

Misery deliverance strategy

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[0:00] Now we know all speech is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

But in Esther there are some great spiritual and moral lessons for us to learn through the individual examples of Esther and of Mordecai.

But also the experience of the Jews corporately as the people of God, God's covenant people and their time in exile. But I think even more importantly than that, although God is not mentioned once in the book of Esther, we learn so much about God and how he works in time and in history and particularly in providence.

We learn of his character. We learn of his ways. Studying Esther helps us to grow in knowing God, to know God and to love him and to glorify him.

Now, although Esther is ancient history, it's not any old history. Esther is part of God's redemptive history.

[1:16] More specifically in this book, we see pointers, we see glimpses, we see echoes of Christ in the characters, in the gospel principles. And the overarching redemptive plan of God preserving his people, ensuring their deliverance while ensuring the destruction of his enemies.

Now, this morning, we won't be looking at a particular text. So today's sermon won't be exegetical, meaning I won't be going through systematically a text in Esther. It's going to be more thematic. It's going to be very broad brushstrokes.

And it's going to be more of a kind of topical review. And I may not be bringing any real new insights. This in many ways will act as reminder and review. I've got four thoughts this morning that hopefully you can see behind you.

We learn lessons about worldliness and power in Esther. We also learn lessons about persecution and spiritual warfare. We learn lessons about God working great reversals for his people.

And we learn lessons about deliverance, victory and remembrance for God's people. So my first point, lessons about worldliness and power, which is broadly chapter one all the way through to chapter two, 23.

[2:38] So immediately in the opening verses of Esther, we are confronted with the backdrop for this drama of deliverance. And this is a dark backdrop.

It gives us a glimpse of what is valued and held in high esteem by a pagan, godless culture. We see worldliness in all its crassness.

The king is boasting in his material wealth. We see his indulgent lifestyle, the taste for pomp and excess and opulence. And we're meant to see here the splendor and the might of the pagan Persian empire.

So in these opening chapters, we're confronted with excessive material wealth, abuse of power, the victimization of the weak and vulnerable and the treating of women as mere commodities.

Now, near eastern kings in those days, they measured greatness by the size and might of their empire. Well, we live in a very different time, don't we?

[3:43] And although we do live in a different era, some things don't really change that much, do they? We often read or hear in the news about how corrupt leaders abuse power.

We live in a society that is increasingly aware of the victimization of the vulnerable on one hand. But yet, places great value on indulgence and materialism and wealth and status on the other hand.

Those things are kind of held up as badges of honor and success. Never have we as a nation, or probably in the entirety of the West, been so materially wealthy, but so spiritually bankrupt.

Now, worldliness is a great enemy to the Christian. Now, when I speak of the world, when I'm speaking of worldliness, I'm not primarily talking about a way of dressing.

I'm not talking primarily about the kind of music you listen to or the places you go or the films that you watch, although those things will be impacted for sure. I'm not talking about the physical world, the creation.

[4:58] Even after the curse, there is beauty and there's goodness in God's creation. I'm speaking of a world system that holds sway over so many souls, and even can over Christians.

I'm talking about this sphere, this overall sphere that is basically, it's set up to dethrone God, and to set up institutions, worldviews, attitudes and beliefs and behaviours that are in direct opposition to God and his rule.

You think about the promise of power and prestige and owning stuff. You think of the security that we can so easily find in the things of this world.

Making governments and leaders like gods. Making idols of pleasure and success. Following the philosophy of this world.

In the New Testament, there's much to be said about this book. 1 John 2.15 James 4.

[6:18] Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Enmity with God. Going back to Esther, we get a view of the king's understanding and value of marriage.

In his deposing of Vashti and his acquiring of Esther, he sees marriage as something primarily just to serve his own selfish desires, meet his own needs.

And again, I would submit to you that the world that we live in has an increasingly warped view of marriage. As something disposable. Something cheap.

Something with little sanctity. The covenantal Christian view of marriage is rarely spoken of. And we see endless examples of celebrities, don't we, whose marriages are car crashes.

I was struck by some colleagues at work just this week talking about a cheap reality TV show.

Using marriage as the means of entertainment.

[7:29] Glorifying and finding entertainment in adultery. And all the while, the morality of our culture and society is being corroded. People of God, if you were asked about your view on marriage, it's likely that you would receive a sneering response.

You'd be seen as irrelevant, old-fashioned. And we see in these opening verses in Esther a display of godlessness. In chapter 2, verses 5 to 6, there is the first mention of the Jew, Mordecai.

And his status as one who's been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives. So in contrast to the indulgence and the opulence of the Persian citadel, we get a glimpse, a glimpse of the people of God and their status.

And what is their status? Their exiles. They're exiles in a foreign land. Those exiled Jews, part of the captivity, they didn't belong.

That wasn't their native land. And you may ask, what's the Jewish exile got to do with you or me? Well, Christian, it has much to do with you.

[8:50] Because you may not know this, but you are an exile. This world is not your home. You're passing through. It's temporal. You don't belong here. In the New Testament, the language of exile is used to describe the church.

We're described as strangers. You think of 1 Peter 1, 2 to 3. I, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.

How are we to behave as exiles? Well, later Peter says, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your souls.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. How relevant is this today?

Well, to some degree, we as exiles, we have to assimilate and share in the things of our neighbors, don't we? But we are called as Christians to be salt and light and a blessing in our communities.

[10:00] Think of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 29. What does he say? He says to the exiles then, build houses, plant gardens, have families, seek the welfare of the city.

But we must be distinguished. And what distinguishes us is that we must faithfully give our worship and allegiance to God and his people.

