

Surprise

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[0 : 0 0] I think about images from concentration camps during the Holocaust, or images of Emmett Till at his funeral, or of that little Syrian boy lying face down on the beach of the Mediterranean, and these types of images that you just see and ask, where in the world is God?

There's one image in particular, though, that has stuck with me for a few years. The first time I saw this image was in a documentary, a film called *The Salt of the Earth*, which chronicles the career of a famous photojournalist by the name of Sebastião Salgado.

And Sebastião Salgado, he covered the front lines of human suffering for decades. He captured images to tell the story of suffering people to try to help them, to help the world know what was going on.

So he captured images of workers forced to labor in extreme and dangerous work conditions, and the countless victims of the countless wars and the refugee crises that resulted from them.

And he worked tirelessly until he covered the Rwandan genocide. It was this project that broke him. And so he describes in the documentary a series of photos.

[1 : 1 8] You see pictures, and then he's talking about the pictures. And in this particular image, it's in the aftermath of the genocide. Two million refugees fled Rwanda, and they had assembled in a refugee camp in the Goma region in the DRC.

So there's two million of them, and the situation is extreme. It's really terrible. Twelve to fifteen thousand are dying every single day from diseases that are preventable, things like cholera.

And there were just too many people to bury by hand. And so Western governments, I think it was the French government, I don't know what other aid they sent in, but they provided bulldozers. And the image that is burned into my mind is a bulldozer with a bucket, and it has a human body in it, and it's just being dumped into a mass grave and covered with dirt.

I remember the arms and the legs hanging over the bucket. About this image and this series of images, Salgado says, everyone should see these images to see how terrible the human species is.

About his experience in Rwanda, he said, when I left there, I no longer believed in anything. I no longer believed in any salvation for the human species. You couldn't survive such a thing.

[2 : 3 3] We didn't deserve to live. No one deserved to live. This seems grim, maybe overly pessimistic, but when I consider the evil and the injustice that I read about, the images that I see, maybe, maybe not.

You can pick your poison. Whether it's the commodification of people and the rise of sex slavery or systemic racism leading to violence, leading to women being shot in their own homes and losses of freedom, or the destruction of the earth fueled by our rampant greed and consumerism, it's sometimes hard not to see the world as one big wildfire.

And this is just the stuff that we see in the headlines, right? This isn't taking into account the things that you or I experience on a daily basis. I wonder what you would add to that list.

When we think about these things, I think it's fair to ask, where in the world is God? Is he involved? Does he care? Is he good? As I've thought about it, I think there are two options for how we can understand God's role in human history.

On the one hand, you have somebody like Martin Luther King, who famously said that the arc of the moral universe is long. There will be ups and downs, but it ultimately bends towards justice.

[3 : 50] So there's a force guiding history, and that force happens to be a person. It's God, and he's good, and he's just, and he's loving. And so we can take heart because we are not alone.

All will be well in the end. On the other hand, you have somebody like Ta-Nehisi Coates, who argues that history actually isn't guided by any sense of destiny. He writes that the moral arc of the universe is bent not towards justice, but towards chaos, and then is concluded in a box.

Somebody like Coates would say, there is no God to come to the rescue. We are forced to fend for ourselves until we die. And there might be another option, deism, which is sort of a combination of the two, that there is a God, but he's not involved, which functionally is just like Coates' view.

So I wonder which view of history best describes how you see the world this morning. Maybe it changes every day based on your circumstances, or maybe you came to church this morning because you're asking these kinds of questions.

And as a church, we believe it's important to wrestle with these hard questions, to think through them, and to see what the Bible has to say about them. And I think the book of Esther, the book that we're focusing on in this series, is a really helpful book to wrestle through some of these hard questions.

[5 : 12] It's a story about a people facing genocide, and God appears to be absent in the story. God's name is never mentioned. So as we study Esther, we can ask, Is the moral arc of the universe bent towards justice, or is it bent towards chaos?

What role does God play in our lives, in human history, and what is our role as human beings in the world? Our chapter, Esther 7, I think will help us to begin to wrap our heads around some of these questions.

