

A Feast for Deliverance

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[0 : 00] I'd like to add my welcome to Jonathan's. Good to see you all. Before we start, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it is sharper than a two-edged sword.

We thank you that it reveals, it teaches us, it trains us in goodness and righteousness. It points us to you, and ultimately, it points us to your son, Jesus.

I pray that the words of my mouth would be honoring to you, and I pray that you would be building us up and challenging us this afternoon from your word. Amen.

So Harold Wilson, the British Prime Minister, famously said that a week is a long time in politics. I suspect that the U.S. presidential election suggests that that phrase is just as true today as it was back then when Wilson first said it.

A lot can happen in politics in a very short space of time. Things were just the same in the Persian Empire way back when Esther was alive. The book of Esther spanned several years.

[1 : 05] Esther had been queen for about five years when the edict for the genocide of God's people had been published by Haman. What happens in these chapters all happens very, very fast.

Within the space of less than two days, Persian politics undergoes a massive change. Another Prime Minister, this time Harold Macmillan, another Harold, described the challenges of politics as events, dear boy, events.

As Prime Minister, or as President, or as Supreme Leader, you have a certain degree of power and control. But you do not have power over events.

Donald Trump might behave like he does, but events are the one thing that we can't control. We all know this. Things happen. Things fall apart. What if there was someone who controlled events?

We've said each week that the big question posed by the book of Esther is whether God is still there or not. In episode four, a feast for deliverance, his guiding hand is very obvious behind events in the longest day of Haman's political career.

[2 : 20] In what happens, we see a story of deliverance through a series of reversals. So our first two points are a reversal of honor and a reversal of execution.

And then where we're going to finish up is by coming to the cross to think about how the reversals here in Esther are pointing us ultimately to the great act of reversal and deliverance that God performed in Christ on the cross.

So first, let's look at the reversal of honor that we find in chapter six. The particular word for honor here occurs seven times in this chapter.

And the reversal of honor is perhaps the finest moment of irony in the whole Bible. I think it's certainly the funniest. So the king can't sleep. Of all the nights, this is the night that the king has insomnia.

His desired cure, he wants to hear all about his reign. Narcissistic world leaders weren't invented in our generation. So he has the chronicles read to him, which arguably might put anyone to sleep.

[3 : 25] But instead, the king sits up straighter because his attendant reads about that time when Mordecai's intelligence saved the king's life. We saw that way back in chapter two.

And obviously, this is quite a big deal for Xerxes to revisit. He's alive because Mordecai exposed his would-be assassins. So he asks his attendant in verse three, what honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?

The answer, nothing. Now, this went way against Persian protocol. The Persians always honored those who had performed noteworthy duties. For example, other historical documents tell us that Xerxes once made a certain individual a governor over one of the Persian provinces because he'd saved the king's brother.

So for Mordecai to have received nothing for saving, probably in Xerxes' view, the more important sibling, that would have been quite shameful. Is there anyone in the court?

Asks the king. Aha, luckily, Haman has just arrived. If you remember, at the end of our last episode, Haman, filled with fury, was marching off to see Xerxes to ask him if he could impale Mordecai on a giant stake that he'd set up in his backyard.

[4 : 40] So, with Mordecai's murder on his mind, he arrives at the king's court. But before Haman can bring his request to the king, the sleepless sovereign has a question to put to Haman.

Verse seven, what should be done for the man the king delights to honor? Here, Haman's pride really gets the better of him, doesn't it? Now, Haman thought to himself, who is there that the king would rather honor than me?

So he answered the king, for the man the king delights to honor. Let them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head.

Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, this is what is done for the man the king delights to honor.

See how much that honor word comes up. What an excellent idea, thinks the king. Haman's really thought this through. I wonder why. Haman, he says, go at once.

[5 : 43] Get the robe, get the horse, and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai. For Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate, do not neglect anything that you've recommended.

One of my best friends has a vein that pops out in the side of his head when he's trying not to show that he's angry. We discovered this during a particularly brutal game of risk, where things really weren't going so well for him.

I suspect that Haman, when he hears the command of his king, the vein was popping. You can always hear the vein popping as the king gives him this command.

I suspect it probably didn't pop back for some time, given that he then had to parade around his nemesis, around the city, saying, this is what is done for the man that the king delights to honor. Back in chapter 3, when Haman was first honored by Xerxes, we noticed just how jarring it was, because it came straight after the account of Mordecai saving the king.

