

Lesson 9: Esther 7:8 – 9:4

Verses 8-10

8 And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. 9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." 10 And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.

Remember when we asked whether things could get any worse for poor Haman? They do in verse 8 with yet another remarkable coincidence. The king walks back into the room at the very moment that Haman falls on the couch, causing the king to ask, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?"

The king must have known that Haman had not seen this time as the perfect opportunity to assault the queen. Instead, the king interprets Haman's actions that way so that he can condemn Haman without implicating himself in Haman's plot against the Jews. Haman's apparent "assault" will allow the king's own complicity to remain hidden and unexamined. Even though he is guilty of many crimes, Haman is about to be executed for a crime he did not commit!

Is it possible for things to get even worse for Haman? Yes! One of the eunuchs speaks up and tells the king that Haman had built a giant gallows for the purpose of killing Mordecai—the very person who had saved the king's life and who had just been honored by the king. The king no doubt saw this revelation as a threat to his own life by the villainous Haman, who must, the King likely reasoned, have secret sympathies for the attempted assassins.

And so in verse 10 Haman is executed on the very gallows on which he had planned to kill Mordecai. Once again, the author is very brief – telling us nothing about what Haman is thinking and failing to describe him as he is led away to the gallows. Herodotus and archaeologists tell us that a Persian gallows consisted of wooden stakes on which the victims were impaled. Darius, Xerxes' father, was known to have impaled 3,000 men.

Of all of the reversals in the book, Haman's reversal may be the greatest and most sudden. One day he was on top of the world, and the next day he is standing at the top of his own gallows. Overnight the tables had turned, and he did not see it coming. That same reversal awaits all who have plans opposed to the plan of God.

This entire scene is steeped in irony. Both Esther and Haman plead for their lives in this chapter. Mordecai the Jew initiated the conflict by refusing to bow before Haman the Agagite, but here we see Haman the Agagite falling down before a Jewish woman. And in the end his fate is sealed by something as insignificant as the king's sleepless night.

Those who are inclined to think ill of Esther often wonder why she didn't tell the king that Haman was really not trying to molest her. One writes that Esther's "character would have been more attractive if she had shown pity toward a fallen foe." But that author makes a crucial error – Haman is a *falling* foe rather than a *fallen* foe. He could do much damage while he remained alive. And are they really asking Esther to follow the example of King Saul, who years earlier had spared the life of another Agagite against God's explicit command? Esther had finally succeeded where Saul had failed – and Esther, like Saul, was acting with royal authority. In fact, what had Mordecai said to her in 4:14? "Who knoweth whether thou art come **to the kingdom** for such a time as this?" As Queen of Persia, Esther was now Queen of the Jews, and she was carrying out a royal sentence on this great enemy of God's people. Showing pity to Haman would have been wrong, just as King Saul's pity toward Haman's ancestor was wrong and disqualified Saul from being king. Esther killed Haman with her cunning just as Saul should have killed Agag with his sword. What was at stake here was God's plan of redemption! There was only one way for Haman to exit, and Esther showed him to that door! Those who argue that Esther should have forgiven Haman don't know the first thing about forgiveness! The concept of unconditional forgiveness is foreign to scripture—just read John 3:16, for example. God loves the entire world, but God does not forgive the entire world.

Haman dies in his own trap. "The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their lust." (Proverbs 11:6) And the same is true today. Many are caught in a trap of wickedness and deceit, and for many that trap was their own creation. They thought they could control it and use it on others, but in the end they were the ones captured by it.

Although one might expect the book to end with Chapter 7, a very serious problem still remains. How can we revoke an irrevocable law? Although Haman is dead, his edict against the Jews lives on. The death of Haman is *not* the major climax of the book.

Esther 8

Verses 1-2

1 On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. 2 And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Herodotus indicates that in the Persian Empire the goods and property of condemned criminals were taken over by the king. That appears to have happened here as Esther is given the house of Haman. The Hebrew word translated “house” may have also included Haman’s family.

Verse 1 tells us that Esther had told the king of her relation to Mordecai, but we are not told how much time had elapsed since that revelation. There were 2 months and 10 days between Haman’s edict in 3:7 and the edict that is about to be made in 8:9. Certainly by now the king knew that Esther was a Jew and that his edict had been against the Jewish people.

Esther told the king what Mordecai was to her, which means likely means she told the king more than that they were related, but also that he was her advisor and protector.

Mordecai’s relation to Esther further increased his status in the eyes of the king. In verse 2, Mordecai takes over in the position recently vacated by Haman, and Esther sets Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Haman had sought to publicly humiliate and kill Mordecai, but now ironically Haman is dead and Mordecai has taken his place both in the palace and in Haman’s own home.

