

Have you noticed the date?

It is the twelfth day of the twelfth month (in the modern calendar).
Purim is in February of our calendar –
but it was the 13th day of the 12th month.

So it seems fitting that we conclude our study of the Book of Esther
on the 12th day of the 12th month!

It is also fitting that we do this in Advent –
as we celebrate the proclamation of “peace on earth, good will toward men.”

Because this is what Purim is all about.

The salvation of the Jews brings peace (shalom) and welfare (tov) –
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
(or at least the Persian!)

Americans of all stripes have learned how to play the victim card.

Everyone – it seems – has become a minority.
Everyone claims to be oppressed.

The book of Esther reminds us that those who are *truly* being oppressed
are rarely in a position to say so!

Speaking truth to power is virtually impossible
when you are *actually* under the threat of death.

Esther herself was paralyzed by fear.

Go to the King?

No. I can't do that! I might die!

Only when she realized what story she was in –

that God had placed her here *at this place*, *at this time* –
for such a time as this.

It did not make her suffering and affliction trivial.

But it became transformed to a “light and momentary affliction”
which was preparing for her an eternal weight of glory.

Those are hard words to accept when you are in the middle of the suffering!

That's why you need for the way of the cross to become the way you live – now!

So that when the day comes, you can say with Esther,

“I will fast for three days, I and my maidens...
and then I will go to the king – and if I perish, I perish.”

1. The Day of Vengeance (9:1-19)

a. In Susa (v1-10)

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.

Verse 1 opens with a classic statement of reversal.

“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.”

You might wonder –

if the King had issued a second decree,
why did anyone try to carry out the first one?
Plainly Xerxes has sided with the Jews –
even placing a Jew in a prominent place as “prime minister.”

Wouldn't this be a good time to lay low?

Well, sure!

But every general who ever ordered a suicidal charge
thought that it had a chance before they started!
And while *we know* the end of the story –
they did not.

For that matter, many people in the Persian empire
would have been only vaguely familiar with what was happening in Susa –
and pretty obviously, the ten sons of Haman
thought that they could avenge their father...

² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.

This echoes the language of Exodus 11:3 –

“Moses himself was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt,
in the sight of Pharaoh's officials and in the sight of the people.”
But in Exodus we are told explicitly:
“The LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians.”
In Esther, there is only silence.

But with all of the Passover connections that we have seen thus far,
two things should become clear:
first, *God has done this* – his “fingerprints” are all over the story!
But second, God has done this through the ordinary faithfulness of his people.

There are no signs and wonders.
There are no mighty deeds.

There is Mordecai.

Mordecai is a great man.
And the fear of Mordecai has fallen on the people and the officials.

But when that happened in Moses’ day,
Moses could not remain in Egypt –
God had said to Pharaoh,
“Israel is my son, my firstborn – let my son go that he may serve *me*.”

Now God is saying, in effect, to Xerxes...
“As long as you don’t kill them off, you can keep them!”

And Mordecai and Esther proclaim a feast to celebrate this!!
A feast that has equal canonical status with Passover!

A feast called Purim – casting lots –
a celebration of the lucky draw!

This is what it means to live in the Diaspora –
the dispersion – the time in between Exile and Kingdom.

In the book of Acts, we hear that a great fear
fell on all who heard of the death of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5:11)

In that case, the apostles did not take up the sword.
Peter simply proclaimed the word of the LORD,
and those who lied to the Holy Spirit died on the spot.

One of the things that the NT makes clear
is that we live in the fulfillment of *all* the phases of redemptive history.

Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed – says Paul in 1 Corinthians.
We are living in the wilderness – between Egypt and the Promise Land – says Hebrews 3.
Jesus is our Joshua who brings us into the land – says Hebrews 4.
He is the Son of David, who sits at the right hand of the Father, says Paul in Romans 1.

But Peter also says that we are “elect exiles of the dispersion” –
combining the last two phases of the OT in one statement! (1 Peter 1)

Exiles long for home – and we do long for the heavenly Jerusalem – our home city!!
But we are also residents of the diaspora.

So how do we make sense of what comes next?

⁵ 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.

Remember that the Jews gathered to lay hands on those who sought their harm.
The decree had stated that the Jews could “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.” (8:11)

This suggests that Haman’s sons launched an attack on the Jews.
Haman was a very wealthy man –
and while the king had placed Mordecai over Haman’s house –
if Haman had ten adult sons,
they would no doubt have contested his control of the house!
How could they withstand the King?!

