

## **Esther 8:9 – 10:3 Catastrophe averted**

I think we have to admit there are some bits of Scripture that we're almost a bit embarrassed about. Society pushes back so much nowadays on the idea of anything to do with judgement, that we're probably rather wary of ready out too readily or too loudly words like

***And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.***

(Acts 10:42)

And if that judge does his work properly,

***“Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.”***

(Matthew 25:32-33)

Well, it's great to mention what happens to the *sheep* ... but, the goats ... well, do we *have* to mention their destination?

And so when we get into this last section of the book of Esther, many of us would probably have been quite happy if it had finished at the end of chapter 8:

***The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour. 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.***

(Esther 8:16-17)

The threat of genocide has been averted. Esther and Mordecai have cleverly put together a decree. The King has put his name behind it. It is promulgated across the Persian empire. *End of.*

It *could* have been. But it wasn't. Instead, there is a quite lengthy chapter with some pretty grisly details. Some of the things that we see detailed there just do not sit comfortably with modern sensibilities – even modern *Christian* sensibilities. At first reading it looks like bloodthirsty vengeance, and even the wonderful Queen Esther seems tarnished by it.

But when we think it through, we will see some very helpful practical lessons for today. People have not changed since this episode from several hundred years BC. And the world has not changed since this episode from several hundred years BC. We have still not *arrived*. Even though the Messiah *has* come and lived and died and risen again, even though it clearly *is* a whole new era, a whole new ball-game, with *Jesus* in our history, the one who brought grace and truth, and a new and fuller understanding of the person of God:

***... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.***

(John 1:17-18)

Even though we can now be born again of the Spirit of God, and enter into new, eternal life from that moment, the world still remains to be changed. The world remains to be changed. A war is still being waged, even if the decisive blow has been struck. We have not yet arrived at the Christian version of VE-day. And there are still some grisly, gory details to the last days – or the last millennia – of that campaign.

The lessons that we get from Esther 9, particularly, are insights that we need for a realistic view of the world still around us today.

Life is messy, but ...

... God will tie up the loose ends  
... God will turn the tables  
... God's ruler will come

### ■ God will tie up the loose ends

I don't really have the time to go through all the details of the story so far. If you want to catch up, take a few minutes and go through the roller-coaster of what feels at some points like a royal court drama, complete with palace intrigues, and at others more like a pantomime or one of those old Brian Rix farces.

But the big story – which doesn't really kick in until chapter 3 – is a threat to the whole of the Jewish people. I can't really say “nation”, as such, because this is late on in OT history, and the Jewish *people* are no longer predominantly located in the Jewish *homeland* of Israel. By the looks of it, there are various pockets of them scattered around the whole of the Persian empire – a *huge* empire, as the writer of the book is at pains to emphasise right from the start:

***Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, ...***

(Esther 1:1)

There's the king – whom we find out, as we go through the book, is scarcely worthy of the name. And the Jewish people?

***Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom.”***

(Esther 3:8)

This Haman, for personal reasons, as well as his descent from ancient enemies of Israel ...

***... Haman the Agagite, ...***

(Esther 3:1)

... has hatched a plot to purge the world of these people. He tricks the king into signing a decree that will promote this genocide on a specific date. It's about a year between the decree being issued and that fatal date, because, remember, they don't have electronic communications as we do now. Their high-tech equivalent of superfast broadband is the Pony Express.

***Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.***  
(Esther 3:13)

and across an empire of 127 provinces, that takes time to communicate and then to organise.

So now things happen fast back in the palace. Mordecai is a Jew, high up in the Persian Civil Service. And his relation Hadassah – her Jewish name – or Esther, a Persian one – ends up as favourite wife of the king in the royal harem, and becomes Queen. Between them, they reveal Haman's plot, and Haman ends up for the chop.

***So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.***  
(Esther 7:10)

But the clock is still ticking. The fuse on this dynamite that will destroy the Jews has been lit. Several months have gone by. And there is still what seems like an insuperable problem. Persian laws could not be repealed. And it looks to me as if the King is once again at a loss, with no idea what to do. So he hands over his signet ring, and all of this official authority, to Mordecai. *If you can think of a way to avert this catastrophe, well, good luck to you!*

***“But 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, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.”***  
(Esther 8:8)

That's where we left it last time. It is the last episode of the drama series, so it starts off with a whole set of impossibilities to resolve. How do you change a law that cannot be changed?

And the book doesn't just leave it hanging as an incidental detail. Nobody would take seriously a story left with this enormous question mark unanswered. No, we need the detail here. This is this one particular loose end which needs to be publicly tied up.

And what they did was actually very clever. And, if you think about it, you'll see stories like this down through history. You have it in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The pound of flesh is a legal entitlement, if you remember that story-line. Well yes, ... but there's no mention of any *blood* in that legal document, is there?

I sometimes think that this is quite possibly how lawyers earn their fees nowadays, finding loopholes around things that are supposed to be watertight.

