

STAND UP, EVEN IF YOU PERISH!

Esther 3: 8-11, 4: 1, 10-16, 5: 2, 3, 7:1-10 and 9: 20-28

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Throughout the centuries, the enemies of God's people, Israel, have plotted the destruction of Israel. Time and time again, enemies of Israel have plotted, schemed, and counseled together, but in the end their treachery has only come to rest upon their own head. And, the amazing truth, each time this has happened, the children of Israel have been given a feast day to celebrate the wonders and mercies of God. This happened at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. All the Jewish baby boys were to be killed at birth but God protected His people and gave them the baby boy Moses, whom Pharaoh's daughter picked up from a basket bed in the bulrushes. Moses became God's leader to lead His people out of Egyptian bondage. God ultimately defeated Pharaoh and the Jews celebrate Passover year after year, and so do we as believers in our Passover Seder meals. The same pattern happened with the defeat of Antiochus Epiphanes during the time of the Maccabees, 150+ years before Christ was born. The resulting feast is called the Feast of Hanukkah. The Passover Seder reminds us that in every generation, there are those who rise up to destroy the Jews, and for that matter, many who would destroy God's church, and there are thousands of Christian martyrs today.

There is another Jewish Feast that has been celebrated annually by the Jews since 509 BC. The Feast of Purim, celebrates the historic deliverance of Israel from Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite. This year, Purim was celebrated by the Jews this past week beginning on the evening of Wednesday, March 4th and ending on the evening of Thursday, March 5th. Remember that Queen Esther fasted and prayed and prepared herself to risk her life for her people. God heard her cries for help as Esther went into the king. He welcomed her, holding out his golden scepter. She asked the king to let her prepare for him two banquets. At the second banquet, she told the King of Haman's plot against her people, in the presence of Haman who was the only other invited guest. The King was furious. Haman ate his last banquet meal. The Jewish people were saved, and Haman and his ten sons were all hanged on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai. The Jews then were permitted to defend themselves on the prescribed day of their death. On that day that the Jews were to be destroyed, they instead rose up in power and celebrated a victory over all their enemies. The Feast of Purim was the feast celebrating the Mordecai/Esther victory that truly was God's mighty victory.

This same pattern happened in the 20th century. Think of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews which ended with the death of Hitler but also paved the way for

the emergence of the modern State of Israel and its annual Day of Independence on May 11th. There are so many later echoes of Purim. In modern times, there have been two significant figures who have threatened the Jewish people, and there are echoes of Purim in their stories. Many have noted the echoes of Purim in the Nuremberg war crime trials. In the Book of Esther, Haman's ten sons were hanged (Esther 9:13); in 1946, ten of Hitler's top associates were put to death by hanging for their war crimes, including the crime of murdering 6 million Jews.

Another echo of Purim is found in the Soviet Union a few years later. In early 1953, Stalin was planning to deport most of the Jews in the Soviet Union to Siberia, but just before his plans came to fruition, he suffered a stroke and died a few days later. He suffered that stroke on the night of March 1, 1953. You will see March 1 that year on the calendar as Purim. The plan to deport Jews was not carried out. With that background, I ask us today, "What important lessons does God the Holy Spirit want to teach to us through Purim and the events leading up to Purim? I see four lessons that I hope we never forget. What are they?"

GOD WILL ALWAYS KEEP HIS PROMISES TO ISRAEL AS WELL AS TO ALL HIS FOLLOWERS IN HIS CHURCH. (I.) In Mordecai's sackcloth and ashes and lamenting, and in Esther's bold three day fast and risking her life by going in before the king, what promises were they claiming? I like to think one of the many promises of God that Esther claimed as she fasted, and one she must have claimed as she appeared in the presence of the king is found in the prophet Hosea's words in Hosea 14: 3, words written in 725 BC, over 200 years earlier. "In You the orphan finds mercy." Esther was an orphan. What a promise to claim as she fasted, prayed and trusted God for King Ahasuerus to hold out his golden scepter. I think of Mordecai, Esther's cousin who took her as an orphan and raised her as his own daughter, as now he wept in sackcloth and ashes. What promises was Mordecai claiming and crying out to God? I believe there is a great chance he was claiming Psalm 91: 2 and crying out to God, "My refuge, My fortress, My God, in You I will trust." Beloved, God is faithful to His Word and to all His promises. This should give us exceedingly great comfort as we experience the challenges of our lives. Although often God's presence cannot be seen or even felt, even as the God of Israel's name is not mentioned once in the Book of Esther, He was nevertheless there--near to His people and God can always be trusted.

