

I'm going to finish our studies in the book of Esther this morning. I will be covering the last three chapters in one sermon because there are not that many themes to cover. So I will summarize the story and then make a few comments by way of explanation and application.

Through the past few chapters of the book of Esther, Esther has taken steps toward saving her people from annihilation. The people in question were the Jews living in Persia. They had been condemned to die by a wicked high ranking official named Haman who hated the Jews and wanted to get rid of them. Esther was queen of Persia but she was also a Jew. So far she had kept her Jewishness hidden. But as queen she was in a position to ask the king to save her people. Her plan involves many steps. One of them was to expose Haman as the man behind the plan to kill off the Jews. She manages to do this and Haman is condemned by the king to be hanged on the same gallows that he had built to hang Esther's cousin Mordecai. So Haman is out of the way.

The beginning of chapter 8 describes good things beginning to happen to Esther and her cousin Mordecai. The king gives Haman's property to Esther. He also gives Mordecai the position that Haman had occupied before the king had him killed. Mordecai had been a low-level official. He had been instrumental in saving the king from an attempt on his life and so he was rewarded by being placed in the second highest place of authority in the realm. So things are looking up for Esther and Mordecai.

However, the main problem that the story is about persists. The law that Haman had made with the king's authority to kill all the Jews still stood. It was one of those irrevocable laws. Once a law received the king's approval by being sealed with the king's signet ring, it could never be repealed. Clearly that was not a wise practice. It was probably something that was thought to honor the king's wisdom and authority. Whatever the reason, it was clearly a problem for Esther and Mordecai in their quest to save themselves and their fellow Jews from genocide.

Esther goes to the king and asks him to revoke the law, but what the king does instead is give Esther and Mordecai the authority to write another law that might take away the affect of the first law. And that is what they do. Mordecai summons the king's scribes and dictates a law which "allowed the Jews who were in every city gather together and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill and annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods...."

Well that changed things considerably. The Jews were allowed to defend themselves at the king's command. You can be sure that the new command took away a lot of enthusiasm for the first command among the Persian people. A lot fewer people would want to be involved in killing Jews since it was now clear that the king did not want them killed and since the Jews would now be able to gather and defend themselves.

Anyway. This second decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves was met with gladness and joy. Verse 15 describes Mordecai coming out from the presence of the king in his royal attire and we are told "the city of

Susa shouted and rejoiced.” Verse 17 says, “And in every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.”

So we come to chapter 9. The day comes when Haman’s law commanded the killing of the Jews and Mordecai’s law allowing the Jews to gather together and defend themselves comes into effect.

The Jews have the upper hand. 9:2 says, “And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all the people.” No doubt God was helping his people. And no doubt part of that was the fact that the enemies of the Jews were fearful. No doubt many of the Persians had no desire to kill their Jewish neighbors. And the ones who hated the Jews no longer had the enthusiastic support of the king and his officials. 9:3, says, “All of 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.”

So there was not a lot of enthusiasm and courage on the part of those who hated the Jews. And the Jews were easily victorious. “No one could stand against them.” The focus in the text shifts to Susa. We are told that the Jews “killed and destroyed 500 men.” They killed the 10 sons of Mordecai.

King Ahasuerus is with Queen Esther. He remarks on the 500 men killed in Susa and wonders how many have been killed in the rest of the realm. But he still is feeling supportive of Esther and so he asks her what else she might want. And she asks for another day for the Jews to fight in Susa and that the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows. And those requests were granted. On the next days 300 more men in Susa were killed by the Jews.

The paragraph beginning with 9:16 says that the Jews defending themselves killed “75000 of those who hated them.” And when the fighting was over they celebrated. They had been spared the annihilation that had been threatened against them. They had been given permission to defend themselves. They had won the victory. And so they rejoiced and celebrated.

And they established a re-occurring holiday to celebrate how God had delivered them from Haman and his fellow Jew haters. They called that holiday Purim. A two day celebration that they committed themselves to remember throughout the generations. A letter was sent throughout the empire by Queen Esther and Mordecai to announce the establishment of the feast of Purim throughout the realm.

Then we come to chapter 10 which briefly describes the power and authority of Mordecai, the Jew. 10:3 says, “For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitudes of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.

So that’s the story told in the last three chapters of the book of Esther. We will now look at a number of principles and applications that arise in this chapter.

The first is a principle expressed in Psalm 147:6, “The LORD lifts up the humble and casts the wicked to the ground.” In this story we see Haman the proud selfish Jew-hater being cast to the ground – he is humiliated and executed on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai. And while he is humiliated Esther and Mordecai are exalted. In these last chapters Queen Esther is much more secure and powerful than she had been in earlier chapters and Mordecai is placed in a very high position, second-in-command to the king. And in the very last sentence of the book, we get a hint that Mordecai is going to use his power to be a blessing to the people – “He sought the welfare of his people and spoke people to all his people.”

Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang of this principle when she celebrated the salvation that was going to be accomplished through her Son. Luke 1:51-52, “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.” This is one of the ways that the Bible often describes God’s work of salvation.

We certainly see that happening to Haman on the one hand and Esther and Mordecai on the other in this story. Haman was brought down from his high position and Esther and Mordecai were exalted.

The ultimate fulfilment of this principle is the glorification of Jesus Christ. Paul in Philippians 2:5-11 speaks of how Jesus humbled himself by being born as a servant and by becoming obedient to the point of death on the cross. And he continues in verse 9, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name....”

And one of the glories of the gospel is that those who believe in Jesus will share in Jesus’ exaltation at the end of the age. It does sometimes happen in this life that a proud person is brought low and a humble person is exalted. But that is not always the case during this life. Not every haughty person is humbled in this life and not every humble person is exalted in this life. Stories like this are in the Bible to illustrate the principle and they are a foreshadowing of what will happen at the end of the age when all of the proud will be brought down and all of God’s people will be exalted.

It is important for us to be humble. Esther and Mordecai are not shining examples of godliness in this story, but they are God’s people in the story and there are times that they do show evidence of that. The text does attribute significant wisdom to Esther in the way in which she approached the king to seek to save her people from Haman’s decree. And Mordecai does come across as a humble man. He seems to be content to serve in his lowly position in the king’s bureaucracy. There is no hint of him striving for greatest and honor. And yet by the end of the story Haman has been dishonored all the way to hanging on the cross that he had built for Mordecai and Mordecai is raised to the second highest position in the realm without striving and conniving for that honor.

Certainly the Bible would encourage humility among God’s people. Proverbs 18:12 says, “Before destruction a man’s heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.” Proverbs 29-23 “One’s pride will bring him low, but

he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.” James 4:10 “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

Now the main manifestation of the humility of Esther and Mordecai was that they were willing to be counted among the Jewish people. That was a process for Esther for she hid her Jewishness at the beginning of the story, but in the end she chose to make her Jewishness known to the king and Mordecai was known all along as a Jew. They were both willing to be known as Jews in a context where being a Jew was not looked upon with favor at least by many of the people among whom they lived. And they were exalted and as such they are examples of what will one day be true of all of God’s people.

The people of God are often hated by the world. It is usually not the way to this-worldly honor to be counted among the people of God. Jesus told his disciples to expect to be hated by the world just as he was hated by the world. But God’s promise is that those who humble themselves including the humiliation of being counted among the people of God will be exalted. Paul in Romans 8:17 says that if we suffer with Christ we will “also be glorified with him.” In Romans 8:21 he speaks of the coming “glory of the children of God.” In Colossians 3:4, Paul says that when Jesus appears we “also will appear with him in glory.”

Esther and Mordecai are a foreshadowing of this. God’s people will one day be glorified. And that can and ought to give us hope as we think about where God is heading in his plan of salvation. The day is coming when all the proud haters of God and his people will be humbled and when all those who have humbled themselves before the Lord will be exalted. We will share in the glory of our Saviour.

Another principle from this passage that is before us this morning has to do with the fact that God’s deliverance of his people involved fighting. They were given permission to defend themselves and that included killing those who were seeking to kill them. This is part of the theme of spiritual warfare in the Scriptures and in the OT that involved bloodshed as it did in this story.

This can be difficult for us to understand. There is a lot of literal warfare in the OT and most of the time when it involves God’s people it is commanded or sanctioned by God. In this case too, the theme of the story is how God delivered his people from annihilation and it is clear that this deliverance involved the people of God fighting back and killing their enemies. The key thing that we have to understand about this is that in these wars God was using his people as instruments of his judgment upon his enemies.

A key passage that applies to the situation we are looking at in the book of Esther is Genesis 12:3 where God promises to Abraham and his offspring, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.” These people who were trying to kill the Jews were cursed by God and in the OT period one of the ways that God executed his curse was through being killed in war. So in this story God is bringing about his curse on the people who were seeking to annihilate his people.

One of the things that this highlights is how serious sin is and how terrible God's judgment against sin is. It is unpleasant to think of the severity of God's judgment against sinners. But the reason that we are uncomfortable with it is that we do not fully grasp how evil it is to reject God and to refuse to worship and serve him. But the Bible makes it very clear that not worshipping God is inexcusable and it is right and proper that God punish his enemies with death.

