

Sermon 11: Esther 9:1-10:3: The Deliverance of God's People

OUTLINE

Deliverance described
Deliverance remembered

INTRODUCTION

We embarked on our journey through Esther as an investigation into the bible's teaching on the providence of God. How God's sovereignty is at work bringing all things to pass according to His will through miracles, through means, using us as His instruments, even using the sins of believers and unbelievers to fulfil His good purposes. Esther is a particularly pertinent book as God's name is not mentioned but His invisible hand is everywhere present. We have watched God sway the most powerful man in the world; use sinful servants; give God's enemies enough rope to hang themselves; granting favor; using sleeplessness; how He is the master of perfect timing; how calamity for God's people results in our repentance, prayerfulness and recommitment; that God's care extends to His people no matter where they are; that He does not abandon them even if they have created the problems by their own sinning. Esther has served as a wonderful reminder of the God who is in control of all things no matter how they appear and who will finally bring deliverance to His people.

We come now to the final part of our story, but the ending we already know is a forgone conclusion. God steals the tension of not knowing how things are going to end and ruins a good plot to give us the assurance of how it is all going to end. V1, 'Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.' Here the deliverance is announced, what follows is the deliverance described; and then the deliverance remembered. These will be our two points.

Deliverance described

The prophesied day has arrived. There are two groups of people, God's people, and the enemies of God's people who seek their harm. There are two decrees, the decree Haman wrote sanctioning the destruction and plundering of God's people; and Mordecai's decree which gave the people of God the right to defend themselves. From a human point of view things are not as sure as the Bible portrays them. What is not described is the great number of people hoping to kill the Jews, the strength they had, the coordination of this intended attacks, the people in government who were working for them, the long preparations they had made for this day. What is not described is the tension that each Jew would have felt, the lack of certainty of the outcome as the sun rose that morning. The Bible regularly turns our focus to the certain ending. As it is described here we see no report of casualties or resistance but merely that it was a white wash, v2, 'The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples.' The final battle of history is described in a similar way, not in a literary way that carries tension and causes the crowd to rise and fall in emotions, but in a way that portrays God as strong and His people as safe; it shows us the inevitable victory which will be ours. Rev.

20:7-10, 'And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. ⁹ And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, ¹⁰ and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.' When it comes to the greatest battle of all time you might have wanted a bit more detail, but we are always given the detail that matters—God will save His people; God's plan is irresistible; God's power will have the last word.

V3-4, 'All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful.' We do not see God mentioned here but we do see a sign of His working, the fact that the fear of the Jews came upon both the people and those in powerful positions. As when God was with His people in the conquest of Canaan, He is acting for His people now. Remember the words of Rahab to the spies, Josh 2:7-11, "'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. ¹⁰ For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. ¹¹ And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.'

When we look at this reversal we must revisit the bad times in our own lives. We must remember God is there, God is in control, God is working all things together for good. As someone has put it, the difficulty with that promise is relearning to believe the 'all things' part. In this instance the all things includes a selfish king; the stealing of a nations young women; unacknowledged good; racial hatred; attempted genocide; and a corrupt legal system which enables extermination. Think about your situation, what are the 'all things' that you need to trust are part of God's plan for His good purposes?

V5-9, 'The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. ⁶ In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, ⁷ and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha ⁸ and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha ⁹ and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, ¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.' As we come to the battle parts we can see several things. Firstly, the Jews were acting in self-defence. Secondly, we see repeated mentions of 'men' being killed not women and children. Thirdly, the sons of Haman are singled out for special mention showing how Haman had influenced his family in his ways bringing God's judgement upon them. Fourthly, the Jews did not fight their enemies for personal gain, but in the spirit of holy war they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

This does highlight for us the reality of our family culture. What do your children learn from you, what is the take away from being brought up in your house? Do

they see you prioritize Christ and His ways in your home; or do they see hypocrites? Do they like you prize the Bible, cherish the church, imitate your generosity and hospitality? What is the legacy we leave our children? Haman left a legacy of racism and hatred and embroiled them in a fight that resulted in their destruction. Mothers have a powerful influence on their children, but here in particular we are reminded of the power of a father's passions and example and how it shapes the behavior of his children.

There is a challenge about serving for personal gain. We know the story of how Achan took the plunder which was to be destroyed. Here we see a nation that has been brought to its knees in prayer and repentance and is now serving the Lord and His purposes earnestly. Are we serving for personal gain?

V11-15, 'That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. ¹² And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." ¹³ And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows." ¹⁴ So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. ¹⁵ The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.' Here we see the king is impressed with the results and asks Esther what she wants. She asks for one more day for the Jews to defend themselves. This has raised a number of questions about whether Esther is being bloodthirsty or not. The text does not make a judgement call on her actions it merely describes them. It is possible that given her and Mordecai's positions they would be aware of the depth of the resentment to the Jews and knew some key players had not yet entered the fray. What we do learn from these people who attacked on the second day is the absolute folly of sin. Even though the first group were easily overrun; even though God has put the fear of the Jews on the people, these people show the way we can harden our hearts and refuse to see reason and they drive on in a self-destructive fashion into sin. Even though God warns of judgement, speaks in our consciences, works through providence to prevent sin, we in our folly drive ourselves into it.

