

## Lesson 23

Last week we had just read Esther 9:12-15, and we were just beginning to look at those verses. In verse 12, Esther learns from the king that 500 men had been killed in the Susa, along with the 10 sons of Haman. And the King asks Esther if she wants anything more, and Esther does. She wants a second day of fighting in Susa, and she wants the bodies of Haman's 10 dead sons to be hanged on the gallows.

A detail that seems to have escaped many commentators is why Esther is with the king in the first place. The queen was not in the habit of lingering in the king's presence, and the king was not in the habit of summoning her. Evidently, the reason Esther is with the king now is because she has come before him once again as a supplicant. Certainly, that is how Xerxes interprets her presence, because he asks her to present a request. (Xerxes couldn't get Vashti to appear – and now he can't get Esther to disappear!)

Esther's response has caused some controversy among commentators. She asks the king to let the fighting continue for another day in Susa, and she asks that the bodies of Haman's 10 already 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.” “Perhaps Esther's request for a second day of killing shows that she herself had begun to feel the heady intoxication of the power she has so remarkably attained.” “Esther seems harder, blunter, even cruel.”

Before we ask why, we should first note that the request is granted without hesitation. The request was not a shock to the king, it would seem. Haman's ten sons, killed the day before, are impaled in a public demonstration. To any who might have doubted, it is now graphically obvious that Haman's ambitions have come to nothing. His lineage has been cut off; his house has been left destitute. The fate that Mordecai had warned would come upon Esther (Esther 4:14) has befallen Haman instead.

But why was the fighting to continue for a second day? 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 may suggest Esther was acting on her own. Had the power gone to her head? What was Esther thinking? As usual, we are not told.

The wording of Esther's request is of utmost importance in understanding the second day of fighting. Esther asks that the Jews (only in Susa) be allowed to do as they had done on the first day for a second day. The same rules would apply on this day as had applied on the first: the Jews would be permitted to kill anyone who attacked them. Given the carnage that the Jews had just

visited on their enemies, it seems reasonable that survivors might well seek revenge, whatever the law would normally allow. Indeed, in an honor-driven culture, it would be their responsibility to do so. A royal edict allowing a second day of violent self-defense would serve as a deterrent against any such reprisals.

Another factor that may play into the request for the second day of killing is the backdrop of the Israelite-Amalekite struggle. In 1 Samuel 15, the Israelites had failed to carry out God's instructions to utterly annihilate the Amalekites. Now, that failure had come back to haunt them in the person of Haman and his evil decree. This time, they were going to make sure that their enemies were destroyed utterly.

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. A big clue to the reason for Esther's request for more fighting is Esther's request that the bodies of the 10 sons of Haman be publicly exposed to serve, no doubt, as a warning to others.

Esther was not being vindictive or bloodthirsty – Esther was being wise. She knew with whom she was dealing!

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 is the one who requested it!).

### **Esther 9:16-17**

16 But the other Jews that were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes seventy and five thousand, but they laid not their hands on the prey, 17 On the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of the same rested they, and made it 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 to some. It was the size of a very large city in those days. 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. Or it could be 75,000 – although high, it is certainly not impossible.

These 75,000 were killed on the first day, and there was no second day of fighting in the provinces. The main reason for that, of course, was that Esther's request for a second day of fighting was limited to Susa. But even if she had asked for a second day of fighting in the provinces, word of the extension could not have reached any or many of the provinces in time.

Verse 16 tells us that the Jews had rest from their enemies. The word "rest" is a key word here, as it is throughout the Bible. It shows that the goal of this carnage was not revenge or plunder, but instead was rest. This had been the promise from long ago. Deuteronomy 12:10 – "But when ye

go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety.” But their disobedience (including King Saul’s disobedience with King Agag) had led to anything but rest.

The word “rest” here also provides an important link back to what happened with the Amalekites. Deuteronomy 25:19 – “Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.”

Amalek has, at last, been blotted out. God’s people have been saved. And yet, God is not mentioned anywhere in the book. The text invites the reader to consider not only *how* God has done it, but *whether* 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.

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. (2 Corinthians 4:18; 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. At last we see why “feasting” is such an important theme in this book – the book explains the basis for the feast of Purim. 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.

### **Esther 9:18-22**

18 But the Jews that were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness. 19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwalled towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another. 20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far, 21 To stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, 22 As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

As we said, 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.

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 of Adar, but in Susa they feasted on the 15th day of Adar because they had taken a second day of vengeance. Today, the only city in which Purim is celebrated on the 15th of Adar is Jerusalem.

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 is done for remembrance and for a memorial.

Is there a contradiction between verse 19 and verse 21? Many commentators say yes, arguing that verse 21 commands all Jews to observe two days of feasting, while verse 19 commands the Jews in unwalled towns to observe only one day of feasting. But, of course, there is no contradiction.

First, to state that Purim was celebrated on two days is not the same as saying that everyone was required to celebrate for two days.

Second, a basic canon on interpretation (still used today) is that a specific statement governs a general statement. The general statement is that Purim is a two-day feast, which it is. The specific statement is that some Jews celebrate one day while others celebrate on the other day, which they do. Both statements are completely true.

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. In Nehemiah 8:10-12, the people were instructed to celebrate the reading of the Law by feasting and sending portions of food to anyone who did not have anything available with which to celebrate.

Is there a book in the Bible in which we do not see God’s care and concern for the poor? If you are still looking for God in the book of Esther, this may be the best place to look. Even here, where God is not mentioned by name, the poor are remembered.

### **Esther 9:23-28**

23 And the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them; 24 Because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had devised against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them; 25 But when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them, 27 The Jews ordained, and

took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; 28 And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.

