

To Whom Go the Spoils?

Esther 9:18-10:3

Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 5 November 2023, AM Service.

So, we come to the end.

We began with a queen, (Vashti), we end with a queen (Esther).

We began... at least in chapter 2, with a second in command (Haman), we end with a second in command (Mordecai)...

And we began with a compulsory empire-wide feast... where Achashverosh celebrates his own supremacy... and we end with an empire-wide feast... at least for the Jews... and Esther and Mordecai are remembered for all posterity.

Last week we saw that when the Jews destroyed those who rose up against them, particularly the Agagites, that there was that recurring phrase: they did not lay a hand on the plunder. Verse 10, 15, and 16.

It's likely that they did this because they remembered that Saul had been condemned for taking the same plunder... when God had told Israel to destroy them utterly.

In chapter 8, Achashverosh had said Israel could keep it, but they refused to do so.

In this way, Israel seems to remember something of their history. That's a good sign.

And yet immediately after this, they establish the feast of Purim.

The feast of Purim looks very different now than we can presume it was practiced initially. We can't be sure of this... we aren't told exactly what they were to do in the beginning.

But generally, the Jews, both children and adults, would dress up in various costumes... figures such as Esther, Mordecai, Achashverosh, or Haman. Apparently, I read this week, these days, Jews will dress up, or wear masks, of modern day anti-Semitic people who would like to exterminate the Jews... Yassir Arafat, Osama bin Laden... Saddam Hussein.

They would assemble at a synagogue and hear the reading of the book of Esther. Every time the person reading came to the name of Mordecai, the Jews would shout; "Blessed be Mordecai." And when they came to the name Haman, they would stomp their feet on the floor, and shout: "Cursed be Haman."

Our text tells us that they were to practice the feast in the memory of gaining rest from their enemies, verse 22, the month of Adar being the month which their sorrow was turned to joy, and mourning to a holiday...

And they were to send presents to one another and gifts to the poor.

So far so good.

But let's take a step back here.

Ordinarily, for the Jews, the Passover was to be held yearly, on the 15th of Nisan.

In Israel, prior to the exile, this practice had largely disappeared. Josiah restored it for a short time, but then it lapsed, and Israel was taken to Babylon.

But remember that these events happened during the book of Ezra... where the Jews who returned home were building the temple. And in Ezra 6, when the temple was being rebuilt, what did they do? They held the Passover together as the people of God.

Meanwhile, what was Esther calling the people to do during the time they should be celebrating the Passover?

When you do the number crunching... and again, Jewish sources agree with this, Esther asks that the Jews fast with for her for three days in chapter 4:16, on the 13th of the month of Nisan.

That meant that rather than partake in the Passover feast on the 15th of Nisan instead, the Jews were neither eating nor drinking.

Then on the 15th, in chapter 5, who was feasting instead of the Jews? Their captors... their subjugators... being fed by Esther who was throwing *him* a feast.

Fast forward to chapter 9, and we begin to see a dissonance here. While Ezra was reintroducing the Passover back in Israel, Esther and Mordecai were making up another feast in Susa... one God had not commanded them to keep...

And while doing so, they were neglecting the Passover... an explicit reminder of the 10th plague in Egypt... where the great fear for Israel was not Egypt... but the angel of death as the hand of God's wrath. The Passover reminded Israel that they would face the wrath of God just like Egypt, if they did not have the blood of a sacrificial lamb on display on their doorposts.

The Passover reminded Israel that they could not presume on the grace of Yahweh... their sin caused them to be culpable just as Egypt was culpable. And it was only by God's mercy and kindness that they avoided the same judgement as the pagans.

So, even though Esther and Mordecai are recognized as Jews, and have adopted some cultural Jewishness, they aren't reinstating the Passover like Ezra did. What are they doing instead? Making up a new feast.

A feast which, to be sure, remembers a redemption event... and yet it doesn't call to their memory the need for Israel to repent... it doesn't celebrate that this only happened because of the mercy of God...

And it doesn't acknowledge that Israel is again enslaved to a pagan nation, explicitly because they forsook God as king. That their biggest problem has never been earthly kingdoms, but a just and a jealous God.

And the weakness of Purim is that despite the enforcement of the new feast day, Israel had bigger problems than Haman. Why? Because we see in chapter 10, that Achashverosh is doing what? Imposing a new tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea.

Achashverosh is having his acts of power and might remembered, and how he lifted Mordecai up... and so on, Achashverosh is celebrated... where is Yahweh?

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In John 5, we have an interesting scene. It has long been held that the feast of the Jews mentioned here is the feast of Purim. It makes the most sense when working out the calendar of Christ's travels.

And Jesus has gone up to Jerusalem.

