

Lesson 22

We are nearing the end of our study of Esther. We are on page 474 of my notes. And for any who think we are moving slowly, it could be a lot slower! Most of my time each week is spent deleting material rather than adding material! The process reminds me of a very famous statement that Pascal wrote in one of his letters: “I’m sorry I wrote you such a long letter; I didn’t have time to write a short one.” As with any book of the Bible, what could be said is far greater than the time we have to say it! If anyone wants to take a deeper dive into any of these verses, let me know, and I’ll recommend some very good resources.

Last Week: We were near the very end of our study of 8:11-13. We ended by considering the king’s edict, written by Mordecai, that the Jews were to kill “both little ones and women.” And we discussed the similarity between that edict and God’s command to King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:3 – “but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

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 the 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 our leader, 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 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 9 months away, and according to Herodotus it took only 3 months for a message to circulate throughout the entire empire using the famous Persian postal system.

Why the urgency? Most likely 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 may have been preparing to flee – perhaps even to join the exiles in Jerusalem. They needed to know 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!

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 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 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 honour – 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, they celebrate that reversal in verse 17 with a feast.

Verse 17 tells us that many Persians "declared themselves Jews" or "became Jews." 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, 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.)

What does it mean that they became Jews? First, we have seen this before. God’s promise to Abraham had been the promise of a worldwide blessing, and other Gentiles had declared themselves Jews prior to this time. We can read about this 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 having to 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 very powerful. The Jews were now on top, and that may have caused many in Persia to suddenly want to join in with them. And, of course, they would be the first to jump ship when the Jews lost that lofty position in the Persian government. Esther earlier risked death when she chose to identify herself with the Jews. These Persians may be identifying themselves with the Jews because they see personal gain in doing so. We see similarly motivated “conversions” (in quotes) in the book of Revelation.

The later rabbis compared these converts to the “lion proselytes” of Samaria who adopted the Jewish faith because of their fear of the lions that God sent to punish idolaters in the land (2 Kings 17:24-28). And, of course, that comparison was not a complement!

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 brought nothing but disappointment and disillusionment then—and the same is true today.

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? 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 they 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. But for those Amalekites who remained, this fear of God was a big reversal for them. Remember how they were described in 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 came. The month of Adar would correspond to February or March, likely around 473 B.C. (If so, Xerxes would himself be killed about 8 years later.)

Haman had cast his lot almost a year ago to choose the day—and now Haman was gone, but his edict remained. That edict was not alone, however. 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 translates it as “the tables were turned.”) There in a nutshell is the theme of the entire book. 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 others verses where the 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 32:20 – “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? It may be that the entire theme of reversal in Esther is pointing back to that one verse.

God’s people had reversed themselves away from God, which was why they were now in exile. They were on the right path, but they had turned around. The book of Esther shows that God is the master of reversals, and God could use reversals to bless his people even while they were suffering as exiles. It reminds us once again of Joseph – “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.” (Genesis 50:20)

But how is Deuteronomy 32:20 connected with the book of Esther? How does Deuteronomy 32:20 describe God? “I will hide my face from them.” And where is God in the book of Esther? He 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 he loved them and was working on their behalf. Like the father of the prodigal son, God was looking for them to return and was working on their behalf.

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. 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!

The end of verse 1 says that “the Jews had rule over them that hated them.” Here “hater” is used as a synonym for “enemy.” We see a similar usage in Deuteronomy 30:7 – “And the LORD thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee.” This hatred was more than just an emotion – these haters were actively seeking to harm the Jews. They were acting on their emotion of hatred.

Verse 2 makes it clear that the Jews destroyed only those who sought to destroy them. That means they sought to destroy only those who physically attacked them, and not merely those who wished them harm. The Jews’ intention was not simply to go on a murderous rampage, but rather was to wreak vengeance on their attackers.

Verse 2 also shows that the Jews, as a whole, had, like Esther, undergone a transformation. No one could stand against them because the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. The Jews must have also seen the hand of God at work in these events, and they were emboldened and encouraged.

Esther 9:3-4

3 And all the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies, and officers of the king, helped the Jews; because
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the fear of Mordecai fell upon them. 4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.

Verse 3 tells us that the Persian officials helped the Jews because they feared Mordecai, who was growing more and more powerful. And, unlike with Haman, the Persians apparently needed no order from the king to fear Mordecai. It is amazing, both then and now, how fast the political winds can change. And then, as now, power draws politicians like moths to a flame. These same officials had, no doubt, been Haman's greatest admirers not too long ago; now they were proud members of the Mordecai fan club!

The verb here translated "helped" literally means "to lift, bear, or carry." The same verb is used in Esther 3:1 for the promotion of Haman. Once again, we see a reversal: previously it was Haman who was lifted up, but now it is the Jews.

