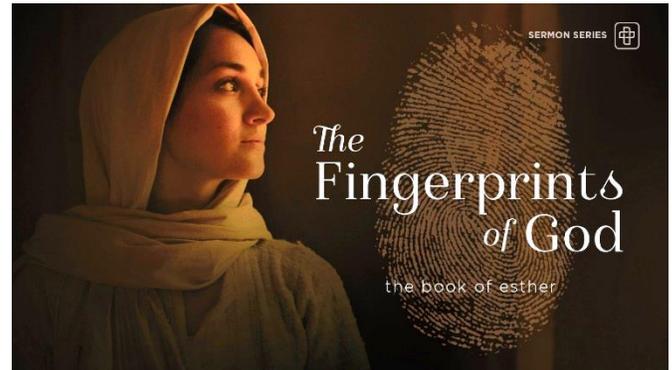


Relief From Our Enemies

David Sunday

November 3, 2019



I pray that the words of my mouth and thoughts of all our hearts would be pleasing in Your sight, Lord. As we go through trials and darkness, may we find refuge in You and Your Word today. Strengthen those who are afflicted. Give fresh life and encouragement to the weary. Those who are wandering, Lord, bring them back, and bring in those who are outside Your fold, I pray, for their everlasting good and for Your glory. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please open your Bibles to the book of Esther. We're going to be in the last episode this morning—chapters eight through ten—in this amazing book we've been in this past month. God's name is not mentioned once in this book, but His fingerprints are all over the place. As I've been pondering this last episode of Esther, I was reminded of the signature line that often appeared in Ross Stern's emails. The bottom of his email said, "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end."

Don't you feel like last week would have been a great time to end the story of Esther? That was an amazing story. The vile and vicious enemy of God's people, Haman, is hanging from his own gallows. And not only has he lost everything, but even better, Esther now owns the house of Haman; Mordecai, her cousin and adopted father, is second in command. And that one signet ring with which to rule them all, that Haman once clutched like greedy Smeagol, is now in the hands of Frodo—also known as Mordecai. I'm thinking this would be a great place for the author to write, "And they all lived happily ever after. The end."

But everything is not okay yet—it's not the end. Let's pick up the story in Esther 8:3: "*Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.*" Esther is risking her life once again. She's throwing aside all dignity, falling at the king's feet, weeping and pleading/ Why? Because a decree of death is still hanging over the heads of her people. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with his signet ring, translated into the languages of all the people, proclaiming in 127 provinces that they were to get ready for the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar. On that day of doom, the king commanded the people to

destroy, kill and annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, and to plunder their goods. That decree found in Esther 3:12-13 still stands.

So yes, it's true that the great Haman has been executed in the citadel of Susa. But the people of God out in the empire are still in peril, living on the brink of their demise. They have enemies lurking in the shadows, thirsting for their blood, looking forward to the day when they can unleash their fury on the Jews. Esther can't let that stand. After the king holds out his golden scepter and welcomes her to make her request, she asks him to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite. She says in Esther 8:6, *"For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?"*

Can you imagine what it would be like to be a Jew living in Persia at this time? To hear that dreadful, demonic decree of Haman being read in the streets? To see people looking at you suspiciously everywhere you go? Friends you've known all your life stop talking to you, and you're wondering, "Do they have it in them to kill me?" At night you can hear them whispering outside your door, talking about who's going to get your property after you're gone. Bullies who never liked you anyway, sneering at you and now taunting you whenever they see you. You watch the way men look at your wife and daughters with lustful malice, looking forward to the day when it's open season on the Jews. They're terrified. They need rescue.

Living under the shadow of death

We need to identify with them this morning, just as we did praying for the persecuted church. We need to remember and feel the weight of what it's like to live in the shadow of death. That's what I want us to focus on as we look at the rest of this story in Esther 8, because actually our plight is very similar. The Bible warns us in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death. We all live under an irrevocable decree from heaven's King. Let that sink in. The wages of sin is death. The Jews in Persia didn't deserve the decree Haman and the king made against them, but we do deserve the sentence of death that's pronounced against us. All of us have sinned and all of us die, but that won't be the end of it all.

Hebrews 9:27 announces that people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment. That should terrify you and me, if we have sins that have not been forgiven by an Almighty God. God has made an irrevocable decree: the soul that sins shall die. Sin brings us under a decree of death. God's judgment on sinners will result, not in annihilation, but in something far more dreadful. Listen to what 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 says: God's judgment will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels. Jesus will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They

will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might on the day He comes.