Very easily.
The King depended upon the Persian nobility.
They had considerable independence –
and as long as they did not flagrantly rebel,
they could get away with an awful lot.
Given Xerxes’ long habit of not paying careful attention to details,
if they could outwait his short attention span,
they could outwit his latest decree!

And if they succeed at defeating the Jews –
then Mordecai will be overthrown,
and Parshandatha, Haman’s eldest son,
would be restored to his “proper” place.

So the first point that we need to recognize is that the Jewish action was an act of self-defense.
They were only authorized to kill those who attacked them.

But also – they were authorized to kill women and children.
This reminds us of what God had commanded Joshua –
the war of utter extermination that was to be waged against the Canaanites

King Saul – Mordecai’s great-uncle 20 times removed (or so)
had failed to do this to the Amalekites.
He had let King Agag live.
And now Saul’s descendants must repair his fault.

But it’s not just that ancient fault!
Haman had decreed utter destruction upon the Jews.
If you decree utter destruction against the innocent –
then you are bringing a decree of utter destruction upon yourself.

There has been a lot of attention lately on the problem of convicting innocent people
for crimes they did not commit.

The solution is simple:
if a prosecutor is found guilty of *knowingly* charging the innocent –
then he should be sentenced to the penalty that he sought against the innocent.

But, you say, many prosecutors would be afraid to bring charges!!
Yes!!
Bringing a charge should always be a fearful thing.
Far better to allow the guilty to escape judgment,
than to wrongly convict the innocent.

We require airline pilots to have a 100% track record on safely landing airplanes.
Even so, we should require prosecutors to have a 100% track record
on only convicting the guilty.

(This should include a “repentance” provision –
where if the prosecutor finds the evidence that exonerates the accused,
he can drop the charge, apologize to the innocent, and keep his job!)

God’s standard of judgment is that he judges each according to his deeds.
With the standard that you use in judging others,
God will use that same standard in judging you.
Haman sought a decree of utter destruction –
so he got it! – against his own family, and all who sided with him.

But there is a difference between Haman’s decree and what the Jews actually do.
The decree had said – men, women, children – *and plunder*.

But when they actually go to war they take no plunder
(and it is not clear that they kill any women or children).

Again – there are so many connections to OT history!
Abraham had defeated the kings who had plundered Sodom and Gomorrah,
but he took no plunder for himself. (Gen 14)
In 1 Samuel 15, King Saul was commanded to destroy King Agag
and the Amalekites – but *take no plunder*.
All of the plunder was to be destroyed.

When Saul kept the best of the plunder “to give as a sacrifice to the LORD” –
Samuel asks, “Why did you swoop down on the spoil,
and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?” (15:19)

Mordecai remembers how great grand-uncle Saul had failed to obey the voice of the LORD.
There is a sense in which Mordecai realizes that God has not been silent!
God had told Israel what to do!
God’s decree may have come 600 years ago –
but he never revoked it!

When you strike down the Agagite – don’t take the plunder!

And the point in Mordecai’s day should be abundantly clear:
while Haman’s plot involved despoiling the Jews,
they did not seek their own personal advancement
at the expense of their enemies.

Sure, it would have been *just* for them to plunder their enemies.
That *is* what their enemies *deserved*.
If you are trying to kill people and plunder them –
then you *deserve* to be killed and plundered.
But God’s purpose goes back farther than the Law.
His promise to Abraham was that all nations would be blessed through his seed.
And so the Abrahamic refusal to take the plunder
forms the basis for the Jews here.

They are supposed to be a light to the nations.
There is a future for those who bless the Seed of Abraham!

But those who *curse* the Seed of Abraham will be cursed!

b. A Second Day in Susa (v11-15)

¹¹ 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.”^[a]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.

So the King calls for Queen Esther – and asks her what else she wants.

This is a very strange episode for two reasons:

First, Xerxes calls for Esther! – he takes the initiative! (for once)

Second, he gives a long speech –

almost as though he actually cares about what she thinks and wants.

And she asks for a second day of vengeance.

Why?

Apparently, Haman's sons had led an attack on the Jews on the first day,

The Jews had won the victory – but it was contested

Perhaps the fact that Haman's sons had been so active came as a surprise.

There is much that is unclear – but what is clear is that Esther believed that a second day would be necessary to establish in Susa that *you don't mess with the Jews!*

But again, they laid no hands on the plunder.

