

LESSON 29

Last week, when we ended, we were looking at the royal permission the Jews had requested and had received to kill the women and children of their enemies in Esther 8:11.

As we saw, this part of the second edict not only paralleled the same language in the first edict, but also paralleled the same language in God's command to King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:3.

And last week we looked at the key distinction between suffering as punishment for sin versus suffering as a consequence of sin. God does not punish us for the sins of others, but that does not mean we will be spared from suffering as a consequence of the sin of others. Children suffered and perished in the great flood, but they were not being punished by that flood.

What about punishment for sin today? Does God punish people today (present tense) for the sins they commit? Yes. How do I know that? Paul and Peter both tell us about it.

Romans 13:3-4 – For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

1 Peter 2:14 – Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.

And, of course, we all suffer today from the consequences of the sin that we see all around us.

Many people have struggled with the commands from God in the Old Testament to kill women and children. I know of one well-known gospel preacher who left the church, taking his family with him, because he said he could not reconcile the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New.

Do I understand all there is to know about the commands by God in the Old Testament to kill children? No, I do not, and I don't think anyone else does either. But there is one thing I understand perfectly and completely about such commands – they must be viewed in the light of Jesus Christ and in the light of God's love for the world in sending his only begotten son to die on a cross. If God commanded it, then it was good and it was part of God's plan to bless the entire world through Jesus

Christ. That much I know with absolute certainty.

If anyone is struggling to understand something about God in the Old Testament, your answer lies in the New Testament.

2 Corinthians 1:20 - For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

Not only did Jesus rise from the dead – Jesus changed the meaning of suffering and death. Trying to understand suffering and death in the Old Testament apart from Jesus in the New Testament is a hopeless effort. No one understands suffering and death more than Jesus does.

Why the command to kill everyone in 1 Samuel and why the similar language here in Esther?

In both cases, the continuance of God's plan of redemption was at risk. God was working to bring a worldwide blessing through the Jewish people, and no one and nothing could be allowed to stop that plan. God saw the Amalekites as a threat, and God commanded their total destruction. That command was not obeyed, and, as a result, God's people were once again on the brink of extinction due to the Amalekites. Anyone who doubts the wisdom of God's command to Saul needs to look at the book of Esther to see what came as a result of disobedience to that command.

The ancient enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites is an underlying theme throughout this book. We may look at that enmity with disdain – there they go again fighting a war that is centuries old. But doesn't the church have its own ancient enemies? Aren't we also surrounded by Agagites? The ancient Amalekites wanted nothing more than to wipe God's people off the face of the earth – aren't there people today with exactly that same desire?

Haman the Agagite is with us still, and one need only turn on the TV set to see him. He is seeking our destruction. We must fight back, not with carnal weapons, but with the sword of the Spirit and by remaining faithful and true to Jesus, the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23).

The phrase "avenge themselves" in verse 13 is significant. The Hebrew word used there "everywhere designates a punitive action and presupposes a prior wrong, that is, some offense to which the avenging party is responding." This decree is not giving the Jews carte blanche to do away with anyone they don't like. We need to keep this point in mind when later we will see Queen Esther ask the King for a second day of slaughter.

Esther 8:14-17

14 So the posts that rode upon mules and camels went out, being hastened and pressed on by the king's commandment. And the decree was given at Shushan the palace. 15 And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. 16 The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour. 17 And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.

Why the great urgency in verse 14 to get this second decree out? After all, the day of attack under Haman's decree is still nine months away, and according to Herodotus it took only three months for a message to circulate throughout the entire empire using the famous Persian postal system. Why the rush?

Most likely the urgency was because it would take time for the Jews to assemble their army, plus it was important for all of the Jews to know that their situation was no longer hopeless. Some of the Jews may have been preparing to flee – perhaps even to join the exiles in Jerusalem. They needed to know as quickly as possible that the tables had turned!

But there is yet another reason for the urgency – each detail shows how Mordecai and his decree do not merely parallel Haman and his decree, but they do it one better.

- Xerxes gives Haman the signet ring only when he needs to authorize a decree (3:10), but Mordecai receives it right from the start.
- Haman's decree goes forth by couriers (3:13), while Mordecai's goes forth by couriers mounted on special royal steeds.
- Haman's decree goes out in "haste" (3:15), but Mordecai's decree goes out with "urgent haste."

Mordecai has triumphed over Haman in every possible way! Even his edict is better!

Mordecai is greatly honored by the king, and the Jews rejoice everywhere that this second edict is announced. They must have been very worried about the first edict, and we can imagine their relief when the second edict was read. They may have even thought that the second edict meant that no

one would attack them, but if so they were about to be disappointed.

The “crown” in verse 15 was really a turban, and, along with the other clothes, it showed Mordecai’s important position in the government. The text is making the point that the honor Mordecai received went far beyond anything that Haman had ever received.

