

How many feasts are there in the book of Esther?

In chapter 1, there were three feasts (the lengthy feast for his nobles, and the seven-day feast for everyone, along with Queen Vashti’s feast for the women)

In chapter 2, there was Esther’s Feast at her crowning (so that’s number 4).

In chapter 5, Esther holds her first feast for Ahasuerus and Haman (5).

Here in chapter 7, Esther holds her second feast for Ahasuerus and Haman (6).

At the end of chapter 8, the Jews hold a feast celebrating the news of their deliverance (7).

And then in chapter 9, the Feast of Purim is established.

That’s not surprising, since we have often seen that *eight* is the number of redemption.

Seven is the number of creation.

But man falls short – that’s why the number 666 is called “the number of man”
in Revelation.

Man falls short of completeness – for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
But Christ has come to bring an eighth day – the glorious wedding supper of the Lamb!

Tonight we need to look plainly at one of the central themes of the book of Esther:
when the chips are down, Esther does not *simply* pray and ask God to intervene.

No, Esther herself goes to the king and puts her life on the line.

She certainly prayed.

She spent three days fasting – which, in Jewish culture, meant prayer as well.

But due to the author’s decision to leave the name of God out of this book,
we are left with a striking impression

that when God is silent, it is human action that “saves the day.”

Because sometimes it appears that God is about as involved in day-to-day life
as Xerxes.

Is God really paying attention?

Is he really doing anything?

In the middle of the book of Esther,

you would be pardoned for wondering

if God is really going to let his people perish?

“Her royal station is not an end in itself or of benefit to her alone,
but an element to be fitted into the larger story of her people and their destiny.
This is the heart of the political ethics of the book of Esther:
life in the Diaspora is not to be passively endured,
actively opposed, or dissipated through cultural assimilation.
It will continue to present opportunities
that must be creatively incorporated into the life of the Jewish people,
for immediate or subsequent employment as levers
to attain or preserve safety and well-being in the short and long term.”
(Wells, 70-71)

Some Christians have thought that we should form a Christian ghetto
and passively endure the troubles of this age.

That’s not Esther.

Other Christians have said that we need to oppose, protest, and fight the cultural decline.
That’s not Esther, either.

Still other Christians have assimilated to the “spirit of the age” – and look just like the culture.
That’s not Esther – although until four days ago, she sure looked like it!!

(That’s why some commentators think that Esther compromised her Jewishness
by marrying a Gentile and eating unclean foods...)

But as we have seen, she didn’t really *marry* a Gentile.
She was forced into the harem.

This is not “assimilation” – this is called doing your best in a very awful situation.

1. The Confrontation (7:1-10)

a. Esther’s Request (v1-6)

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ² And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, “What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”

Notice again that it is as the king is drinking wine after the feast – that he asks.

The king knows better than any one else that if she asks now,
he is required to grant what she asks.

And when he says “even to the half of my kingdom” –
that is just a figure of speech –
after all, if someone has *more* than half the kingdom,
then they will have control of the kingdom.
Xerxes is saying, in effect, I will do anything for you

that does not compromise my kingship.

But she knows that what she is about to ask is indeed
possibly far more than half the kingdom.
He is already indebted to Haman for the princely sum that he is planning to use
for the massive building project that he hopes to undertake.
The book of Esther has already told us
that there was a palace coup in the works five years ago –
which Mordecai thwarted
(just after Xerxes got back from his failed invasion of Greece).

³ *Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king,*

Esther’s speech is brilliant.

“If I have found favor in your sight, O king...”
She knows that he is eating out of her hand.
But – in keeping with a long tradition
of overstated humility when addressing powerful people –
she takes the low place.

After all, what would happen if she said,
“Hey sweetie, this jerk Haman is trying to kill my people.
What were you thinking when you signed that idiot decree?!?”

Yeah, you don’t call Xerxes “sweetie” (especially not in front of others) –
and you don’t put him down!

It’s something that we would all do well to remember!

