

## Holy War

Esther 9:1–10:3

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Now would you please take your Bibles and turn with me in them to the book of Esther, chapter 9. Esther chapter 9; we're going to read chapters 9 and the three verses of chapter 10. You'll find that on page 415 in the church Bible. Would you please read along with us? Before we do that, would you bow your heads with me as we turn to God for His help in prayer? Let us pray.

*O Lord, our God, would you now, by the ministry of the Spirit of Your Son, give to us the illumination, understanding - open our eyes that we might behold marvelous things out of Your Law, in Jesus' name, amen.*

Esther chapter 9. We're reading from verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

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. 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. The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. 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.' 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.' So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

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, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, 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.

So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. 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. 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. 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, 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, 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.

Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, 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. The command of Queen Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. 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? 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.

Amen, and we praise God for this reading from His own holy Word. I want you to notice that neither Esther, nor our narrator, after having listed the ten sons of Haman ever goes back to the rigamarole of trying to pronounce their names again! (laughter) They're always just "the ten sons of Haman!" I wonder if he had the same bother I did? (laughter)

Well we come tonight to the last in our series in the book of Esther. If you recall, wicked Haman's "final solution" was to be the holocaust of the Jewish people. But, as we'll see tonight, what actually happens in the end is the climactic reversal in a book of sudden reversals. The Jews are delivered, their enemies are destroyed, giving rise to the annual festival of Purim, which is celebrated by the Jewish people even to this day. For many of us, however, the details of Esther chapters 9 and 10 are a little unsettling because they record terrible conflict and loss of life. They depict the public shaming of Haman's ten sons, their bodies. And they tell us that it is this blood-thirsty denouement to the story of Esther that provides the rationale for an annual festival of celebration among the people of God. At a superficial level at least, Esther 9 and 10 takes what has been a wonderful tale, full of irony and biting wit - we are made to laugh out loud a few times at the folly of the enemies of righteousness and the wisdom of God in saving His children from the worst jams imaginable - at a superficial level, Esther 9 and 10 takes all that and almost spoils it. Instead of the joyous hilarity of the surprising deliverance of grace, the climactic notes of the book are rather dark, aren't they - full of the bitterness of judgment. We can't help but feel the sting of moral ambiguity when the good guys turn on the bad guys and act just like the bad guys.

And we must immediately admit, before we get into the details of the story, the plausibility of those instincts. Let's be honest enough to confess that even the most godly among us are flawed, and that those flaws often reveal themselves most obviously when we find ourselves, like Esther and Mordecai do now, in a position of power and dominance. Aren't we often contrite and dependent on the Lord when we are weak and vulnerable, in trouble, only to become as mean as spit when we think we've at last won the upper hand? So it is at least possible that something of that order is going on here in Esther 9 and 10. Now, perhaps, now the Lord has brought Mordecai and Esther from disenfranchised depths to sit in the heights of supreme power and privilege, and they become mirror images of the very tyrants they have displaced. Like the pigs in Orwell's, *Animal Farm*, who, having displaced the farmer and his family declare, "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." And as they begin to abuse their power, you know what happens to them - their faces start to change to resemble the very farmer and his family that they had displaced. Is that what is happening here with Esther and Mordecai? Lord Acton put it this way, he said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men," he said, "are almost always bad men." Great men are almost always bad men. Could that be what is happening in Esther 9 and 10? Have Esther and Mordecai become tyrants in their own right? Has absolute power corrupted absolutely? It's plausible, but I don't think that's what's happening.

Would you look at the passage with me, please? It divides into three sections. Verses 1 to 19 of chapter 9 record Esther's holy war. We're going to spend the bulk of our time there this evening. It is the pattern of sacred conflict you might say. Then in verses 20 to 28 of chapter 9 - of chapter 9, rather - we have a record of the Jewish response to that conflict. Here we are taught the principles of spiritual celebration. A pattern of sacred conflict, the principles of spiritual celebration, and then verse 29 of chapter 9 to the end of chapter 10, we are made to look again at Esther and Mordecai and indeed at King Ahasueras, because here we're taught about the priority of a superior king. The pattern of sacred conflict, the principles of spiritual celebration, the priority of a superior king - I told you I like alliteration.

