

LESSON 28

Esther 8:3-6

3 And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. 4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king, 5 And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces: 6 For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?

Although Esther had saved the Jews from Haman, Haman's handiwork remained in the form of an irrevocable sentence of death against the Jews. And so Esther falls at the king's feet and pleads with him to reverse Haman's evil plan.

Some understand these verses as describing a second time at which Esther risked her life by approaching the king unsummoned – and we do see the king hold out his scepter to her in verse 4.

But a better view is that verse 3 is just a continuation of the scene in verses 1-2, which would mean that the scepter here is 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 time frame ("on that day"), and verse 3 says "Esther spoke" rather than "Esther entered." Esther does not seem to have left the king's presence, and so this is likely not another case where she is appearing unsummoned.

Verse 3 is the first time since 3:10 that Haman has been specifically identified as "Haman the Agagite." Haman is mentioned by name 44 times in Esther, but he is identified as an Agagite only four times – each time in the context of his plot against the Jews.

This usage supports, and we might even say confirms, the view that the animosity between Haman and Mordecai was due to racial hatred. Verse 7 will again refer to Mordecai as "Mordecai the Jew."

In verse 5, Esther again stresses the ethnic dispute that led to the edict – Haman the Agagite sought to destroy the Jews – perhaps hoping that the king would see that he (and Persia) had been used by

Haman to further Haman's own personal agenda against the Jews.

Once again, Esther must proceed very carefully. In Chapter 7, Esther could present the matter as one of personal insult to the king, and as an attempt by Haman to swindle him. But here the king's honor is no longer at issue. In fact, Esther might be asking the king to do something here that would be seen as dishonorable - rescinding an order that he had already signed into law.

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 the king had no personal interest in saving all the other Jews (unless he had believed Esther's argument about their financial worth!).

In fact, history tells us that Xerxes had reversed the policies of religious tolerance of his predecessors (such as Cyrus) and had destroyed many temples of Marduk in favor of his own Zoroastrian philosophy. Why would this king 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 used 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 so was revocable.

Also, Esther does not use the word "overturn," but rather uses the word "recall." And, as Esther describes it, the letters are not the king's letters at all - but they are Haman's letters, and Haman is an Agagite. Perhaps Haman's letters could be recalled even if the king's law could not be overturned.

Can't we find a loophole somewhere? Esther (thinking like a lawyer!) has suggested three potential loopholes herself! These aren't laws - they are letters! These aren't the king's letters - they are Haman's! And we don't need to revoke them - we can just recall them!

Should her legal appeal fail, Esther adds a personal appeal in verse 6. The destruction of her people would be an unbearable tragedy for the queen herself. If the king truly loves Esther, would he not desire to spare her such heartache?

Does Esther's statement that she does not want to "see" the destruction of her people imply that she expects to escape the destruction herself? Not necessarily. First, the phrase "to see" or "look upon" can be synonymous for "experience."

Also, unless Esther expected to be the first person executed, she would surely be forced to witness the destruction of her people if the decree were to go into effect.

In 7:3-4, Esther spoke as if she expected to be included in the destruction, and Haman's death has not changed the situation. No explicit decree has been issued exempting Esther from the slaughter. As unlikely as it might seem that she would be slain, it is still a legal possibility, and one that Esther can use to her advantage.

We often say that we can find Jesus on every page of the Old Testament. Can we find Jesus here? I think we may be seeing in these events some foreshadowing of the gospel. Were the Jews in Esther's day the only people who were ever under an irrevocable sentence of death? Hardly. All people are under such a decree.

Romans 3:20-For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Romans 3:23-For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 6:23-For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As we have said, the theme of reversal is not only the theme of Esther. It the theme of the entire plan of redemption!

And look again at Esther's personal plea in verse 6 - "For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" Does that remind us of anything?

1 Timothy 2:5-For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Like Esther, Jesus was also a deliverer of his people, and like Esther, Jesus was also a mediator on behalf of his people.

Esther 8:7-8

7 Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews. 8 Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse.

The king's statement in verse 7 is not technically correct. The king says that Haman had been executed because he laid his hand upon the Jews, but Haman had been executed, not because he had attempted to lay his hand upon the Jews, but because he had attempted to lay his hands upon one Jew in particular – Queen Esther.

Xerxes is rewriting history a bit, most likely to make the point that he has already done his part in saving the Jews – while conveniently overlooking the key point that “his part” had been to sign the death edict in the first place!