We'll learn how God deals with evil and injustice, and perhaps most surprisingly, uses flawed and imperfect people, people like Esther, people like you and me, to accomplish his purposes.

So here's my plan for this morning. I want to summarize chapter 7, summarize our scene, and then I want to look at how this passage teaches us some things about the nature of evil and God's justice in the world, and then lastly, I want to consider how all this points to the greatest surprise in human history.

So first, we're going to summarize the scene. This is an incredibly dramatic scene. A lot of things happen. All of the action up until this point in the story really comes to a head in chapter 7 of Esther.

[6 : 30] So I want to rehearse where we've been in case you've missed a few weeks, or maybe this is your first Sunday. So recall the opening scene in the book of Esther. The king of Persia is throwing a banquet, a lavish feast to show off his wealth and his power, and we see that Queen Vashti is deposed because she refuses to be an object of lust for the king and his bros.

So he gets rid of her because she was disobedient, and to cheer himself up, the king says, you know, I'm going to throw a beauty contest. And so he gathers all of the virgins around the Persian Empire and tries to see which one of them will please him the most.

That woman will be queen, or that girl will be queen. As the story goes on, we see that Esther, this undercover Jew, just so happens to become queen. And in becoming queen, she becomes the queen of the most, the mightiest empire in the world, the Persian Empire.

And then Mordecai, her adoptive father, as the story goes on, disrespects the wrong guy. If you remember, he refuses to bow down to Haman. We don't know why, but he doesn't.

And Haman happens to be the second most powerful person in the whole kingdom, and not honoring him was an offense worthy of death. Haman was enraged that Mordecai didn't honor him and respect him, and so he decides he's going to manipulate the king.

[7 : 51] And he manipulates the king to issue an irrevocable edict with instructions to destroy, to kill, and just in case we're not clear, to annihilate all of the Jews.

And they end up casting lots to find out, to determine what the execution date would be, and it would be 11 months from now. They'd have to wait 11 months for the final solution. While all this is going on, Queen Esther decides to step up to the plate, and in this moment, she becomes the queen.

And she risks her life to save her people, and she shows herself to be a brilliant political strategist. She hatches a plan. She throws two banquets in order to have a big setup, to butter up the king so that she can present her request to save her people, and to thwart Haman and his evil plans.

While all this is happening, Haman has no idea what's going on, and he's feeling pretty good about himself, because he and he alone was a guest of honor invited to the queen's banquet for the king.

And as he's going home, after he gets this wonderful invitation, he's going home to tell his friends and family how amazing and successful he is, and as he's walking home, he just so happens to see Mordecai, this man that he hates.

[9 : 04] And he thinks he just hates seeing Mordecai's face so much that he can't wait 11 months to kill him, so he decides to build a gallows, a 75-foot spike, and he puts it in his front yard, and he's going to kill Mordecai on that.

And as we see in the story, it's all fun and games until somebody builds a 75-foot spike to kill God's people. Things begin to turn for Haman at this point, and he's publicly humiliated twice.

A couple weeks ago, Tommy preached on what might be the funniest passage in the scriptures. There's a comical turn. He approaches the king and wants to get permission to hang Mordecai on the spike, and in so doing, the king decides to have Haman honor Mordecai.

It's a hilarious scene where he's forced to walk Mordecai on the king's horse with the king's crown throughout all the streets of Susa, saying, Thus shall it be done to the man who the king delights to honor.

It would be like the Astros leading the Nats in the World Series victory parade through D.C. It just wouldn't happen. It's ridiculous. And our chapter is the second public humiliation.

[10 : 16] Things are no longer funny. Things get deadly serious in this chapter. So that's where we've been, and we're going to pick up in the second banquet in chapter 7. So there's a lot of wine being drank, drunk, I never know how to say that.

They're drinking a lot of wine at this feast. Wine is mentioned three times in this story. So the queen is whining and dining the king and Haman. King Ahasuerus is feeling pretty good, and so again he asks his queen, What is your request, my queen?

And this is the moment that she's been waiting for. But the situation is fraught. It's a really complicated situation. She needs to highlight the horrors of the king's edict and accuse Haman, while at the same time doing this without implicating the king who himself made the edict.

