

SERIES: God Incognito: As Seen in the Book of Esther

SERMON: **A Day to Remember**

SCRIPTURE: Esther 9-10

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So soon we have come to the end of our summer series on the OT Book of Esther! I have thoroughly enjoyed this excursion through one of the great short stories in the Bible, and I hope you have as well. I told you when I began this series that in forty years of Bible teaching and preaching I had never seriously tackled this book, and I shared with you some of the factors that made it rather intimidating to me.

But I have discovered something in the process that I have always known intellectually but perhaps did not believe as fully as I ought, namely that “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*” (2 Timothy 3:16). That is a verse I memorized as a small child; it was perhaps the most-often quoted verse at Dallas Seminary; and it was a verse that I swore allegiance to when I was ordained. But through this study I have learned in a more profound way how absolutely true that verse is. Here in Esther is a Bible book which doesn’t mention the name of God, was ignored by much of the early church, was questioned by such great theologians as Luther and Calvin, and has been neglected through the centuries by so many pastors and commentators. Yet it gives absolutely clear evidence that it is God-breathed and profitable.

A number of you are reading through the Bible this year with us. In the process you have undoubtedly come across a number of passages that caused you to wonder, “What’s this doing here? Why does God waste precious space giving us these genealogies and telling us where the various tribes of Israel resided? And what are we supposed to do with these slaughter scenes in Joshua and Judges?” Don’t despair. Keep reading. Keep studying. The Word of God is inexhaustible and thoroughly profitable—all of it, including Esther.

By the way, as we resume the two service schedule next Lord’s Day we will be returning to the NT and a very different kind of Biblical literature. We’ve just completed two books that are almost entirely narrative—Ruth and Esther—but for the next four months we will be studying one of the most profoundly doctrinal books in the Bible—the Book of Galatians. I’ve entitled this new series, *Free At Last!*, because the Book of Galatians is the premier biblical book on Christian freedom. Sadly there are so many people who think of Christianity as a moral straightjacket, a rule-book religion that focuses on what you can’t do. Galatians will reveal that biblical faith is anything but that.

Now let’s turn our attention to the final two chapters of the Book of Esther. First, however, let me do a little review. As Dick shared so effectively last Sunday, Queen Esther confronted the wicked Haman in front of the king, Haman was impaled on his own gallows, Esther was awarded Haman’s entire estate, and Mordecai replaced Haman as Prime Minister of the Empire. What a

reversal of fortunes—both for Haman and for Mordecai! What a vindication for Esther!

But Mordecai and Esther were by no means content with this outcome. While they had achieved tremendous personal victories, tragedy was still staring them in the face in the form of a law granting permission to anyone in the kingdom to slaughter Jews on the 13th day of the month Adar, a date rapidly approaching. Esther begged the king to revoke that law, but he could not—it was a law of the Medes and Persians and thus irrevocable. But King Xerxes himself offered a resolution to the dilemma—he suggested another decree, also irrevocable, that would give the Jewish people the right of self-defense. When the Jewish people all over the Empire learned about the new law, they experienced happiness, joy, gladness, honor, feasting and celebrating. And many non-Jews converted to Judaism, mostly out of fear that the Jews would prevail when that day arrived.

This morning we come to chapter 9 and discover that fear of the Jews to be well-founded. Please follow along in your Bible as I read much of this chapter:

On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them. And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them. Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful.

The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

The number of those slain in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day. The king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted."

"If it pleases the king," Esther answered, "give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on gallows."

So the king commanded that this be done. An edict was issued in Susa, and they hanged the ten sons of Haman. The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of them but did not lay their hands on the plunder. This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

That is why rural Jews observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other.—

The next several paragraphs talk about establishment of an annual two-day feast to commemorate the deliverance of the Jews, including how and when they were to celebrate and what the celebration was to be called, namely the Feast of Purim. Let's read just verse 28 as a summary:

These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants.

The great reversal described (1-16)ⁱ

The fateful day has arrived, the very day Haman had chosen by lot on which to exterminate every Jewish person in the Empire. But now, of course, it is also the day on which the Jewish people are allowed to defend themselves. And the story teller makes it clear that the Jews quickly gain the upper hand.

