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The Exaltation of God's People

Esther 8:1-17

Esther 7-9:15d details the telos or end toward which ALL of His redemptive work is headed.

A couple of months after Haman was executed, Esther approached the King once again unbidden where she asked him to change Haman's edict which condemned God's People (Esther 8:3-7). The king essentially said, *"While the edict cannot be changed, nevertheless you and Mordecai are in power. So, address the problem yourself."*

The result was that Mordecai and Esther passed a law which essentially deputized God's people for a day giving them the right to defend themselves if any lifted their hand against them (Esther 8:8-14). The response of the Persian Empire was recorded in Esther 8, NOT ONLY to Mordecai and Esther's decree BUT to the positions and favor which Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish people now enjoyed in Persia.

One of my more favorite hymn writers is William Cowper who lived from 1731 to 1800. The hymns he writes reflect many of the struggles/difficulties we face as Christians living in an estate of sin and misery. Yet these hymns provide such glorious answers.

How are his hymns so spot on? Cowper struggled with severe depression throughout his life. Though he knew the truth of God's word, oft-times the trials and difficulties of the world blocked his view of God.

That is exactly where the book of Esther found God's people. They were on the cusp of a new era where there would be NO prophets, NO miracles, NO Jewish kings. Redemptively it was an era of silence — much like the silence reflected in Esther where God's name is not mentioned. At this time, living was extremely difficult for God's people. But rather than cling to the promises of the Lord, God's people concluded that the difficulty of their life was an indication that God had abandoned them.

So, God gave them the book of Esther which teaches that even when God seems absent, He is most present *AND* working all things for the good of His people!

This truth is beautifully reflected in the Cowper hymn, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*.¹ Listen to some of the lines:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy
and shall break in blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense
but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face."

We've seen both of these truths in Esther 7 -8. God shockingly and yet gloriously reversed the plans of Haman by which the Lord exalted Mordecai and Esther, thus demonstrating that "*Behind a frowning providence God hides a smiling face*"! The hymn continues:

Blind unbelief is sure to err
and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,

and He will make it plain.”²

If I had to summarize the significant truths of Esther 8 it would be this statement! How wrong was every child of God living at the time who believed the Lord had turned his back on His people! Yet as we come to the end of Esther 8, we find the shocking and unbelievably deep rejoicing (vv. 15-17) which erupted when Mordecai and Esther sent out the decree. Notice the three things which served as the cause of their rejoicing:

On Account of an Office Attained, v. 15.

Esther 8:15, “Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white,³ with a large crown of gold⁴ and a garment⁵ of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.”

It is obvious that Haman was NOT the most popular Prime Minister. The fact that the Palace servants suggested the form of his death alerted us to that fact (cf. Esther 7:9). Yet in this verse we have further proof. It was NOT just the Jews who rejoiced in Mordecai’s appointment as Prime Minister, BUT the entire city of Susa “shouted and rejoiced”!^{6,7} Clearly, he was a favorite!

Yet there is more to this. As we have seen via the language used as well as the similarities in character and circumstances, throughout this book a comparison is drawn between Mordecai/Esther and Daniel and his three friends. Recall the words of Iain Duguid:

The similarity of Esther’s position to that of Daniel and his three friends, exiled and incorporated into the imperial system, highlights also what is different about them. (Duguid, 2005, p. 23)

Then Duguid went on to talk about those differences:

Think of it: (1) Daniel and Esther roughly were the same age when they brought into the imperial system, (2) Both were called to eat the king’s food, (3) Both would be used by God to protect God’s people, and (4) Both would rise to a place of highest authority- which is the focus of the text before us in the case of Mordecai.

Now, what makes the passage before us so applicable to where you and I live⁸ is NOT the *COMPARISON* between Daniel/his three friends AND Mordecai/Esther, BUT their *CONTRAST*.

Recall, Daniel and his three friends from start to finish were wholly devoted to the Lord. In fact, it would be easy to moralize the book of Daniel by thinking that it was on account of Daniel and his friend’s devotion to the Lord that they were exalted. And

yet as the book of Esther initially presents both Esther and Mordecai as compromised Jews, it would be hard to make that mistake here.

So, let's ask the question: Why did God use Esther and Mordecai? What was it about them that made them God's choice to protect His people? The answer is NOTHING!

Year ago in Sunday School we studied the lives of Saul and David. And after finishing up the story of the "evil and wicked" Saul whom the Lord deposed because of his infidelity, we turned to David. I asked: What made David better than Saul?

Many of the answers revolved around David's character or his conduct. Yet that is wrong. If you think back upon David, you realize he too was an unsavory character:

- He was a liar.
- He was irresponsible (at the time when kings went out to battle, he stayed behind).
- He had a lust problem which led to ultimately to adultery...
- He then did everything he could to cover it up.
- He killed the husband of the woman with whom he slept.
- He was an absent father and incredibly blind when it came to his children.
- He brought a curse to God's people on account of his pride in numbering the nation.
- And much, much more!

