

“From Grief to Gladness”

Esther 8:1-17

November 19, 2023

Last week ended with a bit of a cliffhanger. At the end of Chapter 7 wicked Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai, but there is still a terrible problem for the Jews in Persia. Haman’s irrevocable law to annihilate the Jews is still in effect. Even though Haman has been brought to justice for endangering the Queen’s life, the bill had been sealed with the king’s signet ring making it irrevocable. So the lives of the Jewish people still hang in the balance.

Esther’s Restitution and Mordecai’s Promotion (Esther 8:1-2)

Chapter 8 picks up the story on the very same day that Haman was hanged (literally impaled) on the gallows. [vs. 1-2]

We know from the ancient historian Herodotus that the property of an executed traitor in Persia was confiscated by the king to do with as he pleased. Because Queen Esther had been endangered by Haman’s wicked scheming, the king gave Haman’s estate to Esther as restitution for the evil conspired against her.¹ And as you may recall, Haman was extremely wealthy. This recalls to mind Prov 13:22, “the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.”

Furthermore, Mordecai was promoted to take Haman’s place as the king’s top advisor—how ironic. The king gave his signet ring to Mordecai, which meant that Mordecai was able to conduct kingdom business in the name of the king. The signet ring was used to seal official documents with the King’s authority. To build on the irony even further, Esther put Mordecai in charge of Haman’s estate.

This is just one of several reversals that we will see in Esther 8. In fact, this is the dominant theme of chapter 8: **By His providence, God is able to reverse the course of circumstances so that God’s enemies fall, but His people are**

exalted. This is a warning for God’s enemies, but a source of encouragement and hope for God’s people. Today it seems that the wicked are prospering, but in reality they are storing up wrath for the day of judgment. The book of Esther is a foretaste of the final day when God will turn the tables, bringing the wicked to judgment and exalting the righteous who trust in God.

Pleading for Justice in an Unjust World (Esther 8:3-8)

But until the final day of judgment, there will be many times when God’s people need to take a stand and plead for justice. And Esther 8 is one of those moments. [vs. 3-8]

You may recall that chapter 7 ended with the anger of the king subsiding after Haman was executed. In the King’s mind, Haman was dead, Esther was compensated with Haman’s estate, and Mordecai was promoted to fill Haman’s vacancy, so justice had been served and everything was back to business as usual. He has little concern for the edict which still looms over the lives of the Jewish people, technically including Esther and Mordecai though they may appear to be safe in the palace.

There are a number of interesting things to note here about Esther’s plea before the king. First, she has to once again take the risk of approaching the king uninvited, which we already saw could be deadly if the king is not pleased to hold out his scepter. Second, this time all diplomacy and strategic planning to win the king’s favor through wining and dining is abandoned. She throws herself at his feet, weeping and pleading. She is showing the king her emotional distress at the possibility of her people being slaughtered. Third, she knows that the king as a completely insufficient view of justice for the people in his kingdom, so she makes her appeal on the bases of her own relationship with the king. Four times, she introduces her request with, “if it please the king...If I have found favor...if it seems right to the king...if I am pleasing in his eyes. In essence, she comes not demanding justice, but appealing to him while expressing respect for his authority. Fourth, she comes proposing a solution—that an order be issued to revoke the letters written by Haman. Finally, her concern is not for her own life, but for the

¹ Karen Jobes, *NIV Application Commentary: Esther*, pg. 177.

lives of God's people whom she now clearly identifies with as her people as well.

Are God's people your people? The degree to which we identify with God's people may indicate our loyalty to God himself. When you take a stand for a just cause, are you demanding, or do you appeal to others with wisdom? Do you demean others, or do you challenge them respectfully?