By the way, this may be the single most difficult portion in the entire book of Esther for us to wrestle with. We have already struggled with the apparently secular nature of the story, namely that God is left out, or at least His name is. And we have struggled with the fact that Esther seemed to thrive in the beauty contest to choose the next Queen, hiding her faith and auditioning before the king in a manner that raises serious moral questions. But we found answers to those problems that, if not entirely satisfactory, at least provided us potential solutions.

However, here we are confronted with the killing of over 75,000 people *by the Jews*, an event that has caused some theologically liberal commentators to accuse Esther and Mordecai (and the Jewish people as a whole) of being bloodthirsty and guilty of a totally unjustified slaughter of innocents. This view often goes hand-in-hand with a perception that the God of the OT was also bloodthirsty, a very different kind of God from the NT God of love and compassion. I reject this false dichotomy completely, yet at the same time, we must admit that the kind of killing we see here in Esther 9 is troubling, and not unique. We find it elsewhere in the OT, and we must do something with it.

Let me ask what may appear as a strange question:

Is this a case of Jewish jihad, or holy war? As you read through the book of Joshua, for

example, you find God ordering the Israelites to practice a kind of holy war against the inhabitants of the Holy Land—the Canaanites, the Amalekites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites, the Stalagmites, the Stalactites, etc. This wasn't because God was bloodthirsty; it wasn't a racial thing; it was because the peoples of the land were evil and wicked almost beyond comprehension, and God knew that if they were allowed to remain in the land, the Israelites would intermarry with them, adopt their customs, and become idolaters like they were. In fact, that is exactly what happened.

But Jewish holy war was a very different thing from Muslim jihad or examples of genocide that we have seen in our own time (e.g., the Tutsis versus the Hutus in Rwanda). Jewish holy war had nothing to do with hatred, or racial superiority, or political power, or even economic advantage. It had everything to do with God's people maintaining a lifestyle of holiness.

Furthermore, here in Esther 9, it is clear that the killing is entirely defensive in nature.

Redeeming factors to consider: Our first hint that this killing is defensive rather than offensive comes in the statement of verse 2 that the Jews assembled “to attack those seeking their destruction,” and in verse 5 it is stated that they struck down “all their enemies.”ⁱⁱ There was no indiscriminate killing. Second, three times it states that “they did not lay their hands on the plunder” (verse 10, verse 15, and verse 16). This is especially significant because Mordecai's edict specifically permitted them to take the plunder (8:11), but they refused to do so. (Can you think of any modern case of religious war or genocide when the victors refused to profit from the subjugation of their enemies? I can't.)

Third, in verse 6 we are told that they killed “men,” meaning males only, apparently because only the men attacked them. Once again, Mordecai's edict specifically gave them permission to kill the women and children of their enemies (verse 11), but again they did not do it. By the way, perhaps you are wondering why Mordecai wrote these provisions into the edict in the first place if the Jewish people did not intend to carry them out. I suspect the answer is that he merely copied the provisions of Haman's original law. Look at 3:13: “Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children . . . and to plunder their goods.” If Mordecai was going to be able to instill the appropriate fear of retaliation in the minds of their enemies, those same provisions had to be included. But the Jews refrained from actually carrying them out.

So my conclusion is that the killing here in Esther 9 is in self-defense and has nothing in common with jihad or genocide or wars for personal or political advantage.ⁱⁱⁱ However, a rather strange interaction takes place between Xerxes and Esther in verse 12. The king says to his queen, “The Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and the tens sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces?” It's as though he's impressed with the death toll and wants to keep a score card. Then he asks her, “Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted.” He seems to perceive that Esther has something else on her mind. She does, indeed.