Have you ever felt the weight of this irrevocable decree of judgment? Has it ever sunk in? I want you to think about a time when you were really scared, then really relieved. I'm not talking about being scared over something little, like maybe you were scared this past week that you weren't going to be able to go trick or treating because it snowed outside, but then you were relieved because you got to go after all. That's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about the kind of scared that Kate and I did not know anything about until about ten years ago when we heard she had stage four cancer and it was terminal. That type of scared. You can understand then that every time we go for a CT scan, we take a deep breath going in. Then when the oncologist comes in with a big smile, hugs her and says, "Your scan looks great," we breathe a huge sigh of relief. We step outside, the sun seems to shine brighter, the air feels cleaner, and the embrace we hold one another in feels sweeter, knowing that God has given us another day to live with and love one another.

If the scare isn't very serious, then the relief won't be very sweet. But if you've been really scared, if you've really felt the weight of what God's Word is talking about, then the gospel will bring relief. I want to ask you, friends, have you ever stood at that gulf of separation that your sin has caused between you and God? Have you ever looked down into that bottomless chasm of the pains of hell and trembled at the wrath of God, trembled at the just judgment of God against your sins? Has it ever caused you to be scared for your soul? If you've never stood there at the mouth of hell and felt that God would be just were He to condemn you to spend eternity there because of your sin, feeling the terror of that, then you won't find much relief from the gospel.

But if you have, then the hymn is true that says, "Thy Word can bring a sweet relief for every pain I feel." We see a hint of this sweet relief here in the eighth chapter of Esther. After Esther pleads for her people in verse seven, the king doesn't seem to be overly moved by the plight of the Jews. He's more interested in the security of his own wife. He tells her, "I've taken care of Haman." But then he says this in verse eight, *"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."*

So the king's scribes are summoned, Mordecai has an edict written to all the provincial leaders in 127 provinces in their own script, as well as to all the Jews in their own language. It's written in the name of the king and sealed with his signet ring, then sent out on mounted couriers who are riding swift horses, bred from the king's royal stud, so that this message could get out pronto. They want all the provinces to hear this counter decree.

This is the message, beginning in verse 11: “If anyone tries to attack you, the Jews, on that fateful day, the king allows you, the Jews, in every city to gather and defend your lives.” Notice in verse 11 how the wording of this counter decree mimics the decree of Haman precisely. The Jews are given permission *“to destroy, to kill and to annihilate any armed force of any people 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.”* Copies of the counter decree are issued in every province and displayed to all the people, so that the Jews can get ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies.

What’s happening here? All through the story of Esther, God’s name has never been mentioned, but we’re seeing His fingerprints. How did Haman determine the day the Jews would be annihilated? What did he do? He cast lots; he rolled dice. What does Proverbs 16:33 (NLT) say? *“We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall.”*

So the Lord determined that the day of Haman’s planned annihilation of the Jews would not take place until 11 months into the future. That meant there was plenty of time for a counter decree to spread through the empire and turn the tables in favor of the Jews and that’s just what happens. From the same royal signet ring that had issued the decree of annihilation there comes another decree, a counter decree that effectively neutralizes the decree of death. That counter decree frees the non-Jewish citizens of Persia who didn’t really want to kill their Jewish neighbors to not do it. It also warns anyone who does want to kill them that they do so at their own peril.

This word brings a sweet relief to the Jews in Persia. And no wonder, they were under a law that sentenced them to death. Now they hear a proclamation that preserves their lives. It’s not surprising that they rejoice. Look at Esther 8:15-17:

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. ¹⁷ 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. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

In chapter two, it was dangerous to admit that you were a Jew. That’s why Esther and Mordecai concealed their identity. But now here in chapter eight, Gentiles are lining up to become Jews. We’re seeing here that God has not forgotten His covenant with Abraham that He’s blessing those who bless Abraham’s offspring and He’s cursing those who dishonor them. He’s bringing blessing to Gentile Persian families from India to Ethiopia.

God also has not forgotten His covenant with David that on his throne would sit a king who would rule the nations forever. Mordecai's ascension to power and authority in the empire of Persia ensures that the lineage of David will not be extinguished and that a Ruler will come whose reign will draw people from all the nations. That's what's happening here.

