

Esther: Holy War

Esther 9

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Today we finish up our series on the book of Esther. Last week we saw the counter decree of Mordecai and Esther, enabling the Jews to protect and defend themselves. But neither the death of Haman, nor the counter-edict, fully remove the threat of annihilation hanging over the covenant community. For nine months, two competing edicts go forth. Two proclamations before the day of judgment and war. One can either become a Jew, or one can choose to be an enemy of the Jews. And that suspense – between the already decisive action, taken in the palace, with Mordecai’s exaltation – and the not yet, of a world still hostile with the possibility of war - that suspense, resolves itself finally today. With that we will make three points. The headline in vv. 1-5, the holy war in vv. 6-16, and the holiday in vv. 17-19.

I. The Headline

First, the headline. The 13th day of the 12th month – the day of the original edict by Haman, and the day of the counter-edict for the Jew’s defense – has arrived. There will now be a resolution of the two edicts. A resolution paid for in blood. This was the day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them.

BUT NOW, the tables were turned – the very theme of the book – the tables were turned – and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. Already, one knows the outcome of the war. It is reported in a journalistic, matter-of-fact way.

The Jews throughout the Empire, assemble to counter-attack those who seek to destroy them. No one could stand against them, because the people of the various nationalities were afraid of them. At the Exodus as well, the nations around Israel were terrified. But there, they feared the God of the Jews. Here, in keeping with the author’s refusal to mention God, they fear the Jews. There is a kind of numinous, other-worldly dread, that attaches itself to this people and their remarkable preservation. The nobles and political officials, formerly charged with enabling the killing, not only stand down, but they helped the Jews (how? possibly arms).

And we get to the cause, the root of the fear, and the reason for the aid, when we are told that this was BECAUSE the fear of Mordecai had seized them. The righteous, vindicated, exalted mediator. Lifted up in glory, prominent in the palace, his reputation has been spreading these nine months, his power increasing.

Now, there is a certain anticlimactic feel, to the end of the book of Esther. This last portion of the book, is told without the artful suspense, and psychological drama, of the earlier parts of the story. And that is likely because the war – and it's outcome- is – a result of the reversal between Haman and Mordecai, which has already taken place in the heart of the palace. That reversal simply widens out here. Once the tables are turned in the center of the Empire, there is no doubt that they will be turned to the ends of the earth. So, the headline is summarized, bluntly and more graphically, in v.5: *The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them.*

Let me say a word about this, because we are about to move into a more explicitly violent section of the text. I have a whole sermon in the Joshua series – you can get it on the website – which defends, and address the reasons for holy war, in the OT. It's there if your want the full, longer background.

But here, note three things. First, this is – unlike Joshua's military campaigns in Canaan – this is wholly (completely) DEFENSIVE Holy war.

Second, the enemies had nine months to change their minds. Against the clear wishes of the King, and the new regime in the palace headed by Mordecai, and the actions of all the local governors. They still decided, in their allegiance to Haman, and in their implacable hostility and hatred for the Jews – to attack and seek to kill them. Instead of becoming like Ruth the Moabitess, or Rahab the Canaanite, they chose to become like Haman. There are no innocent or neutral attackers here. There are only two options: kill the attackers or be killed. And the narrator makes no apologies for the Jew's choice.

Thirdly, the narrator – not hobbled by modern sensitivities – considers this good, really good, news. He expects us to be cheering as we read. He expects us to react as the Jews do. With the relief and amazement, of a people under an unjust death sentence, being rescued.

II. The Holy War

We've heard the headline, then, our second point is the holy war. The citadel, where the heart of the matter has already been settled in the elevation of Mordecai, is reported on first. The Jews killed 500 men. It appears that they did not kill women or children – even though the decree from Mordecai allowed it

(presumably on the supposition that women and children would be involved in attacking the Jews)

It is (perhaps) shocking, that in the heart of the government quarter, there are that many violent enemies of the Jews. Clearly Haman still has allies. Starting with his own children, to whom, apparently, he passed on his poisonous ideology. Thus, we are told next, the Jews killed the 10 sons of Haman. And they are all listed – for effect – as a sort of grim counterpoint to the comedic listing of all the kings eunuchs, and all the kings legal advisors in chapter 1. (one breath in synagogue recital on purim: come to nothing)

Again, Haman is an Amalekite, a perpetual enemy of the Jews. And this is a (limited and defensive) holy war against the Amalekites. And killing his sons – seeks to cut off the threat of future attacks. At the end of v.10 we are told: They did not lay their hands on the plunder. We are told this three-times in this passage. The counter-decree of M allowed it, but it is forbidden under the principles of holy war. In holy war, the people of God are the instrument for the judgment of God, on the enemies of God. And thus, there can be no question of personal gain. Or enrichment. Taking the spoils is forbidden.

Notice, back in 1 Samuel, King Saul, spared the sword. He And he took spoils. And, thus, lost his kingdom. Here that is undone. The Jews, under M, do NOT spare the sword. They execute Haman's sons, and they refuse to take spoils. This is about justice, not plunder or bloodlust. The number killed in Susa, is reported, that same day, to the Xerxes, the king.

And he, strangely, initiates a conversation with Esther – she does not need to plead. That's how much her power has been solidified in the royal marriage. He says to her: that they've killed 500 men and the 10 sons of Haman – who knows what they have done in the rest of the provinces? He wouldn't get reports from the provinces for days/weeks. He seems kind of detached, more bemused by the death toll, than he is rejoicing in the Jews' deliverance.

And he basically gives Esther a blank check. NOW, what is your petition. It will be given you. It's a remarkable act of deferral. The tables have turned in their relationship as well. Esther asks for a second day to carry out the edict, and for Haman's 10 sons to be impaled on poles. She's been criticized here for unjust vengeance. But it's more likely, that, from inside the palace, she knew that, in Susa, there were more attackers, who posed a clear and present danger.