The parallel structure of Esther is really on display here. The original decree had caused great mourning among the Jews, but the second decree causes great rejoicing. After the original decree, Mordecai was clothed with sackcloth and could not come before the king. With the second decree, Mordecai wears royal garments and comes from the presence of the king.

Mordecai’s new clothes illustrate his new status. As we noted earlier, a change of clothing in Esther typically indicates a change of position.

Xerxes’ earlier command in 6:11 to clothe Mordecai in Xerxes’ own robe now seems almost prophetic. The honor he received at that time foreshadowed the honor he now receives from the king.

When Mordecai had heard of Haman’s decree, he had taken off his garments and clothed himself in sackcloth (4:1). Dressed that way, he could not enter into the king’s gate (4:2). Now, when Mordecai issues his own decree, he is clothed in splendor, and he can stand in the very presence of the king.

The four words in verse 16 – light, gladness, joy, and honor – are the antithesis of the four words found in 4:3 – mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing. God’s people have experienced a dramatic reversal! And, in keeping with one of the book’s major themes, the Jews celebrate that reversal in verse 17 with a feast.

Verse 17 tells us that many Persians “declared themselves Jews” or “became Jews.” What does that mean?

The Hebrew word used here occurs nowhere else in the Bible, and its meaning is widely debated. It appears to be the Hebrew equivalent of a verb that literally means “to Hellenize” (that is, to act like a Greek). “To Hellenize” could simply mean “to speak Greek,” or it could mean a deeper adoption of Greek customs and values. The same ambiguity applies to the term “became Jews.” (The Septuagint, without any justification, adds “and were circumcised” – but if true that would seem to settle the question of their sincerity.)

So what does it mean that they became Jews? We have seen this before. God’s promise to Abraham

had been the promise of a worldwide blessing, and some Gentiles had become proselytes and declared themselves Jews prior to this time. We can read about it elsewhere in the Old Testament, and we can also see it from a careful study of the genealogical lists.

Why did it happen here? Most likely they had seen the dramatic reversals in these events as must have come from a divine source – the very fact that the reader of this book has been invited to see over and over. Perhaps these Persians had simply had, what one commentary called, “a public perception of divine involvement.” Romans 1:20 tells us that the wonders of God’s creation should have that same effect on everyone.

The Persians certainly knew at least two things – they had a first edict from Haman, who was now dead, and they had a second edict from Mordecai, who was very much alive and who was very powerful.

The Jews were now on top, and that may have caused many in Persia to suddenly want to join in with them. These Persians may have been identifying themselves with the Jews because they saw some personal gain in doing so.

The later rabbis compared these converts to the “lion proselytes” of Samaria who adopted the Jewish faith only because of their fear of the lions that God sent to punish idolaters in the land (2 Kings 17:24-28).

But another possible reason for their conversion is that perhaps they had seen in Esther and Mordecai a faith and trust in one God – and that faith and trust stood in stark contrast with the vanity and misery of their own polytheism. We see the same thing in the New Testament where pagans were drawn to the power of the gospel. Pagan religions offer nothing but disappointment and disillusionment.

I fear that sometimes we think paganism is a thing of the past – an ancient false religion that is no longer a problem in our modern world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Satan would love for us to believe that paganism is dead – but it is alive and well. Men worship nature more today than they ever did in the past. Men worship more false gods now than ever before.

While the nature of the “conversion” is uncertain, its significance is clear. First, it represents yet another example of the “reversal” theme. Early in these events, Esther had to conceal her Jewishness – most likely out of fear. Now, it is the Gentiles who are afraid, and they try to hide their non-Jewishness.

What is the “fear” in verse 17? Is it fear of God? We are not told. The Hebrew word used here refers to a nearly debilitating fear, one that induces trembling. The word is used often for fear of God (Isaiah 2:10; 2 Chronicles 17:10), but it is also used for the fear of the military might of Israel (Deuteronomy 2:25; 11:25).

Perhaps they simply feared the Jewish attack, but that attack was not directed at all Persians. Another view is that the Persians themselves noted the huge reversals that had occurred and were still occurring – and they at last understood who was behind those reversals. Perhaps verse 17 is the clearest reference to God in a book that never directly mentions God. Of what were the Persians afraid – just the Jews, or did Persia at last see the power behind the Jews?

We know Haman was an Amalekite, as were his sons, but we don’t know who else was an Amalekite. But for those Amalekites who remained, this fear of God was a big reversal for them. Remember how they were described in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 25:17-18 – Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.

The descendants of Amalek had experienced a complete reversal!

Esther 9:1-2

Now in the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king’s commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, (though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them;) 2 The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt: and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people.

The day for the attack against the Jews finally comes in verse 1. The month of Adar would correspond to February or March, likely around 473 BC. (If so, Xerxes would himself be killed about 8 years later.)