But instead of asking for a fur coat or a diamond tiara, Esther asks for more time for the killing to continue, one more day for the Jews to mop up the opposition. And she asks that the ten sons of Haman, already dead, be impaled on the gallows in public. Once again liberal commentators have a field day mocking the punitive revenge this account seems to portray and the God who

allowed it. But I am inclined to believe Esther asks for another day because of a realistic assessment on her part of the importance of ridding the government completely of its anti-Semitic element. If some are allowed to remain, they will just show their ugly faces later, and the Jews will have to fight this battle all over again.

The relevance of the hanging of Haman's ten sons. And as to why she asks that the bodies of Haman's ten sons be impaled on gallows, let me try to answer that by taking you back 600 years to a specific example of holy war from the time of King Saul. I believe it has particular relevance for our story. Dick made a brief reference to it last Sunday, but I want us to examine it in some detail. Turn with me to 1 Samuel 15, or follow along on the screen.

Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.' "

Skipping down to verse 7, we read,

Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

The Lord then told Samuel that He was grieved that he had made Saul king, so Samuel sought out Saul, who gave him all kinds of excuses and distributes all kinds of blame to others for his own disobedience to the command of God. Let's pick up the reading in verse 19, where Samuel asks Saul:

"Why did you not obey the LORD ? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD ?"

"But I did obey the LORD," Saul said. "I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal."

But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD ? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."

The essential message of this story is that partial obedience is disobedience. And then down in verse 33 we read that Samuel the prophet killed King Agag himself.

So what is the relevance of this account to chapter 9 of Esther, and specifically the request of Esther regarding Haman's sons? Remember that Haman has been identified at least five times as

Haman the Agagite. That means he is a descendant of King Agag, and the author is making a direct and purposeful connection between Haman and Agag. Whereas Saul refused to obey God completely and because of that failure the Amalekites continued to plague Israel for centuries to come, Mordecai and Esther, by hanging Haman, by killing Haman's ten sons, and by having their bodies exposed in public are making certain that this evil family never again has the opportunity to threaten the people of God.

Of course, we live in a day and time when public hanging is almost universally condemned, and capital punishment of even a serial killer by the most humane means conceivable is viewed as a violation of every instinct of a supposedly civilized person. Ultimately, friends, it boils down to whether we are going to take our worldview from Scripture or the culture. Now I am not suggesting that we adopt Mordecai's and Esther's methodology of dealing with all our enemies, because the NT does indeed institute a change in our attitude toward our enemies—challenging us to love them and forbidding us to take vengeance on them, but I don't think we have any basis for impugning God's character (or Mordecai's or Esther's, for that matter) over the methods they used. There were good, rational, moral reasons why they did what they did at the time in which they lived.

The great reversal celebrated (9:17-32)

Starting in verse 17, the author makes it clear that it is not enough for the Jews to achieve victory over their enemies. They must also celebrate that victory.

Celebration is a very common theme of Scripture. Do you know how often celebration is urged upon God's people, or even required in Scripture? Let me just list a few of the times:

1. After the Egyptian chariots were buried in the Dead Sea, Moses led the people in a song of praise to God (Exodus 15).
2. After the victory over Jericho and later over Ai, Joshua led the people in a great celebration to renew their covenant with God at Mt. Ebal (Josh 8:30-35).
3. After the Lord delivered His people under Deborah, the Judge, she led them in thanksgiving and praise (Judges 5).
4. When David had raised the money for the Temple, He led the people in a huge celebration (1 Chron. 29).
5. When Zerubbabel and the exiles who returned from Persia succeeded in laying the foundation of the post-exilic temple, they celebrated in Ezra 3.
6. When that same temple was completed, they celebrated in Ezra 6.
7. Seventy-five years later when Nehemiah led the people in building a wall around the city, they had a tremendous celebration at the time of its dedication. (Nehemiah 12).
8. Many of the Psalms are calls for celebration at the deliverance God brings to His people.
9. In fact, all the required feasts of Israel, Passover, First Fruits, Unleavened Bread, Tabernacles, Trumpets, and Atonement are really calls upon the people to remember the deliverance of the Lord.

