

“Old Testament Gospel”

Esther 8:1-17

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In his recent book, “Irresistible,” popular Pastor Andy Stanley claims, “When it comes to a stumbling block to faith, the Old Testament is right up there at the top of the list.” He goes on to say that since many people choose not to turn to Jesus Christ because of things found in the Old Testament, pastors should “unhitch their ministry” from it and focus just on the New Testament.

Now Stanley is correct that many Christians fail to appreciate the extent to which the new covenant, the New Testament fulfills and supersedes the Old. However, when he claims he still believes the Old Testament is the inspired Word of God, I am not sure what he means. And I suspect he would say that I am making a poor decision as a pastor to preach a sermon on Esther 8. This is the type of passage many folks today think is barbaric and offensive.

It would be easy to skip over a text like this, however, I am convinced that **2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture** (including Esther 8) **is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.** Our goal this morning is to experience some of the profitable things the Lord has for us in this passage. Let’s pause and pray that will happen.

Okay, quick review... Esther, the young Jewish girl who has become queen of the Persian Empire about 500 years B.C., has foiled the plot of Haman the Agagite, the king’s top advisor, to exterminate the entire Jewish population. In fact, Haman is executed on the “gallows” which he intended to use to kill Esther’s cousin, Mordecai. That brings us to chapter 8.

**Esther 8:1, 2 On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.** given There is a lot of ironic, poetic justice here. As Haman hangs on the gallows he had built for Mordecai, Mordecai is given Haman’s highly exalted position in the empire. But there is

a problem. Haman is dead, but the edict to wipe out the Jews, which he had convinced the king to sign, is still in effect. On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Adar on the Jewish calendar, March 7, on ours, 473 B..C, everyone was to attack their Jewish neighbors, kill them and confiscate their property. And there is a big complication. The tradition in the Persian Empire was that any law or edict declared by the king could not be repealed. **Esther 8:8b** says, “**An edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked.**” King Ahasuerus had sealed the edict wicked Haman had written in his name. The only solution would be to issue another decree that would make it difficult or impossible to implement the first decree. So, Esther makes this request. **Esther 8:5,6a** “**If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?**”

In response, the king recounts how he has executed Haman and given Esther his property and then says, yes, **Esther 8:8a** **you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king’s ring.** There will be a new edict., composed this time not by Haman, but by Esther and Mordecai. Verses 9 and 10 explain how the edict is written, copied into many different languages, affixed with the king’s seal, and sent to all 127 provinces in the Persian Empire.

What did the edict say? **Esther 8:11,12** **That the king allowed the Jews who were I every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.**

The people who were the defenseless target of an evil plot to annihilate them, are now empowered to

defend themselves. It is hard to know exactly how this was to work. Apparently, under Haman's edict the Jews would have no right to defend themselves from those trying to kill them and confiscate their property. Any actions taken by the authorities would be supportive of those attacking the Jews. Under the new edict, the Jews efforts to defend themselves will be supported by the authorities. **Esther 8:13 A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies.** The implication is that the Jews will be allowed not only to defend themselves but kill those enemies who try to kill them.

The copies of the new edicts are delivered and posted. **Esther 8:15 Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple,** (he has come a long way from the sackcloth and ashes he had worn earlier) **and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.**

Some of this response is proper protocol for what is essentially a new prime minister. However, even among the pagan Persians, Mordecai was more popular than the wicked Haman. Though the perspectives of unbelievers are always distorted in some way, these folks are still usually able to discern between good and evil. That is something we should keep in mind in our own current context as well. And if the pagan Persians are glad Mordecai has replaced Haman, the Jews, Mordecai's people, are ecstatic. The text says, **Esther 8:16 The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor.** And then the writer tells us **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 many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.** The focus of this fear of the Jews is probably the great power Mordecai now wields, but the new edict plays a role as well.

Other verses say, "Many people of other nationalities become Jews." Or "tried to pass themselves off as Jews." Perhaps some "conversions" were genuine, but like so often happens, when the tide turns, many folks will be deceptive if they think that is in their best interests. While Esther had once hidden her Jewish identity to

protect herself, pagan Persians are now adopting a Jewish identity to protect themselves.

