

- Do you think you could ever be able to celebrate that kind of judgment?
- In what ways might that be inappropriate? In what ways might it be completely justified?
- How should a non-Christian respond to this chapter?
- How should a Christian?

D. THE GREAT CELEBRATION

Esther 9:17-28

Commentary

Part of the reason for the story of Esther is to explain why the Jews celebrate this festival of Purim, so it's understandable to include details of why it's done on different days in different places! But whenever and wherever it was done, it was a feast of enormous joy and generosity.

Most festivals of the Jews were given to them directly by God through Moses in the Law. But this festival seems to have sprung up spontaneously. Even Mordecai's letters are confirming "what they had started to do" (v23). These feasts were genuine outbursts of excitement and pleasure of being alive. The joy comes from the reversal. v24-25 outline the reasoning. Evil was plotted against them but instead it fell on the plotters. Hooray!

What's interesting is the name given to the festival. Why call it Purim after the lots Haman cast in 3:7? It's such an insignificant detail. Shouldn't be Saint Mordecai's Day? Or Reversal-Fest? You can't get much more random than casting lots or rolling rice or having a lottery. And yet God overruled the seeming random out-of-control-ness of the situation to save His people. It's like calling the festival Bingo; it looks like just a random sequence of numbers but then 'bingo!', God wins. Yet again, Esther's story draws our attention to the unseen God who reigns supreme even in the darkest times to keep His promises and rescue His people.

Christians aren't obligated to observe the festival of Purim for the same reason we don't celebrate all the other Jewish festivals. They all find their fulfillment in Christ. We celebrate the truths behind Purim all year long as we put our trust in Jesus, the one who gave His life to plead His people's case and assures us of a great future victory. He is utterly sovereign and He providentially cares for our every need, so we continually should respond in joy and faith.

READ Esther 9:17-28

- Narrator A read v17-19
- Narrator B read v20-22
- Narrator C read v23-28

Discussion Questions

- Why are the people celebrating?
- Who told them to celebrate? (Nobody needed to!)
- Why was the festival was called Purim? Isn't that a tiny part of the story?
- Where else in Esther have we seen God at work through 'random' events?
- Why don't Christians celebrate Purim?
- In what ways *do* we and *should* we celebrate these truths?
- What big things will you take away from our time studying Esther?

Esther 8:3-9:28



What this passage is about

Previously, Esther and Mordecai had seen off the wicked Haman, but the Jews still aren't safe. Haman's edict lives on. Esther pleads for King Ahasuerus to do something but his laws can't be reversed. So they issue a second edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves. It's this edict which prevails and the Jews win the battle against those who tried to destroy them. This reversal of fortunes was celebrated with an annual feast. There are troubling aspects to the story, but it all points to God's goodness in rescuing His people. It should leave us rejoicing!

[NB]

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A. THE LINGERING THREAT Esther 8:3-8

Commentary

This section begins by exposing a false ending. We might have finished chapter 7 thinking all was well with the world. But having saved her own life and dealt with Haman, Esther still needs to plead for the life of her people. Haman may be dead, but his edict lives on.

She becomes emotional for the first time in the story and begs King Ahasuerus for their lives. She has re-established herself in the king's high regard and Mordecai is now the second most powerful man in the empire. But they use their new-found authority and influence for the good of their people. Esther finally picks a side and calls the Jews her "people" and her "kindred", utterly identifying with them.

Here we see in Esther a picture of Jesus, yet again, as she is moved by the desperate plight of her people and seeks to save them. He too didn't rest in His heavenly palace but identified with His suffering and sinful people to use His power to save us. He pleads our case.

Unlike Jesus however, the pleading doesn't seem to be enough. The king says he's done a lot already, but his laws can't be revoked. The best they can hope for is to issue another decree. We leave this section reminded that unless something happens, all God's people will die on 13 Adar.

READ Esther 8:3-8

- Narrator read narration in v3-7
- Esther to read her bits in v5-6
- King Ahasuerus to read his bits in v7-8

Discussion Questions

- Can anyone remind us of the story so far in Esther?
- Where did we leave it last time?
- What's the problem in this section?
- How does Esther use her new-found power?
- In what way is this a picture of what Jesus came to do?
- Back to the Esther story – why does a rescue from the king seem unlikely?

