

August 1, 2021 | Esther: Fractured People Flawless God

Week 10 | Esther 9-10 | "Victims Turned Victors"

Announcements:

- Communion and business meeting next Sunday, August 8 at 6PM.
- Church picnic, Sunday, September 12th. We'll have food, games, water balloons, and even an inflatable water slide.

Today, we close out our study of the book of Esther. And, as you'll see, the story ends on a resounding note of celebration. The Jews entered these events mourning and fasting; they will leave the story rejoicing and feasting. The victory, which had been foreshadowed as far back as chapter five, finally occurs here in chapter nine. Haman has been done in, and now those who supported his cause will come to an end too. No one will have the will to fight after this. And while there is a fair bit of action, the carnage is, by in large, diminished and relegated to a few sentences. After all, the story is not about unjust vengeance but about honorable victory. The Jews will not only win the battle but the war and the heart of Persia. Through God's providential hand, we will witness as victims are turned into victors. No one can stand against you when it is God who fights for you.

READ: Esther 9:1-10 (ESV)

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. ⁵ The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. ⁶ In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, ⁷ and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha ⁸ and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha ⁹ and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, ¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

Three things to notice about this first section.

First, the writer of Esther says that “no one could stand against [the Israelites], for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples.” This statement harkens back to the last first of chapter 8, where we're told that “many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.” Bear in mind that the time between Mordecai coming to power and the date of the decree was about nine months. One can imagine that during those long months with Mordecai ruling as Xerxes' right hand and his decree incapacitating Haman's, that popular opinion had skewed in favor of the Israelites. In the very next verse, we see this, which reads that it wasn't just the people of Persia who joined the Jews or were too afraid to fight, but then “officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents.” The Jews even had the government on their side, right down to the servants and stewards who attended to the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom (i.e., “royal agents”). The point that writer of Esther is trying to make is that most of Persia simply did not have the will to fight. And if you can crush a person's fighting spirit before the battle, you've all but won the war itself.

Secondly, we're then told that the Jews “did as they pleased to those who hated them.” And while admittedly, that sounds harsh and barbaric, let me remind you that the actions of the Jews were purely defensive. As verse two tells us, the Jews only engaged in conflict with “those who sought their harm.” War is never pretty. But if you are ever forced to fight, it is far better to be in the pose of self-defense than inactive and intentional offense. And apparently, the Israelites defended themselves so well that the death toll was five hundred men only, not women or children, in the capital alone.

What's more, Haman's own sons were among those who attacked the Jews and lost their lives because of it. Now, their names are not recorded so that the Jews or we as the audience can revel in the carnage. Throughout the centuries, these names have been read in solemnity and even, given the manuscripts, have been written in a column to impart a seriousness to what has occurred. Haman was a despicable human being. And his nefarious acts not only rebounded against him, but it took his family along with him. In writing out each of these names, we are supposed to mourn the fact that an entire family line died because of one man's folly. Parents, it is a sobering reminder that we ought to be leading our children in such a way that they do not repeat our mistakes.

READ: Esther 9:11-19 (ESV)

¹¹ That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. ¹² And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." ¹³ And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows." ¹⁴ So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. ¹⁵ The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they killed 300 men in Susa, but **they laid no hands on the plunder**.

¹⁶ Now, the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to **defend** their lives, and got relief from their enemies, and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but **they laid no hands on the plunder**. ¹⁷ This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁸ But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

A couple things to notice about this section.

Rather than balk at the death toll in Susa, Xerxes is amazed and wonders aloud that if the Jews had killed so many in the capital city, "how much more fell before the Israelites in the whole of the empire?" Later, we get the answer to that question when we learn that the total loss of life was 75K deaths. Now, bear in mind, this conflict only lasted two days. To put that in perspective, Haman's decree accumulated more casualties than what we amassed during the Vietnam War, which lasted 19 years.¹

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Xerxes' macabre admiration for the Jew's success leads him to ask if Esther had any further requests. Why he does this is not clear. Perhaps he felt it politically advantageous to garner even more favor with a clearly powerful people group within his own empire. Or, just as fear of the Jews had fallen on the Persians leading many to identify with their cause and support their defense, Xerxes too may

¹ General Editors, "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," April 30, 2019, *The National Archives*, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>, [accessed, August 1, 2021].

have been moved to sympathize with the Israelites. Or this may be another evidence of God moving behind the scenes to move the heart of the king (cf. Pro. 21:1).