[6 : 42] But now the tables have turned, and Mordecai is the one who has been honored in this wonderfully ironic reversal. Look at verse 12. Back in chapter 4, verse 7, we were told that Mordecai said to Esther's eunuch everything that had happened to him, including the money that Haman had agreed to pay into the treasury for the destruction of the Jews.

And it's the same phrase that we get here in chapter 6, verse 12. But now Haman is the one telling folks about everything that has happened to him. So we've got that parallel.

The narrator is using these parallels to show us that things are reversing. Events are really spiraling out of control for Haman. And the end of the chapter reveals why, in case we were in any doubt. Haman gets whisked away to Esther's second feast, but not before his wife has told him. Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him. You will surely come to ruin. This might seem a bit odd at first, but it actually cuts to the heart of what the book of Esther is all about. Haman clearly hadn't revealed either to his wife or the king which particular people group he was planning to ethnically cleanse.

[8 : 13] When his wife realizes that he's picked a fight with the Jews, she can see her husband's ruin on the horizon. Remember how Mordecai was able to tell Esther, if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place.

But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. Mordecai was convinced that God would not abandon his people. And he had a certainty that at the very least, a remnant would be delivered. He was convinced because of God's promises to his people and his actions towards his people in history.

And I suspect that Zeresh, Haman's wife, is also remembering history. And remembering that Israel's God does not suffer foes or fools. Perhaps she's remembering the Exodus, where God brought plagues on the evil of Egypt and destroyed its army in the Red Sea as it pursued Israel. Perhaps she's remembering the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, who besieged Jerusalem, but whose army died in the night. Or maybe she remembers Haman's own ancestors, Agag and the Amalekites, who tried to destroy Israel on multiple occasions, but who faced God's wrath instead.

[9 : 36] God's people have never been abandoned by God, not even in exile in Persia. Deliverance will always come to God's people. And the deliverance always comes because God is in control of events.

Christians sometimes use the word providence to describe this. Israel's God is the God who is in control of the world, and he will not let his people be annihilated.

Haman's downfall is not merely events. It is God. There are many reasons why we might doubt God's providence, but it's helpful to remember that in this section we can see God's hand clearly working.

But it wasn't as obvious, was it, in earlier parts of Esther? Certainly not to the characters within it. Providence is not always obvious, but God is always there and is always in control.

And that's essential to our understanding of Esther. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

[10 : 41] We may only see events, but behind events, good and bad, is the God who always delivers his people. He is our hope and he is our deliverer.

What we see in chapter 7, and this is us on to our second point now, is that this deliverance in Esther comes hand in hand with another reversal. The reversal of execution.

Because God's deliverance of his people from the enemy also requires the defeat of the enemy. So chapter 7 is Esther's second feast.

A feast that I'm calling a feast for deliverance. Because this is the moment where deliverance actually occurs. We've had hope before. We've had confidence that God was still there before. But now the actual act of deliverance is set in motion. We mentioned how things have really sped up in these chapters. And Haman's downfall is particularly rapid.

[11 : 40] It's like machine gun fire, how rapid it is. The king asks Esther why she's put on two banquets and risked her life in coming before the king. As she promised, she tells him. If I find favor with you, your majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life.

This is my petition. And spare my people. This is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated.

If we'd merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet. Because no such distress would justify disturbing the king. Now imagine being the king and hearing that.

And then the killer blow comes when the king asks who is responsible. And it's just so quick. An adversary, an enemy, this vile Haman. Haman's response?

Sheer terror. I think verse 7 is quite telling. The king got up in a rage, left his wine, and went out into the palace garden. I don't know if you've noticed, but throughout the story, Xerxes drinks his way through the narrative.

[12 : 45] I don't think it's insignificant that he now leaves his wine and sets it down. His famous rage is about to explode. And Haman knows that the game is up.

And then Haman makes probably the worst possible decision he ever could have made. So interesting fact about the Persian king's harem. No man except the king could be in the same room as one of the king's wives or his concubines.

So Haman's got a choice. Does Haman leave the room, thus making himself look more guilty? Or does he join the king in the garden? Neither ideal. He does neither. He chooses a third way.

But his third way is perhaps even more questionable. He decides to go down on his knees before the queen and begs for his life as she reclines. And of course, it's at this point that Xerxes comes in. Of course, Xerxes was in part responsible for the edict of annihilation. Even if Haman was the mastermind who's clearly manipulated the king. With Haman pawing at the queen pathetically, the king says, Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?