Verses 16-19 then describe the results throughout the Empire:

c. Throughout the Empire (v16-19)

¹⁶ Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

Large numbers in the OT are often used to make a point.

If you divide 75,000 into the 127 provinces, that is around 590 men per province.

(Of course, there would not have been Jews in every province) –

but the point is that this was a complete victory of the Jews over their enemies in the Persian empire.

Also this episode explains why the Jews in Susa and the Jews in the villages celebrated Purim on different days

¹⁷ This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁸ But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

Because the whole point of the book is to explain the origin of the Feast of Purim –
the feast of casting lots!

2. The Feast of Purim (9:20-32)

a. From Sorrow to Gladness (v20-22)

²⁰ 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.

Mordecai does what no one had done since the days of Moses!

He ordains a new feast that the Jews should celebrate their relief from their enemies.

This is the day – the 14th day of the 12th month – when sorrow was turned into gladness.

When mourning was turned to a holiday – to a *good day* (as the Hebrew puts it).

So the 14th and 15th days of the 12th month

were to be celebrated as days of feasting and gladness.

b. The Day of Casting Lots (v23-28)

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.

The Feast of Purim is the feast of the lucky draw –

the feast that celebrates the seemingly random events that are actually

firmly in the hand of God.

When you are facing a decision between two good options –
if you can't make up your mind,
it is entirely appropriate to flip a coin.

The apostles did that when it came to the question of who was to replace Judas.
They had two good candidates – either one of whom would have been suitable.

So they cast lots – and the lot fell for Matthias.

At the same time, there is no command from God that you have to obey the coin flip!
So if you are really disappointed by the coin flip,
then pick the other one!
In one sense, you cannot *escape* God's will!

He will accomplish all his holy will!

On the other hand, his *will* refers to what he has said that you should do.
So if you disobey God, then you are acting contrary to his revealed will –
and you should not expect blessing and happiness from him,
so long as you are walking in rebellion against him!

So when you facing decisions, remember that you cannot *thwart* God's will –
but you can live in rebellion against it –
and, as Haman learned the hard way –
that is a painful road to walk!

But then also notice that the Jews obligate themselves and their offspring
to observe this day forever.

c. Themselves and Their Offspring (v29-32)

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.

So this becomes the perpetual feast of Purim.
All other feasts are fulfilled in Christ.
What about Purim?

Well – the soldiers cast lots for his garment.

But even more, the feast of the Eucharist – the Lord’s Table –
is a celebration of the great reversal!

“that God, the mighty, has come down from the seat and become humble and meek
so that we, if we are humble and meek,

might, through the power of his Spirit, become mighty.

This should be the place and time where Christians celebrate the greatest of all reversals
and where they [remember] the death and resurrection of Christ,
the definitive reversal gently anticipated in the mission of Esther.” (Wells, 90)

One commentator asks:

“Do Christians realize that if Haman’s decree had not been overcome
it would have meant no Christianity?

Is there a sufficient sense that the world has been turned upside down,
and now anything is possible with God?

Perhaps, among more deprived and oppressed peoples it does.

But maybe in the West the banquet feels disturbingly

like one of a people who never believed that the fearsome edict really applied to them.”

(Wells 90)

We have lived so long in the halls of power – walking with Mordecai the Great!! –
that we forget that we were under a sentence of death and annihilation.

The rulers of this age *correctly* realize that the gospel of Jesus Christ
means that Jesus is Lord – and so therefore *they are not!*

But they want to be Lord!

They want their people to love and serve only them.

Mordecai and Esther offer a different path.

With respect to earthly allegiance – they will serve and honor Xerxes.

Because the kingdom of Christ encourages Christians

to treat every foreign land as a home land,

and every home land as a foreign land.

I once was asked to serve as a reference to the FBI for a lawyer friend.

The interviewer asked me if she had any allegiance

that might interfere with her allegiance to the United States.

I answered “yes. She is a faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

She will never compromise that loyalty for anything.

But because she is a faithful servant of Jesus Christ,

so long as you do not ask her to compromise her devotion to him,

she will serve her country well and faithfully.”

Mordecai and Esther seek the welfare of Susa – of Persia – of Xerxes himself!

3. The Peace of Mordecai (10:1-5)

10 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 ends with the Peace of Mordecai.

Shalom has come to all his people – all his *seed* is the term that our author uses.

He sought the *good* – the *welfare* – of his *people* –
and he spoke *peace* to all his *seed*.

Peace on earth – goodwill to men.