

Sermon 10: Esther 8: Saving God's people

OUTLINE

Esther's request
Mordecai's edict
The Jews rejoicing

INTRODUCTION

Even though the great enemy of God's people and has been outwitted; defeated; and judged in a wonderfully ironic fashion, the work of saving God's people continues. I don't know about you but in reading the book I never liked the long ending to The Lord of the Rings. Sam and Frodo finally make it to Mount Doom, they destroy the ring, Sauron is defeated and there you expect the story to end. But no there is still the story of the Hobbits going back to the shire, and there they find that Saruman has been destroying the place, and the returning Hobbits have to wage a mini revolt to overthrow the grip of Saruman. I always felt like that part of the book was so unnecessary and so anti-climactic. That is a little of how I feel now as we get to the closing chapters of Esther. I am sure it is psychological because we are so well trained to follow the main characters that we forget to follow the big story. Esther is not the focus, but her role as an instrument to save the people of God. The intimate detail of God working in the royal court of Ahasuerus is not about Esther overcoming her personal hurdles and becoming her best self. So the removal of Haman, the recognition of Mordecai, and the bravery of Esther are only the backdrop for the bigger story of God saving His people. As we go into the closing chapters of the book, we can go in with a sense of anti-climax because we are no longer carried on by the tension of the earlier chapters. We have to deliberately remind ourselves at this point that there is a bigger story we still need to see resolved, the rescue of God's people. In fact the Christian life which is lived between Christ overcoming Satan on the cross and his final overthrow at the Second Coming is the place where we live our lives. It may feel little bit like a bunch of Hobbits involved in a parochial revolution, but it is here that God is still working through weak people, and ordinary acts to work out His plan of salvation. Chapter 8 continues driving us towards the real point of the book. We will look at this chapter under three headings, Esther's request; Mordecai's edict, and the Jews rejoicing.

Esther's request

V1-2, 'On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. ² And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.' Haman has been put to death, and now the king gives the house of Haman and gave it to Esther. On top of that Mordecai who had been honored by the king for saving him from an assassination attempt, by Haman leading him through town on the king's horse, is now presented as Esther's step-father before the king. Mordecai get the king's ring which Haman was wearing, as well as the house of Haman as well. There is a lot of gift giving and the bestowing of honors and position, but the problem of God's people is not yet resolved.

V3-6, 'Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that

he had devised against the Jews. ⁴ When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. ⁵ And she said, “If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. ⁶ For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?” Esther is safe; her family is safe; but her people are not safe and so Esther pushes on seeking the life of her people. We can see by v4 that Esther has once again risked her life by coming unannounced into the presence of the king, and he holds out his scepter. As we observe her request we see that she is not using any nuance or finesse, she is wearing her heart on her sleeve as she comes right out and asks for the lives of her people. She does emphasize four times that if the king has any regard for her to give an order to overturn the edict of Haman.

Esther would no doubt be less nervous to enter the king’s presence and present her request, we may not be able to commend her bravery at this point, but we can commend her concern and compassion for those who are going to be destroyed. We cannot help but think of Christ, Matt. 9:36, ‘When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’ Or when He wept over the coming destruction of Jerusalem, Luke 19:41. We cant help but think of Paul’s concern for the Jews, Rom. 9:1-3, ‘I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.’ As with Christ and with Paul, Rom. 10:1, ‘Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved’, this desire expresses itself in a persevering request, and persevering action. Is a desire for the lost compelling you to prayer and to action for the lost? It did in the case of the first American missionary, Adoniram Judson, ‘In his passion for those who were perishing without Christ, Judson penned an article titled, “Concern for the Salvation of the Heathen,” which was published in two magazines (Benge and Benge, *Adoniram Judson*, 52). In it Judson expressed his frustration with so many “Christians” who seemed unconcerned for those dying without having an opportunity to hear the gospel. He wrote, How do Christians discharge this trust committed to them? They let three-fourths of the world sleep the sleep of death, ignorant of the simple truth that a Savior died for them. Content if they can be useful in the little circle of their acquaintances, they quietly sit and see whole nations perish for lack of knowledge. (Anderson, *To the Golden Shore*, 63-64) God would use Judson to help form one of the first missions organizations in America and then to serve as one of the first missionaries to be sent. Driven by deep concern for the souls of others, Adoniram and his wife, Ann, would sacrifice greatly for the sake of the gospel in Burma.’¹

Are we comfortable with our own lives so have no sense of urgency or concern? Everything was going well for Esther but she continued to agonize and risk herself to save others. Our own lives have been saved because Christ who was rich and in a position of comfort gave it all up to become poor, to serve and to lay down His life for our salvation. We are not looking at Esther and merely

1 Landon Dowden, [*Exalting Jesus in Esther*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2019), Es 8.

challenging ourselves to do the hard thing, but we are resonating with Esther because we are reminded to do the Christlike thing.

Contrasted with Esther's concern is the king's indifference, v7-8, 'Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. ⁸ But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." This king feels he has done his duty and is acting like his hands are tied. He hands off the responsibility to Esther and Mordecai. He rehearses how generous he has been giving Esther the house of Haman. And he says that he killed Haman for his intention to lay his hands on the Jews, but the pretext for that was violating harem protocol and attempted rape. It is interesting that the king assumes that because he has saved Esther all should be well betraying his own self-interest and how he makes decisions.

