

A Feast for Victory

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[0 : 00] So we're now at the end of Esther, this story of God's faithfulness to his people, even when it seems like he isn't there. We've said throughout that this is the central question running through the book.

Is God still there? What we've seen is that although it might not always look like it, God never abandons his people and he never retracts his promises.

We've also noticed that major developments in the story occur at feasts and banquets. And all of these feasts and banquets are building up to the feast in the final episode, that celebration of Purim, a feast for victory.

The story of the Bible is ultimately a story of victory. As we've seen as we've worked through Esther, that the evil which threatened God's people in Persia had its roots all the way back at the moment that evil first entered the world.

And as we work through our final episode, what I hope we'll see is that the victory over evil in ancient Persia that we see here is a little snapshot of the final victory over evil that will be won by Christ.

[1 : 11] We've seen that lots of themes and the patterns in Esther find their ultimate fulfillment and their fullest expression in Christ. And that's no different here in our last section, which I hope is going to be an encouragement for us as we continue to live in anticipation of Christ's return.

So that's all by way of introduction. The focus is, of course, the victory of God and the victory of his people. This victory is a royal victory. It's a violent victory.

And it's a commemorated victory. Those are our three points, which I'll aim to unpack over the next few minutes. So let's dive into chapter 8, which shows us that the victory we find at the end of Esther is a royal victory.

So we begin with an unresolved problem, don't we? In verse 3 reads, Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews.

And then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him. So the problem that Esther comes before the king with is the outstanding edict.

[2 : 23] Haman may be dead, but his evil plan of genocide is still very much in motion. And Esther's plea is for the king to override and to overrule the genocide decree.

But here's the problem. The king's hands are kind of tied. Verse 8 tells us that no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked. So the genocide decree has to stand now that it is in law.

So the solution then is to give Mordecai and Esther the same power that Haman formerly had.

We're told in verse 10 that Mordecai wrote in the name of king Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.

And so just as the genocide decree was sent through all 127 provinces of the Persian Empire, so Mordecai's decree, which has the same royal authority, is sent through all those provinces.

And verse 11 tells us the contents of this new edict and shows us how it opens the way to victory for God's people. The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies.

[3 : 48] The language of this edict reflects almost word for word Haman's genocide decree. And so whilst we might at first wince at that language of destroy, kill, and annihilate, it's very much a justified response given that this is the threat that they are facing.

What that repetition of language is showing us is a complete reversal. Before Mordecai's decree was published, the Jews had no rights to defend themselves. God's people were being lined up to face a firing squad.

Defenseless in the face of execution and, one suspects, other horrors which would have been inflicted upon them. But now, wonderfully, they have the right to take up arms against a sea of assailants and fight back.

It is, in effect, a royally sanctioned civil war in the Persian Empire. And the idea that it is royally sanctioned, that's key. Esther and Mordecai began this story as members of an ethnic and religious minority in the dangerous world of the Persian capital.

But now Esther is a powerful and self-assured queen. Mordecai is second in command to the king and wears King Xerxes' signet ring. And to really ram the point home, look how Mordecai is described in verse 15.

[5 : 08] When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold, and a purple robe of fine linen. I don't know if wandering around a gallery is your idea of a fun day out.

I must confess, it probably is mine. But in portraits, there are very often visual clues that tell you something about the person that this portrait is of. The portraits where the clues are probably at their most obvious is in portraits of kings and queens.

They're usually painted on these massive canvases that you can't miss. And their attires are going to be regal robes of rich reds and rich blues. They'll be painted to look powerful and commanding. And they'll probably have a crown or a scepter, some other object that shows you who they are. The painting will be designed so that you are in no doubt that this is a king or a queen. And that's exactly what our author is doing here.

If you flick ahead to chapter 10, verse 3, the very end of the book, we're told Mordecai the Jew was second in ranked King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of the Jews.

[6 : 23] At this stage in Bible history, there is no king of the Jews. God's people are either in exile or they're trying to rebuild Jerusalem from the ruins. So although Mordecai and Esther are not Israel's monarchs, they effectively become monarchs and rulers of the Jews.

And that royal authority is a powerful glimmer of hope for a people without a king who are patiently waiting for the king that God has promised them. Mordecai is not that promised king, but he is a reminder that God is still there and that his promises have not been forgotten.

The king they were waiting for, the king very much foreshadowed by Esther and Mordecai, was Jesus. Jesus, who, as we saw last week, dealt a hammer blow to those ultimate enemies of sin, death, and the devil.

He did this when he died on the cross and when he returned to life three days later. And the victory in Esther, that's a pattern that's looking beyond itself to the great victory.

The great victory of which this pattern is building towards belongs to Christ the king. So here in Esther, the defeat of Haman is not the end of the story.

[7 : 43] Just as in the wider Bible story, the defeat of sin, death, and the devil at the cross is not quite the end of the story. That's obvious because we're all still here 2,000 years later, and clearly sin, death, and the devil continue to be a blight on God's good creation.

What we're waiting for is the final victory when Jesus comes back. We're waiting, if you like, for the return of the king. At the moment, where we are, we're in a kind of period of grace before his return, where his enemies are going to be routed eternally.