So, what is it that set David apart from Saul? It clearly was NOT his character NOR his conduct. So, what was it? The answer can be found in David's name. What does the Hebrew word דָּוִד (*David*) mean? Beloved of God!

What made David different from Saul? What was behind God's use of Mordecai and Esther? The answer is one and the same: God's sovereign choice and will!

This goes against our performance-based mentality, BUT it ALWAYS is THE reason behind those whom God chooses to use. Paul couldn't have been clearer:

Romans 9:10-13, "And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac; for though *the twins* were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to *His* choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

We must see this in Esther 8. Mordecai received the fanfare, approval, and position as Prime Minister NOT because he did anything to merit it, BUT because of the God who

wills — as it was with Abraham, the Judges, Joseph, Daniel, the apostles, Paul, and everyone in redemptive and church history.

Ecclesiastes 9:11b, “...the race is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability...”

Rather, it all is dependent upon the good pleasure of God! With that, notice the second cause of the rejoicing referenced here on account of redemption.

On Account of Redemption, vv. 16-17a.

Esther 8:16-17a, “For the Jews there was light and gladness and joy and honor [which is the exact opposite of the result of Haman’s decree which was ‘mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing’⁹ (Esther 4:3)] And in each and every province, and in each and every city, wherever the king’s commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy for the Jews, a feast and a holiday¹⁰...”

The focus here is on the response of God’s people to the decree of Mordecai and Esther. Recall, the first decree originated with Haman essentially deputized the entire nation giving authority for one day for the nation to execute God’s people and commandeer their wealth. The second decree originated with Mordecai and Esther changed NOTHING about the original decree, for a day of reckoning still was coming to the Jews, and yet, when God’s people read the second decree, their response was fivefold in this text:

1. Their depression vanished (“there was light”),
2. They were filled with gladness of heart,
3. Instead of worry/concern for the future “there was... joy”,
4. Their focus was realigned such that they began to value what truly was important (“there was... honor”- which refers to something weighty), and
5. “There was... feasting and a holiday”!

This seems like a strange response again knowing that nothing had changed when it came to the original decree.

So, why the celebrative response? It is because this latter decree deputized God’s people making them officials of the state. This essentially removed that which was hostile in the first decree — which explains the celebrative response here!¹¹

Let us take “a page from this playbook” and learn the secret to joy in the kingdom of God. It has NOTHING to do with temporal circumstances and so our wealth, health, jobs, marital status, and the like.¹² RATHER it has everything to do with the status of

the threat that lies before us, On the horizon of our lives is a day of judgment in which the vast majority of those who have lived and are living on the earth will be declared “Guilty of Foul Revolt Against God” and thrown into the Lake of Fire. NOTHING can prevent this day from happening.

Yet herein is the good news! God has established the “Law of Substitution” by which He Himself died in our place that we might gain His life. Accordingly, on the day of Judgment the standing of all relying upon Christ will be confirmed, “Not Guilty!”

It is the knowledge of this truth changes everything in our lives without changing anything physically or temporally. Recall the exhortation of Paul:

Colossians 2:13-14, “And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us *and* which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

As with Mordecai and Esther’s decree, the threat that rests upon our lives on account of sin has been removed; it was nailed to the cross of Christ!

Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

And what impact ought this to have in our lives?

Romans 5:1-2, “Therefore having been justified by faith [this is forensic language indicating that, as it relates to God’s people, the judgment given on the Last Day has already been rendered, ‘*Not Guilty!*’ Accordingly...], we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.”

As a shadow of this, we read that everywhere the decree of Mordecai and Esther went, God’s people responded with praise, joy, peace, and feasting! May it also be the case with us today! In the words of Landon Dowden:

The edict that Mordecai sent out informed the Jews the king granted them permission to defend themselves. If the Jews celebrated in hearing that they could at least fight for victory, how much greater should our rejoicing be since Christ has won ours? (Dowden, 2019, p. 8)

That is what is behind the worship we offer each week as a body. We assemble each week to rejoice, exalt, praise God, and enjoy a Feast (the Lord’s Supper)¹³ — all of which is in response to the victory we have in Christ!

That brings us to the third reason God's people responded with rejoicing on account of God's evident weightiness and glory.

On Account of God's Evident Weightiness/Glory, v. 17b.

Esther 8:17b, "...and many among the peoples of the land¹⁴ became Jews,^{15,16} for the dread¹⁷ of the Jews had fallen on them."

