

Esther: Reversing the Irreversible

Esther 8

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Well, we took a rather extended break from Esther, to finish up John's gospel. Today we return to Esther chapter 8. You'll recall that Haman has just been hoist with his own petard – impaled on the pole he had built for Mordecai. However, although Haman is dead, his lethal edict against the Jews lives on. The irrevocable law remains on the books. The machinery of extermination is still in place. Haman's death dealt with the symptom. The law, is the root of the problem.

We know, of course, that the tide has turned in chapter 7. Yet, all that has happened – from the perspective of Xerxes – is that he has saved his Queen from the (alleged) "assault" of Haman. Esther – who made two requests: spare my life and the life of my people – to this point, has NOT succeeded in saving the Jews – her people. Only herself. So, in the words of that great theologian – Yogi Berra – it ain't over, till it's over. And here, it ain't over. With that, we will make three points. The Exaltation (vv. 1-2), the Edict (vv. 3-4), and the Exultation (vv. 15-17).

I. The Exaltation

First, the exaltation of Mordecai. That same day, the text says – that is, the same day of E's second banquet. The same day of H's execution. That very day, Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. The property of a condemned criminal would be forfeited to the crown. To degrade H's memory, Xerxes gives his labors to his foes. Mordecai is elevated, promoted, brought into the presence of the king.

For Esther, finally, told how he was related to her. Her Jewishness was revealed in chapter 7, but until now, not M's. The king gives M his signet ring – freshly reclaimed from Haman's dead body – making him the new Prime Minister with grand, delegated authority. With the position, comes property, an inheritance. Esther, appoints M over the vast estate & wealth of H. Mordecai is exalted, enriched, and clothed with an authority previously held by Haman, the enemy of the Jews. That's exaltation.

II. The Edict

Our second point is the edict. It has been about 70 days since Haman's edict to destroy the Jews. The edict remains in force, time is passing, and, while H is dead, and Esther's life is spared... The king has given her things she did NOT ask for: Haman's estate, and Mordecai's promotion. And he has NOT given her a critical thing she DID ask for: the life of her people.

So again, she pleads with the king. It is necessary, it appears, to put her life at risk again – though here, with all that has transpired, she is much more assured. Thus, there is no head fake, no feint, no indirection, no proposal about banquets. She falls at his feet weeping.

Again, picking up the key word, falling. M refused to FALL before H. The lot then FELL against the Jews. Haman's wife said he was beginning to FALL before Mordecai. Haman FALLS on the couch where E is reclining. Now Esther falls at the king's feet weeping.

She doesn't even wait for the golden scepter to be extended, to grant her a hearing, she just starts pleading. She begs him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman, who, we are reminded again, is an Agagite. The king now extends the golden scepter, formally sparing her – though here the outcome is in little doubt – thus granting her permission to speak.

Again, in a series of four phrases all starting with "if," Esther appeals to two things: the king's self-interest, and his affection for her. If it pleases the king / If he regards me with favor. She alternates between his own interest and his bond with her. She wants – quite boldly - an order written overruling, revoking, the dispatches Haman – again identified as an Agagite – the edict he devised to destroy the Jews. Esther, wisely omits the King's complicity in the existing decree. It's all that evil Haman's fault. She then makes a heartfelt plea. Often, the only power/weapon the weak have in the face the mighty. How can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?

After the turning of chapter 7 its hard to get ourselves emotionally back into the tension here, the pathos, the atmosphere of not yet being in the clear, and still under threat. The Jews have had their enemy defeated, their champion exalted, and yet they are still living in the valley of the shadow of death, living in weakness awaiting the final rescue.

So here, Esther, lays all her cards on the table. She drops all pretense of playing to the King's interest. Now her emotional trauma and grief come to the fore. How can I bear this? How can I bear to see this? This is intercession stripped of all artifice. She's banking on the fact that she's won some goodwill, and that Xerxes has some fundamental human empathy. And also, just under the surface, she is,

indirectly, but not very indirectly, appealing to his fear of losing her. The subtlety here is that “I cannot bear this,” is virtually the same as saying “I will not bear this, I will not abide another decision.”

Now Xerxes is in a bind. How does he grant Esther’s request, in light of the absurd Persian legal system where edicts can’t be revoked? How does he save face in this quandary? He replies to Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew (now “Jew” is a title of honor). Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther. And they have impaled him on the pole he set up.

This is manifestly false. It was because Haman – on trumped up charges – “attacked” the Queen—not the Jews-- that he was executed. He wants credit as the champion of the Jews. When, clearly, he didn’t really care. Now that it’s becoming hip, it’s: I was defending the Jews, before it was cool to defend the Jews.

Machiavelli (early 16th c political theory, The Prince) said: The Ruler doesn’t need to be concerned with things like justice, integrity and the like, but it is important that he appear to be concerned with such things.

This falsehood is actually Xerxes’ first explicit acknowledgment of the Jews in the text. And it sounds like he’s saying: look, I’ve done all I can. Haman is dead and you have his estate. But he grants one more thing. He does it with a sort of nonchalance, but it is the decisive thing he does. Write another decree in the king’s name in behalf of the Jews. You do it, not me, I can’t really be bothered. But I see it means a lot to you, Esther. So, do what seems best to you (what do I care what you write?). And seal it with my signet ring. Because, if you do that - and this is satire – if you do that – no document written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.

We have irrevocable laws that can be nullified or negated by passing another irrevocable law. *The law, like the Empire, is a theater of the absurd. But God works in the midst of the absurdities for his people.* And here, we have the actual POLITICAL turning point of the book. Here, for the FIRST time, a favorable outcome for the whole Jewish people becomes a live option. Here we have the equivalent of telling the supreme court to leave precedent intact, but hand down a decision that undermines the precedent radically.