[13 : 53] Haman is, in short, done for. In chapter 6, Haman had gone home with his head covered in grief. And that's a little foreshadowing of what now happens. His face is covered immediately by the guards.

And one of the attending eunuchs pipes up and says, A pole reaching to a height of 50 cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.

Apparently, it can get even worse for Haman.

Now Xerxes knows his plan to execute Mordecai, the man who saved the king. And so coupled with how the king has rather conveniently decided to interpret Haman's actions towards Esther, he is guilty very much of high treason.

And now, an appropriate punishment has arisen, literally. The king said, Impale him on it. So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai.

And then the king's fury subsided. In Deuteronomy 21, we're told that anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse.

[14:55] It's part of God's law for his people in the Old Testament. And it reads literally, anyone hung on a tree. It's exactly what happens to Haman, isn't it? It's exactly the same words used.

For Haman's evil and his hatred towards God and his people, he is under God's curse. And the just punishment for his actions is that he's hanged on a tree.

That pole had Mordecai's name written on it. But in a stunning reversal, it's Haman who ends up being hoisted on his own petard, to use a Shakespearean phrase, if I may. As Proverbs tells us, whoever digs a pit will fall into it.

If someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them. And we might add, whoever builds a stake will be impaled on it. It speaks to the truth that evil is self-destructive.

Evil often ends up wreaking its own destruction. Sometimes, of course, people do get away with evil for their whole lives. It's true. I was just reading a terribly sad story in the news earlier today about a headmaster at a school who had got away for his whole life, despite several court cases, molesting and raping children at a school that he was the headmaster of.

[16:10] It's terribly sad. There are rapists who go unpunished and unchecked. There's killers who never get caught. There's the powerful who continue to feed off those without power. And that is where the Bible's understanding of justice is really rather comforting.

Haman and others end up paying the price for their evil in this life. But with God, every act of evil is dealt with after death. The justice of God is meted out against Haman and every evil deed, whether it was revealed in this life or concealed.

God sees and God cares. The episode ends in the first few verses of chapter 8, where Esther's given the estate of Haman. Esther reveals her relationship with Mordecai, and Mordecai then replaces Haman.

It's a complete reversal, as the king now gives Mordecai his signet ring, which used to rest on Haman's finger. The story doesn't end there, because there's still the edict calling for the genocide to deal with.

Nevertheless, the enemy, the master manipulator, the forked-tongued Haman, is dead. And Mordecai, whose life was on the line, has now replaced him in the sight of the king.

[17:24] And so in an episode of stunning reversals, God, in his providence, has given his people newfound honor in the sight of the king of Persia. And he has brought his curse and his justice upon the hateful enemy of his children.

And it's really good to know that this same God is still there and still cares for his children in just the same way. It's at this point that I'd like to come to our last big idea.

We've thought about the two big reversals in this episode of Esther, and I want to think about an even bigger reversal that they foreshadow. The act of reversal that happened when Jesus was hanged on a cross.

If you remember that last week we said that the whole Old Testament was about Jesus. We said that in the Old Testament, in the Old Testament stories, there are patterns.

These patterns are all pointing forward towards and building towards Jesus. It's a developing story where all these patterns culminate in a variety of different ways in Jesus himself.

[18:31] Jesus is at the heart of the Bible story. And so to fully appreciate this episode in Esther, we need to see how these patterns in this episode find their fullest expression in Christ himself.

And so the episode finishes with Haman getting the punishment he deserved for his hatred, for his lies, and for his plans to murder and exterminate an entire people group, the people of God.

And he suffered a punishment, which is a picture, as we've said, of God's curse. He was hanged on a tree. I think it's quite hard to read this without thinking about what Paul said to the Galatian Christians.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole or hung on a tree.

Christ died a not dissimilar death to Haman. As Paul says, that bit from Deuteronomy applied to Jesus' death just as it applied to Haman's. But the key difference, of course, is that Jesus was not deserving of such a death.

[19 : 34] He was completely innocent. Even the Roman governor, who signed the death warrant, admitted that he was innocent. So what does such a parallel tell us?

Well, the thing is, we all deserve God's curse. Our culture is incredibly resistant to that kind of idea, but that's the truth of it. Your heart and my heart is evil.

Admittedly, I am hopeful that you haven't planned any genocides like Haman did. Fingers crossed. But the truth is, you are by nature not a good person. We like to think of ourselves, I suspect whether we're following Jesus or not, as, at root, good people.