As a result of this second decree and Mordecai's office, many of the pagans throughout Persia turned to God and became His people (not to imply all the conversions were genuine). Why was that? The text says that it was because "...the dread of the Jews had fallen on them." What was "this dread"? Ultimately it was a recognition of the Providential Power and Working of God.

Consider, while the ancient world was polytheistic (and so recognized many gods), nevertheless it believed that deities were local and so ruled according to a region, a city, or a location.

Accordingly, when a person moved, they did NOT want to risk offending the local deities and so they "converted" to the worship of the local gods. While this may seem silly, there was some validity to their concern. Consider what Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 10:20a, "*No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God...*"

From this passage we conclude that behind every false religion is NOT a god BUT a demon. And what do we know about demons? From Daniel we know that at least some were assigned specific earthly regions. Speaking of the angel Gabriel, Daniel wrote this:

Daniel 10:12-13, "Then he said to me, 'Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding *this* and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia [this was the demon assigned to Persia] was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia.'"

There are NO other gods beside God Almighty. That which the nations worship therefore are NOT deities BUT fallen angels many of whom have been charged with the oversight of a region or location.¹⁸

It no doubt was these demons which the ancient world did NOT want to offend when

they moved into its territory. So, what happened when God's people were brought in exile into foreign lands? The fact that they were deported initially would have indicated to the local populace that the God of Israel was weak. But what happened instead? God worked His providential will in protecting and using His people such that many times the local population was left in awe over the power and God. We saw this in Daniel, after Nebuchadnezzar was humbled by God, we read of the king:

Daniel 4:34-35, "But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom *endures* from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"

That is what was going on when God exalted Mordecai and Esther by which He then protected and delivered His people. Because of this many in Persia at the time came to the same conclusion as Nebuchadnezzar, "[God] does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"

This ultimately was "the dread of the Jews" which ultimately is the dread of God. With this dread/fear, many in Esther's day came to a saving knowledge of God!¹⁹

This continues to be one of the ways God brings people to a saving knowledge of the Lord. They behold God's dealings with us, and, through the working of the Spirit of God, their eyes are opened to the reality of God! Hence, we are charged by Peter this way:

1 Peter 3:15, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."

This is the New Testament equivalent of Esther 8:17b!

So, as it was in Esther's day, God deigns to proclaim His glory through the life witness of God's people. However, there is a difference between our witness and that of God's people in Esther's day. God says our witness will revolve in part around the "hope that is in" us. Did you get that? It is NOT our morality, superiority, education, dress, or conspiracy theories (even if they are true). It is our hope — our confidence expectation in God's character and the promises He has made!

May God give us the grace to keep our focus and hope on His character and work rather than the waves which seem to be growing in their intensity in the world in which we

live!

Some of the redemptive principles revealed in this chapter.

- v. 2- Christ possesses the signet ring (cf. Is. 7 and the Key of David).
- vv. 3-7- God can't revoke His word or will.
- v. 11- There is such a thing as a "righteous war" which is different in nature than a "holy war."
- vv. 7-8- Unlike Ahasuerus, God's deliverance does not occur as we do what we want. Rather, we have redemption because the Son did what God wanted!
- vv. 15 & 16- such a glorious foreshadowing of the exaltation of Christ (Phil. 2:9-11).
- v. 17- A snapshot of our ultimate future and our present glory (cf. v. 11) which is the point of this section (the exaltation of God's people).

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End Note(s)

¹ Red Trinity Hymnal #128.

² Jeremiah Day similarly put it this way, "The longer I live, the more faith I have in providence, and the less faith in my interpretation of providence."

³ "Mordecai's new clothes illustrate his new status. As noted earlier, a change of clothing in this narrative typically indicates a change of position. This motif is not unique to the book of Esther: both Joseph (Gen 41:42) and Daniel (Dan 5:7, 29) also received stately robes to accompany their promotion to high status by foreign monarchs. What is more, Xerxes' command to clothe Mordecai in Xerxes' own robe in 6:11 now seems almost prophetic. The honor he received at that time foreshadowed the honor he now receives from the king." (Tomasino, 2016, p. 320)

⁴ "Upon Mordecai's head is a golden headdress (עֲטֶרֶת, 'āteret, typically translated "crown"). The noun comes from a root meaning 'surround' and may refer to any

ornament that is worn on the head. The term is used to designate the royal crown in 2 Sam 12:30, but merely some kind of jewelry in Ezekiel 23:42. It is uncertain what Mordecai was wearing, but it is somewhat misleading to refer to it as a 'crown,' which in English usually implies kingship." (Tomasino, 2016, p. 320)

⁵ "The word translated 'mantle' (תַּכְרִיף, *takrîk*), like the word for 'headdress' (עֲטֻרָה, *'ăteret*), derives from a verb meaning 'encircle.' In later Heb., it denotes a burial shroud. Here, it could refer to a garment, or it might refer to some other kind of headdress, as suggested by the LXX, which has Mordecai wearing both a 'crown' and a 'diadem.'" (Tomasino, 2016, p. 321)