### **The Pattern of Sacred Conflict**

Nine, 1 to 19, first of all. Esther has secured for herself and Mordecai now the right to enact a new law that would contradict wicked Haman's original law aiming at the destruction of the Jews. You can find the language of the new law verse 11 of chapter 8 - "The King allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, destroy 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." So Chapter 9 opens now as that day has at last dawned. And we are immediately told what happens - "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 mastery, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.” Helped by government officials, the Jews throughout the empire turn the tables on Haman’s cutthroat mob. In verse 6 we’re told that 500 men were killed in the capitol. In verse 16 we’re told that 75,000 were killed across the rest of the empire. And between these two statements, in 11 to 15, we have another interview between King Ahasueras and Queen Esther.

Ahasueras has heard reports of the battle on the streets of the citadel, Susa. And, like the aristocratic sociopath he’s shown himself to be, he not at all distressed at the carnage among his citizenry. Actually, if anything, he seems quite impressed! Look at what he says - “500 slain in Susa! Jolly good show! Let’s see what they can do elsewhere!” And all unsolicited now, he invites Esther to ask whatever she wishes, another unconditional request. “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled?” And at this point, for some commentators, what Esther says next is her darkest hour. She asks, notice, she asks for the bloodshed in Susa be extended for another day, so that it might be taken out of the citadel now down into the streets of the outer city. And she wants more than that, doesn’t she? She wants the ten wonderfully named sons of Haman to be publicly exposed to ridicule and humiliation by being hanged on their own gallows alongside daddy-dearest. And we’re left to think, “She wants more bloodshed?” And what in the world do we do with the macabre business of the shaming of Haman’s children’s bodies?

### **Holy War: A Scriptural Precedent**

Well in order to understand what Esther’s really doing here, we need to come to terms with the Scriptural tradition of holy war, of holy war. We know that that is in fact what is going on here because of the three times in the text - I wonder if you noticed it as we read through - when our author makes the points that, amidst all the conflict and bloodshed, the Jews - verse 10, verse 15, verse 16 - “did not touch the plunder.” You remember Mordecai’s original decree had expressly permitted them to plunder their enemies. So, why didn’t they? The Jews didn’t touch the plunder because they understood that the conflict in which they were engaged was not merely political, but was sacred in nature. This is holy war that they are engaged in.

In Genesis 14, Abram went to war to rescue his nephew, Lot, and when he came home triumphant the king of Sodom offered him the plunder. And Abram refused the plunder, lest wicked Sodom be said to be the source of his prosperity. And from that point onwards, especially during Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land, they would touch none of the possessions of their enemies when they were defeated. So, after the defeat of Jericho for example, under Joshua’s leadership, Israel went on to attack the city of Ai and they were utterly defeated. Why? Achan had stolen some of the plunder and until Achan was destroyed, Israel could not triumph. Holy war, you see, required that Israel become the

executor of divine judgment on the idolatry and immorality of the peoples into whose land they had come, and they were to destroy them utterly for their sin, but to profit in no way from their wickedness.

### **A Failed Holy War: The Background to the Book of Esther**

Now, you might recall that the back-story to the book of Esther is in fact a narrative of failed holy war. It is the history, remember, of King Saul, Israel's first king, and his war with the Amalekites, who were led by King Agag. Saul, like Achan before him, failed to execute the principles of holy war. He left Agag alive, he plundered the best of the enemy's possessions, so that the prophet Samuel confronted him in these words, "The LORD sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?" And so, because of Saul's failure to obey and execute holy war at the decree of the Lord in His judgment upon Agag and the Amalekites, Saul was disqualified as Israel's king.

And now in Esther chapter 9, we meet Saul's descendants, Esther and Mordecai, leading God's people as they rewrite their history, a history of failure, now becoming one of new obedience. They have unfinished business with the Amalekites, so they prosecute a new holy war, this time against Haman, the Agagite, that is, the descendant of King Agag. So, when Esther asks for a second day to chase down those who sided with Haman the Agagite in the lower city of Susa, she is not asking out of blood lust or venom; she is asking for permission to do what Saul failed to see through to the end. She wants to complete the task of holy war, to "make war on them until you have wiped them out." Even the gruesome act, you know, of publicly displaying the bodies of Haman's sons was part of the tradition of ancient warfare. It is, in fact, the fate of Esther's own ancestor, King Saul, and his sons. They were humiliated in precisely this way on the walls of the Philistines in 1 Samuel 31:1-13. But now here the tables have turned. A great reversal has occurred. It is the enemies put to open shame.