Deliverance remembered

As with any victory we have seen that following the victory there was a time of feasting and gladness and giving of gifts, v18-19. This deliverance was no small matter so Mordecai and Esther give instruction that this deliverance must be remembered. You will notice that there is a lot of detail given to describe this remembrance. The bible puts emphasis where it gives detail, and the detail is in the importance of the people of God everywhere celebrating this deliverance. V20-32, 'And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, ²² as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

²³ So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. ²⁴ For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. ²⁵ But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, ²⁸ that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants. ²⁹ Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. ³⁰ Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, ³¹ that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. ³² The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.'

What I find striking about the large amount of detail here is the fact that God is not mentioned, though I think He is clearly implied. My understanding of this part of the book of Esther is that we are seeing a major spiritual revival of God's people. There they were well assimilated into pagan culture, Mordecai's complacency and Esther complicity were tokens of a larger spiritual problem. Then the people of God came under threat and were cast upon God for help. The book of Esther does not mention that they prayed but it is implied in their act of fasting and sackcloth. We noted how these descriptions were shorthand for times of repentance. After this time of repentance we see a new Esther and Mordecai, they are committed to the plight of God's people and laying down their lives. They call upon all the Jews to fast with them as they seek to find favor with the king. God grants them favor, gives them a first victory against Haman, and now we see more of the same. Esther and Mordecai are active in a spiritual role of leadership, they are leading the people of God in remembrance of God's mighty acts. They are insistent on God being honored as the one who has saved them. The give-away is in the fact that the name of these days are called 'Purim' after the word 'Pur' which means 'lots'. God is in control of the casting of the lots. There was no chance involved in this deliverance it was an act of God. The naming of the days Purim is a recognition of this fact. The feasting and gladness would not merely be for their lives and deliverance but the confirmation that God is with them and for them, and that He has the power to cause His greater plans for His people to prosper.

Two key things stand out for us. Firstly, let us think about our remembrances of God's saving deeds. Sadly there are many who go about remembrance celebrations without any mention of God. We have just had Christmas, how many use the holiday for food and gifts and play but without actually remembering the good that God has done in giving Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. Mindless remembrances are common for us. Even as we have ANZAC day coming around each year, and we read the words 'Lest We Forget' how

many really take to heart the drastic loss of human life, the sacrifice of those who fought for freedom, and have a deep appreciation for the freedoms we now enjoy at their expense. As believers we have been given one day in seven, called the Lord's Day in Rev. 1:10, as a reminder that the Day of the Lord in judgement has fallen upon Jesus instead of us; and the Day of the Lord in resurrection has already experienced its firstfruits in the resurrection of Christ. This is to be a day that we hunger for as we come together again as the redeemed people of God celebrate what God has done. Added to this we have been given the Lord's Supper as a regular remembrance meal. This is a meal, like the Passover that focuses our attention upon the sacrificial Lamb that died to save us from death, and by whose death we now experience deliverance. We have in the form of a sustaining meal a reminder that we are dependent upon Him for life; we are reminded through the bread and cup of a body given and blood poured out for the payment of our sin debt; we are reminded of things, past, present, and future that are ours. The Lord's Supper is to be a meal of gladness and joy, a time when we remember how our sins are paid for, that we are free, that victory is ours and God is with us. We do not have to keep the OT calendar as Israel had to, all these things pointed to Christ and our salvation in Him. Now that He has come all we have to do is meet regularly on the Lord's Day and remember Him given for us in the regular observance of the Lord's Supper. How is your remembrance going? Is it a time of rejoicing or sadness? Do you make an effort to make it meaningful or do you approach it with familiarity?

10:1-3, 'King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. ² And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? ³ For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.' The book of Esther ends with this strange exalting of Mordecai, what is going on here? It has been suggested that this has been put here to show that the glory for saving Israel is not to go to the pagan king Ahasuerus, but rather that God has saved Israel through his chosen instrument, Mordecai. And that the ongoing welfare of Israel is being provided for through Mordecai.

As we come to the end of the book which ended with a battle where the people of God were at risk of extermination but God was acting to preserve His people and gave them a great and overwhelming victory through a dramatic turn around where the underdog was now on top. We cannot help but see this as a type of the final battle and final victory that we will face. But what we can say is that where the Jews won a battle only to have to fight again later on, Jesus Christ will fight and win for us putting all enemies under His feet and we will experience a victory that can never be challenged or overturned. Mordecai would live and die, he would be able to secure the safety of Israel as long as he had power, but he would go the way of all flesh. Jesus has overcome the grave and the victory and reign that He will have can never end.