So even though the deliverance has not been completed yet, the mere proclamation of good news is enough to cause all the Jews in Persia to be filled with "*light and gladness and joy and honor.*" They're still living under the shadow of death, but they have the hope now of deliverance from death. Though they have not yet seen and experienced that deliverance, they believe in it. So they are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

If that was true for the Jews living in Persia, how much more should it be true for us? We too were born under a sentence of death. As we heard, the wages of sin is death. But praise God that's not the end of the story. A counter decree called the gospel has been issued as well which means that not only do the wages of sin bring of death, but there's a free gift of God that brings eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus came into the world to taste death for everyone who dwells in the valley of the shadow of death. Look at how God's Word proclaims this gospel, this good news, in Hebrews 2:14-15 (NIV):

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Do you hear what that's saying? It's saying that by His death, Jesus took God's irrevocable decree against sinners on Himself and now He's been raised from the dead to free us from our captivity to death. So now that Jesus has been raised, a counter decree of life is going into all the world to sinners who deserve death. This counter decree needs to be published far and wide. Just like the people of Mordecai went out on swift horses to make sure everyone heard, we need to make sure that our neighbors and the nations hear this decree of life, this free gift of life through Jesus that comes to those who deserve death. We need to resist the temptation to keep this good news to ourselves.

Look at what King Ahasuerus is saying to Esther in Esther 8:7. Basically he says, "Esther, Haman's dead. You're safe in the palace now. What more could you want? Just be secure. You're safe. What more is there to care about?" But Esther says in verse six, "*How can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?*"

That should be the attitude of each one of us have, like the Apostle Paul who said in Romans 9, "God is my witness that I have unceasing anguish in my heart for my fellow Jews who

are outside of grace? I could wish that I myself were accursed if they could have life.” That’s the way Paul talked and that should be our attitude. We should want to get this good news to everyone.

Every year in American 100 firefighters are dying to save people’s lives and 150 police officers are laying down their lives in the line of duty. On 9/11, in front of the World Trade Towers, 400 first responders died that morning to preserve physical life. Shouldn’t we feel a greater sense of responsibility for friends and neighbors and family whose lives are just a heartbeat away from eternal peril? As the hymn says, “Brethren, see poor sinners ‘round you, trembling on the brink of woe.” See them. Notice them. Feel the burden for them. Care about them. They’re trembling on the brink of woe. “Death is coming, hell is moving, can you bear to let them go?” Can you bear it? If the good news of Jesus has brought light into your darkness, turned your mourning into dancing, your sorrow into joy, then spread the message far and wide. When people take in that message, even though they walk in the valley of the shadow of death, they will fear no evil (Psalm 23:4). That’s what we see in Esther 9—a people of God who are fearing no evil.

Fearing no evil

At the beginning of chapter nine, the board is set, the pieces are moving and we come at last to the great battle of Esther and Mordecai’s time. Verse one is very important. Let’s look at it together.

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.

Now, I want you to pause there and notice the contrast from the rest of the book. Throughout the rest of the book there’s lots of suspense. We’re always sitting on the edge of our seats wondering, “What’s going to happen next? How are things going to turn out?” But here in chapter nine, there’s no suspense. The writer tells us from the very beginning what’s going to happen. The tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. This is the writer’s way of showing us that the outcome of the battle is not in doubt. God’s people have the promise of victory. It’s sure. Though faced with trials on every side, we know the outcome is secure, but we still have to fight.

That’s what they do in verses two through four. They assemble in their cities to attack those who are determined to destroy them. Notice in verse two the nobles and leaders of all those

provinces are helping the Jews because they're afraid of Mordecai, who is representing the Jews at the right hand of the king in Persia.

Then in verses 15-17, we read how the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying everyone who hated them. Let's just scan through this section together. In verse six, 500 men in the citadel of Susa are destroyed. In verses seven through ten, the ten sons of Haman with names I couldn't pronounce are killed as enemies of the Jews. Then all this is reported to Esther in verses 11 and 12, then she asks for one more day of battle. And she asks for the bodies of Haman's sons to be impaled and hung up for all to see. So this nice gentle queen is quite an iron lady as well.