So as brutal as it all no doubt was, we do need to understand that in conducting holy war, the people of God were engaged in something quite different than a modern program of ethnic cleansing or geopolitical land grabbing. They were prosecuting the judicial decree of God in His wrath upon His enemies. It was, in fact, a graphic picture and expression of a deeper conflict, we've seen this before, that has raged, really, since Genesis 3:15 when God declared that the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent would live in perpetual enmity, one with another, 'til one would come who'd crush the serpent's head.

### **The Great Holy War and the Already-Won Victory of Jesus Christ**

Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Israel and the Amalekites, Saul and King Agag, and now Esther, Mordecai, and the exiled Jews, and Haman and his allies: all of that gives expression to an age old warfare which meets its final expression, it's climactic expression, in the Lord Jesus Christ who prosecutes holy war against Satan himself. Paul says in Colossians chapter 2 verse 15 that Jesus "disarmed the rulers and authorities"- the satanic powers - "and has put them to open shame," like Haman and his sons in our story. Here is Christ's holy war. What is unique about his conquest, Paul says, is that Jesus triumphs over them in the cross. The defeat of the devil and his allies, supernatural and human, is achieved at Calvary, where, neither Satan, nor sinners, but Christ Himself, was made to share Haman's cursed fate - He was hung upon a tree.

### **The Spiritual Warfare of the Christian Life**

Now, Paul tells us, doesn't he, that we are, all of us if we are Christians, we are all still locked in a deadly spiritual warfare, if we are Christian people. We are engaged in spiritual conflict still. That pattern of sacred conflict continues, although now, remember, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against authorities, against cosmic powers over this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" - Ephesians 6:12. That is the Christian life Paul's describing. It's warfare; it's conflict - supernatural conflict. But as we see that, doesn't it help to remember that our conflict, unlike Esther's, is not waged against the backdrop of our king's past failure? Our conflict is waged in light of our greater King's finished victory. We are fighting a battle day by day with sin and the flesh and the devil. We're in conflict with worldviews that reject and deny the truth claims of the Christian Gospel. We struggle constantly with the flesh, with our own remaining corruption, but we do not do so in any doubt about the final outcome. We know what Esther did not yet know. We know that the victory has already been won. Christ has "disarmed the enemy, putting them to public shame, triumphing over them in the cross." That's why Paul can quote Genesis 3:15, where the seed of the woman would come to crush the serpent's head, the first promise of a Messiah, and apply it not to Jesus but to us, to Christians. In Romans 16:20 he says, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." He will bring us into the very same victory Jesus has already won. He will crush Satan under our feet, because the Seed of the woman has already crushed the serpent's head. Isn't that good news? That is good news.

Some of you have become discouraged in your conflict with sin. You feel you'll never overcome that besetting vice that's got its hooks into your heart. Your conscience is seared and stings and you live with shame every day, longing for deliverance. You're like Paul, "Who can save me from this body of death?" you are crying. Others of you are in contexts - an office, a hospital, a lecture theatre,

even a home - where the claims of the Gospel are constantly held up to ridicule and you are weary and you feel bruised and you wonder if you can go on. Cling to Romans 16:20. Cling to Romans 16:20. Remember, holy war has been prosecuted and won at the Cross, that the promise of Genesis 3:15 is one you can plead for yourself now, because it has already been kept on your behalf by the Lord Jesus Christ - "The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet" one day because he has already decisively done so at Calvary. So do not give up. Fight on. Love on, even when your love is not returned. Pray on. Keep on keeping on, knowing that sin and Satan, cynicism and unbelief, will not win, because Jesus has.

### **The Principles of Spiritual Celebration**

The pattern of sacred conflict, and then secondly, and very much more briefly, verses 20 to 28, principles of spiritual celebration. Mordecai writes everything down in a letter mandating that the day of victory be observed now as a holiday among the Jews, in perpetuity. They named the day, verses 23 to 28, Purim, after the pur, the lots, that Haman had cast to determine how and when to strike at the Jewish people. This was the day, selected by lot, intended by Haman for disaster, but which God intended for deliverance.

