 29 shows Esther and Mordecai acting with full authority – quite a reversal from how the book began. Esther's importance to her people is not as a mother, but as a queen.

Verse 32 tells us that the command of Queen Esther was recorded in writing. Think back over all of the writings we have seen in this book. In fact, there is a distinct emphasis in Esther on the written word – which is another interesting parallel with our modern world in which God speaks to us only through his written word.

This writing in verse 32 likely also included the writings of Mordecai from verse 20, and was likely either the book of Esther or was used as a source by the author of Esther (who may have been Mordecai himself).

Esther 10

Verses 1-2

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?

The book of Esther ends with a short chapter that is focused on the greatness of Mordecai, without a word being said about Queen Esther. As one commentator said, “it is Mordecai who gets the last word.”

In the ancient Greek versions of the book, Mordecai’s role in the text is amplified and Esther’s is diminished – which is additional evidence that the early version was inspired by God while the Greek additions (which do not appear in our Bibles) were not. God has no problem making a woman the hero in the event, but the male editors who came along later did have a problem with that! There is a parallel in the gospels. Who first saw the resurrected Christ? A woman. But when the apocryphal versions appeared later, Christ was seen first by men. I ask again, does the Bible denigrate women? Hardly!

Earlier we saw a tax holiday from the king, but not surprisingly the taxes are back again at the end of the book. Why is it mentioned? Perhaps Mordecai had something to do with it, or perhaps it showed God’s blessings on this pagan king for his role in preserving the Jews (although he very nearly wiped them out due to his inept leadership). It may also be a subtle reminder that the king had first tried to enrich himself by selling the people of God to Haman.

Verse 1 emphasizes the vastness of the king’s reign, and in fact does so using the same phrase Isaiah uses in 42:4 and 10 to describe the

extent of the servant's rule. Just as Joseph's presence had blessed Pharaoh, Mordecai's presence has blessed Xerxes. As the eunuch in 7:9 said, Mordecai was someone who spoke up to help the king.

Those who argue this book is fiction have some trouble with verse 2. The author is telling his readers that they can consult the official government records to confirm the truthfulness of the full account.

Verse 3

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.

Verse 3 contrasts Mordecai with Haman. In Chapter 3, it was Haman who held the seat of honor higher than all the other nobles – and now Haman is on a gallows higher than all of the other gallows, and Mordecai is in his place before the king. Haman had been self-centered and self-indulgent, but Mordecai seeks the welfare of others. Haman was committed to evil and destruction, whereas Mordecai was committed to goodness and peace.

Why was Mordecai so highly esteemed? Two reasons are given – “he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.” First, Mordecai worked for the welfare of God's people. He was not focused on his own welfare or that of his physical family, but he was focused on the welfare of his spiritual family. Second, Mordecai spoke peace to all his people. He was not afraid to stand up and speak on behalf of his people and to his people. God needs more Mordecai's today!

Mordecai combined service to the king with service to his people, and he was able to do both without compromise. Mordecai could serve as a mediator between the king and his people, and it is just as good today as it was then to know that there is someone with the ear of the king who has our best interests at heart.

Conclusion

Few books in the Bible are more relevant to life in a society hostile to the gospel than the book of Esther. As we said in the introduction, in many ways it is the most modern book in the Old Testament. God provides for his people in Esther as he provides for his people today – through his loving providential care. We do not see angels or miracles, but the hand of God is unmistakable to those who see with the eyes of faith.

But, if we look closely, we might even glimpse the gospel in Esther. Much of what happens in Esther is driven by the irrevocable nature of the Persian edicts. In place of the first irrevocable edict, a second edict is issued to counteract it. Can we not see a gospel parallel there? Because of our sin, an irrevocable decree of death was pronounced in the garden. How can it be undone? Through a second decree, the gospel.

Like the Jews of Persia, all men are under an irrevocable decree of death. And like the Jews of Persia, the people of God have a mediator who works on their behalf. And like God's people in Esther, we can rejoice that there is a second decree that counteracts the first decree.

The book of Esther prefigures our own redemption through the gospel. The theme of Esther is reversal, and our hope in the gospel depends on the greatest reversal of all time – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. “Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:9) All of history revolves around that event. Like the Jews of old, we too will someday find ourselves alive and well after the day of death has come and gone.

Ezra 7:1-5

Finally in Ezra 7 we meet the man from whom the whole book has taken its name. Chapters 7 and 8 will introduce the scholar-priest Ezra, his task, and his expedition. Chapters 9 and 10 will show the moral disarray that he found at Jerusalem when he returned and the strict countermeasures he applied. Much of the account is written by Ezra in the first person.