In verse 15, on that second day of battle, 300 more enemies of the Jews are put to death in Susa, the capital, and in verse 16 we're told that throughout all the 127 provinces, 75,000 enemies of the Jews were killed. That's a lot of bloodshed. It might make you squeamish, but remember, those who were killed were enemies who were determined to destroy the people of God. This is but another episode in that ancient war that began in the Garden of Eden between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, when God gave His first promise of a Messiah Who would triumph over the evil one and destroy sin and death (Genesis 3:15). Along with the promise, God gave a preview of the conflict that would embroil the ages.

Friends, if Haman's decree would have stood uncontested, the Jewish people would have been destroyed, killed and annihilated, and the coming of a Messiah would have been jeopardized. That's why in the Old Testament we see holy wars from time to time. Holy wars in the Old Testament are God's battles against sin and evil on the earth, so that His people are preserved and His Messiah can come and put an end to evil once and for all.

The people understood that they were not fighting their own battle here. It wasn't just for their own selfish reasons. They were fighting for the preservation of the people of God and for the promise of God. That's why three times the author gives us a very important phrase—in verses 10, 15 and 16. Look at this phrase: "...but they did not lay their hands on the plunder."

Now, the counter decree actually says they could take the plunder, but they didn't. They did not lay their hands on the plunder, because they were thinking like Abraham, their forefather. They're not going to allow themselves to be put in a position where God's enemies could say, "I have made you rich." You can read about that in Genesis 14.

Here's the key for chapter nine. These holy wars in the Old Testament were not to be repeated. God does not want us going out there today trying to find the enemies of God and killing them. That is not what we are to be doing. Jesus taught us in Matthew 26:52, "All who draw the

sword will die by the sword.” His apostle said, “Vengeance belongs to the Lord, not to us. Do not take revenge. Do not take matters into your own hands” (Romans 12:19).

These executions in Esther were necessary so that the people from whom the Messiah would come would be preserved. They’re a prelude to the final judgment that Jesus is going to execute which began when He died on the cross. On the cross, Jesus was entering into a holy war against sin and evil—and He won. He won the decisive victory over Satan. Let’s read what Jesus did on the cross from Colossians 2:13-15 (NIV):

He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Do you hear what that’s telling us? It’s saying He’s won the war. D-Day has happened. Jesus has won the decisive victory. But like the Jews in Persia, we’re still waiting for our final deliverance. We’re still waiting for the day when Christ will return and destroy His enemies once for all, when we will see heaven open and a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11-21). With justice He will judge and wage war, and His name is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Whenever God’s people think about that Day when Jesus will return and destroy all the enemies of God and put an end to sin and death, God’s people say, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. We long for that complete deliverance that only You can bring. We long for the peace on earth that can only happen when You are reigning here, Lord Jesus.” If you long for all things to be made new, then you long for the destruction of sin and evil when the enemies of God will be a footstool under Jesus’ feet.

In the meantime, Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” In the meantime Jesus says, “Don’t try to determine who is an enemy of God.” Think about it like this. If we try to sort it out, we’re going to get it wrong. Christopher Ash said:

If we had watched Saul of Tarsus ravaging the church, we would have thought, “Surely he’s an enemy of God,” and we would have been wrong—surprisingly, wonderfully wrong. If we had watched Judas Iscariot at the heart of the band of apostles, the treasurer, we would have thought, “Surely he’s on the right side.” But we would have been wrong—tragically wrong. If we had listened in to Peter’s denial of Jesus three times, we would have thought, “Surely Peter is an enemy of God.” But we would have been wrong.

It's only on the last day that we're finally going to know who belongs to Jesus and who does not. In the meantime, our job is to make the gospel known. Our battle is not against flesh and blood; our battle is against the sin that dwells within us and the devil who roars like a lion to devour (1 Peter 5:8). Our battle is not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). The enemies of sin and Satan are the ones we're fighting against and we must show them no mercy, for we shall receive no mercy from them.

I want you to take heart with what is said back in Esther 9:1—the outcome is secure. It says that the tables were turned, the Jews got the upper hand. It always ends that way for God's people. In the end, you will get total mastery over demons. You will get total mastery over addictions. You will get total mastery over everything that is breaking and destroying your life, over everything that's seeking to have mastery over you. If you belong to Jesus and fight that good fight of faith against sin, you can be confident that your future is full of hope and victory.