He finds a sick man lying on the steps before the pool of Bethesda. A name meaning "The house of mercy".

And this sick man was waiting for the stirring of the waters... and when it happened, he would ask someone to carry him into the water, that he could be made well.

And Jesus asked him: Do you want to be made well?

And the man said: I can't get anyone to carry me into the water.

Now note that this is during the feast of Purim... on the Sabbath day... and yet what happens? Jesus doesn't require the man to do anything himself... he doesn't get him to gain wealth or status or power before he does anything for him. And he certainly doesn't dump him in the pool of dirty water.

What does he do instead? Like God in Esther, he displays his power. And he does it despite the man not recognizing him or displaying true faith. If anything, the man is at best, toying with paganism... and yet what does Jesus do? "Take up your bed and walk." And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked.

And as amazing as that act of power was, what did Jesus intend to be the takeaway?

Verse 14 of John 5: *"See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you."*

What are we to learn here? Especially as we come to the close of this book?

1. Your works are meaningless if you've forgot the God who calls you to them.

This can happen in a number of ways. Often it doesn't come across as plain disbelief. Instead it reveals itself with a selective memory... a celebration of certain elements of our faith, and a casual dismissal of others.

A memory for some of God's character and commandments and a flippancy with others.

God is immensely good. Patient... long-suffering... but good. All good things come from him... the overturning of slavery... redemption from hardship...

Think Psalm 103... all his benefits:

He forgives all your iniquities...

He heals all your diseases...

He redeems your life from destruction

He crowns you with kindness and tender mercies

He satisfies your mouth with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagles.

Every single one of you sitting here have experienced his gracious providence and wonderful care. The food you eat... the breath you breathe... the colourful panorama of life you enjoy.

And most of the world, and perhaps even some of you, take all that blessing and put it in your back pocket... and ignore the God you received it from.

And most of the world, and perhaps even some of you, look at what God requires of man... and you treat it as something of a roster for volunteer service. And so you check your boxes alongside the 5th and the 6th commandments and hand in your sheet.

God can't be mad at that can he? At least I'm giving something back.

Like Saul... I was going to worship you my way God!

Or like Israel, who arguably learnt the lesson here in chapter 9 regarding the destruction of Agag, but were blind to the greater lesson they should have learnt in Egypt.

And so they remained in slavery... paying even greater taxes to their slave-master.

Jesus' warning to the man he healed on Purim is telling, is it not? It is a lesson for us no less than it was for him, and for Israel.

Now that this man was saved from his earthly suffering, what still lay over his head? Now that Israel was saved from the hand of evil in the person of Haman, what still lay over her head?

Their own sin against God.

And how was that going to be resolved? Lest, as Jesus said, a worse thing come upon you.

Congregation, the book of Esther turns the attention of the people of God away from earthly fears and concerns... the prolonging of physical well-being... the risk to life and limb... and instead drives us to consider the true king of kings and lord of lords.

Like Israel facing the 10th plague in Egypt, all of us are liable before God for our sin. And it's only by his grace in Christ that we are free from sin.

Despite all his earthly benefits we continue to rebel against him... to submit in the areas that suit us yes, but to ultimately do what is right in our own eyes.

Which is why, out of all the benefits the Psalmist identifies in Psalm 103, the first... that he forgives all our iniquities... is the greatest joy of the believer.

None of you can be saved by your good works... but you are saved *for good works* because of the good work of another: Jesus Christ. If you are a Christian, it is his blood which enabled you to be adopted into the household of God... his blood which atoned for your sin that the angel of destruction would not judge you guilty... his blood which ensures that, despite your ongoing sin, will never allow you to be snatched from his hand.

It's not a bad thing to remember particular events... and to celebrate certain things annually... but if you call yourself a Christian, insofar as it is up to you, never allow yourself to be distracted by minor things... Allegiance to the world will not give you comfort... a higher position in a pagan government or an earthly business... or a bigger house... none of these things will bring lasting peace.

What does? The knowledge of Christ... his person and work. The comfort that you can stand boldly in the presence of God with your sins forgiven. The peace of receiving from the prince of peace an inheritance that can never perish and never fade away.

And the full assurance that even now, though he lead you through the valley of the shadow of death... though you must carry your cross as you follow your Lord... though you may be required to give up all things in the service of your king... even here God is with you. And he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Brothers and sisters, God is king. Do you delight to serve him well?

Do not presume on the grace of your God. If you consider yourself a Christian, never think you replace his laws by his own and that he'll be impressed. Doing such things will drive you deeper into depression and slavery to sin.

Lift your eyes to the empty cross. Lift your eyes higher to the right hand of God... there you see your king seated on his throne.

Worship him... serve him well.

And may we all hear those wonderful words when he returns: Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord.

Amen.