

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE (Part 4 of Esther: Dynasty & Destiny)

Esther 8-9

| Andrew Irvin, First United Methodist Church

| August 2, 2020

REVIEW

Today is the last day of our series in the book of Esther. I want you to know I have rewritten the ending to make it more exciting. Xerxes is kidnapped, Queen Esther takes over the Kingdom and is on a quest to find and rescue her husband, but Mordecai does this Darth Vader turn-to-the dark side thing and the last scene is Esther, holding on for dear life at the edge of the Death Star. A sequel is coming soon.

No seriously, the actual story of Esther is filled with enough drama all its own! Xerxes, the generous, party-going, yet fair-minded King deposed his first Queen for disrespecting him publicly. After a losing streak on the battlefield against the Greeks, he returned home and found a new bride in the original Bachelor series, which his advisers cooked up for him. Her name is Esther, raised from a young age by a Jew named Mordecai, apparently a relative of Esther's parents who both died suddenly when she was little. Esther won the hearts of everyone she met in this Bachelor process, and she definitely won the heart – through the eyes – of King Xerxes. But Esther had a secret: she was a Jew.

Early on in their marriage, Esther's cousin Mordecai overheard a plot to kill King Xerxes, and Esther revealed this plot to her husband, giving her cousin full credit for the intel. Soon a huge promotion was made in the Empire, but not to Mordecai – instead it was made to a dark horse named Haman. For whatever reason, Mordecai didn't show Haman the respect that arrogant Haman craved.

Eventually, Mordecai said the reason he didn't bow to Haman was that he was a Jew, which incidentally was the secret he asked Esther to keep all her life.

Discovering that Mordecai was a Jew, driven by hatred and racism, Haman developed a scheme to slaughter the Jews, and swindled Xerxes into endorsing it by not revealing the identity of "those people" who were being killed.

When Haman's edict was read out as law, Mordecai began a public protest of weeping and wailing very loudly, which caused quite a stir there in the Persian capital of Susa. Mordecai was a one-man protest, and his wailing and wearing sackcloth and ashes got Esther's attention.

Personal, societal comment: The Medo-Persian Empire was a strong, powerful nation with tremendous systems, one example is their amazing communication system, which was used to announce the empire-wide Bachelor contest and Haman's hateful edict. **The goal of Mordecai's protest** (which was jarring and attention-getting by the way) **was *not* the destruction of the empire or their elaborate systems, but the reversal of an injustice.** Had the Jews destroyed the empire or the system, they wouldn't have been able to use it for their own protection later. There are certainly areas in our society – perhaps our whole society - that need reform. There are policies, decrees, and laws that need to be reversed, but our nation and skeletal systems don't need to be destroyed from within.

Finally convincing her she needed to act, Esther called her people to a fast for three days just before she went in uninvited to see Xerxes, and act which could cost her her life. She may have been uninvited but she was certainly not

unwelcome! When Xerxes asked her what she wanted, she invited him and Haman to a banquet. One banquet turned into two and on the second night she revealed that she was one of “those people” scheduled for slaughter on the 13th day of the 12th month of the year. Haman became hangman. He was out, and Mordecai was in.

Since the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be revoked, Esther and Mordecai wrote a new law to mitigate, if not reverse, the effects of Haman’s law. It’s interesting to note that after Haman’s edict was read out as law, the city of Susa was thrown into confusion. After Mordecai’s edict was read, the city of Susa celebrated.

THE STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY

It is interesting that, **according to Mordecai’s edict** sent out in King Xerxes’ name, the **Jews were permitted to assemble together and defend themselves**. It’s notable that these are two rights proclaimed for all people in the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights.

There are many parallels between Esther and our day. I hope you’ve been inspired and provoked (but hopefully not triggered) as we have explored Esther’s story. Now put yourself back in time in Susa, you were told that you would be destroyed, but now you are encouraged to gather together with your people and defend yourselves. I wonder what those first planning meetings were like?

- But if we gather together, they'll see us, right?
- But if we gather together, we could all be killed! If we gather together, we will all be identified as Jews!

But sooner or later, your true identity will come out. You'll be identified.

Benjamin Franklin's words are strangely appropriate here, "We must indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

In order for community to be community, the community *has* to be together. The community of the Jews in Susa may not have met together often, but they were connected through a network of communication and galvanized through the fast that Esther called. As a result, they were uniting spiritually, and their courage was beginning to build. **As God's people, it is critically important to be intentional about staying connected and spiritually united.** Don't let spiritual connection and fellowship be out-of-sight, out-of-mind in between live streams. Even if you find great joy, comfort, and blessing in our weekly worship times, there's more that God wants to give you than this!

There were **three things** that **fueled the community's courage**: **calling on God during the fast; seeing its result in Mordecai's edict; and realizing that if they stood together, they could more readily defend each other.** Community is not every man for himself! As they stood and defended each other, they defended themselves! They were able to ward off their enemies! It was a difficult and bloody victory and they had to fight with all their might, but it was victory!

By the way, this is all backed up in history – even the point I made last week about our actions having far-reaching consequences. Because of Mordecai’s edict, Jews in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas were prepared to defend themselves. History indicates a very short-lived, armed uprising about that time from people in Samaria, no doubt emboldened by Haman’s edict, and no doubt having grossly underestimated the power of united community.