Listen to God's Word in Isaiah 54:17 (NIV) and look at what the prophet says: *"No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you..."* Is this for you? Is this for me? Isaiah 54:17 goes on to say, *"...This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and this is their vindication from me."* This is for us. No weapon fashioned against us will prosper. That's what we see here in this story. So we can pray with confidence.

On Friday night Kate and I were in a small group with a bunch of young adults from The Rock and Blake was praying. It was so encouraging to pray with them. Blake prayed the promises of God from Psalm 143. Listen to this:

*⁹ Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord! I have fled to you for refuge!
¹⁰ Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit
lead me on level ground! ¹¹ For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve
my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! ¹² And in
your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies, and you will destroy
all the adversaries of my soul, for I am your servant.*

That's something we can lay hold of. The Lord will destroy all the adversaries of our soul, so we can fear no evil. Even though "this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us," we will not fear, "for God has willed His truth to triumph through us."

Feasting at the table

When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil. Do you remember what comes next in Psalm 23? It says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows." That's how the book of Esther

ends. It ends with the Jews feasting at the table—a feast of great joy, the festival of Purim. From verse 9:20 to the end of Esther, there’s an account of how this feast was established to be celebrated annually. Verse 22 says, *“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...”* These were *“...days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.”*

So these weren’t days to just go out and destroy your enemies; they were days to be generous and give. Then in verses 24 and 25 we’re told why the feast is called Purim. It’s because the word *pur* means lot or dice, then the ‘im’ at the end just makes it plural. It’s because Haman threw the dice to determine the day of destruction for the Jews, but the Lord turned the tables on Haman instead. He and his sons were impaled and hanged for all to see.

Can you imagine anyone walking around on the day after their deliverance frowning or depressed? No. They rejoiced. They rejoiced that even when God seemed most absent, He was omnipotently present. Even when He was silent, He was working for their good. They could see the providence of God and how He had delivered them.

One of the Puritans said it like this: “The providence of God is like a Hebrew word—it can only be read backwards.” We can’t see it at the time. Sometimes it seems like, “Where is God in the middle of this? God, why aren’t You speaking? Why aren’t You doing a miracle?” But in the middle of it all, He’s weaving things together for our good and for His glory. When we look back on it, we’ll see.

So every year the Jews celebrate Purim. They’re still doing it today. When they celebrate this feast, they bring noise makers. Every time the name of Haman is mentioned, they make a lot of noise and blare horns. They even tell their children to shout “Boo!” every time Haman is mentioned. They hiss and boo. It’s a time of great celebration. In fact, the rabbis started a saying that although moderation is required throughout the year, on Purim you are allowed to drink wine until you don’t know the difference between “Blessed be Mordecai” and “Cursed be Haman.” That’s what they say. That’s why in modern Israel they now call Purim “Ad D’lo Yada,” which means “You can’t tell the difference.” I’m not saying we should go that far, but I am saying that we should be a people of overwhelming joy because of the gospel. God puts more joy in our hearts than they have when their wine abounds. He’s done good things for us and we are glad.

Look at the last verse of Esther, Esther 10:3: *“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.”*

We could say at this point, “All is well that ends well.” But I like the way Tolkien says it more: “All is well that ends better.” Christian, I want you to know our story ends better than this. What do we see? We see Jesus at the right hand of the God in heaven, crowned with glory and honor, Who through the suffering of death tasted death and conquered death for us. We see Him. And while we wait for His return, He’s preparing a table for us in the presence of our enemies.

If we doubt today that God could really forgive our sins, that God could really be gracious to us, know that Jesus comes through this sacrament, this visible sign of inward spiritual grace that He gives to everyone who trusts in Him. He says, “Here, take this bread. Put it in your mouth, chew it and swallow it. Take this cup and drink. As surely as you taste this bread and wine, that is how certain salvation is for you who trust in Jesus Christ.” He wants you to know that your enemies will be defeated, that He will turn your mourning into dancing, that He will turn your sorrow into joy, that your enemies will not overpower you and that the devil himself is going to hang on his own gallows.

Because of these truths, we come to this communion feast—not with somber gloom, but with joy, celebration, light and gladness—because we have a Savior Who has given us relief from our enemies. And one day we’re going to see Him and will feast in the house of Zion. We will sing with our hearts restored, “He has done great things, we will say together. We will feast and weep no more” (from *We Will Feast in the House of Zion* by Sarah McCracken).

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