But a little introspection reveals that we're not as good as we think or like to think. When was the last time you lashed out in anger or frustration? When was the last time you gave in to your own selfishness and self-centeredness?

When was the last time you looked at someone who wasn't your spouse in a way that you know you really shouldn't have? When was the last time you told a lie just to save face or save your skin or make things easier?

[20 : 46] You and I are not as good as we think. We are, to use the Bible's word, sinful. But why does that mean that we deserve God's curse?

It's a good question. God is perfectly just, and so are his standards. Because ultimately, where does one draw the line? Anything other than God's gold standard is absolutely inconsistent. You know, I don't know about you, but I don't want an inconsistent judge if I'm ever in court for something. That was the judge in that case I was reading about in the news. This guy had been brought before the judges many times, but the judges were inconsistent, and they didn't believe the testimony of children against the testimony of an upstanding citizen.

Couldn't do wrong. I want a judge who appreciates real justice. Unfortunately, because of this standard, Paul can say in Ephesians that you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air. That's the devil. The spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. We are all in line to experience God's curse because we all, by nature, don't follow God.

[22 : 05] Instead, we follow our own hearts. We follow the evil of the enemy, like Haman. And therefore, by nature, we are dead in our sins. It's not a great prognosis, is it?

But here's the good news. Here's the gospel hope. Paul says, But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. God is just, but God is also merciful. And this episode of Esther is all about deliverance, and that deliverance happens when the enemy is hanged on a tree. And this is looking forward to Jesus, who, because of God's mercy, died on a tree in order to defeat the enemy. How did this work? Well, we said we're all sinners.

We've established this. We are naturally dead in our sins, and we deserve God's curse. We are, by nature, without hope in the world. But when Jesus died on the cross, as he hung on that tree, he was taking the curse, and he was taking the punishment that we should have experienced.

[23 : 25] And the result is twofold. One, anyone who follows Jesus has had their sins forgiven because Jesus took the curse on that tree. Two, in taking the curse, Jesus gave a mortal blow to the devil because three days later, he defeated the undefeatable.

He came back from the dead. The cross and the resurrection is the point in the story of the Bible where the greatest act of reversal happens.

The cross and the resurrection is the point in the story of the world where the greatest act of reversal occurs. The cross and the resurrection is where sin, death, and the devil were all dealt with.

The cross and the resurrection is where it became possible to escape the curse that we deserve. As Haman's limp body hung from his pole, it was a sign of deliverance from the plots of the enemy. That deliverance was very particular to a particular time and place. As Jesus' limp body hung from the cross, that was a sign of cosmic deliverance from the evil one for everyone who trusts in Jesus.

[24 : 45] And so the question that remains is this. Have you been delivered from the enemies of sin, death, and the devil? That's a massive question.

And I hope if you've never considered it before, that you will. Because the implications of your answer are huge. And I really hope and I really pray that you can answer that question in the affirmative.

If you can't, I don't want to be dramatic, but the truth is, you will experience God's curse. If your answer is yes, if you are following Jesus, who took that curse on your behalf, you can and should be so, so thankful.

And more than that, I hope that your trust in God will be bolstered by the reminder that in his providence, God sent Jesus to die in your place.

dark days will come and there will be days when you just cry out to God in confusion. But no matter what events might throw you off course, I hope that you don't ever stop trusting in God's providence and his control.

[26 : 00] Because in his providence, he has dealt with your sin and he has dealt with the enemy. He has delivered us. So when we read of Esther's feast for deliverance, we can see how it sets a pattern for a later feast.

A much smaller affair, but with cosmic consequences. Before he died, Jesus ate and drank with his disciples. We call it the Last Supper. And it was a symbol of what Jesus achieved at the cross.

And it's that deliverance at the cross which that feast calls us to remember and put our trust in. We began by thinking about events. No event is more significant than the cross where Jesus died and the grave where Jesus rose.

Christ is our deliverer. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for all that you've done for us in Jesus.

We thank you for what was achieved at the cross and the resurrection. Lord, I pray that you would help us to have a new and more profound understanding of what you did for us.

[27 : 16] I pray that you would help us to leave here joyful and content and with a sense of real lasting peace in ourselves.

Father, however we're feeling today, I pray that that peace would overwhelm us because of all that you've done for us in Jesus and his willingness to take that curse on our behalf.

Father, we thank you so much for your grace, for your mercy, and for your unparalleled kindness that you have shown us in Jesus. Amen.

Amen.