Mordecai's edict

V9-14, 'The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. ¹⁰ And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, ¹¹ saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, ¹² on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. ¹³ A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. ¹⁴ So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.' Mordecai now in emulation of Haman's authority and actions issues an edict, and it is almost exactly the same in the way in which is described as going out, the only major difference being the extra swift horses mentioned in v10. Mordecai's edict goes out in the 3rd month in preparation for the 12th month. There has been a lot of controversy over this edict especially v11, 'saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods.' The same wording of destroy, kill and annihilate, the inclusion of women and children, and the allowance of plundering. What do we make of this?

Some have tried to write it off as an uninformed tit for tat. But I think there is probably a mix of strategy and holy war going on here. In the OT there is the concept of Holy War. This is when God uses his people as the instrument of His judgement. Unlike in the cases of the Flood or Sodom and Gomorrah where a more natural means is used, God uses the armies of Israel to bring His divine

wrath for His sins upon a people. Like at the final judgement where a fire will sweep over everything, and all the people, and all the animals will be brought to an end before God makes a new creation, the armies of Israel enact something like that. Holy war is a religious thing not a racial thing, we see that holy war was enacted upon the Jew Achan and even the whole nation of Israel through the Babylonian invasion for their sins. What seems to underline this issue here is the fact that the war between Israel and the Amalekites, the Agagites being another name for them, stretches back to Ex. 17 when Amalek tried to wipe out the people of God. God declared war on the Amalekites, a war that we see continued through the prophet Samuel in 1 Sam. 15. There we see Saul failing to wage holy war by sparing the king and taking the plunder, so Samuel has to put the king to death. If holy war is the context then judgement day like judgement is in step with other instances of holy war in the OT. Another interesting detail pertains to the plunder itself. In holy war any silver or gold was consecrated to God and not taken by the people. Even though this edict allows the Jews to plunder their enemies, we see that when the holy war actually takes place in the next chapter that the plunder is not touched, 9:10, 15-16. This means that despite the wording of the edict, an edict intended most likely to deter any opportunists, if they did not seize the plunder they may not have killed the families of those who attacked them. This point if true should not detract from the reality of holy war conditions in other places. The NIV tries to soften this reality altogether which is wrong.

Holy war is a glaring issue in the bible, but it is not something that we must shy away from. We are sinners who all deserve to die. The Mosaic Covenant was a time when God put His judgement day justice on display, He did this both through the armies of Israel and the laws of the land of Israel. We see an increased case of capital offences where sinners are put to death for all sorts of sins. Firstly we must recognize that God is the Holy Warrior who comes as a judge to put an end to sin and the sinner. Sin is serious, sin must be judged, these intrusions of justice remind us of this fact. What should stand out even more for us is that fact that God did not wipe out the human race when Adam and Eve first sinned. Instead what He did is He promised the Seed of the Woman who would rescue the human race from Satan, sin and death. When the day finally came for rescue, it was not by God putting to death all the sinners, for then none would live. Instead in Jesus Christ He came down and took our punishment upon Himself making a way open for guilty sinners to be forgiven and saved. Our God of grace takes the strike of His own holy law against Himself before pouring out full justice upon the world. We have a warning in Christ for all to turn from sin, that they not stand before God dressed in their sins, for the death of Christ is testimony to all what will happen if you try to endure the day of judgement with no Ark, no Passover lamb, no sacrifice of atonement as your protection. Secondly, and this is where we come in. It is no longer our task to put on display the judgement of God upon sin, Christ has put on display all that our sins deserve and has made a way for sinners to be saved from that justice. We are now given a mission to take this message of forgiveness to all nations, inviting all to come and receive this forgiveness for free, and to warn of the judgment that will come upon all who refuse to take refuge in Christ. We go with a sword but it is the sword of the word of God.

The Jews rejoicing

V15-17, 'Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple,

and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. ¹⁶ The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. ¹⁷ And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.' Mordecai is changed from sackcloth to ashes and the Jews as well. In fact the four kinds of distress mentioned in 4:3 are replaced with four words for victory, v16. We see the Jews are rejoicing. What are they rejoicing in? They are rejoicing because of the turn around in their fortunes. They now have a friend and not an enemy in power, with Esther and Mordecai holding very prominent positions. They are no doubt rejoicing at the return of some sort of legal protection and are no longer persona non grata. No doubt there would have been a real risk of opportunists taking advantage of the Jews being out of favor and not waiting until the given date to do them harm. Though not out of the woods they do have a chance to at least defend themselves. And I think they are rejoicing because they had prayed, they had confessed their sins, they had humbled themselves and now they see that God has not forsaken His people, He is hearing and answering their prayers.

A surprising detail is the fact that many declared themselves to be Jews. Like Rahab who could see that God was with His people, there would have been some genuine conversions to the God of Israel. True there may have been some false conversions, there always are, those who convert because the tide of public opinion is with God's people at the time, or people who are overly influenced by celebrity conversions. But here we see that God uses the saving of His own people to be a means of drawing those from all nations to Himself.

It has been pointed out how the Jews were rejoicing when technically they did not know how it was all going to end. Maybe they had some surety because of a partial answer to prayer. We are in a better position than the people of God in the OT. though we may be in a similar precarious position, out of favor, being attacked, unwelcome and hated, we know how history will end. Christ has dealt the death blow to the devil; the devil is thrown down to earth and all the pressure he brings to bear against the church, be it persecution, deception or seduction are we know the death throes of a defeated foe. We know that we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Like these Jews we will still have to pray and fight but we do so with a greater confidence.