### **The yearly Jewish feast day of Purim**

And in the celebration of Purim the Jews were doing two things. First they were remembering. They were remembering the remarkable providence of God, and his saving intervention, and the gift that He has at last given them of relief from their enemies, as verse 22 puts it. That word, relief, by the way, is really the word rest, and it is a word that rings throughout Scripture, but especially perhaps in the books of Joshua and Judges, that feature holy war most prominently, it rings with connotations of God's saving blessings and mercy. They remember the saving rest God gave them from their enemies. And the second thing they do is they remember that rest as they rejoice. They rejoice. "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." That day that commemorated their victory became the perennial day of rejoicing and celebration. The plot that was intended to destroy them became the festival that would unite them and sustain them down all the long years of trial that still lay ahead of them.

### **The weekly Christian feast day of the Sabbath**

In many ways, the application of the whole book of Esther is right here in this section of Esther chapter 9. The answer to the question, "What is the book of



Esther intended to do in the hearts of its readers?" is here. Here is the "So what?" question answered regarding Esther. The whole thing is designed to explain why the Jews observe Purim, that is, why do we rejoice and celebrate? Here's what you do with the truths of the book of Esther - you remember grace and you rejoice. The Jews did it at Purim; it's what we do every Lord's Day, at least it ought to be. On the first day of the week, when death was undone and the stone was rolled away, and life and immortality were brought to light in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we gather to remember the Sabbath rest of God, and to rejoice. Sunday is our festival day when we remember that victory has been won, that the seed of the woman has crushed the head of the serpent and now reigns from the throne of glory. The Christian Sabbath is our day for feasting and gladness, and giving and celebration. Part of our task, as we seek to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, is to do what the Jews do here at Purim, to remember to rehearse again the "old, old story of Jesus and his Cross," that we might reignite the flames of rejoicing in our hearts. A Sunday that is morbid and dark is not a godly Sabbath. Today is the day when life and immortality were brought to light, the day in which light was created, when the Light of the world broke through the darkness of death for us and our salvation. Today, brothers and sisters, of all days, we have reason for joy. Jesus Christ lives and reigns and has won a victory for us.

### **The Priority of a Superior King**

The pattern of sacred conflict, the principles of spiritual celebration, and finally the priority of a superior king. Look at 9:28 to 10:3. The book of Esther ends, actually, quite wonderfully when you think about it, not by focusing on the duty of the people to remember Purim, but by turning their gaze again to the central characters through whom the redemption they are to celebrate was brought to them. They are shown again, Queen Esther and Mordecai. Esther confirms Mordecai's decree in 28 to 32. She is now, at last, come into her full royal, legislative authority, acting like the queen she has grown to become. And then in 10:1 to 3 we focus on Mordecai, his high honor and privilege, his great popularity among the Jews because, verse 3, he "sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people."

They are almost Messianic in their status here. The last sights the author wants to fill our gaze with are visions of these two, who have been the instruments of God's deliverance among His people. But he can't quite do it. There is a discordant note in this otherwise harmonious final song. Look at 10:1. "Ahasueras imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. And all the acts of his power and might...are written in the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia." Even when talking about Mordecai, he is very careful, our author, to point out that he is only second to the emperor, not first. He is not king. For all Esther's political power and all Mordecai's personal popularity, they remained subjects of tyrannical, sociopathic, volatile, amoral

Ahasueras. He is the one still on the throne. He's the real power politically in the empire still. We get to the end of Esther, with its stunning victory and the jubilation of the people of God, and the author very carefully, very deliberately drops a fly into the honey. "Don't get carried away. The final victory isn't here yet. The true Savior hasn't come yet. A better King is what we need. Look there, not at Esther, not at Mordecai! It's not them, not yet. We need a better King."

As we take our leave of the book that, surely, is the most helpful thing it can teach us. It is in the end a call to look to Jesus "the author and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" - Hebrews 12:2. We are to "see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" - Hebrews 2 and verse 9. No mere man or woman will do, could ever do. Do not put your trust, do not seek your comfort, do not locate your value, in the ministry of your pastors, or in the love of your spouses, or in the successes of your children, much less in yourselves. Look to Christ. We need a better king, the true and only Savior. So fix your eyes on Jesus.

Amen. Will you pray with me?

*Our Father, we bless You for the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the true and better King who has come, who, having tasted death for everyone, is now exalted to Your throne and there reigns over all. We lift our hearts to bless Him. We rejoice in the knowledge that He has risen and has crushed the serpent's head, and has promised one day to bring us into that same victory. Give us grace as we cling to that promise to press on, to keep on keeping on, resting on the Lord Jesus alone, that all the honor and glory might be His. In His name we pray, amen.*

Will you stand and receive God's benediction?

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

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