There is a lapse of about 57 years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. It was during that time that the events in Esther occurred. We know almost nothing about what happened to the former exiles in Judah during that period.

The only reference we have to what happened is from Ezra 4:6-23, where the hostility of the Samaritans is described. What we can deduce from that description is that the Jews were most likely subjected to similar hostility from their neighbors throughout much of that intervening period.

Also, being surrounded by people with a different way of life seems to have a negative effect on the Jews, as we will soon see. Likewise today, being surrounded by people with a different outlook on life can have a negative effect on our own purity and godliness. Some of the Jews here appear to have lived like their neighbors in order to be at peace with them and be accepted by them.

Ezra 7

Verses 1-5

Ezra 7:1 Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest—
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Chapter 7 opens with a genealogy that shows Ezra's connection to Aaron. It begins with Ezra and walks back through history to Aaron, the first high priest.

The genealogy here is presented in an abbreviated form, which we can see when we compare it with the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6. The two lists agree up to Meraioth, but from there on some of the names are left out of the list here in Chapter 7, and at the end Ezra's name is added.

Should it bother us that some names are left out? Not at all. It is common in the Bible, where we know from other studies that the phrase "the son of" does not necessarily imply a direct father/son relation, but sometimes passes over generations and simply means "a descendant of." We know that happens at least one place in this genealogy because Ezra is identified as the son of Seraiah. Seraiah was High Priest at the time of Zedekiah and was killed by Nebuchadnezzar. (See 2 Kings 25:18-21.) That happened nearly 130 years before these events, so we know that one or more generations must have been omitted from the list.

Some argue that six names were dropped from the genealogy through a copyist's error. They point specifically to the similarity between *Amariah* and *Azariah*, where the break in names occurs.

Here is 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 compared with Ezra 7:1-5—

<p>The sons of Aaron: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. 4 Eleazar fathered Phinehas, Phinehas fathered Abishua, 5 Abishua fathered Bukki, Bukki fathered Uzzi, 6 Uzzi fathered Zerahiah, Zerahiah fathered Meraioth, 7 Meraioth fathered Amariah, Amariah fathered Ahitub, 8 Ahitub fathered Zadok, Zadok fathered Ahimaaz, 9 Ahimaaz fathered Azariah, Azariah fathered Johanan, 10 and Johanan fathered Azariah (it was he who served as priest in the house that Solomon built in Jerusalem). 11 Azariah fathered Amariah, Amariah fathered Ahitub, 12 Ahitub fathered Zadok, Zadok fathered Shallum, 13 Shallum fathered Hilkiah, Hilkiah fathered Azariah, 14 Azariah fathered Seraiah, Seraiah fathered Jehozadak; 15 and Jehozadak went into exile when the LORD sent Judah and Jerusalem into exile by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.</p>	<p>Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.</p>
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I think that idea makes sense and would explain why we are now missing the middle part of the list. Under that theory, the original

copy had the complete list, but somewhere a copyist dropped some of the names. But it is also possible that the author intentionally shortened the list, which we know he did when it comes to the gap between Seraiah and Ezra.

The name Azariah is at the center of genealogy. It means “The Lord Has Helped,” and Ezra is a shortened form of that same name. Hilkiah was the High Priest in the time of Joash. (2 Kings 22) Zadok was the High Priest who replaced Abiathar, the last descendent of Eli to occupy that position. (1 Kings 2)

All very interesting, but any time we see a genealogy in the Bible we should immediately ask *why* it was included. What was the point? (And there is *always* a point!)

On point can be seen just from the length of the genealogy, which prepares us to meet someone of considerable importance. The 16-ancestor genealogy introduces Ezra with fanfare and establishes him as the most prominent person in the book. It also “signals that something momentous is to come and that Ezra is at the center of it.”

In Jewish tradition, Ezra is regarded as a second Moses. It was perhaps Ezra more than any other person who stamped Israel with its lasting character as a people of the book. Some commentators go too far with this point and suggest that Ezra actually wrote or perhaps rewrote much of the law we find in the books of Moses. But as we read his book, we see that the law was something Ezra received rather than something Ezra created.

So, one point of the genealogy is to let us know we are about to meet someone important. But the main point of the genealogy is to show that Ezra is a direct descendent of Aaron, and thus Ezra has the right to act as priest and the right to introduce reforms. The purpose is to show that Ezra came from a line of High Priests, although Ezra himself was not a High Priest. Ezra was thus acting with authority both from the Persian king and also from his Jewish ancestry as part of the High Priestly family. It was important that the people respect him and respect his position, because absent respect it is very difficult to lead or accomplish anything.