At the end of verse 8, the king responds to Esther's suggestion that the letters be recalled. The king reminds her that no writing sealed with the king's ring can be recalled. This statement by the king serves two purposes – it explains why Esther's suggestion will not work, and it explains why the king's suggestion will work.

The law declaring death for the Jews had been sealed with the king's ring and so could not be revoked. So what then is the answer? What can be done? The answer in verse 8 is that another edict could be written, and in this edict the Jews could write as they pleased rather than Haman writing as he pleased.

How do you reverse an irreversible law in a book of reversals? Simple. You write a second irreversible law!

We are about to see a parallel here to what happened earlier in Chapters 3 and 4, but here the tables have been turned. Now the Jews will destroy their enemies rather than being destroyed by them.

As before, the king is unwilling to take any action on his own but instead turns the writing of the edict over to someone else – but this time it is turned over to Mordecai rather than over to Haman.

“Here, yet again, we see Ahasuerus's inability to focus his mind on the details of any matter whatsoever – even the extermination of a substantial body of his people and the potential death of the queen: he repeats his earlier disastrous habits and simply hands authority over to

Mordecai.”

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,” but 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 be covered up. In short, the king washes his hands of the matter.

Also, the king does not like being in the position where he is bound by what Haman did and unable to change it. So, as usual, the king turns the entire problem over to someone else. Xerxes may have failed in many areas, but he was an expert in one thing – he certainly knew how to delegate! No one can ever accuse Xerxes of being a micro-manager!

Esther 8:9-10

9 Then were the king’s scribes called at that time in the third month, that is, the month Sivan, on the three and twentieth day thereof; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded unto the Jews, and to the lieutenants, and the deputies and rulers of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, an hundred twenty and seven provinces, unto every province according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language. 10 And he wrote in the king Ahasuerus’ name, and sealed it with the king’s ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries:

For those who keep track of such things (and you know who you are!), Esther 8:9 is the longest verse in the Bible. (See this week’s handout.)

The 23rd day of the third month in verse 9 was two months and ten days after Haman’s edict in Esther 3:12, which occurred on “the thirteenth day of the first month.”

This time span could itself be significant. Why? Because two months and ten days is seventy days.

As we know from our study of Daniel, seventy is a significant Biblical number, being the product of

two numbers that represent perfection and completion, seven and ten. The number here is a literal 70 days, as was the 70 years of the exile – but (as we saw many times in our earlier studies) it is possible for a literal number to have a figurative meaning. The 70 year exile is a good example; that number was not random. God chose the number 70 for a reason.

The month of Sivan in verse 9 is mentioned only here in the Old Testament. The Babylonian month names were adopted by the Jews during the Babylonian exile. And, as we have seen, they also adopted Babylonian names for themselves.

The terms in verse 10 describing the types of horses used to distribute the edict in verse 10 are difficult to translate. In fact, the Hebrew text simply transliterates 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.

The text takes a significant shift at this point.

From the time where Mordecai first approached Esther about petitioning the king in Chapter 4, the focus has been on Queen Esther and on her plan to get the king to reverse his decree (which didn't happen).

But from this point on, there will be greater emphasis on Mordecai's actions. In fact, Esther is not mentioned at all from 8:9 until 9:12, where the king asks her what more she desires.

We are seeing quite a few “Plan B's” here.

Esther wanted the king to execute Haman because he had swindled the king, but the king instead executed Haman because he assaulted the queen.

Haman may have thought he could convince the king of his innocence, but he didn't get the chance when the king left the room, and so Haman turned his attention to Esther.

Esther wanted the king to reverse his irreversible decree, but instead the king allowed them to write another irreversible decree.

I think there is a lesson there for us. Sometimes our own plans will not work out as we had envisioned them. That does not mean we throw up our hands in defeat. What it means is that we keep trusting God and obeying God, and we look for some other way to accomplish what he wants us to do. That is

what we see repeatedly here in Esther.

Esther 8:11-13

11 Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey, 12 Upon one day in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, namely, upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar. 13 The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, and that the Jews should be ready against that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.

“To destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish” in verse 11 is the same phrase found in Haman’s original decree (3:13), but here the Jews are the ones doing the destroying rather than being the target of the destruction. The Jews here are being allowed by the king to defend themselves against anyone that might assault them.

The two decrees operated together to create in effect a legalized civil war between the Jews in Persia and the Persians hostile to the Jews. Again, we are forced to consider Mordecai’s refusal to honor Haman, and how that refusal looks in light of the command in Jeremiah to the exiles.

Jeremiah 29:7 – And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

“Seek the peace. ... In the peace thereof shall ye have peace.” We are not seeing any peace here in Esther 8. Instead, Mordecai has caused a civil war!