And she shows off her political savvy. She pulls a play from the playbook of Nathan the prophet, if you remember this, from 2 Samuel, when he accused the king of adultery and murder.

Nathan the prophet told a story to circumvent the king's defenses. And he aroused King David's indignation and his resolve to fix the injustice without initially revealing that David was the person guilty.

[11 : 33] And then there's the big reveal, where he says, You are the man. So Esther does something similar here. She skirts the king's defense mechanisms, and she appeals to him by showing how her situation actually just affects him negatively.

The king is enraged at the injustice, and he wants to fix it. This is what Esther says. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, to be annihilated.

She's talking about the edict. If we had been sold merely as slaves, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king. Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, Who is he and where is he who has dared to do this?

One of the commentaries describes this sentence. It's sort of lost in translation, but if you read this quickly in the Hebrew, it sounds like machine gun fire. So he's very angry.

And Esther says, this is the big reveal, A foe and an enemy, the wicked Haman, he is the man. And Haman, understandably, was terrified before the king and the queen. And immediately the king gets up, he leaves, he's pretty drunk, he's pretty angry, and now he's pretty confused.

[12 : 46] He just heard several alarming things all at once. It's the kind of news that servers you up real quick. He learns his queen is Jewish, and that the destruction of the Jews, which he himself decreed, meant that he would lose another queen, which he didn't want to lose.

He also learns that his most trusted leader, his number two guy, Haman, has been playing him. He manipulated him and orchestrated his queen's death, and not only the death of the queen, but Mordecai, the man that he just publicly honored through the streets of Susa.

And so I want us to appreciate the conundrum that King Ahasuerus is in. It really is complicated. If he decides to punish Haman, he'll appear foolish and weak before his kingdom.

They'll see that he's been a puppet, Haman's puppet, all along. And if he doesn't punish Haman, he'll have to kill the queen and kill Mordecai, and again appear foolish.

After having honored him, he'll have to kill the man he publicly honored and will look like a fool. So it's complicated, so he just says, T, I gotta go outside, I need to think this through, I need to process what I'm going to do.

[13 : 59] Meanwhile, Haman stays inside and is pleading for his life. And note who he speaks to when he's pleading for his life. He doesn't go outside with the king, he talks to Queen Esther, because Queen Esther really is the boss.

The king returns, and I have no idea what his plan was, right? I don't know how you solve the situation, but Haman does him a favor. When the king returns, Haman seems to fall down on the couch where Esther is seated.

We don't know what happened. I don't think he was trying to assault her or something. He was pretty drunk, remember, so he was just begging for his life. And he falls down, and as soon as the king sees that, the problem is solved for him.

An assault on the queen is worthy of death. And so the king says, Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house? And as the word left the mouth of the king, this is terrifying, they cover Haman's face.

It's like something out of a spy movie with a black bag over your face. It's terrifying. And as this is happening, one of the king's eunuchs interjects and says, Well, you know, there just so happens to be a pretty decent tool for execution in Mordecai's front yard, the 75-foot spike, and so the king says, Perfect.

[15 : 17] Let's hang him on that. And so Mordecai is impaled on the spike, meant, Haman is impaled on the spike, meant for Mordecai, and the king's wrath is abated.

It's an amazing scene. What I want to do now is draw out a few things about the nature of evil and God's justice that we learn from this passage. So first, the nature of evil.

We see in this passage and other places of Scripture that evil is self-deceptive and it's always bent towards its own destruction. So evil is self-deceptive and always bent towards its own destruction.

So evil always tricks evildoers. Evildoers think that they're justified in their wicked deeds. They think that they will never get caught in their evil schemes.

I think of somebody like Bernie Madoff in the Ponzi scheme who in his evil shenanigans thought he would never get caught. Haman, in his evil ways, was fooled.

[16 : 18] He thought that with his immense power and his immense wealth and his immense influence, that he could do whatever he wanted to do, even oppose God, and nothing could stop him.