TURNING THE TABLES

In Esther 8:17 it says many people became Jews because of “fear of the Jews”. Fear could mean a state of distress or terror or it could mean being in awe. Fear can be a powerful motivator.

Picture this: All of a sudden Jews went from being afraid to being feared. “Yeah, that’s right,” you can almost hear the swagger, “Whose side is King X on now, sucka?” That’s perhaps not an accurate portrayal (smile) , but... **A united, purposeful, joyful community can be attractive to the world around it.** This had an effect on non-believers near them, and many “became Jews”. Whether they insincerely claimed they were Jews or whether they sincerely embraced faith in God, all of a sudden, kosher was the new cool! Put that ham sandwich down and start singing a psalm, because we’re all Jews now!

Can you imagine a community of Christians, starting perhaps with the people of First United Methodist Church of Bakersfield, united in Christ, purposefully proclaiming Him in the community, and joyfully worshiping Him for salvation and

victory? Sure, there may be some insincere professions of faith, but there may be others who genuinely and sincerely make Christ the Savior and King of their lives.

In addition to the awe of the Jews, there was another motivating factor: fear of Mordecai. When it came to the political class in the Empire, I believe the fear of Mordecai was drawn from his reputation. It was clear that he wasn't just an empty suit, nor had he taken the second-in-command gig as a single issue candidate. Mordecai was active, thorough, just, and apparently quite a reformer. He had Xerxes' trust and something Haman never had... not only the people's respect, but their adoration as well. Being on Mordecai's side was not only being on the King's side, but it was being on the people's side, too. Mordecai was a leader to follow.

Imagine Christians who are people of love, integrity and action, taking responsibility to lead their workplaces, schools, governments; being respected for their fair-mindedness, rigorous work ethic, and kindness to the people around them. But I digress.

The tables turned. The oppressed are no longer oppressed. The chief oppressors met justice, and would-be oppressors met with strong opposition that became deadly for them if they chose to continue to attack. Many people recoil at the bloodshed of that first Purim. However, I want you to see that the bloodshed was just and would have been avoided had the haters not attacked. And I want you to see a testimony here: **even though** the edict said that **the Jews had the right to plunder the possessions of the people they killed, no one touched the plunder.** Self-defense was enough. Looting was not necessary, nor was it carried out. The

way you deal with possessions that are rightfully yours speaks volumes about your relationship with God.

HANGING ON A TREE

There are many more things I'd like to share but let me close with a final thought: for a moment I need to express something that parents might find too violent for young children to hear, so ... this is your 10 second warning. 😊 Through our short journey to ancient Persia, I have been careful to say that Xerxes' treasonous bodyguards, Haman, and his ten sons, were hanged on gallows. That was the description of their deaths that I grew up with – all our Sunday School lessons, etc., were based on the King James Version, which uses those terms. However, there was no rope hanging in ancient Persia. Many of you know this already. Here's how people were hanged:

These structures weren't gallows as we think of them. They were tall poles cut from trees with very strong, but sharp points on the top. Criminals and others who were killed in this way were impaled. Their bodies were dropped down on the sharp point, and I don't need to continue. It was extremely painful, brutal, and ruthless. It was a lot like crucifixion. **[In the story of Esther's destiny, guilty men hang on a tree instead of an innocent man. In the story of God's redemption, the Innocent Lamb of God hangs on a tree for the sins of the world.]**

And here, ironically, we see the Gospel. All through the book of Esther, guilty people were hung on those poles made from trees: the bodyguards, Haman, his ten sons. Haman built a pole for Mordecai, who didn't deserve death, but Haman ended up meeting his end on that very tree pole, suffering in agony the way he

had intended Mordecai to suffer. We could view this as justice, and it is pure justice with no shred of mercy. Haman was a vile, ruthless, evil man who was driven by hatred, arrogance and racism. He was a sinful human being.

The Scriptures tell us that all of us are sinful human beings and have fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). We all deserve Haman's death (Romans 6:23), or some variation of it, for our sin separates us from a holy God and demands His judgment. There is no remedy but justice.

About 400 years after Xerxes and Esther, there was One who came – on purpose – to be hung on a tree. In stark contrast to the rest of us, He was Innocent... and He came to die for all the guilty.

The Scriptures say, "cursed is everyone hung on a tree."

- The king's bodyguards were charged with treason, and cursed.
- Haman was charged with attempted murder of the Queen and all her people, and therefore cursed.
- Haman's sons were raised and steeped in their father's hatred and arrogance and took up arms against the Jews, and were cursed.

But Jesus Christ took our curse, the sins of the world, upon His shoulders. He suffered our humiliation, torture, and death so that when we believe in Him, receiving Him as the Sacrifice for our sins and the King of our lives, our curse is taken away and we have freedom to stand before God being justified by Christ. Through His sacrifice, He took God's justice on Himself, and gave mercy to all who

would receive Him. That is what we celebrate and remember at the Communion table... the once-for-all Sacrifice of Christ who hung on a tree for you and me.

That Sacrifice of Christ knits us together in a Community that is bound by love for God; love, mutual support, and sharing for one another; generosity and good works to others in Christ's Name; and, when necessary, defending one another for Jesus' sake. Even when you don't see Him at work, He is at work. Even when He is not named, He is the protagonist, working all things to the good of those who love and follow Him. Esther found her destiny in the dynasty of King Xerxes. It is my prayer that each of us will find our destiny in the Dynasty of the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.