And that there were likely to be more – technically unlawful – attacks. Since both edicts – attacking and defending – were originally limited to one day. And the impaling of Haman's sons is well-attested in this type of ancient warfare. It sends a grim message to the anti-Semites and their allies. It says: There will be no restoration of "Haman-ite" policies. It's a deterrent. It says NEVER AGAIN.

So, the King issues the edit. Haman's son's are impaled, 300 men in Susa are put to death on the following day. And again, were told: they did not lay hands on the plunder. In the provinces, 75,000 attackers, enemies, were killed. And, again, they did not lay hands on the plunder. This victory in the provinces, one scholar astutely says, should be viewed as "equivalent to a successful insurrection in the WWII-era Warsaw ghetto, with the result of 75,000 SS troops being slaughtered."

III. The Holiday

Finally, the holiday. The whole rest of the book is taken with showing how this – including Esther's request for a second day – this is origin of the two-day celebration of Purim – derived from the word pur, meaning lots.

I want to focus on this note of celebration. We are told three times in three verses, that this day (days) are days of feasting and joy. A day of rest and the giving of gifts (almost certainly food gifts) to each other (and, after our text, to the poor).

We mentioned last week, the already – not yet, in this text: Mordecai is exalted, a new decree is promulgated, but the old decree – the threat of death, the presence of enemies – remains. When the enemies are defeated – as here - the church enters into joy and gladness, into her rest. Now the banquets, are the banquets of the redeemed. Even the feasting in the book, has been reversed.

This is how the age ends: our enemies – with their banquets in the mouth of the grave - are defeated, and the church celebrates the marriage Supper of the Lamb in the light of God's face. And the celebration starts now. It is already underway now in the old covenant community's ongoing celebration of Purim. And it continues in the church's life of eating and drinking together, especially – though not exclusively of course - around the table. Festivity, joy - banqueting – eating and drinking – these are to mark the life of the Christian community. Eucharistic living. Gladness. Thanksgiving for God's deliverance. Should produce an avalanche of hospitality, banqueting, feasting and joy.

Let us conclude with some orientation for us, from this text, and the book as a whole. I'm sure you've been relieved about something which terrified you. A medical diagnosis which turned out to be wrong. A gripping fear which turned out to be unfounded. That atmosphere of relief – escalated here for a whole people's existence – is what our text is trying to get us to taste and feel. And we have been rescued from our own sin and shame, from our enemies, from the very mouth of hell, in Jesus Christ. There has been a revolution in the power structure of the universe, in the cross (and resurrection) of Christ. And it should be for us, exhilarating. His cross is the gallows, the petard, on which he has disarmed, made a public spectacle of, the powers arrayed against us.

Yet, we are still in the world awaiting final deliverance. Between the revolution and the resurrection of the dead. Between the revolution & the renovation of the cosmos. Still subject to sin and death and enemies. And pogroms and exiles. And still living, as we mentioned at the opening of this series, still living in a world very much like the world of this book. A world dominated by secular Empire. A world where God seems painfully absent, a world where miracles are few and far between. No narrator telling us this or that is the hand of God.

In that world, this book has been, and remains, a source of great comfort and hope. It was cherished by European Jews in the face of Hitler's, Haman-like, final solution. Hitler, in fact, banned the reading of the book of Esther. And the Nazis would kill anyone who had a copy. Yet, many Jews could produce it from memory. And here, we should be clear: for millions of Jews. As for millions of Christian. No deliverance comes on the 13th of Adar.

The preservation of a people, can and has been accompanied, by the immense suffering of that people. Tyrants have their way, and continue to slaughter the people of God. Documenting this around the world today would take a series of lectures. Yet, the covenant community survives and prevails. Hitler gave a speech in Jan. 1944 saying that if the Nazi's lost, the Jews could celebrate their Purim.

In October of 1946 – after the war – 10 Nazi leaders – same number as Haman's sons – were hung on the gallows at Nuremburg. One of them got the connection. When he was led to the scaffold, he shouted: Purim Feast, 1946. We thank God – as the Jews did, for historical victories – but for us, the primary meaning, the Christian hope, is that there is a guaranteed future, utterly complete deliverance, because Jesus has hung on the gallows. Deliverance for him was after death. After the 13th of Adar. After Good Friday. And so, it will be for most of us.

Elie Wiesel, the famous Jewish author, wrote in his gripping book, *Night*, of watching a young child hung (with two others) in front of thousands of spectators in Nazi death camp. Then being forced to walk past the hanging victims, he writes:

But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing... And so, he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where is he? This is where—hanging here, from this gallows.

Of course, Wiesel meant that God himself was extinguished (died) in the camps. For us it means – if deliverance does not come now, if God appears absent or silent... if miracles do not intervene – it means he is on the gallows, deep in the

fabric of death, the One who destroys death by dying. The One whose victory secures our victory. The One whose resurrection – with its guarantee of our resurrection – alone secures the hope and promise of the book of Esther.

This is why in the midst of a brutal and dark world, the people of God, hounded, but not extinguished, trusting an often mysterious and elusive providence, still celebrate. We eat and drink, we rest. We exercise a defiant joy and gladness. For our mediator, once on the gallows, once at the bottom of all human misery and abandonment, is exalted. He has cancelled the decree against us. He has promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against his people. He shall come again, in glory, to deliver us from all our enemies. The revolution at the center of power has already occurred, and by the often silent and elusive and strange hand of God, his Empire will extend to the ends of the earth. On that day we will say: all of history's tables have been turned, and God has given us the upper hand over all our enemies. Amen.

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