It has been nine months since the second edict (which 8:9 tells us was in the third month). What happened during those nine months? We aren’t told, but what happens here in Chapter 9 suggests

that Haman's plan had either created or fanned the flames of anti-Semitism, and now thousands of Persians were eagerly awaiting the appointed day when they could attack the Jews. But now, of course, the Jews had royal permission to create an army and fight back.

What is Mordecai thinking about all of this? Does he have any regret about not showing any honor to Haman? If peacekeepers are blessed, what is Mordecai?

Haman had cast his lot almost a year ago to choose the month and the day, but Haman did not live to see that day. Instead, he experienced a big reversal. Haman is gone, but his edict remains. But that edict was not alone. A second edict had gone out giving the Jews permission to defend themselves.

You should circle a key phrase in verse 1 – “it was turned to the contrary” or “the reverse occurred.” (Another translation says “the tables were turned.”) There in a nutshell is the theme of the entire book of Esther.

The Hebrew word is emphatic and denotes a complete turnaround of fortunes such as when a curse becomes a blessing. The Hebrew word can literally mean “to flip over.” God's people were on the bottom, but now they are on the top. Here are some other verses where that same word is used:

2 Kings 21:13 – And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab: and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down.

Hosea 7:8 – Ephraim, he hath mixed himself among the people; Ephraim is a cake not turned.

The same Hebrew root word is found in Deuteronomy 32.

Deuteronomy 32:20 – And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward (twisted) generation, children in whom is no faith.

Why is that last reference significant? Because it may be that the entire theme of reversal in Esther is pointing us back to that one verse from Deuteronomy 32.

God's people had reversed themselves away from God, which was why they were now in exile. They had once been on the right path, but they had turned around.

The book of Esther shows us that God is the master of reversals, and that God could use great

reversals to bless his people even while they were suffering as exiles. It reminds us once again of Joseph.

Genesis 50:20 – But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

But how is Deuteronomy 32:20 connected with the book of Esther? How does Deuteronomy 32:20 describe God?

Deuteronomy 32:20 – And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward (twisted) generation, children in whom is no faith.

Notice that first phrase: “I will hide my face from them.” And where is God in the book of Esther? God is never named in the book. In a sense, God is hiding his face in the book of Esther.

God’s people had turned away from God, and God had hidden his face from them, but even then God loved them, and God was working on their behalf. Like the father of the prodigal son, God was looking for his people to return, and God was working on their behalf.

As we have seen, the book of Esther is a textbook about God’s providence. Yes, God is not mentioned, but God is working all throughout the book to deliver his people and to provide for his people.

And here is a key point - God’s people are also working! At no point do we see them just sitting down and waiting for God to do all the work. In fact, and perhaps to really drive home that point, we are not told that God does anything in this book. The focus is on what God’s people are doing.

And what do we see here in Chapter 9 about what God’s people are doing? What do we see here about the role that they are playing? We see two main things here in Chapter 9 - vigilance and obedience.

First, they were vigilant. They did not sit down to rest when Haman died, and they did not sit down to rest when the second edict was written. Instead, the fight continued, and we see that fight here in Chapter 9.

Second, they were obedient. They understood that King Saul’s disobedience had brought them to this point, and they were not going to make that same mistake again.

But the fact that God is not mentioned forces us to consider another question - were the Jews on their own here? Some commentators think so:

“They employ astonishing wit and courage but at no stage explicitly look to God to visit them in their distress. When they attain power it is not because of their witness to the God of Israel but because of a sequence of blunders by their enemies and their own opportunistic ability to manipulate those around them.”

Were they on their own? Had God given up on them, or perhaps was God concerned instead with those who had returned to Jerusalem by this time? And if we are asking that question, don't we think the Jews in Persia were also asking it?

The book of Esther **could** have been written to explicitly answer that question by mentioning God all throughout and by showing us everything that God was doing, but the book does **not** do that. Instead, I think the book is inviting us all to ask that same question - were the Jews on their own here? Is this book a testimony to what **they** did, or is it a testimony to what **God** did?

And that question is not confined to the book of Esther. One reason why Esther is such a modern book is that the question it presents is the same question we may sometimes have - are we on our own? And the answer is also the same - we are NOT on our own!

Verse 1 says that “the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them.” A theme we have seen in this book is the ability or inability to exert power over another.

- Xerxes **could not** get Vashti to appear before him.
- Haman **could not** get Mordecai to bow down.
- Xerxes **could** get Haman to honor Mordecai.
- Esther **could** get the king and Haman to come to her banquets.
- Esther **could** get the king to execute Haman.
- Esther **could not** get the king to overturn his first edict.

- Esther **could** get the king to allow a second edict.

Over and over, the power comes and the power goes. Who has power over whom? Who is the ultimate power? Certainly not King Xerxes, even though he was supposedly the most powerful person on earth at the time.

#ezra-esther