Whatever his reasons, Esther's response is far more shocking. She requests that the Jews be allowed to mount a defense for another day. Not only that, but she also asks that the sons of Haman be hung on the gallows alongside their father. This is a genuinely gruesome turn of events for a moment that was gory enough already. One that has led many commentators to criticize Esther, citing this as a perfect example of the oppressed turning into the oppressor. Some going so far as to say that Esther picked up the mantle that Haman left behind. But I do not think this is the case. And while I wish for a better outcome, the reality is, this was war. And she was not acting out of some vendetta but in the best interests of the men, women, and children in her care. And what is clearly evident in all of this is that there was a sizeable portion in Persia who was, at worse, anti-Semitic and best, looking to get rich off the spoils of war. This is why Mordecai, all those years ago, had advised Esther to hide her identity. He knew that a young Jewish girl would've been abused and possibly killed if her ethnicity was made known. And given that her request for an additional day of defense in Susa only speaks to the level of animosity that must've been concentrated in the capital. If some would do the Jews harm on the national level, how much more at the local level in the very headquarters of Persian life and culture?

What's more, Esther knew that the bloodshed on that first day would've undoubtedly resulted in reprisals from those of Haman's ilk, even if it would've been unlawful to do so. Esther, in all her wisdom, knew this to be the case. And so, rather than risk losing her kin due to revenge seekers, she makes it perfectly legal for the Jews to defend themselves once again. What's more, she mounts a stern warning for all who sought to do her family harm by impaling Haman's sons along with him. Is that gut-wrenching? Yes. But was that too extreme? I think not.

Esther did not only win the battle, but she also wanted to win the war. And she wanted to succeed in such a way that no one would have the will to fight them again. And for any who question Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews, I'll remind you that three times we're told that the Jews did not so much as take a bent penny of the "spoils of war." This would've been their right. They had every legal claim to that money. But they didn't lay a hand on it. This speaks to their virtuous intentions even though it is couched in such gruesome circumstances. The point is, if there was ever a good way to win a war, this is how you do it. Due to no fault of their own, the Jews were thrown into conflict, fighting

for their lives. They did not start this fight, but they did end it. And they ended it in such a way that would ensure no one would have cause to criticize or seek reparations from them.

In fact, the following section moves on to explain how the Jews were to commemorate these events. Mordecai and Esther did not want the generations who follow to forget how God had delivered them from genocide once again. And it is telling that the manner in which the Jews were to celebrate had ***nothing*** to do with immortalizing carnage or bloodshed and everything to do with commemorating deliverance and rest.

READ: Esther 9:20-32 (ESV)

²⁰ And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, ²² as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

²³ So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. ²⁴ For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast **Pur** (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. ²⁵ But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.²⁶ Therefore they called these days **Purim**, after the term **Pur**. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, ²⁸ that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

²⁹ Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. ³⁰ Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and

truth,³¹ that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting.³² The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

Time does not permit me to explain all the nuance of this passage, so let me briefly summarize these scenes.

The holiday that commemorates the events in Esther is called Purim after the Persian word for dice or lot, which was the method by which Haman determined the date for the genocide of the Jewish people (cf. 3:7). The idea is that fate is not in the hands of nefarious actors but in the hands of a loving God (cf. Pro. 16:33). We may throw the dice and try to exert our will on events, but God alone controls the outcome. Interestingly, Purim is still celebrated today by Jews during March. And the purpose of this celebration is not to glory in crushing their enemies but, as Mordecai puts it, to “make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor,” for the “relief” the Jews got “from their enemies.” The tone of this holiday is one that remembers deliverance and rest, not bloodshed and war. And true, while you cannot speak of one without at least mentioning the other, reveling in the carnage of war and remembering how God preserved his people in the face of a seemingly unbeatable foe are not the same. One immortalizes the dark, the other perpetuates the light. Imagine if they would’ve named it the “feast of gallows;” a more fitting name since impaling plays a far more prominent role in the story than the lot (cf. 1:23; 5:14; 7:9-10; 9:13). The emphasis would be heavy on the vengeance and light on the deliverance.

