



LIVING IN A HOSTILE WORLD
Studies in Ezra and Esther
Lesson 8
(Esther Lesson 5)

HE REMAINS FAITHFUL!
ESTHER 8-10

I. THE VENGEANCE ESTHER 8:1-9:19

A. The Rewarding of Esther and Mordecai 8:1-2

So far we have seen that Haman had fallen from favor and had been slain. After that the king set Esther herself in charge over Haman's house. She was given the great wealth that he had bragged so much about. Not only did Haman lose his position and honor that had led to such pride, but he also lost all his wealth to one of the very people whom he had sought to destroy!

Honor was given, not just to Esther, but also to Mordecai who was advanced to a high position before the king. This was done because of the good he had formerly done in sparing the king's life and because Esther told the king about Mordecai's relationship to her, which had been kept secret until now.

The irony of the story is continued. The king exalted Mordecai to the very position that Haman had occupied. The ring, which was the symbol of the king's authority and which had been given to Haman, was given instead to Mordecai. He was made second in authority in the Empire (cf. Joseph, Genesis 41:42; Daniel, Daniel 5:7, 29; and Nehemiah, Nehemiah 1:11).

Esther, who had been set over the house of Haman (v. 1), in turn put Mordecai over that house. All this simply demonstrates that the exaltation, which Haman formerly possessed, now belonged in every detail to the very one whom he considered his chief enemy and whom he had sought to kill. The reversal is now complete.

There still remained, however, one major problem that had not yet been overcome. The decree of the Medes and Persians was irrevocable. The Jews of the Empire were still condemned to death. The real root problem had yet to be resolved.

B. The Dangerous Request by Esther for Her People 8:3-8

Esther again must argue her case before the king. This time her request involved expense to the king. He would not receive the money promised by Haman nor be able to confiscate the property of the Jews. Ahasuerus could have spared the life of Esther and Mordecai and let the rest of their nation perish.

In tears Esther approached the king again and even fell at his feet, imploring him to counteract the decree that had been made by Haman against the Jews.

Notice how Haman's decree actually outlived him. He had been slain and was no longer able to pursue his vindictiveness against the Jews, yet the effect of his wickedness lived on. So with us, the effect of our sins may continue on affecting our lives or the lives of others even after we have repented or even died.

The danger is made even greater when we realize that Xerxes was not only

heavily committed to Zoroastrianism but was intolerant of any other religion (see Thomas Constable, Esther, Bible study Notes).

The king reminds them that he did not have authority in his government to cancel decrees (cf. 1:19; Daniel 6:17).

C. The Royal Decree 8:9-14

The first decree to destroy the Jews had gone out on April 17, 474 B.C. There is some confusion about the second-decree that allowed the Jews to defend themselves, but it seems to have gone out on June 25, 474 B.C. The Jews thus would have had over eight months to prepare for their defense against attack on March 7, 473 B.C. This, of course, neutralized the enemy's former advantage.

In verse 11 children and women in view seem to be those of the Jews, not the enemies of the Jews.

Verses 11 through 14 provide a forceful illustration of evangelism. The sentence of death hangs over all humanity because of our sin. But He has given us a royal decree to go into "*all the world*" and preach a gospel that would counteract that decree of death. Only by responding to the second decree can any person hope to be saved.

D. The Jewish Joy 8:15-17

Notice the contrast between the beginning of the fourth chapter (4:1-3) and the end of this chapter (8:15-17). The author contrasts Mordecai clothed in sack cloth and ashes to Mordecai now clothed in beautiful royal robes. From abject sorrow and agony the Jews move to joy, dancing and rejoicing.

II. THE JEWS' SELF DEFENSE ESTHER 9:1-19

A. The Fear of the Jews

The new decree gave the Jews permission to defend themselves by killing their enemies. This seemed also to mean that they could not only meet the attack with resistance but even initiate attack against those who they knew would destroy them (e.g. Haman's sons who in typical ancient fashion would have sought retaliation for their father's death). One thing we see in this passage is that anti-semitism was indeed widespread, as it is today.

One reason the Jews prevailed was that they were assisted by government officials. In fact all the people involved in the king's service helped the Jews. The reason is stated: they recognized and feared the power and influence of Mordecai.

In theory, the Jews' enemies could still have prevailed against them, but the reasons why the Jews prevailed are explained as the story unfolds. The Jews gathered together in the cities throughout the provinces of Persia to fight against their enemies. This enabled them to take advantage of the strength of numbers, rather than being attacked individually. Specifically mentioned is the fact that the fear of the Jews had fallen on all the people (9:2). This was probably due to the fate of Haman and the power of Mordecai. The anti-semites had just become convinced that the Jews' enemies would not prevail, so they tended to be afraid to attack them. Again, however, this is one of the places that the author hides the fact that is so evident -- God was on the side of the Jews.

In spite of their disobedience in returning to the land, God still kept His covenant with Abraham and protected His people from the genocide.

B. The Killing of Haman's Sons

The king suggests that Esther complete her request and she asks that Haman's sons hanged. As mentioned before, this was because of the ancient Eastern custom of retaliation. Additionally, the hanging of the bodies of the 10 dead sons was to disgrace them and to discourage other enemies of the Jews from attacking them.

Almost twice as many people die in the royal section of Susa as in the rest of the city. The word "capital" in verse six must refer to the acropolis or the royal section of the capital city.

C. The Refusal of Plunder by the Jews 9:15

The Jews seem to make a deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies. In a culture where spoil was expected this would not go unnoticed. It showed that they really were simply defending themselves.