It’s one of the challenges of being a pastor.
I’m in a position of spiritual authority –
but if I insist on my “rights” – I am not exercising that authority well.
Esther understands the importance of the *principle* of the incarnation –
more than four centuries before it happened.

Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus –
who, though he was in the form of God
did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped –
but humbled himself, taking the form of a servant... (Phil 2)

But then the way she says it is also brilliant:

and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish,

At first it sounds like a joke.
Please don't kill me!
She's his favorite concubine!
She's "won" the title Queen!

But then she adds:
and my people for my request.

He has been asking "what is your wish, and what is your request?"
Her wish is to live –
and her request is that her people might live as well.

⁴ For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king."

She would have humbled herself to become a slave.
(One could argue that a concubine *is* actually a slave –
but that's not how it was viewed in the ancient world).
But the point is that if the Jews were simply to be enslaved –
that's no big deal.

(Remember the Passover context.
The center of the story happens in the week surrounding Passover.
Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for 400 years.
What's another 400 years?!...

Our whole society teaches us to be self-oriented.
We are so selfish!
We often think that the point of my life is to be happy!
Or at least to be free.

So if I'm not happy – if I'm miserable – and if I'm not free to do what I please,
then there is something wrong with the universe!

Well, yes, there is something wrong with the universe!
It's called the estate of sin and misery.
The condition of being in rebellion against God and suffering affliction!

Esther is already living in a form of slavery.
She is certainly not free!
But she understands how to use her position for the sake of a higher end.

I suppose a modern feminist would say
that Esther should have championed women's rights!
But the modern idea of "women's rights" didn't exist in the ancient world.
What Esther does is more important.

She used her position – not for her self-interest,
or even for the advancement of the Jews alone –
but for the interest of all humanity
in the redemption of the world in Jesus Christ!

It is clear that she has even the interest of King Xerxes at heart!
She knows that she is asking *everything*.
“our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king...”

What does that mean?
Xerxes is about to lose face.
Four days ago he promulgated a decree to annihilate the Jews.
Now she is asking him to revoke that decree.

Please understand:
The King of Persia is never wrong.
What if...?
No, no, no.
When in doubt, refer to point one –
The King of Persia is never wrong!

If you are used to reading the Bible, then you are used to the prophetic approach to kingship.
OT kings often had prophets who would point out where they were wrong.
That is *not* the way the ancient world usually worked!

He's the king.
Therefore, he's never wrong!

Esther understands this.
She understands that she has just committed the unpardonable sin!
She has just told the king that he was wrong.

She even quotes the language of the decree that the King had just signed four days ago.
But he does not seem to remember!
Much about the Persian court has been treated humorously –
but now Xerxes himself is the butt of the joke.

⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared^[a] to do this?”

Oh Xerxes?!

No one in all the kingdom is allowed to make decrees – except *you*.
The way Xerxes says it is “who has presumed in his heart” to do this.

In other words, Xerxes is disclaiming any intent on his part to do harm to Esther,
or Esther’s people.

But the way he says it suggests that he is at a loss to understand what she is talking about.

⁶ *And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!”*

Do you see what Esther has done?

The evening started with the King and Haman on one side,
and Esther on the other.

She is the host – they are her guests.

She is a woman – they are men.

In the world of the Persian court,

Xerxes and Haman hang out and make all the important decisions –
and then Xerxes calls for Esther (or some other concubine) to satisfy his desires.

But Esther has now successfully inserted herself in between Xerxes and Haman,
making Haman into the “foe and the enemy”!

Whose foe?

The enemy of the Jews – that’s how Haman was described in 3:10.

But here Haman is not just the enemy of the Jews –
she is suggesting that he is the enemy of Xerxes!

(The King James translates verse 4 “if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen,
I had held my tongue,
although the enemy could not countervail the king’s damage.”

“hatsar” can mean enemy *or* trouble/affliction.

Since *tsar* is used in verse 6 to refer to “enemy” or “adversary” –
the King James chose to translate it as enemy in verse 4.