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. Mordecai is not mentioned, and Esther is mentioned only in passing. 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.

Why are these details omitted? This account is a summary of what Mordecai had written in his letter to the Jews. Seen in that light, the lack of certain details is very understandable.

First of all, Mordecai would not have had to describe the fighting; the Jews would have been very familiar with it, since they had experienced it.

Second, the emphasis on the king's role is carefully designed to retain the king's favor, which we have seen before in this book. Just as Esther had carefully avoided implying that the king might have been responsible for the Jews' predicament in 7:3-6, Mordecai goes her one better here and gives the king more credit for the Jews' deliverance than he actually deserves.

Finally, it might have sounded vain and self-serving for Mordecai to draw attention to his own role, or that of his cousin, in the matter.

The word "purim" in the Old Testament occurs only in Esther. It came into Hebrew as an Akkadian loanword 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."

The use of the Akkadian word in this text is odd, since the account is written in Hebrew and set in Persia, where the official languages were Aramaic and Persian. No commentary I read has a good explanation for how that word entered these events, but one suggested it may have simply been used because "Purim" sounds similar to "Haman," which in turn sounds similar to the Hebrew word for "destroy" used in verse 24. That is, it may have all been just a bit of word play.

Why is the plural word “purim” used when verse 24 tells us that Haman cast only “pur” – only a single lot? (Esther 3:7 told us the same thing.) We don’t know for sure, but one commentary suggested that the text is implying there were actually two lots cast: Haman’s and God’s.

Why is the feast named after the casting of lots? Most believe there is a double meaning – which fits well with all of the double events we saw in this book! First, the obvious meaning is that 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. But, 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!”

As we said earlier, 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.

Anyone today who is a child of God has, by definition, experienced a great reversal!

Verse 25 in the KJV says, “But when Esther came before the king.” In the ESV, it says, “But when it came before the king.” The pronoun used here is feminine, but it can be translated as either “she” or “it.” The KJV assumes it should be “she,” and it supplies the most likely person by inserting the name “Esther.” The problem with that is that Esther is not mentioned in the immediately preceding verses, which means that the antecedent of the pronoun is being supplied just by the reader’s knowledge of what happened earlier. The NIV says, “But when the plot came to the king’s attention.” That may actually make more sense here than Esther, but the ESV is the best translation. If the text is ambiguous, a good translation should be ambiguous as well.

The reference in verse 27 to “all who joined them” may be another reference to the Persians who became Jews in response to all that they had seen. It may also be a reference to those who would later become Jews and then celebrate the feast.

Nowhere is the feast referred to as a commandment, or a law, or a statute. It is simply related as what the Jews were doing. Mordecai was not Moses. He did not create a new mandated legal

observance.

### **Esther 9:29-32**

29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim. 30 And he sent the letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth, 31 To confirm these days of Purim in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry. 32 And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.

Queen Esther was last mentioned by name 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 10:1-2**

And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea. 2 And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto 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 role 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. Just as Joseph's presence had blessed Pharaoh, Mordecai's presence has blessed Xerxes.

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.

### **Esther 10:3**

3 For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.
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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.

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 reassuring for us 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**

We have seen many themes running through the book of Esther: reversal, feasting, clothing, honor, power, authority.

The theme of reversal, though, is the central theme of the book. And that theme is not limited to Esther, it is a theme of the entire Bible.

The classic example is that of Joseph, to which the book of Esther frequently alludes. “You planned evil against me; but God planned it for good” (Genesis 50:20). But Genesis is full of reversals. The Fall was a reversal. God's statement to Satan showed that he was headed for a reversal. The Flood was a reversal. Abraham, Lot, Jacob – we could go on and on.



The Exodus, to which Esther also alludes, is another example of the reversal process at work. Once again, Israel was in dire circumstances. Pharaoh was doling out oppression and violence against the people of God, attempting to exterminate them (Exodus 1:15-22). But God reversed the situation, so that not only did the Israelites come forth from Egypt as a great nation, but they came forth materially blessed, as they plundered the Egyptians and carried away some of the gold and silver of the land with them (Exodus 12:35-36).

These examples of reversal serve to foreshadow a much greater reversal. Galatians 3:24 – “The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.” Any time we study the Old Testament, we should look for its reflection in the New Testament.

The crucifixion of Jesus was intended by Satan and by Satan’s followers to do away with the threat posed by the Son of God once and for all. But that death on the cross was not a total defeat, but rather was the exact opposite – a total victory. And that is a great reversal that all of God’s faithful children will share – “Death is swallowed up in victory.” (1 Corinthians 15:54) Jesus died, and then he rose again. Reversal! Reversal is not just the theme of Esther – reversal is the theme of the Bible! Reversal is the theme of redemption!

Premillennialists tell us that the death of Jesus was unexpected by God, and that the church is just part of God’s “Plan B.” How can anyone with even a casual understanding of the Bible believe such nonsense! The repeated reversals we see in the Old Testament are all pointing forward to the greatest reversal of all – the death and resurrection of the Son of God! And how does Revelation 13:8 describe Jesus? “The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” Slain when? From the foundation of the world.

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 some 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.

Not only can we see the unseen God in the book of Esther, but we can see the gospel in the book of 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. Because of Adam’s sin? No! Because of their own sin. (Romans 5:12) 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. Under the first decree we are dressed in sackcloth and cannot approach the king, but under the second decree we wear royal robes and we can come boldly before the throne.

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.

I have greatly enjoyed the privilege of teaching this wonderful, but often neglected, book. I hope that we will all continue to study it.