We are in the calm before the storm. And this is just how it was for the Jews in the Persian Empire. Verse 17 reads, So the notice of coming victory has been published, but there's still time to choose allegiance.

You either recognize the authority and power of Esther and Mordecai, or to continue to pursue a course of hatred towards them, and ultimately a course of hatred towards God himself.

And that's really a model of the grace period that we find ourselves in. Jesus has decisively won the victory in his death and his resurrection, and we have the promise of his royal return, where his victory will be consummated, if you like.

[9 : 22] For us, the victory notice has been published. But until then, we live in the grace period where we can choose to recognize Jesus as king, or choose to reject his royal authority.

The reason he hasn't returned yet, the reason his return hasn't materialized, is his patience. As Peter tells us, the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. And here's the reason that God is patient.

Christ's return in victory will be a violent victory. That's what we see here in Esther, and it is a pattern that also finds its fullest expression in that great victory to come.

Perhaps that sounds shocking and maybe makes you a little bit uncomfortable. Violence, after all, is something that we don't take particular joy in, do we? And Jesus himself spoke about turning the other cheek and even rebuked his disciples for defending him when he was arrested.

[10:31] So the question is, how are we then to understand the actions of Esther and Mordecai here in this last chunk of Esther? Once we work through chapter 9, I'd like to say that this violent victory in Persia is not something to be ashamed of, nor is it a product of vindictiveness.

It is instead, I think, a necessity. Violence is, of course, a disgusting product of sin and a fallen world. But in this fallen world, there is a type of violence which is required and indeed justified. An obvious example, perhaps, would be the violence employed in standing up to the Nazi war machine and their ethnic cleansing of Jews and other people groups.

The violence in response to that sort of evil and hatred and cruelty, that is morally justified and indeed morally required. Similarly here, against an act of attempted genocide, the use of violence is actually a necessity for survival and is, as the story has shown us, the way in which God has led Mordecai and Esther to publish this decree and shows that God's hand has been at work in it. We're told in verse 1 of chapter 9 that when the day came, the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them.

[11:57] The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those determined to destroy them. No one could stand against them because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them.

And then, jump forward a bit, in verse 5, our author tells us that the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. And the sons of Haman, who have presumably been involved in attempting to kill the Jews, that they're killed as well.

And this isn't something shameful. This is, in fact, victory over cruelty, it's victory over hatred, and it's victory over evil. This is like when William Wallace defeated the English at Stirling Bridge.

This is like when Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. This is like when the Allies defeated the Nazis in World War II. This is when, to put it simply, the good guys beat the bad guys.

It's a victory, in short, to cheer for, not to be ashamed about. So Esther's request in verse 13, then, might initially seem odd to our ears. She says, if it pleases the king, Esther answered, give the Jews and Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on poles.

[13:17] Now, some have suggested that Esther's actions here are cruel, vindictive, and unnecessary. I don't think that's the case. The narrative certainly gives no indication that she's overstepped the mark.

Rather, the response of joy that comes from God's people would seem to suggest that her actions are, in fact, a necessary action and continued evidence of God being with his people.

So why does Esther make this request? I think the request for a further day to defend themselves suggests that a further day was needed and was necessary. Clearly, Esther recognizes that there are still enemies who pose a threat to God's people in the capital, Susa.

So therefore, another day of legal defense and killing of enemies becomes absolutely justified. As for the impaling of Haman's sons, this might seem gruesome in our context, but it would have been a common occurrence in war in ancient Persia.

It would have been a warning to others not to indulge their hatred of God and his people because God is still there for his people and has protected them from total annihilation.

[14:28] Actually, what it is, is a sign that to be God's enemy is not a wise idea. Perhaps the obvious question then for Christians today is why isn't that a reasonable response now?

And the answer, I think, is that it all comes down to our context. In Persia, a literal war against the enemies of God's people was necessary for the very survival of God's people.

And indeed, without the very survival of God's people, the Messiah, Jesus, would not have been born. And it's worth noting that when there are violent victories over God's enemies throughout the Old Testament, they are always led by a king or a king figure.

Only God's king has this kind of authority. And where's that royal authority today? It was in Jesus, who sits at the right hand of the Father. He is the king who has authority to judge the evil of the world.

But that very king also suffered and refused to fight back when he was falsely accused. He refused to defend himself. He refused to exercise the divine authority that was surely rightly his in the face of sin and evil.

[15 : 44] And even as he died, Jesus said this about the very people who had crucified him. Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. So that is really a model for us to live until he returns.

So a violent victory is necessary in the face of a sinful, rebellious, hateful and cruel world. And Esther is one of those times where God has used a violent victory to preserve and deliver his people from the powers of darkness.

What it points forward to is that great victory. And it will be won by the humble king who suffered and died. Suffered and died, taking the punishment for sin that we deserve.

King Jesus is the only one with the right to bring a violent victory because he is the one who was put to death by those he was trying to save or dying to save, rather.

And he is the king of the whole world. The book of Revelation gives us a striking and really quite terrifying picture of Jesus the judge.

[16 : 54] This is not gentle Jesus meek and mild. This is the king who has every right to bring justice to a world that hates him. The portrait goes like this.