The ESV has gone the direction of “trouble/affliction.”

I’m okay with the ESV translation – so long as you understand it as
“affliction brought about by enemy hostility” (not just random suffering).

Esther is saying that Haman is not just the enemy of the Jews –
he is the enemy of Xerxes –

and the evil that he is doing is too great to suffer in silence.

Rhetorical flourishes aside –
there is an important point here.

There are many evils that should be suffered in silence.

How do you know when to be silent and when to speak?

There is no hard and fast rule.

But the principle that Esther is using

is that you should speak when it is in the *true interest*
of the one to whom you speak.

If Xerxes had enslaved the Jews –

no that wouldn't have been good,

but it's not clear that Xerxes' interests would have been adversely affected
(after all, he would have benefited from their labor!).

But if the Jews are slaughtered wholesale,

that would have political and economic implications for the empire!

In other words, our happiness and freedom is of small account.

But if you kill us – then the hope of salvation is gone.

(Think about what happened during the middle ages under Islam.

For centuries, the church continued to flourish and prosper –

but when rulers started killing Christians,
salvation departed from the middle east.)

Meanwhile back in the palace...

Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Only now does Haman realize what is happening.

Oh no!

The Queen is a Jew!

His wife, Zeresh, had warned him that afternoon

that messing with the Jews would be his downfall.

And now he discovers that Queen Esther is a Jew.

All of his bragging about being invited to a banquet with the king and queen –

now is revealed for the folly that it is!

b. Haman's Demise (v7-10)

⁷ *And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden,*

Once again Xerxes is shown to be a hot-tempered drunk –

and Haman knows this well...

but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king.

So Haman is begging for his life – not with Xerxes,
no there is no point in begging Xerxes.
His life is in Esther's hands now.
But he is not used to groveling.
He doesn't know how to do it properly –
and so he gets a little too aggressive with the Queen...

⁸ *And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?"*

If Haman had been prostrate before the Queen,
his posture could not have been misunderstood.
But instead, his pleading takes a more aggressive form –
falling on the couch – not just the floor!

This suggests that abusers have had similar tactics throughout the generations!
Haman seems to think that a show of power will help his case...

where, in fact (as Esther has already demonstrated), only humility can save you.

As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face.

Now we realize that there are many more people present
than just Xerxes, Haman, and Esther.
Esther's servants would have been serving the feast –
but the King would never be without his own bodyguard – his eunuchs.

And so,

⁹ *Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Moreover, the gallows^[b] that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits^[c] high." And the king said, "Hang him on that."*

Notice again that Xerxes follows the advice of whatever counselor happens to be present.
You might think (and you might be right) that the *real* power in Susa

is not the *king* – but those who counsel the king!

Whoever has the ear of the King is the one who guides the policy of Persia.

¹⁰ *So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.*

This is a principle that the scriptures often restate –
the one who lays a trap for others will fall into it himself.

In the 20th century this was illustrated by the never-ending saga
of Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner.

No matter what the trap,
no matter how cleverly concocted,
you could be sure that Wile E. Coyote was going to fall into his own trap!

2. The Counter-Decree (8:1-17)

Chapter 8 then describes how Esther and Mordecai
overturned the machinations of Haman.

a. Mordecai Set Over the House of Haman (v1-2)

8 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.

First, Xerxes gives the house of Haman to Esther.

This is the “easy” solution to Xerxes’ problem.

Since Haman is a condemned traitor to the King,
his property is forfeit to the crown.

Then Esther brings Mordecai to the King,

and the King takes his signet ring (which he had previously given to Haman)
and now gives it to Mordecai –

as if to say, you now have authority to act in my name.

And then *Esther* sets Mordecai over the house of Haman.

That’s not just a building.

The House of Haman refers to all his business – all his affairs.

Now, think about what this means in *Persia*.

Don’t think about it like Americans.

We tend to think – Ooh, now Mordecai is rich!