However, a question remains:

Is Purim a divinely instituted feast or a human one? Moses got direct commands from the Lord in Leviticus 23 to institute the feasts just mentioned. But here in the Book of Esther the Feast of Purim is not attributed to God at all. It says in verse 20 that “Mordecai recorded these events, and *he* sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually . . .” Then in verse 27 we read that “the Jews *took it upon themselves* to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed.” And finally in verse 29 we are told that Queen Esther wrote with full authority to confirm Mordecai’s letter concerning Purim.

There’s nothing here to indicate that the institution of Purim was ordered by God. On the other hand, as we have frequently noted, God is not mentioned at all in this book, even when his fingerprints are obvious. However, Purim seems to be quite in keeping with the purpose of other biblical feasts. I would put it in the same category as Hanukkah, which is mentioned just once in Scripture—in John 10:22. Neither feast is commanded directly by God, but both commemorate a great deliverance that was surely arranged by God, and thus both are legitimately practiced by the Jewish people.

How important are annual celebrations for the people of God? I would say they are very important, or God would not have given so much space to them. Two weeks ago today we celebrated our 60th anniversary as a church. That was simply a wonderful day. The great music, the testimony, the sermon, the video, the hymn sing, the fellowship, even the pie and ice cream all enabled us to express with our hearts and mouths thanksgiving and praise to God for His amazing faithfulness in our lives—individually and corporately. I believe it is critical to the people of God to regularly observe days of remembrance—celebrations like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and even some with a less clearly biblical focus, like Memorial Day, Mother’s Day, and Father’s Day. Even the observation of the Lord’s Day each week helps to establish a rhythm in life that makes God’s fingerprints more obvious.

Specific information regarding the feast of Purim. Though we didn’t read all of chapter 9, I would point out that it explains why the feast of Purim is celebrated on two different days—because of the extra day the king allowed for the killing of Israel’s enemies in the capital city. It also reminds us of the focus of this particular feast. Mordecai specifies four things that should characterize it: feasting, joy, the giving of presents of food to one another, and gifts to the poor.

The author also tells us how Purim got its name. Haman had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. The plural of that word is *purim*. It has been argued effectively that the point of the name is to communicate that the lot, or destiny, of God’s people could not be determined by Haman’s casting of lots before his gods.

Only the Lord God determines the lot of His people.

Finally, we are told the feast of Purim is to be remembered and observed by the Jewish people in every generation by every family and in every province and in every city. It must never cease. And it hasn't. If you have been around Jewish communities much, you are aware that Purim is a favorite time of the year. Families read the entire Book of Esther, they give gifts, and they celebrate. Even during the Holocaust, in fact, especially then, Jews wrote copies of Esther from memory. The significance of its message was not lost on the Nazis, who would kill on the spot any Jew in the prison camps possessing a copy. Yet they continued to share the story of Esther, because in it they found assurance and hope that they, not their enemy, would eventually triumph against all expectation.^{iv}

The great reversal summarized (10:1-3)

We haven't read chapter 10 yet, so let's do that now. It's only 3 verses long.

King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire, to its distant shores. And all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king had raised him, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia? Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.

Remember back in chapter 2 where the king declared a tax holiday in honor of Esther being chosen as his new queen? Well, life is back to normal now. The king imposes new taxes throughout the Empire. What Caesar gives he can also take away. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? But there is a difference now. The unthinkable has happened. A humble Jewish man is second in power in the Empire. He is pre-eminent in the Empire; he is also pre-eminent among the Jews, held in high esteem because he worked for the good of his people, not his own good, and he spoke up at a critical time.

It's been quite a story, hasn't it? One of the best short stories ever written, actually, exquisitely crafted. I don't know how one could ever tire of reading about the great reversal God brought upon Haman and the great reversal He provided for Mordecai and the great reversal the Jewish people experienced. But there is another reversal in the Bible, an even greater reversal; in fact, the greatest of all.

The Greatest Reversal

I'm talking about the amazing Reversal that took place in the life of Christ. There are at least four important aspects to it, each of which has some parallel in the Book of Esther.