Now, while there is still more to be said about Mordecai, Esther gets the last word when it comes to the establishment of Purim. It is by her authority alone that this national holiday is institutionalized. Queen Esther is a far cry from the girl who was taken from her home in chapter 2. What’s more, I find it interesting that an orphaned girl who was ripped from her home, which eventually became queen and saved her people from genocide, is a tale that has been remembered long after it took place. The same cannot be said for the once-mighty powerhouse Persia, who, if not for the Book of Esther, would’ve all but been forgotten to the sands of time or, at the least very least, would’ve been relegated to a mere footnote in world history. The story of a life that was wholly dependent upon God's sovereignty has a staying power and one that has long outlived nations.

READ: Esther 10 (ESV)

¹ King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. ² And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? ³ For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.

Now, this may seem like an odd epilogue to end out our story. But this brief conclusion effectively says, "All returned to normal once again. The king taxed his lands, as kings are prone to do. But instead of the Jews being without representation in this vast empire of Persia, as they were when this story began, "Mordecai, the Jew" stood at the king's right hand." It is a fitting end to a harrowing tale that saw the Israelites nearly become extinct but are now portrayed as secure in the empire.

But what of Esther? Shouldn't she get some mention here? While this story is primarily about Esther, would we not agree that her father is due some recognition. She would not begrudge the fact that her loving guardian would be recognized here, and neither should we. After all, it was him who saved her life in the first place. And all that she accomplished could, in a way, be attributed to Mordecai. Little did Mordecai know that in saving the life of one orphaned girl, he would save his own life and the lives of every Jew living in Persia. Acts of selfless love have national consequences.

So, what's the takeaway?

READ: Esther 9:1 (ESV)

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.

God turns lost causes into victories.

READ: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (ESV)

⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this

mortal body must put on immortality.⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

The most significant reversal in history was when an innocent man was wrongfully executed on a tree but then rose again three days later, never to die again. At the very moment where sin and the grave thought they had victory over the Son of God, Jesus turned the tables. As the song from *Elevation Worship* puts it, “God turns graves into gardens.” Jesus brought life from a tomb.

The irony, of course, is that we all played the role of villain. We were, all of us, against God and His plan. Like Haman, we were throwing our own dice and trying to manipulate events in our favor to the detriment of others. We had no right to deliverance. Yet, praise be to God who sent his Son to die for victims and villains alike. Even with blood on our hands, we can come to the Savior and be forgiven. What a reversal that is! To think that even sinners can be saved?!

God turns lost causes into victories because God is always victorious. Whether He is center stage working out His will for all to see or behind the scenes raising up leaders to do his bidding, God is always at work. And while we may not always see the hidden hand of God in our lives, we must walk knowing that He is still there. Because, as Paul pointed out, we do not labor in vain. Every lost cause is the purview of the Creator. That is where He thrives. Find the most broken life, and God will still be able to put the pieces back together.

So, what’s the takeaway?

Never forget, God turns lost causes into victories.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Esther: Fractured People Flawless God | Week 10 | “Victims Turned Victors”

TEXT: Esther 9-10

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Haman has been done in, and now those who supported his cause will come to an end too. No one will have the will to fight after this. And while there is a fair bit of action, the carnage is, by in large, diminished and relegated to just a few sentences. After all, the story is not about unjust vengeance but about honorable victory. The Jews will not only win the battle but the war and the hearts of all Persia in the end. Through God's providential hand, we will witness as victims are turned into victors. No one can stand against you when it is God who fights for you.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: