

"A Reason to Celebrate"

Esther 9:1- 10:3

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In another month we will be celebrating Thanksgiving. It is one of America's favorite holidays. Yet, there is a lot of variety in what exactly people celebrate. For many, family, food, and football are what Thanksgiving is all about. If asked about why we call the day "Thanksgiving," folks may say it is a day to express gratitude but to whom that gratitude is expressed is often a bit fuzzy.

One junior high textbook said, "The first Thanksgiving celebration was a time when the pilgrims gave thanks to their Indian friends for helping them through the winter." It seems few people even begin to understand the Christian devotion that motivated almost everything the pilgrims did.

In traditional narratives of history, the pilgrims were treated as American heroes, but now they are often portrayed as oppressors of Native Americans. Incidentally, though traditional historians often glossed over some of the flaws and failing of the settlers of Plymouth colony, Revisionist historians tend to be agenda driven. Their portrayals of the pilgrims are usually far removed from historical fact.

Okay, my point is that whether it is Thanksgiving or any other holiday, people often celebrate without really understanding the origin or meaning of that holiday. That was likely true in ancient Israel as well.

The Jewish people began celebrating the feast of Purim in 473 B.C. I suspect 50 or 60 some years later many of the folks no longer had a clear memory of the remarkable events that led to Purim. It was then that God inspired a writer to compose the book of Esther. It serves as a permanent reminder of what the Lord had done among His people and why it should be commemorated and celebrated each year.

This morning we conclude our journey through this book as we explore chapters 9 and 10. I believe we will see that even though we may not celebrate the feast of Purim, our souls can be strengthened by this ancient account of God's

faithfulness to His people. Let's pause and pray that will happen.

Esther 9:1 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.

Nine months have gone by since the events of Chapter 8, where Mordecai got King Ahasuerus to make a second edict, giving the Jews the right to defend themselves from those who would attack them. This was in response to the first edict that Haman had gotten the king to sign three months before that, which encouraged people all over the Persian empire to attack the Jews, murder them and plunder their property. Incidentally, the dates we have mentioned are based on the Jewish lunar calendar. The twelfth month, Adar is not equivalent to our December, but rather would be March on our calendar. It is March 7, 473 B.C. when these events occur. The summary is pretty simple. As the NLT puts it, **Esther 9:1b On that day, the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but quite the opposite happened. It was the Jews who overpowered their enemies.** The writer then gives the details of what occurred. Because Esther's cousin, Mordecai, is now the prime minister, instead of the wicked Haman, all the Persian authorities are helping the Jews.

Esther 9:5 The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they please to those who hated them. That simply means their self-defense involved killing all who attacked them. But **verse 10**, notes, **"They laid no hand on the plunder."** They were not fighting for personal gain, but to defend themselves from evil enemies. **Esther 9:6 In Susa the citadel itself (the capital city) the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men.** They also killed the ten sons of Haman. They are listed in the text, but I am not going to try and pronounce their names. However, it appears each of them was named after a pagan god. This is seen not just

as a battle between the Jews and their enemy but is indeed a battle in the long war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, between God and those who oppose Him.

Learning what has occurred, (verses 11-15), Esther asked two things of the king. First, that the bodies of Haman's ten sons be hanging on the gallows, meaning that they be impaled on large poles or stakes. This seems rather gruesome, but it is something that would deter those tempted to follow Haman's wicked ways. The second request is that the Jewish people be allowed to fight their enemies for one more day. Though it is possible Esther is simply being vengeful, it is more likely she knew there were still others in the city who were a threat to her people.

The king agrees and both those things happen, with the Jews killing 300 more men the next day in Susa. However, the 800 killed in Susa are just a fraction of the casualties. **Esther 9:16 Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces** (throughout the huge Persian empire) **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.** The author explains how throughout the empire the 14th day of Adar, March 8th on our calendar, the day after the fighting, was a day of rest and feasting. In Susa, since the fighting continued two days, it was the following day, the 15th of Adar, which was the day of rest and feasting. This explains why there are two different days of celebration, one in the capital city and another in all the outlying areas.

Esther 9:20 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, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, 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.

The spontaneous celebrations have now been organized into an annual festival, and it would be called Purim. This has nothing to do with the

town in western Minnesota. Rather, this takes us back to chapter, where the evil Haman has cast pur or a lot, the plural is Purim, to choose the date when he intended to exterminate the Jews.

The thirteenth of Adar was when the pur fell. This ended up being not the day of destruction for the Jews, but the day of their great victory. **Esther 9:27, 28 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 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.** Esther and Mordecai make sure these instructions are written and distributed to every part of the empire. The intention is that all the Jewish communities would be united in celebrating this festival.

The book closes with what is in our Bibles, three verses in chapter 10. These tell us how following the Jews victory over their enemies, Mordecai continued to be the prime minister under King Ahasuerus. He was a popular figure. **Esther 10:3b For he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.** The implication is that under Esther and Mordecai, the Jews living in Susa and other parts of the Persian empire enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity. Yes, it sometimes looked grim for the Jews in the book of Esther, but we have a very happy ending.

Okay, folks, that is our text and the book of Esther. But, once again I ask, what is the Lord saying to us today through this passage? There are things that come to my mind.

#1 – Holidays celebrating what God has done are not a bad thing. Our text today, and really the entire book, provide the background of Purim. This feast is different from the other seven talked about in the Old Testament. The feasts of Passover, Unleavened bread, first fruits, harvest, trumpets, tabernacles, and the day of atonement were all proscribed by God.

The Lord commanded the people of Israel to observe these holy days of holidays. Purim, on the other hand, originated from a spontaneous

celebration following the victory over their enemies. Mordecai formalizes it to an annual celebration, proscribing how and when it should be celebrated. Yet, the book of Esther is part of the Old Testament, thus Purim is a Biblical feast.

That makes it different than the feast of lights, AKA Hanukkah, which originated during the time of the Maccabees, after the Old Testament was complete. The Jewish people continue to observe Hanukkah, but it is not a Biblical holiday. In some circles holidays are a controversial topic. Because we are not commanded to celebrate Christmas or Easter, some folks say it is wrong to do so, that these are worldly holidays. Other folks, or maybe some of the same people, claim that Christians should be observing the Old Testament festivals, because, after all, God commanded His people to celebrate these feasts.

Some of you have probably had conversations with folks who said those things. Or maybe you yourself kind of wonder about which holidays we should be celebrating. What all believers should keep in mind is what the Lord tells us through the apostle Paul in **Colossians 2:16,17** **Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.** I think this verse makes it clear that there are zero holidays that a Christian is required to celebrate. The Old Testament feasts are clearly part of the old covenant, which has now been superseded by the new. These were shadows that the glory of the son, S-O-N, has now made unnecessary.

It also seems clear that no post-biblical holidays, Christmas, Easter, St. Valentine's Day or even St. Urho's day, is something we must observe, or that it is somehow a sin if we don't. On the other hand, Christians are free to celebrate any holiday, as long as it does so in a Christ-honoring way.

If Christmas traditions include getting drunk on Christmas Eve, that is not Christ-honoring. You are also free to celebrate Passover, or the feast of Tabernacles, or Purim. However, if you do so and forget that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of these feasts or think observing them makes you spiritually superior to other Christians, then you are not celebrating them in a Christ-honoring way.

It troubles me when I see folks trying to interfere with the liberty of another Christian, or maybe falsely judges someone because that person does or does not observe a particular holiday. Don't do that. If you believe it is appropriate to celebrate a certain holiday, do it with enthusiasm and joy, in a way that honors the Lord. And don't let holidays divide you from other believers in Jesus.

#2 Be encouraged that through His sovereign providence, God works out His plan and purposes in our world. You have heard this before as we have gone through the book of Esther, because it is one of the major themes. Even though the Lord is not mentioned explicitly anywhere in the book. His fingerprints are everywhere.

Last week in chapter 8 we read that Mordecai and the king issued a decree, giving the Jews the right to defend themselves when others attacked them on the 13th of Adar. Was there any doubt in your mind at that point about what would happen?

Did you expect to read chapter 9 and find out that even though the Jews were now allowed to defend themselves, they still ended up being slaughtered by their enemies? I don't think so! At least if you have been paying attention to the book, you would not think so. The edict Mordecai and the king issued was the culmination of a series of remarkable providences, events that on the surface seem coincidental, but upon further reflection have clearly been the Lord orchestrating His plan.

How does God do that? Through millions of different ways. And He is usually doing it behind the scenes, so we don't see Him working, but as we look back, we see the result of His work, often in magnificent ways.

When the Lord led Mordecai to issue his decree, it in effect guaranteed the outcome. The fact God intended to preserve His people from destruction assures their survival. The rest is just details, but important details because it reflects God at work.

A few weeks ago, I noted that one of the implications of God's providence is that there are really no accidents in our lives. Everything that happened in your life this past year or will happen in the weeks ahead, has a purpose. You may never

understand what that purpose is, at least on this earth, but you can be confident that **Romans 8:28 In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.**

As I was preaching that sermon, in the 9:00 service, I thought, "Wow, that is really cool! That is amazing. No accidents in my life. Everything that happens will be ultimately used for God's glory and for my eternal good." Wow! Now, I have believed that for a long time, but a few weeks ago that truth brought encouragement to both my mind and heart in a way that I have seldom experienced. Friends, I hope you find encouragement in that truth as well. No matter what is happening in your life right now, if you are a believer in Jesus, God has a purpose, a good purpose for you. That is a very encouraging truth.

Another dimension of God's providence in the book of Esther is that He accomplishes His purpose of protecting the Jewish people without using miracles. The book of Esther makes no reference to God or any miraculous events. God is behind the scenes using ordinary occurrences and seemingly coincidences to deliver His people.

Folks, that is encouraging for many Christians who go through life, seldom, if ever, experiencing a miracle. They rarely, if ever, have any direct contact with God. They don't see Him in a vision or hear an audible voice. Oh, they pray, they read the Bible, they believe the Lord speaks to them through that, but they don't have those direct, miraculous encounters with God that some folks talk about, and that people in the Bible had. Some people in the Bible had.

As far as we know, Esther and Mordecai never experienced a miracle, never saw a vision, never heard God's voice. Yet, the Lord was working in their lives. He protected them and blessed them in marvelous ways.

Friends, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you can be confident God will protect and bless you, just as He did for Esther and Mordecai, even if you never experience a spectacular miracle, see a vision, or hear an audible voice. Now, the fact the Lord usually stays behind the scenes, stays invisible, as He providently accomplishes His purposes, certainly doesn't mean He is not real.

The invisible God is a God to be trusted, worshipped, and obeyed.

#3 We can celebrate the happy ending of the book of Esther, because it is really good news for us. Oh, I am not talking about the peace and prosperity the Jewish people enjoy. Mordecai and Esther and all the rest of the Jews in Susa during Esther's reign eventually died. But the Jewish descendants survived.

They would endure 400 years, 400 years, in a spiritual desert where God was silent. This was a time when there were no prophets. But then one day in a little Jewish village a teenaged girl encountered an angel, who told her, **Luke 1: 31-33 You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.**

Folks, that is really what the book of Esther is all about. It is what the Old Testament is all about. God working through Israel, the Jewish people, to bring the Jewish Messiah into the world, the Messiah who would be the Savior and King of all humanity.

If Haman would have succeeded in wiping out the Jews, that baby would have never been born. The seed of the serpent would have crushed the head of the seed of the woman and all hope would have been lost. Yet, the Jews survived, the baby was born, and at that point, the invisible God became visible. And He lived, died, and rose again to bring salvation to you, to me, and to everyone who, by grace, through faith, receives Him as Savior and Lord.

When, on that road to Emmaus, Jesus explained to those two disciples everything written about Him in the Old Testament, I am confident He talked about the book of Esther, and how Haman's plan to thwart God's plan, was thwarted instead, not merely so the Jews would survive, but so that Messiah would come, and save all those who would trust in Him.