Writing a Decree of Defense (Esther 8:9-14)

By God's mercy, the king responds favorably to Esther. And he grants her, along with Mordecai, the freedom to draft another edict. However, they cannot merely revoke Haman's edict because whatever is decreed and sealed with the king's signet ring cannot be revoked. So they need to write another edict that will counteract the former edict. **[vs. 9-14]**

If a lot of what you have just heard sounds familiar, it's because it is the same language used in chapter 3 to describe the writing and distribution of Haman's edict. That's an important observation. Basically, Mordecai puts Haman's edict in front of him and then writes a parallel but contrasting edict line for line and issues it to be distributed in exactly the same way in all 127 provinces, in every language, to *all* people. And he uses the horses bred from the king's stud to make sure that the new edict reaches the farthest ends of the kingdom in sufficient time to protect the Jews.

So now, two edicts stand side by side. One allowing the Jews to be massacred and annihilated. The other allowing the Jews to not only defend themselves, but to also annihilate anyone who attacks them. This is the making of civil war within the kingdom issued under the king's authority.

Vs. 11 is troubling at one level and yet points to perhaps the most significant way in which Esther prepares us to see the relevance of the gospel. So I will come back to vs. 11 in a few minutes and unpack it to help us see how this ancient story is essential to our lives today. But first let's take a look at the last few verses of chapter 8.

From Grief to Gladness (Esther 8:15-17)

[vs. 15-17] Remember, I said there are a lot of reversals in this chapter. We've already seen how wealthy Haman was impoverished to death and his wealth bestowed on those whom he sought to destroy, namely Mordecai and Esther. We have already seen how one edict in a sense is being reversed by another. But now there is more:

- In chapter 4 Mordecai could not enter the palace gate, let alone the king's presence, because he was dressed in *sackcloth* and ashes. But now he proceeds from the king's presence dressed in majestic, *royal robes* (8:15)!
- Chapter 3 ended with the capital city of Susa being thrown into *confusion* at the news of Haman's edict to annihilate the Jews. But now the city of Susa *shouts and rejoices* at the sight of Mordecai who has been exalted to the highest place of influence next to the king!
- In chapter 4, the Jews were crying out with loud and bitter cries, mourning, fasting, weeping, and lamenting. But now 8:16 tells us that the Jews had light, gladness, joy, and honor. Vs. 17 goes on to say that everywhere the news of Mordecai's edict was heard, there was gladness, joy, and feasting. Notice the purposeful redundancy in vs. 16-17 to highlight the change of spirit among the Jews: light, gladness, joy, honor, gladness joy, feast, holiday. So the reversal is one from the darkness of despair to light; from sorrow and mourning to gladness and joy; from fasting to feasting.

So great was the impact of the new leadership of Mordecai and the favorable influence of Queen Esther along with the decree to defend life that vs. 17 says, "many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them." For most this was probably not a genuine spiritual conversion to Yahweh, the God of the Jews, but rather a recognition that it was suddenly in one's best interests to be favorably aligned with the Jews. And may I add, this change of favor toward God's people could only come about by God's hand of providence (similar to what God has done recent history to grant favor to Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah from King Cyrus to return with many of the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the temple with the encouragement of prophets like Haggai and Zechariah)!

So Esther 8 ends with joy and celebration, yet not without another cliffhanger. What will be the result of these two opposing edicts of death and defense? Will there be a standoff on the 13th day of Adar, or will there be a civil war? That waits to be seen next week.

But how is Esther 8 essential for our lives today? Well, ironically it points to the greatest hope that would ever be issued to this world, yet it comes through the troubling door of vs. 11.

From Holy War to the Gospel of Peace

It's not surprising that many of us find it disturbing that Mordecai's edict allowed for not only the killing of armed men, but also women and children. So let's take another careful reading of [vs. 11]. Its amazing how a single verse of details like this, can be like a peephole that allows us to see into a vast hallway of theological truths. It allows us to peer into the bigger picture of God's ways and His plan of salvation.

There are two ways for us to understand what is happening in vs. 11. The most simplistic is that Mordecai is authoring this edict in such a way that there is sufficient language to counteract every aspect of Haman's edict. So, for example, if Haman's edict called for the annihilation of all Jewish people, including women and children, then Mordecai's edict must have enough strength to match Haman's edict, thereby allowing for the killing of even women and children among those who attacked them.