I am struck with how God answers prayer by turning the tables. Notice Esther 9: 1. We read, "Now in the 12th month, which is the month of Adar, on the 13th day 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.” We cannot view this divine turning of the tables, without remembering God’s promise to Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant. Remember in those sacred words of God to Abram, He outlines His future plan for the Jewish people and how His plan was to bring blessings to the world through Abram and his descendants. Remember the words of Genesis 12:1-3, “Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” This struggle in Persia between Mordecai and Haman is just one more shadow of the cross of Christ, which sadly, most of the Jews don’t yet understand. The struggle between Mordecai and Haman is the age-long struggle between the seed of Satan, the serpent—Genesis 3:15 and the seed or the offspring of the woman. Purim is really a celebration in Esther’s day that the cross of Christ was coming, and despite the fact that the Jews have not yet turned to Jesus, Purim really celebrates that the serpent’s head has already been crushed. Purim ultimately celebrates the victory of Christ over the forces of darkness. Because of Calvary, the grave and the empty tomb. Secondly,

GOD PLACES US WHERE WE ARE AND WHERE WE NEED TO BE, IF WE ARE WILLING TO OBEY HIS VOICE AND BE USED BY HIM. (II.)

This passage in Esther 9: 2-10 speaks first of the dread of Mordecai that fell on all of Persia. Now who is this man? Is he some great man who was important to Persia as the story begins? No, he is only an elderly man, willing to obey God’s promptings, and God’s voice, willing to raise his second cousin, Hadassah, Esther as his very own daughter, who was willing to obey God’s voice and mourn publicly before the king’s gate, who was willing to challenge Queen Esther’s reticence to go before King Ahazuerus to beg for the life of the Jewish people. He was a man between 75-100 years old that just obeyed the voice of the Lord. Obedience to God’s promptings led Abraham to be the father of faith to all who believe. Obedience to God’s promptings led Mordecai to fame that grew greater and greater. He first humbled himself to obey God’s voice, and God exalted him in due time. Listen again to Esther 9: 2-4. “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. 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.”

Beloved, do you trust the Lord to use you? Are you willing to obey His voice with the simple heart of a child? Have you made yourself fully available to God to do whatever He commands, compels or constrains you to do by His Spirit? Do you want God to truly lead you? Then He will place you in the right place at the right time with the right person so that His glory will rain down. In this passage, the glory of God was to use the dread of Mordecai to destroy the enemies of the Jews. Esther 9: 5-10 tells the story. Purim celebrates that God's enemies were defeated then as God's enemies will yet be defeated now. Notice Esther 9: 10, 15, 16—tells us that the Jews didn't need or want the Amalekite plunder. They did not desire wealth, they desired to withstand their enemy and win. Win they did. Why? Mordecai and Esther listened to the promptings of the Spirit of God, and those promptings meant listening to God speak to them through each other. Think of it. Learn from it. Sadly, beloved—we all get caught in rigid positions of who is supposed to do what. Why should Mordecai listen to God's promptings through Esther? He raised her. Why should Esther listen to God's promptings through Mordecai? She was queen? Why should Mordecai take orders from Esther? He did. Why did Mordecai follow God's promptings to warn his own Queen? Thirdly,

GOD WILL FIND AND RAISE UP OBEDIENT SERVANTS WHO WILL TOTALLY OBEY HIM, WHO WILL NOT MAKE EXCUSES FOR RESISTING HIS WILL THROUGH PARTIAL OBEDIENCE.

This is an unbelievably strong message of Purim. Notice way back in Esther 2:5 who Mordecai was. “Now there was a Jew in Susa the capital whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.” Mordecai was of the exact same lineage as who? Who else was the son of Kish, a Benjamite? It was King Saul. Mordecai was of the exact same lineage as King Saul. Both men could trace their descent back to Jacob, Isaac and Abraham. Remember Mordecai's enemy, Haman, was an Agagite, Esther 3:1. This means he was of the descendants of Agag, the king of the Amalekites during the reign of King Saul, I Samuel 15: 8. The Amalekites were the descendants of Amalek, the son of Eliphaz, the grandson of Esau. (Genesis 36:12) Now most of us remember the bitter rivalry of Jacob and Esau and that rivalry spilled over into future generations. The Amalekites hated the Israelites, the sons of Jacob and they treacherously attacked unarmed Israel as they passed through the Sinai desert on the way to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses and Joshua. Because of the Amalekites blind, inbred hatred for Israel, the Lord pronounced a curse to blot out the Amalekites. Remember the battle as Joshua fought the Amalekites and Moses held up his hands with the help of Aaron and Hur? As Moses' arms fell, the Amalekites won. When his arms were raised, Israel won. After the battle, Exodus

17:14 reads, “Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this in a book as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven.” Guess who God called to carry out this curse? It was the first king of Israel, King Saul. (I Samuel 15:1-3) Saul was told to listen to the voice of the Lord and obey. Did he? No, he resisted God’s will, (I Sam. 15: 8-12) and only partially obeyed the Lord. King Saul decided to spare Amalek’s King Agag as well as the best of the cattle, sheep and lambs. In this disobedience, King Saul lost his throne and crown. (I Samuel 15:22, 23) Saul let some of the sons of King Agag get away. Samuel killed Agag then in Saul’s presence, but Agag’s sons escaped and Haman was one of the descendants of Saul’s disobedience 6 centuries later.