The Jews were allowed to fight any Persians who would assault them. How many such Persians were there?

The number of Persians hostile to the Jews may have decreased now that Haman was dead and now that Queen Esther was known to be a Jew, but as we will soon see, some such Persians certainly remained.

We know why Haman the Agagite wanted to destroy the Jews, but what about all of the other Persians? What explains their hatred of the Jews?

As look back through history, while the hostility may be difficult to explain, it is hardly surprising. It seems that the Jews have always been surrounded by those who are hostile and who seek their destruction - both in Biblical times and in post-Biblical times. Perhaps there were other Amalekites in Persia, or others who had past dealings with the Jews, or perhaps Haman's decree had created much of the enmity by offering the Persians "an irresistible opportunity to scavenge among the defenseless and dispossessed Jews."

There is something of a letdown in this outcome: after more than two months of deliberation, is this the best they could come up with? Couldn't the Jews have defended themselves even without such an edict? That may be how it looks on the surface, but this second decree is not as empty as it might first appear.

The chief provision of the second edict is to give the Jews the right to "assemble" ("gather themselves together" in the KJV). The Hebrew term for "assemble" often means to muster an army. The Jews are given permission in verse 11 to form armies to defend themselves against anyone who dares to attack them. Without such official sanction, the process of assembling an army would have been viewed as an act of rebellion.

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 to fight back and would be ready to defend themselves.

Who are the women and the children in verse 11? Are they the women and the children of the Jews, or are they the women and the children 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 Jewish 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 has been called the "almost unanimous" and "standard, almost universally accepted" view, and it does seem to make more sense from the context. Why? Because then the second edict would be giving the Jews the same power that had been pronounced against them in 3:13.

■ "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 sought and were given permission to kill women and children?

Here is how one commentary describes where we are in verse 11:

“Israel’s salvation involves no inviolable law, no direct divine action, no return to a promised land, no holiness that imitates the character of God. Instead it involves guile and wits, luck and opportunism, good timing and, when the moment comes, ruthless use of violent force.”

While that may be a bit harsh, is it wrong? Is verse 11 really inviting God’s people to engage in the “ruthless use of violent force”?

First, having permission to kill women and children 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 we will be told three times in Chapter 9 that the Jews 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 now sought to destroy them. There would have been a serious imbalance (possibly affecting the outcome) if one side had the power to kill women and children while the other side did not.

Third, 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 also mentioned women and children: “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.”

King Saul had been commanded to destroy the women and the children of the Amalekites. Haman’s decree had attempted to reverse God’s own decree of destruction against the Amalekites by applying it instead against the Jews. Would God himself be reversed in this book of reversals?

Did God really order Saul to kill the women and the children? Yes, he did – and Saul was punished when he disobeyed that order. And if Saul had obeyed that command, Haman might not have been around to cause trouble for God’s people hundreds of years later.

And this situation here is not unique in the Bible – women and children also perished in the flood. In fact, every young child on earth at that time perished in the flood.

Although it may be hard for those who are suffering to discern the difference, there is a big difference between suffering because you are being punished for an evil action and suffering as a consequence of someone else's evil action.

When people ask why God allows suffering, they are referring to suffering in the second category – suffering that comes as a consequence of evil rather than suffering as punishment for evil.

Why does God allow suffering as a consequence of evil? Because God has given us free will and because man has used that free will to rebel against God – you put those two things together - free will and rebellion - and suffering is the inevitable result. Suffering comes from free will. Could God eliminate all suffering in this world - yes, but only at the expense of our free will. And it is God's will that man have free will, and so we suffer in this life.

What does the Bible say about this distinction? The Bible is very clear that suffering as punishment is limited to the one who deserves the punishment. For example, both men and babies died in the flood – they both suffered, and yet the men were suffering due to punishment for their wickedness, while the babies were suffering as a consequence of their parents' wickedness. How do I know that?

Deuteronomy 24:16 – The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.

Jeremiah 31:29-30 – In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge.

Ezekiel 18:20 – The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.

Jeremiah tells us that this principle is true under the New Covenant, and Deuteronomy and Ezekiel tell us it was also true under the Old Covenant.

The people of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's day were confused about this – they thought they were being punished for the sins of their parents. They were not; instead, they were suffering the consequences

of the sins of their parents.

Our God is a just God – and a just God does not punish me for something someone else did. Does that mean I won't suffer because of what someone else did? No – that sort of suffering is inescapable in this world.

#ezra-esther