This is a practical response to vs. 11 in which Mordecai's edict is a reflection of the OT principle of retribution—"and eye for an eye" (see Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Dt 19:21). Now if "an eye for an eye" seems harsh to you, keep in mind it was actually a way of *restraining* the overreach of vengeance. In other words, if someone knocks out your tooth, you can't take out his eye. If someone takes out your eye, you can't take his life.

Notice, there are a number of *limitations* issued in vs. 11. First, it is limited by *self-defense*. That is, the Jews were not permitted to attack just anyone. They could only raise the sword against those who first attacked them—"to...defend their lives." Second, their militance is limited to those who are

armed—"any armed force." Third, it is limited in scope—"on one day...the thirteenth day...of Adar (vs. 12-13; "on that day").

So there's a sense in which vs. 11 is saying, "If you attack us with arms on the 13th of Adar, we will defend ourselves and no one behind your line is safe, including your women and children!"

I also need to mention that the NIV opts for a different translation by viewing "women and children" as a compound direct object which could eliminate the concern with vs. 11 by translating it as an order to destroy anyone who attacks them "and their women and children." This could be a legitimate translation, but most translators and commentators suggest the most natural rendering of the Hebrew is the way the NAS and ESV render it (if you attack us, we are free to kill you and your women and children).

So if the ESV and NAS are right, what do we do with vs. 11? Well, there is another way to understand vs. 11 besides just offsetting the language of Haman's edict. And that is through the lens of what we call *holy war* in the OT. This concept comes from the Hebrew word *herem* [*cherm*] (not to be confused with harem—the king's company of wives). *Herem* is a ban in which someone or something is to be banned from existence or *devoted to destruction*. This is where the concept of holy war comes from. So let me first explain what holy war is and isn't. And then I will help us make the connection to vs. 11 since the word *herem* is not used in vs. 11.

There are two kinds of war defined in the OT for God's people. First, there are the normal rules for war that are to be applied when conflict occurs between nations. Those rules are found in Deut 20:10-15. For example, when the Israelites came into the promised land and faced conflict with nation-cities, they were to first offer terms of peace. If peace-terms were rejected, then they were to besiege the city, but they were to only strike the men, not the women and children. They were allowed to take the women and children as servants along with the spoil, but the lives of the women and children were to be spared.

The second kind of war was the *herem* or the ban. Deut 20:16-20 details specific cities that were to be devoted to complete and utter destruction in

which no person or animal was to be spared, not even loot was to be taken. The basis and rules for the *herem* are taught in Deut 7. Its essential for you to understand that while God would use the nation of Israel as an instrument of judgment in His hand, the *herem* is God's doing/will, not man's. It was an act of divine judgment on the wickedness of those cities.

Deut 7:1-2: "When the LORD your God...shall clear away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the LORD your God shall deliver them before you, and you shall defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them."

There are many ways in which God can implement divine judgment. He can reign down fire from heaven like he did with Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). He can open up the earth to swallow the wicked alive like He did to Korah and Dathan in Num 16. He can use weather, like hailstones in Joshua 10, or disease like Isaiah 10:16 where God sent a disease among the stout Assyrian warriors. Or He can send divine judgment through war.

So holy war in the OT was *not* at the discretion of Israel or any person, but only by a specific command from God. Furthermore, holy war was *not* genocide—it was not ethnically driven. Rather, it was a response of divine judgment against sin and wickedness. God has the right to initiate either temporary discipline or final judgment at any point in time for any person or any population. Perhaps the greatest evidence that holy war was not genocide or ethnically driven was that at times, God Himself waged holy war against Israel and Judah for their sin. He raised up the Babylonians and Assyrians to take them into captivity. *Holy war is God warring against sin, providentially using other nations as his instrument of discipline or judgment.*

By the way, you might wonder how holy war can be reconciled with the sanctity of human life. Actually, holy war both in its severity and in its limitations is one of the strongest evidences of the sanctity of human life in

that *God alone has the right to determine who lives or dies*. Furthermore, while holy war is an expressing of God's judgment and wrath, His judgment and wrath are an expression of His goodness in that He will not tolerate the wickedness of sin without bringing it to justice.