1. Christ left the glories of heaven to become one of us. (Phil. 2) Talk about a reversal! Philippians 2 describes it as making Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, humbling Himself. But He became one of us not to wage holy war against His enemies, but to

pay the penalty for their sins. Sadly, the Bible makes it clear that when His enemies persist in their opposition to Him and in their efforts to exterminate Him and His people, they will be judged severely. But not until they have been extended every opportunity to make peace with Him!

2. He rose from the dead to provide assurance that His people will never be defeated by the grave. Here is another amazing reversal. Satan must have exulted when his arch-enemy breathed His last on the cross. Satan had battled Him from His birth in Bethlehem, using Herod to try to destroy Him before He was born, and then driving His parents into exile in Egypt. Throughout His ministry Satan tried to stir up everyone against Him, from the Romans to the religious leaders of the Jews. And finally he succeeded (or thought he did) when Jesus was crucified at Calvary. But then three days later, that terrible defeat was turned into an amazing victory over sin and death. Here's how 1 Cor. 15 puts it:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Christ will come again to destroy the Evil Empire once and for all and establish His righteous kingdom. (Rev. 11:15). Listen to Revelation 11:15: “The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’” The kingdom of this world includes the United Nations, the United States, Russia, Britain, France, North Korea, and even what's left of the Persian Empire, Iran—the whole shootin' match. Every nation views itself as so important and so powerful. The leaders of these nations play games with young men's lives and threaten entire populations for the sake of their own selfish interests. But they are not going to last. Another kingdom is going to overthrow them, and the King of Kings is going to reign for ever and ever.

4. Christ will put on a Feast *par excellence* and empower His people to become truly Purim people. The Book of Esther is full of banquets and feasts—ten in all. But there is coming a Feast to end all feasts, a Banquet to end all banquets. It is called the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Jesus told a parable about that feast in Matthew 22. He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.” Probably He is speaking of the Jewish people, who rejected their Messiah. So the king invited others to his dinner, but they too declined; in fact, they killed his servants. Finally the King said to his servants:

“The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited do not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

Friend, the King of the only Empire that will last forever has invited you to come to His banquet. It will be a time of happiness, joy, gladness, feasting and celebrating. That will be *a day to*

remember. Are you willing to accept the invitation? You can by acknowledging your sin and receiving His Son as your Savior.

Allow me to close with a final observation related to the title of this series: *God Incognito, as Seen in the Book of Esther*. I pointed out when we started the inherent oxymoron in that title: incognito but seen. As God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (and that is a direct quote from Ephesians 1:11), we need to be reminded that we cannot at any moment know the significance of world events or even that of the ordinary events of our own private lives. The author of Esther calls us to trust in the power and presence of God even when, and perhaps especially when, He seems to be absent and we cannot imagine how He could possibly do what He has promised to do in His Word.

We are called to walk by faith, not by sight. We cannot see the end of the matter from the beginning or the middle. The story of Esther assures us that we do not have to.^v Through His inscrutable ways, along paths that are sometimes dark and treacherous, God brings His people to that day when all creation will rejoice that our sorrow has been turned into joy and our mourning into celebration.

i. My outline is partially borrowed from Iain Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary.

2. You might wonder how the Jews knew who their enemies were. I suspect that just as with the Nazi party and the S.S. in Germany, the worst of the Jewish enemies were pretty well self-identified. It may also be that shortly after Haman’s original announcement of the 13th of Adar as the day for the extermination to begin, certain anti-Semitic elements publicly declared their intent to help Haman carry out his evil plot. Or it may be that the Jews killed only those who actually came against them with weapons. At any rate, 500 were killed in the citadel of Susa, i.e. within the palace and government complex, and 75,000 died in the empire as a whole.

iii. By the way, there is one troubling verse which I must comment on if I am going to promote the notion that the Jews were merely practicing self-defense, and that is verse 5: “And they did what they pleased to those who hated them.” That sounds a lot like helter skelter, mayhem, mindless revenge. I think that is not what is intended. The point here has to do, not with bloodthirsty revenge but with authority. Whereas all the power of the Empire had formerly stood against their very existence, now they were licensed to live.

iv. Jobes, 220.

v. Jobes, 211, 231.