B. THE HOPEFUL SOLUTION Esther 8:9-17

Commentary

Since the king's laws cannot be revoked, Esther and Mordecai have to find a workaround. Their solution is to send out *another* edict. The two edicts are worth comparing. They have very similar wording, both are sealed with the king's signet ring by the king's right hand man (Haman before, now Mordecai), both are sent out by courier to all 127 provinces, and both provoke a reaction wherever they went. But beyond that, they are exact opposites!

Haman called for the Jews to be killed; Mordecai calls for Jews to defend themselves. Haman's edict led to mourning wherever it went; Mordecai's edict brings joy and celebration as the news spreads.

The first edict isn't cancelled, the threat still remains, and yet this solution brings hope even before it comes into effect. Hope is an amazing thing. It transforms the coming doom to an expectation of blessing.

This second edict is much like the gospel. The previous message, that we will all die, isn't removed. There is still a threat of judgment, but the gospel gives hope of salvation through judgment. So that even ahead of judgment day we can rejoice that our friend in high places has pleaded for us and we can be assured of victory long before that final day comes.

The tide is turning, and people can see it. So much so that v17 tells us that "many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them." To declare themselves Jewish isn't to pretend (putting on a disguise!?) but to convert. This was not a safe option! To be Jewish was making yourself a target. Why not rather be a neutral non-Jew?! That was a plausible option! But they chose to become Jewish themselves. The book began with Jews behaving like Gentiles, and ends with Gentiles becoming Jews!

We might look down on fear as a legitimate motive for conversion, and perhaps some of these people were in it for the wrong reasons. But the Bible never shies away from frightening people into the kingdom. Why are we told about hell and judgment otherwise but to keep us from turning away?

Haman's wife had warned him in 6:13 that he would surely fall before Mordecai, but he kept on going. 8:17 tells us that there were others across the Persian empire who did heed this kind of advice. No longer were they planning on joining in with the opposition of God and His people, they were going to identify themselves with them. This is the call of evangelism; lay down your weapons, surrender to the one you've been rebelling against, and join His army instead.

READ Esther 8:9-17

- Narrator A read narration in v9-10
- Scribes to read the edict in v11-12
- Narrator B read narration in v13-17

Discussion Questions

- What is Esther and Mordecai's proposed solution?
- How does it compare to Haman's original edict from 3:13-15 and 4:3?

- How do you imagine it felt to be one of the Jews receiving the second edict?
- How did they respond to it?
- In what way is this good news like *our* 'good news'? (i.e. the gospel!)
- Why do you think "many" became Jews at this point?
- Why would this have been a dangerous choice for them? What other option did they have?
- Is fear ever a reasonable motivation to turn to God?
- What role should fear of coming judgment play in people's conversions? Did it play a part in yours?
- What are we expecting to happen next?

C. THE SURPRISING VICTORY

Esther 9:1-16

Commentary

9:1 gives us the summary – this victory is a reversal of what was previously expected. The Jews decisively won against those who sought to kill them. They even had official support from government forces!

While we're supposed to be cheering, for many of us these verses are troubling. Is it ever right to kill others? Killing in the name of God? Why shouldn't Christians go and strike down their enemies with the sword? There are a number of answers to this:

Firstly, this was God's people acting as agents of God's judgment, not just people taking on themselves to kill other people. Back in Exodus 17 God had committed to blotting out all the Amalekites, and for centuries God's people had disobeyed. Here they are finally obeying that specific command. 3 times we're told they didn't take the plunder, even though in war that's what usually happens. They were operating under God's instructions for this kind of thing.

Secondly, we mustn't think that we don't do this because it was very barbaric and sub-Christian and we're much more sophisticated now. Final judgment will be much worse than this. This kind of destruction is put on hold, not cancelled. Due to Jesus taking the punishment for us, we've been commanded not to take our own vengeance but to show grace. If people don't respond to that grace, then later they will receive that vengeance directly from God. Esther 9 is a foretaste of that final day. That victory is sure and we need to get on the right side of Jesus NOW!

READ Esther 4:1-17

- Narrator A read v1-10
- Narrator B read narration in v11-16
- King Ahasuerus read his bits in v12
- Esther read her bits in v13

Discussion Questions

- Are there any verses we might use to summarise this chapter? (1)
- How do you think the Jews felt about what happened?
- How do we feel about it? Are there any troubling aspects to it?
- How might we answer those difficult things?
- In what way is this episode a picture of final judgment?