There was to be another mortal conflict between Israel and the Amalekites. If Esther and Mordecai seemed bent on victory, remember...they were 6 centuries later, finally doing what God commanded King Saul to do but he wouldn’t do it. He reasoned, argued, resisted, partially obeyed and had a better plan, so God removed Saul as king. Beloved, the feast of Purim is a celebration that is all about two obedient servants who led Israel to obey the voice of the Lord fully when God gave them a second chance. Sometimes, beloved, when we have disobeyed God’s Word or His promptings by His Spirit, He gives us second chances or multiple chances to obey His voice. But remember, when God has a plan, He will raise up servants who will carry out His plan to the full. Are we among God’s obedient servants who will do His will to the full? (Esther 4: 13, 14) 4thly,

GOD WANTS PURIM TO BE CELEBRATED AMONG THE JEWS THROUGHOUT EVERY GENERATION AND THE LESSON OF PURIM TO MAKE US FOREVER FRIENDS OF ISRAEL. (IV.) This is the lesson of

Esther 9: 16 as the Jews finally, with the help of people in the Medo-Persian kingdom, (Esther 9: 3) eradicated the last of the Amalekites—all 75,000 enemies of Israel left before the initiation of the Feast of Purim. But flashback with me to Queen Esther’s appeal to the king in Esther 8:6. Esther pleaded with the king, saying, “For how can I endure to see the calamity which shall befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?” I would say to the Jews. Yes, keep celebrating Purim. Israel, there is a time to celebrate. To the church of Jesus Christ, there is a time to intercede for the peace of Jerusalem and for all Israel. We don’t need to go to the king of Medo-Persia or Iran. We can appeal before the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Another Agagite kind of evil is looming over the Jews today. The modern Persian empire of Iran is once again issuing threats against Israel, God’s chosen people. The former president of Iran has gone on record on international television calling for the entire destruction of Israel and he has publicly denied the Holocaust ever happening. Like Haman,

the former president of Iran who could only serve 2 terms, crossed God's line. Former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did more than criticize Israel. He single handedly promoted international hatred of the Jews, planning for their destruction. We must do again with Mordecai and Esther what they did, and once again lay hold of the horns of the altar of God, fasting and praying for the peace of Jerusalem and for God's promise in His covenant to Abraham to be fulfilled. Purim calls us to love and bless Israel. God help us pray that God will speed the day when Israel will look upon the One she pierced—and she will, as the prophet Zachariah prophesied, Zechariah 12:10. Billy Graham not long ago said, "Interestingly, Purim occurs exactly one month before Passover. As Egypt was devastated because it tried to destroy Israel so was Persia hundreds of years later. God would not allow Persia to harm Israel then and He will not allow Iran or any nation to touch the apple of His eye today or tomorrow."

Purim is a Lenten subject, a Lenten Feast we can celebrate every day of our lives. We too have the same protector Israel has as our protector. As I close, I call us back to these four lessons of Purim. Remember, (1) God always keeps His word, not just to Abraham, but to the children of Abraham, even His Word to us who by faith are children of Abraham. (2) God places us where we are to use us for His glory, if we will listen to His voice and obey Him. (3) God will raise up servants who will not resist His will or partially obey Him like King Saul, but who will totally and fully obey Him as Mordecai and Esther did. (4) God wants Purim not only to be celebrated by the Jews, but remembered by us as His church, so we will love God and bless Israel, and pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Never forget the lesson Haman and his 10 sons learned the hard way. "Those who bless Israel God will bless and those who curse her, He will curse." (Genesis 12: 3) God speed the day when Israel will recognize the one whom they pierced and find in Him the same eternal salvation that we have, salvation by grace through faith through the precious blood of Jesus. I call us as we close to pray for the obedient faith of Mordecai and Queen Esther to be ours and to stand up for Jesus, and to also stand up to bless the seed of Abraham, as we too have been grafted into the vine. We too, by faith, are the sons and daughters of Abraham. Praise the Lord. Amen.