So that’s what happens. With Mordecai acting now as the chief Justice. Indeed, the sole judge. The decree for annihilation is less than 9 months away, so the whole Persian postal system is activated, as it was for the original decree, which is now being reversed. Mordecai’s orders go, in listed order, first to the Jews, who are now the leading actors in the drama, then to the various political officials, then to all the people in their scripts and languages, but notice... Also, to the Jews in their script and language. This did not happen with the original decree from H, but is here to encourage the Jews. To recognize their official status in the

Empire. The whole decree is framed by M to demoralize their enemies, that is, any allies of Haman. Mordecai knows he needs an overwhelming victory, and victory starts with effective propaganda.

Of which, there is one more piece. The sealed dispatches were sent on fast horses specially bred for the king. The point being clear: this edict has better backing than the one it seeks to redress. It even has the support of the king. The edict granted the Jews in every city, the right to assemble and protect themselves. This would require local officials to stand down. And it would, hopefully, persuade many anti-Semites to abandon their cause. For attacking the Jews NOW would, implicitly, make you an enemy of the king.

It's a primarily defensive decree. If attacked, they can defend. It's written to mirror Haman's earlier language. They have the right to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men, of any nationality or province, who might attack them, and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies. This is the language of terror. And to the Jews, of psychological preparation for war. An attack on the Jews, will subject you to holy war in return.

And the reason for this, is that the threat must be eliminated, even as the Jews were to be eliminated. Those who bless the seed of Abraham will be blessed, those who curse them will be cursed. In the real world, defensive wars are just, and sometimes necessary. And that means defensive wars must, often, have offensive initiatives, beyond the original act of defense. Thus, the families, and the property, of those who attack the Jews, are placed in harm's way by the decree. The day appointed for the Jews to defend themselves is the same day as Haman's decree. The edict wings its way around the Empire, including being issued in the capitol city of Susa.

III. The Exultation

That brings us to our third point, the exultation. Mordecai, temporarily honored with a parade around the city in chapter 6, formally promoted earlier in this chapter, makes a public appearance. He leaves the king's presence, now wearing royal garments and a large crown of gold. He's is clothed in the splendor of the palace. Which to the Jews would have looked a lot like priestly garb with a royal crown. The sackcloth and ashes are reversed and the city – most of which is clearly NOT anti-Semitic – has a joyous celebration.

For the Jews what was described with the four terms: mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing, now becomes happiness and joy and gladness and honor. They share in the honor of the exalted mediator, Mordecai. And for the first time in a book of banquets, we get a Jewish feast. In every province where the edict goes there is joy and gladness, feasting and celebrating.

Mordecai's edict, and now his appearance in public, have brought joy and courage to the Jews – and struck fear – as the text says – into many others. Many people of other nationalities became Jews, because fear of the Jews had seized them. Some of this is clearly political opportunism. People want to be on the side that's winning. But there is also a glimpse of the promise of a gathering of children of Abraham, from every tribe and tongue and language and nation. With their champion, M, in the citadel, clothed with authority, Jewishness is no longer a thing to hide, but an identity to be embraced with joy.

Let's summarize this text, briefly re-visiting our three headings.

First, exaltation. We see here, more clearly than anywhere in the book that Mordecai is a picture, a beautiful type, of Christ. He is enthroned, after his humiliation, in the citadel, in majesty, splendor and awe. He is given authority over the nations. As prophet, he speaks: he issues a decree that reverses the prior decree against his people. As priest, he mediates for and represents his people, and as king he defends and fight for his people. Exalted as prophet, priest, and king, he publishes through the world the edict which promises his people's deliverance, and holy vengeance on his and their enemies.

That brings me to the edict itself. Here something very similar between the situation of the Jews in Persia, and our situation now, comes to the fore. We live in the time of Christ's exaltation, the time of his decisive elevation to the right hand of God. But it is the time before the final battle. Before our final deliverance. It is – the already – Christ is exalted – and the not yet – the full manifestation of his victory – lies in the future. We live in the time where – like the text – two edicts are in force – and will be in force until the final day.

The first edict of sin and death and doom, still exacts a toll on the people of God, for we struggle and sin and die and have enemies. The second edict – the gospel - overturning the first, but not yet displacing or eliminating it, overlapping with it, brings us gladness and joy, it revives our hope. It secures our future. As has been said, we live between D-Day and V-Day (Victory Day). And it's important to understand this, to know the time the Christian life is lived in. For you can get hurt – badly – between V-Day and D-Day. Between the issuing of the edict of triumph and the final battle.

Finally, exultation (with a U). To exult, to be glad, to leap for joy. In the text we can see the importance of this elevation of our champion, to the citadel of universal power, the certainty of our coming victory, and how this is to shape Christian life. We live with confidence and joy in the already not yet tension. We intercede, like Esther, for the kingdom to come in fulness. We fight. We train. We prepare for and engage in battles. Some of which are, like they were for E & M, real strategic political battles. We don't believe in flight from the world of realpolitik. Often, like the Jews, these are largely defensive battles, not of our own making.

All of our armor (Eph. 6) is defensive, except the sword of the Spirit, the edict of the gospel. With that, we go forth to the world, and like in our text, we gather converts to the covenant community. We pray, we fight, we preach, and finally, we celebrate, we exult. For Christ being exalted, having cancelled the decree against us, means... the already-not yet, for all of its shadows, is for us, a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor, feasting and celebrating.

Rejoice and be glad. Exult and sing for joy! The humiliated One, has been lifted up, promoted, raised and installed in power as prophet, priest and king. Glory be to the Triune God. Amen.

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