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called faithful and true. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire and on his head are many crowns.

He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood and his name is the word of God. The armies of heaven were following him riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen white and clean.

Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God almighty.

On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The same Jesus who died in humility for sins is the one who has every right to judge sins as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

[18 : 09] When Christ returns he will return as a warrior. The one who died for the sake of sinners in mercy will return and judge sin with righteousness and justice.

And in a world that longs for justice this is in fact deeply deeply comforting. But of course that final victory is still to come and that's why our final point a commemorated victory is important for how we think about that day yet to arrive.

We're told in verse 20 that Mordecai recorded these events and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes near and far that they should celebrate annually the 14th and 15th days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. And they call this celebration Purim after the power that Haman cast. Proverbs tells us that the lot is cast into the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord.

And so in calling this festival this feast to remember all that has happened Purim there's a wonderful irony there that Haman cast the pure in chapter 3 to determine the best day in the eyes of his foreign and false gods to put his genocidal decree into action.

[19 : 35] What's ironic is that his gods had no power for there is only one God and he always protects his people. His hand over everything has been a running theme throughout Esther and that name Purim is a reminder that even when things seem dark for God's people God has a plan.

And ultimately it is a reminder that God has a plan for the whole world. we don't know when this pandemic is going to end. We don't know if or when our various individual struggles are going to end.

But what we do know is that God is still there and he is not silent and he is certainly not inactive. The creation of this festival was for God's people in Persia a call to remember the joy and the hope of their victory.

The enemy had been routed so their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. And their present victory provided hope of a future victory yet to come.

Since the very beginning of the Bible story that has been the hope that God's people have been looking for. Ever since evil entered God's good world the whole creation has been yearning and crying out for evil to be destroyed.

[21 : 01] And that's the hope of Christ's return. Paul told the Corinthian Christians that when Jesus comes he will raise his people from the sting of death and then says Paul the end will come when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion authority and power.

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. The victory that we see here in Persia the victory that God's people experienced there was truly wonderful.

But it barely lights a candle to the great victory that it is foreshadowing. The great enemy of humanity death itself will be destroyed when Jesus returns.

And those who have followed him and given their allegiance to the king will experience eternal life in him. So the joy and hope that Purim commemorated points forward to the forever joy to the forever hope that we will experience in Christ when the king comes back.

And one implication of all this is what it means to follow Jesus. to follow Jesus is to be on the side of life. To follow the world which has been corrupted by sin and evil is therefore to be on the side of death.

[22 : 32] That's really quite a sobering thought. But it's why Jesus could say I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die.

And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Assuming Jesus doesn't return beforehand which he very much could we will die.

But if you follow Jesus you will be raised to eternal life. So for the Christian death is not the final destination. There is eternal life waiting for us.

So if you're here and you're not following Jesus this is why it's really worth considering his claims. because if true the gift of life far outweighs the curse of death.

Choose Jesus choose life. Now we don't celebrate Purim now that belonged to things before Jesus came things looking forward to his coming.

[23 : 38] But we do celebrate a different feast and we will be doing so next week. And we touched on this a little in our last sermon. we remember the work of Jesus when we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

It's a feast that reminds us of what Jesus has done and points us forward in hope to the final victory which will be won when he returns.

As God's people remembered victory in Persia they looked forward to God's future victory just as we do whenever we remember the work of Christ in anticipation of his final victory and indeed of the future feast in the new creation that he's inviting us to.

Because and that's where we're going to close that's where this story ends. The story of Esther ends with a feast for victory. So will the story of this entire world.

The Bible tells us blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb. The wedding feast of the Lamb is the Bible's name for the great feast of victory in paradise when victory has been won.

[24 : 45] I really hope that we're all going to see each other there. It's a wonderful hope for the future. That vision of all of God's people enjoying paradise together all united to Jesus our victorious King is a truly beautiful picture.

But outside the gates of God's paradise are those who have not followed Jesus. and so we have a choice. I hope that you will choose Jesus because as the Jews in Persia's sorrow was turned to joy when the victory was won so it is on a much grander scale for all who follow Jesus.

Esther's story might be finished but the grand story of which we are all apart continues. Christ is coming back and when he does he will come back in victory.

The resounding note that Esther ends on is one of remembrance. Don't forget and ultimately this is a story to bring us comfort. These are comforting truths to remember.

God is still there. His King is coming back. The victory belongs to Jesus and all who trust in him. In Christ our sorrow turns to joy and never more so than when he welcomes us with open arms to his perfect new creation where sin and death and the devil will never ever touch us.

[26 : 15] And so we can say come Lord Jesus. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you for the wonderful hope that we have in Christ.

We thank you that he has defeated sin death and the devil and that when he returns all those enemies will be completely destroyed. The victory will be his and indeed will be ours.

Father we thank you that in Christ we are on the winning side as it were. Father I pray that you would root us and give us foundations in that hope and I pray that you'd help us as we go out into the rest of the week to be buoyed up and encouraged by the hope that we have in Jesus that hope which will never ever die.

We pray this in his wonderful glorious name. Amen.