⁶ "As indicated in 3:15 by Susa's bewilderment with the original decree, Mordecai may have been popular with the people." (Breneman, 1993, p. 356)

⁷ "...it is apparent that Mordecai was known in the city, since Harbona had observed that Haman had erected a pike for the Jewish hero (Esth 7:9). The situation of this underdog might have struck a chord with the Persian masses. In any case, the celebration continues the trend of reversals: at Haman's decree, the city of Susa was thrown into confusion (3:15); but at Mordecai's decree, it rejoices." (Tomasino, 2016, p. 321)

⁸ And those who soon would live in the silent years of the Intertestamental Period.

⁹ "The Jewish community that had responded to the first edict with four kinds of distress- mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing (4:3)- now responded to the second with four kinds of delight: 'light and gladness and joy and honor' (Esther 8:16). In particular, the fasting and sorrow of chapter 4 were turned into feasting and joy by the announcement of the edict." (Duguid, 2005, p. 104)

¹⁰ "The granting of a holiday implies that Gentile employers received the news with sympathetic understanding and were willing to allow the Jews time for celebration." (Baldwin, 1985, p. 99)

¹¹ N.B., this response is akin to the response of salvation in Isaiah 61:3!

¹² "Once again, we should notice how much of our behavior is driven by perceptions about what the future holds rather than by reality. The actual fortunes of the Jews did not change significantly throughout the story. Their livelihoods were not ruined by Haman's edict; there were no instant pogroms, leading to killing and looting. Nor were their futures radically transformed by the new edict, which simply gave them the right to defend themselves and their property." (Duguid, 2005, p. 105)

¹³ "Every Lord's Day is a day of feasting when we celebrate the great reversal of our eternal fate. Are we celebrating that reality in our hearts Sunday by Sunday?" (Duguid, 2005, p. 110)

¹⁴ "The phrase 'peoples of the land' here clearly means Gentiles, those who are natives of the countries where the Jews dwell. The phrase 'people of the land,' using the sg. noun, is used to refer both to Canaanites (e.g., Genesis 23:7; Ezra 4:4) and Israelites (e.g., Exodus 5:5; Leviticus 4:27). The pl. form, however, always refers to Israel's pagan neighbors (e.g., Deuteronomy 28:10; Joshua 4:24; 2 Chronicles 6:33)." (Tomasino, 2016, p. 321)

¹⁵ "Only here in the Old Testament is reference made to people of other races becoming Jews, though the New Testament bears ample witness to the process in the first century AD (Matthew 23:15; Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43). True, the law had made provision for foreigners who lived in 'the land' (Leviticus 19:33-34), and the prophets envisaged widespread conversion to the Lord from all over the earth (Isaiah 2:2-4; 49:6; Jeremiah 3:17; Zephaniah 3:9; Zechariah 8:22-23, to name but a few). But the verb used only here means 'they Judaized themselves', but by what process is not disclosed. The religion of the Jews had evidently become a separate issue from that of race." (Baldwin, 1985, p. 99)

¹⁶ "'Many people became Jews' is often taken to show the fictitious nature of the narrative since Jewish proselytizing only appears in the intertestamental period. In some parts of the Old Testament, however, there are indications that others became part of the Jewish nation (cf. Isaiah 42:6). In the exodus there was a 'mixed multitude' that went out of Egypt. Some non-Jews joined the Jews in the exodus. A careful

study of genealogical lists suggests that later in Canaan some local clans (of Canaanites or other peoples) were assimilated into the various Jewish tribes. Keil says that most of those who became Jews must have done it out of conviction of the truth of the Jewish religion.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 356)

¹⁷ “What is the ‘fear’ that so moves the Gentiles that they want to become Jewish? The term used here (פֶּחַד, *paḥad*) refers to a nearly debilitating fear, one that induces trembling. The word is used often for fear of Yahweh (e.g., Isa 2:10; 2 Chr 17:10), but also of the fear of the military might of Israel (Deuteronomy 2:25; 11:25).” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 323)

¹⁸ Recall Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.” The words in this verse reflect the different strata and rankings of Satan’s demons and the evil, supernatural empire in which they operate. From this we note that the devil’s forces of darkness are highly organized and structured for the most destructive warfare possible.

¹⁹ Anthony Tomasino wrote, “The Gentiles who did not attack the Jews would have nothing to fear from the Jews, since Mordecai’s decree only permitted the Jews to destroy those who attacked them. Is it, then, a fear of the Jews’ God- an awe of the numinous power that protects the Jewish people- that prompts these conversions , as Clines maintains? [*Esther Scroll*, 41].” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 323)