At the beginning of the book, Mordecai was the cause of Esther’s advancement, and now Esther does the same for Mordecai.

Verses 3-6

3 Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.
4 When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, 5 Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. 6 For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?"

Esther once again goes before the king. Some understand these verses as describing a second time at which Esther risked her life by approaching the king unrequested – and we do see the king hold out his scepter to her again in verse 4. Others, however, see verse 3 as a continuation of the scene in verses 1-2, which would mean that the scepter here was just an encouragement by the king for Esther to rise and speak. This latter view seems better because, unlike verse 1, verse 3 does not provide a timeframe ("on that day"), and verse 3 says "Esther spoke" rather than "Esther entered."

Although Esther had saved the Jews from Haman, Haman's handiwork remained in the form of an irrevocable sentence of death against the Jews. She fell at the king's feet and pleaded with him to avert Haman's evil plan.

Esther was safe, and Mordecai was safe – but Esther's people were not safe. This second appeal to the king may have taken more courage than the first. The king had a personal interest in the first appeal (the life of his queen and the reward to Mordecai for saving his life), but he had no personal interest in saving the other Jews. In fact, Xerxes had reversed the policies of religious tolerance of his predecessors and destroyed many temples of Marduk in favor of his own Zoroastrian philosophy. Why would he help the Jews?

Esther asks the king in verse 5 to issue an order revoking the letters issued by Haman. Notice that Esther did not use the word "law" but rather the word "letters," perhaps hoping that the king might determine that the edict against the Jews was not really a royal edict at all and thus revocable.

Verses 7-8

7 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. 8 But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

The law had been sealed with the king's ring and thus could not be revoked. So what then could be done? Another edict could be written, and in this one they could write as they pleased with regard to Jews. We are about to see a parallel to what happened in Chapters 3 and 4, but here the tables are turned. Now the Jews will destroy their enemies rather than be destroyed by them.

As before, the king turned the writing of the edict over to someone else – but this time it was Mordecai rather than Haman.

One commentator says that the Hebrew words used in verse 7-8 "strongly suggest that the words are spoken in a sharp and exasperated tone of voice." Most of that tone is lost in the English translation. A better translation might be, "Now look here. I have given Esther the house of Haman. You, you write about the Jews as you like," or "Look! This is what I have done for you! Not only can you not expect me to do more, but I cannot do more!"

Xerxes' reaction fits well with what we know about him. For starters, he wants the entire thing buried so that his own role will not be uncovered. Also, he does not like being in the position where he is bound by what Haman did and unable to change it. So, as usual, he turns the entire problem over to someone else. Xerxes may have failed in many areas – but he certainly knew how to delegate! But the king does not offer any advice on how the irrevocable edict can be undone. He does not tell them to write another edict; he simply tells them to write whatever they please. In short, he washes his hands of the matter.

Verses 9-10

9 The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in

their script and their language. 10 And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud,

“On the twenty third” day was 2 months and 10 days after Haman's edict in 3:12. This time span tells us that the events recounted in Esther have been condensed.

For those who keep track of such things, verse 9 is the longest verse in the Bible.

What we are seeing in these final chapters parallels and reverses what we saw in the opening chapters. There is, however, one exception in verse 9. The second edict was translated into the language of the Jews, whereas Haman had no such concern with the first edict.

The terms describing the types of horses used to distribute the edict in verse 10 are difficult to translate. In fact, the Hebrew writer simply transliterated the Persian terms into Hebrew characters. Various translations include “race horses,” “swift dromedaries,” and “post horses.” Taken together, the words likely mean that the very best royal-bred horses were used.

Verses 11-13

11 saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to 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, 12 on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 13 A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies.

“Destroy, kill, and annihilate” is the same phrase found in Haman's original decree, but here the Jews are the ones doing the destroying rather than the target of the destruction. They were being allowed by the king to defend themselves against any that might attack them. The two decrees operated together to create a legalized civil war between the Jews in Persia and the Persians hostile to the Jews.

In verse 11, the Jews are allowed to stand up for themselves, which is stated in terms used for positioning an army to defend against an attack.

As before, the decree is publicized throughout the empire. Anyone who might be tempted to follow the first edict would now know that the Jews had permission and would be ready to defend themselves.

Who are the children and the women in verse 11? Are they the children and women of the Jews, or are they the children and women of those who would attack the Jews?

