

# LESSON 31

## Esther 9:16-17

16 But the other Jews that were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes seventy and five thousand, but they laid not their hands on the prey, 17 On the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of the same rested they, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

Back in verse 12, the king wondered what had happened in the other Persian provinces. Now in verse 16, the king gets his answer.

Verse 16 tells us that 75,000 Persians had been killed by the Jews in all the king's provinces. That number seems very high to some commentators given that it was the size of a large city in those days.

It is possible that the word translated “thousands” may have meant families or clans, which, if so, would mean that the total number was much less than 75,000. Also, the Septuagint has 15,000 in place of 75,000. But the actual figure could be 75,000 – which, although high, is certainly not impossible.

These 75,000 were killed on the first day, and there was no second day of fighting in the provinces. The main reason for that, of course, was that Esther's request for a second day of fighting was limited to Susa. But even if she had asked for a second day of fighting in the provinces, word of the extension could not have reached any or many of the provinces in time to make any difference. And perhaps additional fighting did occur in the provinces but it was not reported back to the king.

Verse 16 tells us that the Jews had rest from their enemies. The word “rest” is a key word here, as it is throughout the Bible. The goal of this carnage was not revenge or plunder, but instead was rest. Rest had been a promise from long ago.

Deuteronomy 12:10 – But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety.

But, of course, their disobedience (including King Saul's disobedience with King Agag) had led to

anything but rest.

The word “rest” here also provides an important link back to what happened with the Amalekites.

Deuteronomy 25:19 – Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.

Amalek has, at last, now been blotted out. God’s people have been saved. And yet, God is not mentioned anywhere in the book of Esther. The text invites the reader to consider not only **how** God has done this great thing, but **whether** God has done this great thing. Yes, the outcome is consistent with God’s ancient edict regarding the Agagites, but what was God’s role in these events? That is left for the reader to decide.

When we consider our own questions about God’s providence in our own lives and God’s role in the world around us, we begin to see why Esther is such a modern book. Esther invites us to ponder the nature of faith in a world where God is unseen. It is faith that allows us to see the unseen reality behind the visible events of our day (2 Corinthians 4:18; Hebrews 11:1). We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The book of Esther shows us how that works.

The day of feasting and gladness in verse 17 is the first Purim celebration. At last we see why “feasting” is such an important theme in this book – the book of Esther explains the basis for the feast of Purim. A day of rest had become a day of feasting and joy. Elsewhere in the Bible, God is identified as the giver of rest to his people, but no such credit is given here.

## Esther 9:18-22

18 But the Jews that were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness. 19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwall'd towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another. 20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far, 21 To stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, 22 As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the

month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

As we said, one reason why the book of Esther was written was to explain the origin of the feast of Purim, and these verses explain when and how that feast was to be celebrated.

One reason that Mordecai wrote the letters in verse 20 was to commend the celebrations and encourage their continuance each year. In the rural towns the Jews celebrated Purim on the 14th day of Adar, but in Susa they feasted on the 15th day of Adar because they had taken a second day of vengeance. Today, the only city in which Purim is celebrated on the 15th of Adar is Jerusalem.

In verse 20, Mordecai makes a written record of what has happened. We see something similar with regard to the ancient Amalekites.

Exodus 17:14-Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”

In Exodus 17, God told Moses to write things down as memorial. Here in Esther 9, God is not mentioned, but a written record is done for remembrance and for a memorial.

Is there a contradiction between verse 19 and verse 21? Some commentators say yes. They say that verse 21 commands all Jews to observe two days of feasting, but verse 19 commands the Jews in unwallled towns to observe only one day of feasting. Is that a contradiction? Of course not! Common sense goes a long way in resolving most of the so-called Bible contradictions!

First, to state that Purim was celebrated on two days is not the same as saying that everyone was required to celebrate for two days.

Second, a basic canon of interpretation (still used by lawyers today!) is that a specific statement governs a general statement. The general statement is that Purim is a two-day feast, which it is. The specific statement is that some Jews celebrate one day while others celebrate on the other day, which they do. Both of those statements are completely true.