So what does all this have to do with Esther 8, especially when vs. 11 doesn't use the word *herem*? Not only are women and children possibly included in vs. 11, not only is the command to kill, destroy and *annihilate* their enemies, but we will learn in 9:10 that they "laid no hand on the plunder." (All of these things are consistent with the *herem*.)

But had God specifically commanded that the Jews' enemies in Esther 8 be devoted to destruction? We don't have a specific command in the book of Esther, but we have been given clues, reminders, throughout the book that God had commanded Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites for their unprovoked assault against God's people (1Sam 15:3; **Dt 25:17-19**).²

Remember, Haman is identified as an Agagite, one of the Amalekites, the cursed enemy of God's people—5 times in Esther (3:10). However, Saul spared king Agag and the livestock and because of it lost his own throne (1Sam 15). Remember also, that Mordecai was identified as a descendant of Saul (2:5). So there's a sense in which God's command in 1Sam 15:3 to utterly destroy the Amalekites is being brought to completion in Esther 8-9. (Note Esther 8:3 & 5, makes the connection twice to the Amalekites by using the term *Agagite*.)

So may I strongly suggest that vs. 11 (while in one sense ought to make us uncomfortable) is not about an overreach of vengeance on behalf of Mordecai, but rather a working out of divine judgment against the enemies of God's people.

Now what does OT holy war have to do with Christians today, especially when we have been commanded to love our enemies (Mt 5:44). First, remember that holy war is ultimately war against sin. Secondly, the command to love our enemies comes from *Jesus*, the ultimate divine warrior

² The Amalekites were the first nation that tried to destroy the Israelites (Ex 17).

who waged the ultimate holy war against sin at the cross. Holy war, for the Christian, has been fulfilled in the death of Jesus.³

Now the church is called to engage in the *spiritual* battle by putting on the full armor of God: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith; and taking up our weapons, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, and prayer. Why? Because our battle is “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12-18).

But what about those who refuse to bow to Jesus? The book of Revelation tells us that Jesus will wage a final war against God’s enemies.

Rev 19:11-15: “*And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war...And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood [the blood of His enemies]; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.*”

Then Rev 20 goes on to tell us that His enemies will experience the ultimate *herem*, the ultimate devotion to destruction, being cast into the lake of fire forever and ever—no enemy of His will be spared.

Choose Your Edict!

Here’s where Esther 8 points us to the gospel. In God’s holy war against sin two irrevocable counter edicts have been issued. First is the edict of death: *The wages of sin is death (utter destruction) for all who have sinned and fallen short of God’s holy standard.* This is an irrevocable edict of judgment on the human race. But God in His mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even though we were His enemies, has issued an

irrevocable and counter edict of grace and life: *God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* [The two edicts: 1) the condemnation of sin, 2) the grace of Jesus]

What this means is that at the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the *herem* that we deserved for our treasonous sin against God. He absorbed the wrath of God for those who bow to Jesus in humble trust and allegiance, forsaking their sin that is under the ban.

Which divine edict will you choose to stand under? The edict of death, judgment, and destruction? Or the edict of grace, salvation, and eternal life? If you bow to Jesus as Lord of your life, He will rescue you as Savior for all eternity. The book of Revelation does not end with doom and destruction. It ends much like Esther 8, with great feasting, joy, gladness, and abundant life forever for those who stand under the edict of life in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: “*Lord Jesus, I can’t deny my sin. I can’t pretend to escape God’s wrath on my own. I need God’s mercy that You have secured through your death and resurrection. So, I surrender to You as the only Lord and Savior of my life. Take me and make me yours! I trust in You. Teach me to follow You.*”

³ The only modern nations that still practice holy war (*jihad*) are those that reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Karen Jobes, *NIV Application Commentary: Esther*, pg. 184)