Some argue that the “women and children” are part of the compound direct object of the verb “attack,” which would mean that the decree is giving the Jews permission to destroy any armed forces that would attack the Jewish women and children. But apparently that is a minority view among Hebrew scholars, with most arguing that the text gives the Jews permission to destroy the women and children of any who would attack them. This second view (which has been called the “almost unanimous” and “standard, almost universally accepted” view) makes more sense from the context because then the second edict would be giving the Jews the same power that had been pronounced against them in 3:13. It is this literary structure more than anything else that supports the majority view. “The text needs to be interpreted as it stands, rather than be watered down to accommodate modern moral standards.”

But should we be troubled by the fact that the Jews were given permission to kill women and children?

First, having permission to do so and doing so are two different things, and later, when the body count is given, only “men” are mentioned (9:6, 15). (Although, the final count of 75,000 dead in 9:16 refers more generally to “enemies.”) Mordecai’s decree also gave the Jews permission to keep the plunder, but will be told three times in Chapter 9 that the people did not take any plunder.

Second, remember that Haman had authorized the Persians to kill the Jewish women and children in 3:13. That is, Haman the Agagite tried to destroy the Jews in the same manner that the Jews had been commanded by God to destroy them. Haman’s decree had attempted to reverse God’s own decree of destruction against the Amalekites. Will God himself be reversed in this book of reversals?

We need to remember the historical basis for this conflict with Haman the Agagite. God’s command to King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:3, “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man **and woman, infant and suckling,** ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

Did God really order Saul to kill the women and the children? Yes – and Saul was punished when he disobeyed that order. And if Saul had obeyed, Haman might not have been around to cause trouble for God’s people hundreds of years later. And this situation is not unique—women and children also perished in the flood. We may not be able to see it or understand it at the time, **but what God does is good** – *by definition*. It is only from God that we know what goodness is. Did God kill women and children? Yes—and he also created them. People who contrast the God of love in the New Testament with the God of wrath in the Old don’t know the first thing about the love of God or the wrath of God. Remember how Jesus is described in Revelation 6:16 – the wrath of the Lamb! You could think about that short phrase for the rest of your life and still not come close to plumbing the depth of what it means. The wrath of the Lamb!

Do I understand all there is to know about the commands by God in the Old Testament to kill women and children? No, I do not, and I don’t think anyone else does either. But there is one thing I understand perfectly and completely about such commands – they can be understood only in light of Jesus Christ. If God commanded it, then it was good and it was part of his plan to bless the entire world through Jesus Christ. That much I know with absolute certainty. Again, I quote Pascal:

Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves.

So if you are struggling to understand something about God in the Old Testament, your answer lies in the New Testament. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.” (2 Corinthians 1:20) Not only did Jesus rise from the death—he changed the meaning of death. Trying to understand death and suffering in the Old Testament apart from Jesus in the New Testament is a hopeless effort.

Why the command to kill everyone in 1 Samuel and why the same command here in Esther? (Although here in Esther it applies only to those who attack the Jews.) In both cases, the continuance of God’s plan of redemption was at risk. God was working to bring a worldwide blessing through the Jewish people, and no one and nothing could be allowed to stop that plan. God saw the Amalekites

as a threat, and God commanded their total destruction. That command was not obeyed, and, as a result, God's people were once again on the brink of extinction due to the Amalekites.

The ancient enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites is an underlying theme throughout this book. As I mentioned, the simple identification of Haman as an *Agagite* may be the most important word in the book when it comes to explaining why this all happened. We may look at that enmity with disdain – there they go again fighting a war that is centuries old. But doesn't the church have its own ancient enemies? Aren't we also surrounded by Agagites? The ancient Amalekites wanted nothing more than to wipe God's people off the face of the earth—aren't there people today with exactly the same desire? Sometimes I fear we have forgotten that while on this earth we are the church *militant!* We are at war!

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:4-6)

If we have become ineffective, it may be because we have laid our weapons down and left the battlefield.

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:11-13)

I fear that sometimes we forget that we have a job to do. Satan would love nothing more than to convince us that there is nothing we can do. Nothingness is one of his greatest tools. As usual, C.S. Lewis said it best:

“Nothing is very strong,” says Screwtape, “strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it

knows not what and knows not why ... in drumming of fingers and clicking of heels, in whistling tunes he does not like.”

Esther had a job to do, and she did it. Mordecai had a job to do, and he did it. We have a job to do, and?

Verses 14-17

14 So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king’s service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king’s command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. 15 Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. 16 The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. 17 And in every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Mordecai is greatly honored by the king, and the Jews rejoice everywhere that this second edict is announced. They must have been very worried about the first edict, and we can imagine their relief when the second edict was read. They may have thought that the second edict meant that no one would attack them, but if so they were about to be disappointed.