He was deceived by evil, and if you look, sort of reading Esther in reverse, he is constantly weaving a web of his own destruction. A real-world example, another real-world example, sort of the classic one, the personification of evil.

I might have chosen a different example than Hitler, but there's so many similarities between Haman and Hitler with their desire to kill the Jews, but we see this playing out in Hitler's life.

He deceived himself into thinking that his evil plan, the taking over the world and the destruction of the Jews, was so good, was so unstoppable, that in his arrogance, he decided to do a thing that everyone knows you shouldn't do, wage a war on two fronts, on the east and on the west, and that led to his destruction, the destruction of the Third Reich, and prevented the destruction of the Jews.

So evil is always self-deceptive and leads to its own destruction. The second thing this passage teaches us is about how divine justice works into this, and I think it works in a surprising way.

[17 : 35] God's justice leverages the corrosive qualities of evil against itself. We saw that in Psalm 7, which we read this morning. I'll read it again for us, and I want you to note the imagery used to describe God's justice and then the surprising way in which God's justice is meted out.

So Psalm 7, 12 to 16, if a man does not repent, if he remains in his evil ways, note the imagery, God will wet his sword, God will sharpen his sword to bring justice.

He has bent and readied his bow. God is depicted as standing there with a bow ready to fire these fiery darts at the evil person. He has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts.

And there's a surprising turn. This is how God's justice works itself out. Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies.

He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made. His mischief returns upon his own head and on his own skull his violence descends.

[18 : 47] So God's justice is depicted as a bow and arrow and a sword and how it plays out in real time is we fall into pits that we've dug for ourselves. So sometimes I think when we do bad things and evil things God's going to hit us with a bus or something like that.

That's what justice would be. But that's not the case. So for instance, if you're looking at pornography or things that you shouldn't be looking at on the internet, you're not going to get hit by a bus.

Most likely, that's not how God's justice is going to work itself out. What you're going to do is slowly destroy your marriage or your capacity to have meaningful relationship. Likewise, if you're involved in immoral practices at work, you're not going to be struck by lightning.

You're probably just going to lose your job and maybe your career. You see, God's justice isn't a lightning bolt. It's a hole we dig for ourselves. We see that with Haman. Haman gets himself impaled on a spike that he himself made.

And so we see God's justice, how it relates to evil, is it judo's evil. It leverages the weight and the power and the strength of evil against itself. Now, at this point, I think I need to qualify this a little bit and make an important caveat.

[20 : 05] We all know, I don't have to tell you, that we don't always get to see God's justice working itself out in the world. Oftentimes, it's one of the big themes of the Psalms where people are crying out to God, why did the wicked seem to prosper?

Where is God's justice? You know, I think of somebody like Jeffrey Epstein, this rich and powerful man. He thought he was rich and powerful enough to buy friends and influence people so that he could sexually assault young girls with impunity for decades.

And he was imprisoned, he was caught, and it looked like justice was going to be working itself out. He would go to trial, and then he died in prison. So, true justice wasn't really served.

I don't know what it looks like in your life where you've experienced evil or injustice and you're still waiting for God to bring justice. Sometimes, God's justice tarries.

I wish it wasn't the case. I wish we had easy answers. We don't know why God doesn't meet justice out right away. But the Bible tells us the math is always the same. Sometimes, it just takes a little while to crunch the numbers.

[21 : 11] We need to take God at his word. So, I think of the promise of judgment or the warning of judgment depending on where you are with regards to God's judgment. In Isaiah 13, this powerful language says, wait for the day of the Lord is near.

Sometimes, we have to wait until the final judgment to see justice play out. Isaiah writes, behold, the day of the Lord comes. I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity.

I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless. We might have to wait until the final judgment to see that, but sometimes, we do see it play out in real time and such is the case in our chapter in the story of Esther.

We see this dynamic of evil and God's justice and a number of surprising reversals in Esther. Right? When Haman wants to, goes to the king to request to kill Mordecai, God's justice works itself out.

He actually has to honor Mordecai. Haman thinks he's being invited into a banquet where he'll be honored and God's justice works itself out. It actually becomes the place where he receives his death sentence.