Well, sure – but Haman’s property was forfeit *to the crown*.
And so Mordecai is effectively the royal administrator of the property.
In one sense, Mordecai now has all the trappings of wealth –
but as an outsider, he is especially dependent upon the King –
and therefore he can be trusted
more than someone from an established Persian family!

In the same way that Esther was Queen! (of the concubines),
so also Mordecai “takes Haman’s place” – but with different standing.

Now, all this is good –
but there is still a decree under royal seal –
stating that the Jews are to be annihilated in eleven months.

And after a month – nothing...
And then another month goes by – and Xerxes does nothing.

According to the decree that Haman had obtained,
Esther and Mordecai – and their people – could be executed by their enemies
in nine months.

And so...

**b. Ahasuerus Authorizes the Revocation of That Which Cannot Be Revoked
(v3-8)**

³ 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.

She goes again to the King – *maybe* this time with greater confidence!
But Xerxes hasn’t lifted a finger to *do anything*.

And – what is more – notice that Xerxes only holds out the golden scepter
after she has fallen at his feet with weeping and pleading!

Xerxes doesn’t really seem to care all that much...

In a book where God is never named,
that means that Xerxes is the most powerful being named in the book of Esther.
And this should make us wonder:
is God like Xerxes?
Does he actually care?
Has he forgotten us?

Esther's pleading with Xerxes may sound very much like her prayers to the LORD!

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?" ⁷ 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,^[d] 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."

Here Xerxes reminds Esther of the problem.

He can't just "revoke" the prior edict.

The King of Persia is *never wrong*.

That annoying edict that I signed a couple months ago –

I can't revoke it (I'm never wrong, after all!).

But if you want to write another one and seal it with my seal,
then go ahead!

Do you see it?

The God who created heaven and earth is never wrong.

He may decree disaster – for a time.

But his decree of disaster is only *for a time*.

It is *never* a decree of *utter* annihilation.

And his ultimate decree is for the salvation of his people –
and indeed, the salvation of humanity!

And this is how the book of Esther treats the final decree of Xerxes:

c. A Day of Vengeance Is Coming (v9-14)

⁹ 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,

The Persian royal messengers were famous for their diligent labor.

“Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat nor gloom of night
stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”
This is what Herodotus said about the Persian messengers.

But now those swift messengers were sent forth with a new decree:

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.

You might wonder why.

Why not just command that the Jews are not to be harmed?
Because that would suggest that the King was *wrong* the first time!

No, the original decree was that people could rise up against the Jews and kill them
and seize their property.
As absurd and foolish as it was, that decree remained intact.

So an equally absurd and foolish decree was put in its place:
if anyone is so foolish and absurd as to attack the Jews
on the 13th day of the 12th month,
then the Jews are free and welcome to defend themselves –
and return the judgment upon the attackers.

Effectively doing to them, as they sought to do to you.

Just as Haman was impaled on the gallows that he built for Mordecai,
so also anyone who imitates Haman in attacking the Jews,
will be destroyed and annihilated – just as they tried to do to the people of God.

We'll see what happens next time –
but in theory, if *no one* seeks to implement the decree of Haman,
then nothing will happen on the 13th day of the 12th month.

Judgment Day is coming.
A day on which everyone will be judged according to their deeds.

d. Gladness and Joy and Fear Leads to the Conversion of the Peoples (v15-17)

15 Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown^[e] 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.

Notice two things in verses 15-17.

First, because of the glorification of Mordecai,
the people of God – the Jews – have light and gladness and joy and honor.

And so they celebrate an impromptu feast – the seventh feast of the book.

But second, because of the glorification of Mordecai,
the Gentiles – “many from the peoples of the country”
declare themselves Jews.

The nations are beginning to come to faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We'll look more at this next week,
but if Mordecai's decree seems unduly harsh,
consider what Jesus says in Luke 13,

When Jesus was asked about those who had been slaughtered by Pilate,
Jesus responded:

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans,
because they suffered in this way?

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them:

Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others
who lived in Jerusalem?

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Would you avoid the wrath to come?

Would you escape the Judgment that comes upon all flesh?

Then repent.