Okay, that is what happens. Now, let's turn our focus back to the part of this passage that some folks today find very troubling. **Esther 8:11 the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods.**

On the surface this is a mirror image of the edict that Haman has made, and the question raised: should not Mordecai and Esther have been better than Haman? Annihilating your enemies, killing not only them, but their women and children. Really?? That type of genocide just seems evil. It is what people like Hitler, Stalin and maybe Putin do. And frankly, I hope everyone in this room is troubled by the thought of innocent women and children being killed.

So, what do we do with a passage like this? Well, one option is to ignore it, not talk or think about this portion of scripture. That is what I think "unhitching" ourselves from this Old Testament would involve. Yet, as I said earlier, that is not what we want to do. The Lord has good things for us in this text, thing which will be profitable for our souls and good for our spiritual health. So, a better option, when we are troubled by what the Old Testament passage seems to say, is to take a closer look and make sure we understand what the text actually says. Study Bible notes, a good commentary, even a chat with a pastor can be helpful at this point.

In this case, there are a number of suggestions which have been made that make this passage easier to swallow. First, some say verse 11 should read the Jews, Jewish men, will be able to kill those who attack them and attack Jewish women and children. Maybe.

Another suggestion is that the verse means the Jews are allowed to kill all their enemies, including women and children involved in the attack. Or it is possible the text really means the Jews had Persian legal permission to kill women and children but did not do that because it was not the right thing to do.

Or it is also possible the Jews did not do the right thing? That is not a huge shock, because just like us they were sinners. This is not an explicit command from God, but an edict written by Esther and Mordecai that gives permission to kill women and children. We know Esther and Mordecai have made some ungodly choices. When we have historical narratives like the book of Esther it is sometimes difficult to know if the God inspired writer is merely reporting what occurred, or if he is endorsing what happened, kind of giving the Lord's stamp of approval.

So, Pastor Dan, which is it? What is the right answer to the question? What is the correct way to understand verse 11, and the women and children part? My answer: I am not sure. My guess would be the edict was intended to allow the Jews to defend themselves against whoever attacked them, even women and children. But I do know that just because I don't understand everything about a particular text, or just because I am troubled by some implications of a passage, doesn't mean I should ignore that part of the Bible. Yes, I should continue to study and learn, as you should as well, but not grasping every detail about a text should not prevent me from hearing what God is saying through His Word.

Okay, so what is God saying to us today through this passage? I want to highlight three things. They all flow from the conviction that the focus of the entire Bible, including the Old Testament, including the book of Esther, is God's work of redemption through Jesus Christ. Oh, there are often many other very practical lessons that are profitable for our souls in these texts, and I am sure there are some in Esther chapter 8. Yet, as Jesus reminded the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:27 the Old Testament is full of things concerning Him, things about Jesus.

**First Lesson:** We should rejoice that the Jews were saved from Haman's plot to exterminate them. In the United States we celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup>, Independence Day, because that was when the continental Congress declared we would be free from British rule. In a few weeks we celebrate Veterans Day, honoring the men and women who were willing to risk their lives to defend that freedom. As Christians, people who have been saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, we celebrate the events leading to the great victory Jesus won for us through His death and resurrection.

I have mentioned before that the book of Esther records an important battle in the war between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Remember the Lord's words to the serpent in **Genesis 3:15 I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and hers. He will crush your head, and you will bruise His heel.**

The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy is when Jesus the Messiah is crucified on the cross and then rises from the dead. That is when the seed of the woman crushes the seed of the serpent. Haman, whether he realizes it or not, was intent on keeping that from happening. If he could exterminate the Jews, there would be no Messiah 500 years later. There would be no Savior.

In **Genesis 22:18** the Lord promises Abraham, **In your seed** (your offspring) **all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.** The descendants of Abraham, the Jewish people, are the vessel through which *thee* descendant of Abraham will come and bring salvation to people from all nations who trust in Him. It certainly is not a surprise when Haman's plan to thwart God's plan fails. Yet, it is still a reason for us to rejoice even 2500 years later, because the coming of Messiah is the source of the greatest blessing in our lives today.