Just think of a verse like Nahum 1:2 "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies." The great message of the Bible is that God is merciful and he has sacrificed his own Son to experience his wrath against sin so that those who turn to him can be saved. But the reason salvation is so wonderful is that damnation is so real and so awful. And the Bible puts great emphasis on the fact that rebellion against God is inexcusable and a horrible rebellion against God. And that God punishes those who live in rebellion against him.

But this always must be seen in the light of God's plan of salvation. The preservation of the Jews that is the subject of the story told in the book of Esther was part of God's plan of salvation. Back in Genesis 12:3 right after God promises to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse," God adds this significant promise, "and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." That promise is fulfilled in little ways here and there in the OT, but it is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ and all that he has done to save his people from their sins.

This story, where God delivers his people through giving them the opportunity to kill those who were intent on killing them, is part of God's plan that leads to Jesus Christ and salvation in him. And whenever we read about and think about the frightening reality of God's punishment of unrepentant sinners, the other side of the story is that God is gracious and has gone through great lengths to provide salvation – forgiveness and life – to all who would turn to him in repentance and faith. And we even have a hint of that in this story. The last verse of chapter 8 says, "And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them." There was always the opportunity in OT times for people from gentile nations to join themselves to the people of God. It does not happen very often in the OT but enough to teach us that it was always possible for the pagans of OT times to turn from their idols and join themselves to the people of the true and living God of Israel.

And of course, once Jesus has died and risen from the dead, he gives his people the glorious task of making disciples of all the nations. Peter describes the heart of God when he writes in 2 Peter 3:9 that God is patient, "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." We must always keep these truths together. Yes – the wrath of God against sin and sinners is frightening and receives great emphasis in the Bible. But at the same time God sacrificed his only Son to provide a way of salvation and he "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Now getting back to spiritual warfare, there is a great shift that happens between the OT and the NT. God revealed himself and his salvation progressively through time and one of the changes between OT and NT is that spiritual warfare is no longer accomplished through physical warfare and bloodshed. The battle between God and his enemies continues to be waged and the issues at stake are no less momentous, but God's kingdom no longer advances by the edge of the sword.

Paul expresses this most clearly in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, where he writes, "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." The warfare between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom continues. And we are involved in that warfare in various ways. But the great weapon in that warfare now is the gospel – the Word of God. Through the proclamation of the gospel, the truth of God is propagated and those who receive it by repenting of their sins and trusting in Jesus are added to Christ's kingdom. But the gospel message is also a means of judgment against those who reject it. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16, where he says, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved, and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance of death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."

The issue that we are confronted with in the gospel message is a matter of life and death, no less than it was in OT times. The gospel message brings those who receive it to life, but it also is a message of judgment upon those who refuse it. We are engaged in a spiritual battle and it is a matter of life and death.

And it also involves fighting defensively in a way that is analogous to the way that the Jews in Esther's day had to fight against those who were trying to kill them. The devil and his followers are trying to kill us as well. In many cases in this world the devil and his followers literally try to kill Christians, but in our part of the world it is more about drawing us into the realm of death by turning away from the Lord and living the life of the world.

Paul speaks of this battle when he says in Ephesians 6:10-11 "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." And that armor turns out to be the gospel and the Word of God and faith and salvation. The Christian life is a battle and the armor is the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. We fight against the schemes of the devil with truth and the good news of salvation in Jesus and faith and the word of God.

But the great encouragement in the fight is that Jesus is behind the fighting of his people enabling them to win the victory. The message of the book of Esther is that God delivered his people. His name is not even mentioned to show that his work is only visible to faith, but the message of the book is that God delivered his people and that is the message of the Bible. We are involved in the fight, but God is the one who gives the victory. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 6:10 "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."

One more thought from this last section of the book of Esther. When the people heard that Mordecai with the king's blessing had decreed that they could fight and defend themselves there was joy and celebration. 8:17, "And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday." And after the fight was over the celebration continued and a permanent memorial was set up called Purim. And the people committed themselves to keep that feast and remember how the Lord had delivered them.

We have our memorials as well – God-appointed times of celebration because of the victory that God has won for us in Christ. Jesus has instituted the Lord's Supper as a perpetual reminder and celebration of his death and he has given us the Lord's Day as a perpetual reminder and celebration of his resurrection. By his death and resurrection, Jesus has rescued us from the greatest enemies of all, sin and death and Satan. And there is much reason for us to celebrate and rejoice.

We rejoice because of what we have been saved from. The reality of the wrath of God against sin and sinners is a sobering reality. The joy and celebration is related to the greatness of salvation. And it is related to the love and grace of God in not giving us what we deserve but rescuing us at great cost to himself in sending Jesus to be the propitiation for our sins. The book of Esther has shown us how God was at work in the story it tells to deliver his people. It is part of the story that leads to Jesus Christ and what he did to save us from the curse of sin. And the love and the grace of God revealed in the story gives us much reason to rejoice.