The “crown” in verse 15 was really a turban, and along with the other clothes showed Mordecai’s important position in the government. The author is making the point that the honor Mordecai received went far beyond anything that Haman ever received.

The chiastic structure of Esther is really on display here. The original decree had caused great mourning among the Jews, but the second decree causes great rejoicing. After the original decree, Mordecai was clothed with sackcloth and could not come before the king. With the second decree, Mordecai wears royal garments and comes from the presence of the king.

The four words in verse 16 – happiness, joy, gladness, and honor – are the antithesis of the four words found in 4:3 – mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing. God’s people have experienced a turn around!

Verse 17 tells us that many Persians “declared themselves Jews” or “became Jews.” The Hebrew word used here occurs nowhere else in the Bible, and its meaning has been debated. (The Septuagint adds “and were circumcised” without justification—but if true that would seem to settle the question of their sincerity.) What does it mean?

God’s promise to Abraham had been that of a worldwide blessing, and other Gentiles had declared themselves Jews prior to this time. We can read about this elsewhere in the Old Testament, and we can also see it from a careful study of the genealogical lists. Why did it happen here? Most likely they had seen the dramatic reversals in these events as coming from a divine source – the very fact that the reader of this book has been invited to see over and over. Perhaps these Persians had simply had “a public perception of divine involvement,” as one commentator noted.

The Persians certainly knew at least two things – they had a first edict from Haman, who was now dead, and they had a second edict from Mordecai, who was very much alive and powerful. “It is surely, rather, the dread of the superior political and military power now wielded by Mordecai and the Jewish community that prompts their profession.” You may recall that we saw similarly motivated conversions in our study of Revelation.

Esther risked death when she chose to identify herself with the Jews. But here, perhaps, the Persians identify themselves with the Jews because they see personal gain in doing so. Although persecution is horrible, it does have a purifying effect. How large would our attendance be if we were meeting here today under threat of death or imprisonment? Many today identify themselves with a congregation that suits their social status or gives them a business or financial advantage. The early church remained relatively pure during the days of persecution. The great apostasy did not begin until it suddenly became fashionable to be a Christian and when the church began to look for safety and security from the government rather than from God.

Another possible reason for their conversion, however, is that they had seen in Esther and Mordecai a faith and trust in one God—and that faith and trust stood in stark contrast with the vanity and misery of their own polytheism. We see the same thing in the New Testament where pagans were drawn to the power of the gospel. Pagan religions brought nothing but disappointment and disillusionment then—and the same is true today.

I fear that sometimes we think paganism is a thing of the past—an ancient false religion that is no longer a problem in our modern world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Satan would love for us to believe that paganism is dead—but it is alive and well. Men worship nature more today than they ever did in the past. They might not admit it or ever recognize it, but men worship more false gods now than ever before. Paganism is alive and well today!

God's word is a beacon in that darkness, and those in darkness will be attracted to that light. Our job is to shine that light so that they can see it. Esther and Mordecai did, and you can see the result in verse 17.

Esther 9

Verses 1-4

1 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. 2 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. 3 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. 4 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 day for the attack against the Jews finally came. Haman had cast lots almost a year ago to choose the day—and now Haman was gone, but his edict remained. That edict was not alone, however. A second edict had gone out giving the Jews permission to defend themselves.

You circle a key phrase in verse 1 – “the reverse occurred.” (The NIV translated it as “the tables were turned.”) There in a nutshell is the theme of the entire book. The Hebrew word is emphatic and denotes a complete turnaround of fortunes such as when a curse becomes a blessing (Deut. 23:5 and Neh. 13:2).

Who caused the reversal? We are not told—but there can be no doubt in the mind of any child of God who has read the book up to this point. Although not mentioned by name, God is present on every page.

Verse 2 shows that the Jews as a whole had, like Esther, undergone a transformation. No one could stand against them because the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. The Jews must have also seen the hand of God at work in these events, and they were emboldened and encouraged.

If we are timid and fearful, what does that say about us? “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7) If we have a spirit of timidity, it is not from God. So where do you suppose it came from? God does not need a timid people! He needs a bold and courageous people. He needs people who takes risks on his behalf. Esther and Mordecai were risk takers – what would have happened if they had been timid? God risked everything for us – what are we risking for him?

Verse 3 tells us that the Persian officials helped the Jews because they feared Mordecai, who was growing more and more powerful. And, unlike Haman, the Persians apparently needed no order from the king to fear Mordecai. It is amazing, both then and now, how fast the political winds can change. And then, as now, power draws politicians like moths to a flame. These same officials had, no doubt, been Haman’s greatest admirers not too long ago.