Verse 4 tells us that "this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater." This may be an allusion back to another great deliver of God's people – "And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people." (Exodus 11:3) If so, then that allusion serves another purpose – it suggests a parallel between the commemoration of Purim and that of Passover, which is the subject of Exodus 11.

Esther 9:5-11

5 Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them. 6 And in Shushan the palace the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men. 7 And Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspatha, 8 And Poratha, and Adalia, and Aridatha, 9 And Parmashta, and Arisai, and Aridai, and Vajezatha, 10 The ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, slew they; but on the spoil laid they not their hand. 11 On that day the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king.

The words in verse 5 – slaughter, destruction – parallel the words in the two decrees. Verse 5 also tells us that the Jews "did what they would unto those that hated them," that is, they did as they pleased. That phrase is important because it highlights the reversal between this outcome and the outcome that Haman had planned for the Jews. 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.

Nehemiah 9:24 uses this same phrase – "So the children went in and possessed the land, and thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with their kings, and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they would." There it points to the conquest of the Canaanites. This parallel is especially significant, since it is virtually certain that the book of Esther is linking the Jews' battle against their enemies here to God's commands that they destroy the Amalekites and other peoples of Canaan, which they had failed to

do so long before.

The placing of the phrase “in Susa the palace” at the front of the sentence in verse 6 places emphasis on it. The text is acknowledging the unusual circumstances that would allow the killing of so many people right outside the king’s palace.

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, but who were also killed by the Jews.

The destruction of Haman’s ten sons was certainly a prudent political action, in order to prevent Haman’s descendants from taking vengeance against the Jews (as a descendant of Agag had attempted to do earlier in this book!).

It also serves to demonstrate Haman’s total defeat. In Esther 5:11, Haman bragged to his wife and friends about his riches, his many sons, and all the ways the king had promoted him. Each of these sources of pride has now been stripped away from Haman and given over to the Jews: his riches were given to Esther in 8:1; his promotions given to Mordecai in 8:2; and now his sons, too, have fallen into the hands of his enemies. With the death of his sons, Haman’s downfall is complete.

The names of Haman’s sons have been cited frequently as evidence of the book’s authenticity. In ancient times, it was common practice in many lands for parents to give their children names that incorporated the name of a deity. Haman’s sons bear names that incorporate names of Persian deities. The deities referenced here were still worshiped as gods by some Persians in the time of Xerxes, but as Zoroastrianism took hold in the realm (during the days of Xerxes’ successor Artaxerxes I), these same deities came to be regarded as demons. Thus, these names reflect the language of the era of Xerxes rather than that of his successors.

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. (See the handout. The manuscript on the right is from the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. It dates to around AD 1000.) 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.”

At the reading of the Esther scroll on Purim, the names are recited in a single breath, to illustrate the contempt in which Haman and his lineage was held among the Jews.

The text 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 must have been very important that no plunder was taken because we are told that three times. 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.

“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 (although the only Amalekites we know about for sure are Haman and his sons, and they are dead), 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. The Jews of Persia obeyed where King Saul disobeyed.

Given that, it is again very odd that the decree – written by Mordecai – permitted plunder in the first place. Wasn’t Mordecai motivated by a desire to obey where Saul had disobeyed? Or was he? Again, we aren’t told. Perhaps Mordecai knew that the Jews would not take the plunder, but he wanted the Persians to know that the Jews’ failure to take the plunder was not because the Jews were not allowed to take the plunder.

I mentioned that Haman and his sons are the only Amalekites we know about here. Jewish tradition has just about everyone in Persia being an Amalekite. They say that all of those killed were Amalekites, and that they represented “all the chiefs of the house of Amalek,” but the inspired text does not tell us that.

Note also that the text here says nothing about the killing of women and children, although (as we discussed at length) Mordecai’s edict gave the Jews the right to do so (Esther 8:11). The text makes special note of the fact that the Jews departed from the express words of the decree by taking no spoils, but it says nothing about them not killing women and children. Should we assume, then, that they did kill women and children? Were some of Haman’s ten sons still children when they were killed? There is no indication in the text that Haman is an old man, and in those days, a man would continue to father children as long as he was able. Again, we are not told – and the body count is of the “men,” but the silence on that issue here is perhaps telling.

Esther 9:12-15

12 And the king said unto Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what have they done in the rest of the king’s provinces? now what is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done. 13 Then said Esther, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews which are in Shushan to do to morrow also according unto this day’s decree, and let Haman’s ten sons be hanged upon the gallows. 14 And the king commanded it so to be done: and the decree was given at Shushan; and they hanged Haman’s ten sons. 15 For the Jews that were in Shushan gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day also of the month Adar, and slew three hundred men at Shushan; but on the prey they laid not their hand.

What is the king thinking in verse 12? Is he worried that so many had been killed so close to where he now was? Is he upset by it? Is he unconcerned? Is he angry? Is he astonished? Does he admire the Jews' victory? We don't know.

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.