So Mordecai and Esther consult with the Persian experts in the law, *looking for a loophole*, I'm guessing.

***The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day.***  
(Esther 8:9)

If the original law can't be repealed ... how could it still be *nullified*? And notice how we're not told the answer immediately. This writer *loves* to tease his readers! It's drawn out, almost padded out, with the formalities of royal and legal precision.

***And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language.***

(Esther 8:9)

We are just left to conclude that an answer *has* been found. Off go another round of messengers – only this time, if you read it carefully, you will see that *this* set of horses is even fleetier of foot than the previous batch. This is absolutely top-priority urgent!

***And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, ...***

(Esther 8:10)

And then finally we get the clever solution reported:

***... saying that 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 one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.***

(Esther 8:11-12)

The very day that the annihilation was due to take place, the Jews are given official royal entitlement to defend themselves with lethal force – and even to plunder the estates of anyone attacking them. Note down that extra provision for later reference, by the way.

Folks, it strikes me that there's a practical lesson to be learned from this ancient bit of legal wrangling. Simply, don't think that anything that human beings can devise and think up is so watertight that it can't be unpicked by a succeeding generation, if they have a mind to do so. So our national democracy, that we've celebrated again despite the current lockdown, will need to be *continually* fought for.

Think of the application to our own church documentation, which we've just sent off for revision to fit with the country's charity legislation. We might want to have something legally set in stone, to make sure that this church will never waver from our desired theological position, the one that we are now passionately committed to. But we can't.

A succeeding generation, if so minded, will be able to find some loophole. Maybe they will redefine some key word – just like the country has done with the word “marriage” – and thereby interpret things differently. Or they will ignore the documentation and push things through using dirty procedural politics at the church meeting.

We can spend months or years fussing over the precise wording of any new trust deed, only for it to be like the French Maginot line, back in the second World War, which the German forces didn't push *through*, but went *around*.

And folks, the battle for the spiritual integrity of this church has to be fought for, year by year, down through any future decades or even centuries, by *spiritual* means, the preaching of the Word of God, and the prayers of the saints. No human scheme of words, no matter how considered, will ever stand firm against all the wiles of the Devil. I know there have been big battles in the past over minute changes in our church rules – and nowadays it's all forgotten and largely irrelevant, because nobody ever bothers to go back and look at them in that kind of detail.

Anyway, that's *one* loose end in the story of Esther that is sorted out. One Persian law is not actually repealed – but practically nullified. But there is one further thing that is going on here, which goes back deep into Jewish history, that we might not have realised. I mentioned earlier the lineage of Haman.

**... Haman the Agagite, ...**

(Esther 3:1)

If you trace that back in the Bible, you will find the first king of Israel, Saul, and a huge error of judgement that forfeited him the throne. Saul had been commissioned to execute judgement on the Amalekite nation. Now that's a big question in its own right, and not one I have time to go into right now. But we can come back to that question of Israel wiping out the Canaanite nations another time, if you want. Just at the very least note that this command from God is on the basis of profound inhumanity to people in need – *refugees*, we would call them nowadays. So, here's the start of that back story:

***Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'***

(1 Samuel 15:2-3)

And also bear in mind that people in those days thought far more in terms of *collective* than of *individual* responsibility than we tend to nowadays.

But Saul thought he knew better:

***But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.***

(1 Samuel 15:9)

And it looks as if somehow this line traced back to Agag has survived. Of course the memory of that, even hundreds of years back, would fuel a deep animosity. People *do* tend to perpetuate things like that. Hatreds of centuries erupted in violence when Yugoslavia as an individual nation fell apart, within living memory. Some Irish still harbour grudges against the English for the potato famine of the 1840's, so I'm told.

But you don't see Haman excused on the basis of this bit of history. Most likely that hatred would have been instilled in his sons, too. Quite possible that blind kind of hatred that would see this Persian edict as their only chance for that age-long revenge on the Jews, even at hazard of their own lives. I think I could imagine them swearing by some

strange kind of honour code, that they would fight to avenge their father and their forefathers, no matter what. The kind of blind hatred that fuels jihadi violence nowadays.

But their death in chapter 9 ...

***In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed ... the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, ...***

(Esther 9:6-10)

That isn't just the pragmatics of war, which is *always* going to be messy. This is, I think we do need to see it, as tying off those loose ends of the sentence passed on the Amalekites way back. There's a big clue here that this is now being done *right*. Previously, under Saul, notice what happened to the spoils of war:

***But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them.***

(1 Samuel 15:9)

This time, even though the second edict provided for more than just self-protection

***... 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, ...***

(Esther 8:11)

But they didn't. That is repeated over and over:

***... but they laid no hand on the plunder.***

(Esther 9:10)

***... but they laid no hands on the plunder.***

(Esther 9:15)

***... but they laid no hands on the plunder.***

(Esther 9:16)

I think that *has* to be significant. If this were just about being bloodthirsty and vengeful, then the Jews would have returned to their homes in Susa, and around the empire, with the spoils of war. But they didn't. And I think the best sense is made of that by linking it back to the unfinished business of King Saul, centuries earlier. This is overdue justice. And it is justice that has been brought down on the heads of those receiving it. Those victims, if you want to call them that, were self-selected, as you can see in the full version of that v16:

***Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces 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.***

(Esther 9:16)

From one point of view, it was just the Jews around the empire acting in self-defence. And yet, from another point of view, it is a loose end being tied up.