III. THE JEWISH FEAST – PURIM ESTHER 9:18-32

Sometime after the reversal of the Holocaust, Mordecai issued a decree establishing a feast he called "Purim." The name is a plural of the Persian word, "Pur" which means "lot" (see 3:7) or "dice." The name became a symbolic reminder to the Jews of God's deliverance, causing the "lot" to deliver them in 473 B.C.

The second letter by Esther may have been necessary to firmly establish Purim as an official Jewish holiday. There may have been resistance from the conservative Jewish community to adding another national festival to those prescribed in the Torah. Indeed, they well could have. The feast of Purim was not established by God, but by men. Chapter 9 verse 27 tells us plainly that "*the Jews established and made a custom for themselves.*" Other feasts, like Passover and Pentecost are feasts which God established and which He commanded men to observe. But the feast of Purim is a purely Jewish invention.

The feast of Purim is celebrated in a very different manner than the feasts which God has ordained. At other times when God had granted the Jews a great victory (such as Exodus 15 or Judges 5) they celebrated with worship and praise. But Esther 9:22 has Mordecai saying that these should be days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor. In Jewish law the participants are instructed to get drunk until they can no longer differentiate between "Blessed is Mordecai" and "Cursed is Haman." Although recovering alcoholics, people with health problems, and those planning to drive are freed from observing this commandment, a fair number of Jews do get drunk on Purim.

Women as well as men are commanded to hear the public reading of the biblical scroll of Esther. The reading is conducted in the synagogue amid much revelry. Almost all children, and some adults, come to the service with groggers (noisemakers), which they sound whenever Haman's name is read. Since Haman is mentioned more than fifty times in Esther, the reading is constantly interrupted by shouts, screams, boos, and the rattling of groggers. Because Jewish law requires people to hear every word of the scroll of Esther, the person chanting the book is forbidden to resume until the noise abates.

While Jews normally come to synagogue in suits and dresses, their attire on the playful holiday of Purim is more likely to

be costumes and masks. Although many women model themselves on Queen Esther and many men on Mordechai, I have seen people come to services dressed as robots or as members of the Women's Liberation Army of Shushan (the Persian city where the Purim story takes place).

The synagogue service is usually followed by a party where the command to get drunk is carried out. Very often, members of the congregation perform skits based on the Purim story (see Esther). At many yeshivot, Purimshpiels are performed, and fun is poked—through plays and skits—at the school, its teachers and rabbis, as well as at traditional texts that are usually treated with reverence.

Another Purim commandment is to send mishloakh manor (gifts of food and drink) to other Jews. The minimum gift one must give is two portions of different foods; they must require no preparation but be ready to eat. In recent years, as the Jewish community has become more affluent, mishloakh manot have grown more elaborate, and many people send them to large numbers of friends.

On Purim one is commanded to be charitable to everyone, even to beggars whose requests for charity one has reason to believe are bogus. On this day of unbridled joy, no questions are to be asked. When I was a student at Yeshiva University, there were two women who used to accost students every morning and afternoon, asking for money. A rabbi I knew there—a generous man—never contributed to them; he told me he knew for a fact that they had independent and substantial means. Nonetheless, on Purim he made sure to give them a donation. - Jewish Literacy, The Most Important Things to Know about the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin - quoted in Esther: A Study in Divine Providence, by Robert Definbaugh

IV. EPILOGUE - MORDECAI'S GREATNESS ESTHER 10:1-3

As you see the extolling of Mordecai in chapter 10, it makes you wonder if Mordecai himself did not write the book. Mordecai was one of several Jews in Gentile nations whom God placed in high positions of government rank (cf. Joseph, Daniel and Nehemiah).

Perhaps the mentioning of the tax in verse one was because Mordecai had something to do with it. Or it could have been another way the author shows us the tremendous wealth of Xerxes.

Xerxes died in 465 BC. Looking back over his reign shortly afterward, the author emphasizes the stupendous power and wealth of this king (v. 1) in order to show the marvelous providence of God in elevating a despised Jew to a position of honor in such an empire.

- (from The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Electronic Database)

CONCLUSION

Esther is the story of the deliverance of the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. It tells us of the greatness of Esther and Mordecai, and introduces us to a new Jewish feast, the Feast of Purim.

But all of this is done by people who are out of the will of God and away from His place of blessing. The Jews who remained on in Persia did not return to Judah and Jerusalem because they had too much invested in Persia. At this period of time, the scene in Susa (Esther 1:1-9) is far more glorious than the scene in Jerusalem, where a small group of Jews (50,000 or so) dwell in the ruins of a once great kingdom (see for example Ezra 3:10-13; Nehemiah 1:1-3).

In that day, there were two kingdoms. One was the great and glorious kingdom of Persia. The problem is that this kingdom was temporal, and even worse, it was a kingdom under the influence of Satan (see Daniel 10:20). The other "kingdom" was the earthly and eternal kingdom of God. It was in Jerusalem that God promised to dwell and to manifest His presence. It was to Jerusalem that people of all nations were to come to worship Him. While the earthly kingdom was far from impressive, it was the place of God's presence and blessing. It is the kingdom which the Persian Jews rejected, choosing to remain in the prosperity and splendor of this pagan realm.

—Ibid, Definbaugh.

One of the most practical uses of the book is not only to encourage us to rest in the providence of God but to teach us how to live in a hostile world. We need the wisdom of Esther to know when to keep silent and when to speak out our faith. We need to learn her courage to be willing to risk life itself for the cause of the kingdom of God. We can learn from the courage and perseverance of Mordecai to be willing to act even when all power seems to be against us.

Esther is above all the story of God's amazing faithfulness to His covenant people even when they are unfaithful. The book of Esther is a brilliant illustration of 2 Timothy 2:13:

*If we are faithless,
He remains faithful;
He cannot deny Himself.*