Verse 22 provides the two main reasons for the feast – relief and reversal. The Jews received relief or rest from their enemies’ plans against them, and they experienced a reversal as sorrow became gladness and mourning became a holiday.

In verse 22, we also see that in addition to all of the feasting and gift giving, the Jews gave gifts to the poor. Likewise, in Nehemiah 8:10-12, the people were instructed to celebrate the reading of the Law by feasting and sending portions of food to anyone who did not have anything available with which to celebrate.

Is there a book in the Bible in which we do not see God's care and concern for the poor? If we are still looking for God in the book of Esther, the closing words of verse 22 may be the best place to look. Even here, where God is not mentioned by name, the poor are remembered.

## Esther 9:23-28

23 And the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them; 24 Because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had devised against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them; 25 But when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them, 27 The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; 28 And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.

These verses give a summary of the events that were behind the feast of Purim.

With this book, Purim joined the five Jewish feasts that were commanded by Moses. By the time of Jesus, Hanukkah had also been introduced to mark the deliverance of the Jews from the threatened religious and cultural annihilation by the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanies in the second century BC.

The summary in verses 24-25 is interesting because it is written from a purely Persian perspective. Mordecai is not mentioned, and Esther is mentioned only in passing. Instead, it is the king who saves the day by writing the orders that leads to Haman's downfall and the end of his evil plot. There is no mention of the Jew's military efforts to secure their safety (or of the king's own role in being duped to

sign that first evil edict!).

Why are these details omitted? Remember how this summary was used - it was a summary of what Mordecai had written in his letter to the Jews. Seen in that light, the lack of certain details is very understandable.

First, Mordecai would not have had to describe the fighting; the Jews would have been very familiar with it because they had just experienced it.

Second, the emphasis on the king's role is carefully designed to retain the king's favor, which we have seen elsewhere in this book. Just as Esther had carefully avoided implying that the king might have been responsible for the Jews' predicament in 7:3-6, Mordecai goes her one better here and gives the king more credit for the Jews' deliverance than he actually deserves.

The word "purim" in the Old Testament occurs only in Esther. It came into Hebrew as an Akkadian loanword to which the Hebrew plural suffix "im" was added. The first time it was used was in Esther 3:7, where the text also gave us the Hebrew equivalent of the word (*goral*). This addition suggests that when Esther was written, the author did not expect all of his readers to be familiar with the word "purim."

The use of the Akkadian word in this text is odd, since the account is written in Hebrew and set in Persia, where the official languages were Aramaic and Persian. No commentary I read has a good explanation for how that word entered these events, but one suggested it may have simply been used because "Purim" sounds similar to "Haman," which in turn sounds similar to the Hebrew word for "destroy" used in verse 24. That is, it may have all been just a bit of word play.

Why is the plural word "purim" used when verse 24 tells us that Haman cast only "pur" – only a single lot? (Esther 3:7 told us the same thing.) We don't know for sure, but one commentary suggested that the text is implying there were actually two lots cast: Haman's and God's. Or perhaps Haman just cast the same lot twice - once for the day and once for the month.

Why is the feast named after the casting of lots? Most believe there is a double meaning – which fits well with all of the double events we saw in this book!

First, the obvious meaning is that the name "Purim" is a reminder that the fate of God's people was not to be decided by some pagan's random toss of the dice before his false gods.

But, second, in Psalm 16:5-6, David said that God had made is lot (*goral*) secure. And so the name of the feast recognizes that the fate of God's people is in God's hands – and God makes their way secure.

The Purim festival today is more of a Purim season.

It begins with a special Sabbath of Shekels (Shabbat Shekalim) right before the start of the month of Adar (our March time frame). On that day, the readings are focused on the giving of money.

Next, there is the Sabbath of Remembrance (Shabbat Zachor) immediately before the 14th of Adar. On that day, the Jews remember the enmity between themselves and the Amalekites.

On the 13th day of Adar, the Jews fast to remember the risk that Esther took on behalf of her people. At the conclusion of the fast, on the eve of Purim, the book of Esther is read in its entirety.

On the morning of Purim, the Esther scroll is read again, but this time the mood is much lighter. The children dress up as characters in the event, jokes are told, and songs are sung. Whenever Haman's name is mentioned, children make a loud noise using home-made noisemakers.

Two types of gifts are sent: food to family and friends, and charitable donations to the poor. The Talmud prescribes drinking on Purim until you can no longer tell the difference between "Mordecai be blessed!" and "Haman be cursed!"

As we said earlier, today it is only in Jerusalem (a walled city) that Purim is celebrated on the 15th day of Adar. All other Jews celebrate Purim on the 14th day.

The point of the feast of Purim is to serve as a reminder that unexpected reversals do happen in history – and they are more common than not for the people of God. Our fate is not determined by the casting of dice. We are a part of God's eternal plan and eternal purpose, and our fate is in God's hands. It is sad to consider that the people celebrating Purim today missed the greatest reversal of all when they rejected the Messiah.

There is a textual question about verse 25 that we should consider before we move on. Verse 25 in the KJV says, "But when **Esther** came before the king." In the ESV, it says, "But when **it** came before the king." Why the difference, and which is correct?

The pronoun used in verse 25 is feminine, but it can be translated as either "she" or "it." The KJV

assumes it should be “she,” and it then supplies the most likely person by inserting the name “Esther.” The problem with that insertion is that Esther is not mentioned in the immediately preceding verses, which means that the antecedent of the pronoun is being supplied just by the reader’s knowledge of what happened earlier.

The NIV says, “But when the **plot** came to the king’s attention.” That may actually make more sense here than Esther, but again the NIV (as it very often does) is trying to clarify an ambiguity in the original text. If the underlying text is ambiguous, a good translation should be ambiguous as well.

The ESV is perhaps the best translation of those three because it retains the underlying ambiguity better than the other two - although the best translation might be “she or it.” The Amplified Version includes both possibilities: “But when **Esther** brought the **matter** before the king...”

The reference in verse 27 to “all who joined them” may be another reference to the Persians who became Jews in response to all that they had seen. It may also be a reference to those who would later become Jews and then celebrate the feast.

## Esther 9:29-32

29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim. 30 And he sent the letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth, 31 To confirm these days of Purim in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry. 32 And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.

Queen Esther was last mentioned by name back in verse 13, where she asked for a second day of slaughter. Verse 29 now shows Esther and Mordecai acting with “all authority” – which is quite a reversal from how this book began!

Verse 32 tells us that the command of Queen Esther was written in the book. Think back over all of the writings we have seen in this book. In fact, there is a distinct emphasis in Esther on the written word – which is another interesting parallel with our modern world in which God speaks to us only through his written word.

This writing in verse 32 likely also included the writings of Mordecai from verse 20, and was likely either the book of Esther itself or was used as a source by the author of Esther of the inspired text of the book (who may have been Mordecai himself).

In Chapter 8, we found the longest verse in the Bible (verse 9). Now, let's look at the one of the shortest chapters in the Bible! (In fact, it is either the shortest or the second shortest outside of the Psalms depending on whether you go by word count or verse count. Job 25 has fewer words but more verses.

## Esther 10:1-2

And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea. 2 And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?

The book of Esther ends with a chapter that is focused on the greatness of God. No wait, that's not right. The book of Esther ends with a chapter that is focused on the greatness of Mordecai!

And Esther? Not a word is said here about her. As one commentator said, "it is Mordecai who gets the last word."

In the ancient Greek versions of the book of Esther, Mordecai's role throughout the text is amplified and Esther's role is diminished – which is additional evidence that the version we have was inspired by God while the Greek additions (which do not appear in our Bibles) were not. Why? Because God has no problem making a woman the hero, but the male editors who came along later definitely had a problem with that!

Earlier in this book we saw a tax holiday from the king, but not surprisingly the taxes are back again at the end of the book. (As we have said, Esther is a modern book!) Why are taxes mentioned in verse 1?

Perhaps Mordecai had something to do with it, or perhaps it showed God's blessings on this pagan king for his role in preserving the Jews (although this same king very nearly wiped them out due to his inept leadership). The references to taxes here may also be a very subtle reminder that the king had first tried to enrich himself by selling the people of God to Haman.



Verse 1 emphasizes the vastness of the king's reign. Just as Joseph's presence had blessed Pharaoh, Mordecai's presence has blessed Xerxes.

Those who argue that this book is fiction have some trouble with verse 2. Why? Because the author is telling his readers that they can consult the official government records to confirm the truthfulness of the full account. That would seem a strange addition to be included by an imposter!

## Esther 10:3

3 For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.

Verse 3 contrasts Mordecai with Haman.

In Chapter 3, it was Haman who held the seat of honor higher than all the other nobles – and now Haman is on a gallows higher than all of the other gallows, and Mordecai is in his place before the king.

Haman had been self-centered and self-indulgent, but Mordecai seeks the welfare of others. Haman was committed to evil and destruction, while Mordecai was committed to goodness and peace.

Why was Mordecai so highly esteemed? Two reasons are given – “he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.”

First, Mordecai worked for the welfare of God's people. He was not focused on his own welfare or that of his physical family, but he was focused on the welfare of his spiritual family.

Second, Mordecai spoke peace to all his people. He was not afraid to stand up and speak on behalf of his people and to his people.

We have been pretty hard on poor Mordecai throughout our study of this book, and perhaps the final verse is telling us that Mordecai was really a good guy after all! Or at least that everyone thought he was!

Mordecai, it seems, combined service to the king with service to his people, and he was able to do both without compromise. Mordecai could serve as a mediator between the king and his people, and it is just as reassuring for us today as it was then to know that there is someone with the ear of the king who has our best interests at heart.

## A Few Closing Comments

We have seen many themes running through the book of Esther: reversal, feasting, clothing, honor, power, authority.

But the theme of reversal is the central theme of the book of Esther. And that theme of reversal, as we have said, is not limited to Esther, but is a theme of the entire Bible.

Few books in the Bible are more relevant to life in a society hostile to the gospel than the book of Esther. As we said in the introduction, in some ways Esther is the most modern book in the Old Testament. God provides for his people in Esther as he provides for his people today – through his loving providential care. We do not see visible angels or explicit miracles, but the hand of God is unmistakable to those who see with the eyes of faith. And through the two themes of reversal and feasting we see the two sides of God's providence - that which God does, and that which we do.

We have a role to play in God's providence, and nowhere is that more clear than in the book of Esther, where God is not mentioned. The role that we must play reminds me of a story about a man trapped on his roof during a terrible flood. When the water was up to the first floor windows, a boat came by and offered the man a ride to safety, but the man said, "No. God will provide." When the water was up to the second floor windows, a second boat came by and offered the man a ride to safety, but the man said, "No. God will provide." When the water was up on the roof, a helicopter flew by and offered to drop a rope for the man to escape to safety, but the man said, "No. God will provide." Finally, the man drowned, and he found himself at the gate talking to Peter. He explained to Peter what had happened, and he complained that he died while waiting for God to provide. But Peter responded, "God sent you two boats and a helicopter! What more were you waiting for!"

Not only can we see the unseen God at work in the book of Esther, and the people of God at work in the book of Esther, but we can see the gospel in the book of Esther.

Much of what happens in Esther is driven by the irrevocable nature of the Persian edicts. In place of the first irrevocable edict, a second edict is issued to counteract it. Can we not see a gospel parallel

there? Because of our sin, an irrevocable decree of death was pronounced in the garden. How can it be undone? Through a second decree, the gospel.

Like the Jews of Persia, all men are under an irrevocable decree of death. Because of Adam's sin? No! Because of their own sin (Romans 5:12). And like the Jews of Persia, the people of God have a mediator who works on their behalf. And like God's people in Esther, we can rejoice that there is a second decree that counteracts the first decree. Under the first decree we are dressed in sackcloth and cannot approach the king, but under the second decree we wear royal robes and we can come boldly before the throne of grace.

The book of Esther prefigures our own redemption through the gospel. The theme of Esther is reversal, and our hope in the gospel depends on the greatest reversal of all time – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. “Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:9) All history revolves around that event. Like the Jews of old, we too will someday find ourselves alive and well after the day of death has come and gone.

I have greatly enjoyed the privilege of teaching this wonderful, but often neglected, book of Esther. I hope that we will all continue to study it.

#ezra-esther