[22 : 24] All of Haman's evil schemes intended to destroy the Jews end up resulting in the exaltation of the Jews to positions of power and influence in the mightiest empire on earth.

We see that evil Haman, this empowered destroyer, loses his power and is himself destroyed. This is how God's justice works. And the most obvious example is the 75-foot spike that was built for Mordecai.

This becomes the place of Haman's own execution. The scene is full of surprises, but the most surprising thing, to me at least, isn't that God judges Haman.

And this takes us to our final point this morning, how this passage points to the most surprising thing in human history. The most surprising thing is not that God judges evil in this story.

That's what God does. The most surprising thing is that he doesn't judge evil. God uses Esther. You see, divine justice is a bit like the laws of nature.

[23 : 24] So, we're not surprised, like if I drop my pen, what's it going to do? It's going to fall to the ground, right? That's the gravity taking over and doing its thing. We would be surprised if when I dropped my pen, it floated, right?

It would require some sort of outside force into the system, some sort of miracle to prevent the laws of nature from doing what the laws of nature do. And so it is with divine justice. It always works itself out unless it's disrupted by some outside force, by mercy, or by grace.

When we look at Esther and Haman, we see two types of people. But the binary is not good people and bad people. Don't get me wrong, Haman is a devil.

He's the personification of evil. But Esther is not an angel. She's not evil in the same way as Haman is evil. But she's managed to arrange her life with no regard for God or his purposes or the plight of God's people.

She's insulated. She's comfortably numb. She's not an oppressor, but she's a bystander. Makes me think of words from Kirk Franklin from a couple weeks ago.

[24 : 34] He said, in the end, it's not the words of our enemies that we'll remember. It's the silences of our friends. Standing by when evil and injustice is happening is different, but it might not be better than being an oppressor.

And the only reason why Esther herself isn't eventually impaled on a spike of her own making is because a force from outside of the system broke in. God's mercy.

She chooses to embrace her Jewish faith, her Jewish people, and she becomes God's chosen instrument to thwart evil and to bring God's justice. She was worthy of judgment, but she becomes the mouthpiece of God.

She was worthy of judgment, but she becomes God's hands and feet. And this is why I think Esther is such an encouraging book for me. God uses flawed and imperfect people like Esther to accomplish his purposes.

So there are two types of people. It's not good people and bad people. The two types of people in the world are unrepentant sinners and repentant sinners. Either we are living a life where we'll ultimately be hung on the gallows of our own making, or we allow God to hang on the gallows for us.

[25 : 49] And by faith, we become empowered and commissioned to participate with him as citizens of his kingdom and become the means by which he overcomes evil and injustice in the world.

We become used like Esther. The only reason why every single one of us is not doomed to die on the spike of our own making is because Christ, though he had done nothing wrong, like we read about in our gospel lesson, he had done nothing wrong, but he hung on the gallows for us, in our place, taking upon himself the judgment we deserve for our evil.

The greatest surprise is not that God's justice defeats evil and judges sinners, it's that he extends mercy in Christ to redeem sinners. And then he uses us, it's amazing, he uses us to accomplish his purposes.

The moral arc of the universe is long, and God uses redeemed people, he always has, to help it bend towards justice. So I want to come full circle this morning.

Remember we asked, we look at these terrible images, we read these terrible things in the news, and we ask, where in the world is God? Where is God in the world? And the answer is, 2,000 years ago, the image of the invisible God walked the earth, and he hung on the gallows of our own making.

[27:12] After he was raised and ascended by his spirit, he's now present among his people, a group of repentant, recovering sinners, people like us. remade in his image, and called to bear his image in the world, in the broken world, to repair it.

Let's pray. Father, I pray that we would not consider Christianity to be just a thing where we are made right with you.

Help us to understand the fullness of the gospel, the fullness of what it means to be a Christian, to be made right with you, to be reconciled so that we can become reconcilers, that we can participate with you in the world to set the world to rights as we wait for you to come fully and finally to bring heaven to earth.

Help us in this amazing adventure, this amazing task. Lord, have mercy. Amen. Let's sing the gospel. Thank you.