Sometimes, looking around the world, it seems that there are quite a few loose ends still waiting to be tied up. In the psalms you see words like this:

***O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?***

(Psalms 94:3)

Do you sometimes get that feeling too? *How long* ... will it be impossible to bring relief to the casualties of a war raging across an innocent people's land? *How long* ... until we have a fair distribution of wealth around the world, or even across our own country? *How long* ... until the ravages of cancer no longer fell random people in their prime?

Remember that the last words of the Bible convert that longing into a prayer:

***He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!***

(Revelation 22:20)

Folks, let me assure you that though life is messy, and far from ideal ... that though there are gory scenes like this in the Bible, and still around the world today, and there seems to be nothing we can do to put things right ...

Let me assure you that God will tie every loose end. And in fact, he has already put in place just how every loose end will be tied, at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Every sin that has ever been or ever will be committed will receive its due accounting. For those of us who believe in Jesus, every last one of those sins is already accounted for. The final audit has not yet been run, but already the books balance. We are told there are no loose ends. We are called to sing, along with Charles Wesley,

*See all your sins on Jesus laid*

Every sin will come to rest either on his back or our own head. If he has borne your sins, you will rise with him to everlasting joy and life and light. If we bear the weight of our own sins, they will drag us down to the very opposite, everlasting death. It is one way or the other. There are no loose ends. There is no second chance, no play-offs for the highest-scoring losers. It is all down to whether we will bow before the Jesus Christ and take him as Lord and Saviour, the Jesus who said

***Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.***

(Matthew 11:28)

And that is what we see just a glimmer of, back in Esther:

***Now the rest of the Jews ... got relief from their enemies ...***

(Esther 9:16)

And we see in these final chapters of the book, how there are

## ■ God will turn the tables

Earlier on, when Haman's decree had been originally issued, things seemed desperate:

***And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, ...***

(Esther 4:3)

Notice the four words: mourning, fasting, weeping, lamenting. Now look:

***The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour.***

(Esther 8:16)

Four more words. The tables are turned. Does that maybe remind you of a psalm?

***Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!***

(Psalms 126:5)

The original decree had been ...

***... to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, ...***

(Esther 3:13)

Now the tables are turned, and the Jews are allowed

***... 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, ...***

(Esther 8:11)

Summary: the tables are turned:

***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.***

(Esther 9:1)

Does that make you think of the cross, too? On *the very day* the forces of death thought they had conquered the Prince of life ... it actually turned out to be the very opposite.

But I don't want to just tell you about *principles* here today, even if you *do* find it encouraging to see in these final chapters of Esther that God leaves no loose ends, and that God turns the tables. I would much rather introduce you to a *person*. So the writer leaves us with a *person*. In fact,

■ **God's ruler will come**

See how the people react differently to him. Earlier in the book, there was Haman. And when *his* decree was announced around the empire ...

***The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.***



(Esther 3:15)

Just look at the difference when *Mordecai's* decree does the rounds:

***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, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.***

(Esther 8:15)

Now of course, Mordecai is not the perfect ruler. There's that sobering verse at the start of the last chapter of all:

***King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea.***

(Esther 10:1)

Actually, we need to hear that ourselves, in 2020 UK. All of this disruption of life around the Persian empire *cost*. Haman had promised a huge sum of money paid into the royal treasuries, but *that's* not going to happen now that Haman is off the scene. And just what it would cost to clean up after that night of carnage that we read about ... well, yes, the state will need further income, and increased taxes will be the result.

Personally, I wouldn't be surprised if increased taxes *around the world* for a while would be necessary, with various countries finally picking up the tab for their Coronavirus emergency expenditure.

But still, doesn't Mordecai's description here at least hint at us the kind of ruler that we know we want?

***For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.***

(Esther 10:3)

Actually, better than want. *Have*. This is the ruler we *have*, and who is coming again. Jesus, who doesn't just seek the welfare of his people, and only *seek* peace, good though that is. Jesus, who *achieves* the everlasting welfare of his people, and *makes* peace.

***For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.***

(Colossians 1:19-20)

*Hark! Those sounds of acclamation!  
Hark! Those loud triumphant chords!  
Jesus takes the highest station  
Oh, what joy the sight affords.  
Crown him, crown him  
Crown him, crown him  
King of kings and Lord of lords!*