Second Lesson: Remember those guilty of sin deserve to be punished. Those who attacked the Jewish people in Persia, deserve their fate. In fact, throughout the Old Testament we see many examples of "holy war," where the Lord either directly or through His chosen people, Israel, kills and destroys those who oppose Him.

These physical battles are indeed part of the war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. From the beginning of time, God has made war on sin and evil. Yet, these are not abstract concepts. Sin and evil are always connected with real people, people who deserve God's punishment.

Yet, remember we too deserve to be punished. The Bible says, **Romans 3:10, 23 For there is no one who is righteous, not one. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** And as **Romans 6:23a** says, **the wages of sin is death.** But the verse continues **Romans 6:23b the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Savior.** When we use the word "salvation" we are implying that we begin from something. That

something is something terrible and real, it is a just wrath against sin and evil.

Yet, the good news is that Jesus Christ has chosen to experience the wrath in our place. The violence of God against sin and evil is just as real in the New Testament as it is in the old. In fact, Jesus Christ is the great divine warrior who waged the ultimate war against sin and evil on the cross on behalf of all of us whom God will deliver from final destruction.

Now, some folks claim God is too loving to punish anyone, including the most wicked. Yet, that is a twisted understanding of love. The full extend of God's love for us is seen when His wrath is poured out on Jesus for my sin and yours. Friends, whenever you are tempted to doubt God's love for you. Remember the cross, remember what Jesus has done for you. And remember what it means, that you have been delivered from a punishment you truly deserved.

**Lesson Three:** Praise God for His magnificent plan of salvation. Be in awe of the wisdom and power of God. We mentioned before the foolish pride of the Persian Royal court. Once a king gave his seal of approval to an edict or law, the understanding was that it could never be changed. They pretended their laws could somehow be eternal, something can only be true of God's law. Still, when Haman's edict was sealed by the king, nothing could be done to rescind or cancel it. What was required was another edict that would supersede the first and prevent it from being implemented.

King Ahasuerus' inability to rescind that edict of death parallels what happens in the New Testament. God, the King of the Universe, cannot simply rescind the decree pronounced in the Garden of Eden against humanity, those who sin shall die. This refers not just to physical death, but also spiritual, eternal death, sometimes called Hell. That is what we all deserve. And this is a decree made by the eternal God, who does not and cannot change His mind. Despite what many folks today think, the Lord will not simply just forgive everyone. A righteous and just God, can not ignore sin or let it go unpunished.

But what God could do, is issue a counter-decree of life, like Esther had Ahasuerus do. And He did just that, we call it the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As the song says, "On the cross where Jesus dies, the wrath was satisfied."

When Jesus, God the Son, experienced the wrath, the of father in our place, it enabled God to forgive us, adopt us as his children and give us eternal life. It enables Him to do so without violating that first edict, that those who sin must die. As the apostle Paul explains in **Romans 3:26b** God does this so **that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus**. In other words, the Lord is able to forgive and save us without compromising His righteousness or justice. That is one of the reason Paul says in **Romans 11:33** **Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgement and how inscrutable his ways!**

I close with two thoughts:

1 - Don't give up on the Old Testament. I plan to conclude this series in Esther next Sunday. And then focus on the New Testament, but keep reading your Bibles, including those first 39 books, the Old Testament. After all, as Martin Luther said, "Christ is found on every page of the Bible. In the New Testament we learn His name is Jesus." So, friends, work to find Christ on every page of the Old Testament. As you see the glorious plan of God being worked out in experiences of ancient Israel, rejoice and praise God that through Messiah, through Jesus, you experience His wisdom and grace every single day.

2 - Make sure you are trusting in Jesus the Messiah, as your Savior and Lord. That is the only way to experience life, abundant life and eternal life. If you are not sure what that means talk to me or Pastor Mark later. Friends, if you do know what that means, and are trusting in him as your Savior and Lord you, like the apostle Paul, have every reason to praise God for His amazing plan of salvation.