There are times that we have to stand in the midst of opposition and partake in the spiritual warfare. Which brings me to my next point, second point, lessons about spiritual warfare and persecution. Chapters 3, verse 1 through to 4, 17. So in chapters 3 and 4, Haman plots to kill the Jews. And this is the focal point which brings us to the heart of a conflict that sets the backdrop of God's redemptive plan for his people's deliverance.

You may remember that Haman the Agagite, he's promoted to a position of prominence as second in command, kind of like a prime minister. And he becomes enraged at Mordecai because Mordecai doesn't bow down to him and pay homage.

[11:10] Now behind this is an ancient, I think Steve called it a blood feud, but it's certainly an ancient enmity between the Amalekites and the Jews.

Yet what's enduringly relevant for us as the church, there's an even more ancient enmity that stretches way back to the beginning of time. The enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

In Genesis 3.15, there is a proclamation from God to the serpent that he will put enmity between the serpent and the woman and the seed of the woman will crush the seed of the serpent's head.

It's interesting to me that that first gospel proclamation is to Satan directly. This is what some theologians call the proto-evangelion.

Theologian Sinclair and pastor Sinclair Ferguson describes this as the key. It's the key that unlocks the unfolding story of the Bible.

[12:16] It's like a golden thread throughout the entire redemptive plan of God. The serpent in the garden becomes the raging dragon in Revelation.

Important to keep that in mind as we look at books like Esther. And we learn how God's people always, always have enemies. And one particular enemy, Satan himself, who is the puppet master behind the Hamans of this world.

Even if they don't know it. And Haman probably didn't know it. But Mordecai takes a stand and he suffers consequences for God's people and not bowing to this ungodly leader.

And it's helpful just to pause and think how difficult that must have been just to stand alone, to take that stand, to go against the tide.

It was very dangerous and very costly. His courage and resolve to remain true to his convictions is astounding. It's a great example to us.

[13:21] And there are times that we, as Christians, need to take a stand. We need to think about when we do that and we need to be discerning. But we can only do this in the power of the Spirit working in us.

Much of our struggle as Christians is due to the spiritual warfare that we're engaged in. Now we're engaged in a war on three fronts. A three-front war. The flesh, the world, and the devil.

But the principal enemy, if you like, the mastermind of allurements behind those is the devil himself.

Ephesians 6 states that we don't wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

1 Peter 5 warns us to be sober-minded, to be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

[14:27] Now the means used for Satan to attack upon God's people in Esther is the raging pride, the egotism, the hungering for absolute power of Haman.

Haman's actions are in direct contrast and opposition to the humble, the self-denying, servant-hearted, godly man, Mordecai. Haman, in essence, he's setting himself up in opposition to God.

Now we may not have a Haman in government at this time seeking our destruction, but there are forces of persecution at play for the church.

There is hostility towards the church. Now there was a time when the church's general moral outlook would have been broadly shared by the culture. There wouldn't have been much conflict there but we're becoming, as the church of Jesus Christ, we're becoming increasingly marginalised. It's a fact, we are. And soon, I predict soon we will be barely tolerated. We see in Esther a principle that the people of God's experience is often one of persecution and suffering.

[15:41] Suffering is a reality the Bible doesn't avoid. We're often needed to be brought low before we're exalted. Any theology, any theology that claims that the Christian life is free from suffering, free from pain, free from having any enemies, it's false.

Run a mile. Run a mile. Acts 14.22 states that we enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations. Romans 8 says that we are fellow heirs with Christ provided we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him.

The cross is always before the crown. the king's compliance to Haman's wishes and his self-interest demonstrates how Satan often will enlist civil rulers or people in power to enact his evil plan.

But our God in his providence will often place his people in positions of power or influence and he will overrule Satan's plans.

He will hinder Satan's work. We know that God has ultimate authority over pagan civil rulers and he has ultimate authority over Satan. The devil is God's devil.

[17:00] Esther is now enlisted to help the Jews and we see God's hand in her life through her fasting, through her planning, through her commitment to her people. And this leads to the marvellous reversal for the Jews and is our next consideration.

So lessons about great reversals and deliverance, chapters 5 through to chapter 8. So we see within this chapter an intricately woven narrative of Haman's downfall being orchestrated by Esther's careful, carefully crafted plan and God's providential hand supertending over all of this. Now there are really dark overtones in this section because Haman, he's energized, he's almost excited in his pursuit of Mordecai's death. He's advising a plot for him to be hanged.

But God providentially, he orchestrates several twists and turns and then Esther is the secondary cause, if you like, of God's purpose. She uses such wisdom.

She uses political discernment. She has great poise and deference before the king. and then, as we know, Haman's plan is foiled. Now there's an obvious lesson here.

[18:19] We've got power to bring about great reversals. The victim now becomes the one who is exalted. Haman, who was going to hang Mordecai, is himself hanged on the instrument of execution that he has built.

Esther, who was not in control of her own destiny, was at the mercy of the king and embodied the fate of her people. Now she's the one in a position where she was able to be the means used to reverse the fate of her people.

An edict that orders destruction and annihilation of the Jews is reversed and the enemies of the Jews are the ones who will now be annihilated.

You see all these reversals going on in multiple levels. God providentially controls the seemingly small, small things the details which all add up to bring about his great purposes.

Now God works great reversals in our lives. He's done this through the redemptive power of the spirit working in us, through the gospel changing our hearts, renewing our minds.

[19:28] But Christ is that great worker of reversals through his salvation. Think of him dealing with the curse of sin on the cross by becoming a curse for us. He was devoted to destruction, made sin for your sake, for my sake, that we can enjoy the great reversal of knowing that his righteousness is imputed, that means credited to our account, and our sin is now credited, imputed to his account.

It's wonderful. What a reversal. Sinners who were once fit for eternal punishment are now honoured and given the place of fellowship with the king of kings.

And the next lesson is about deliverance, victory, and remembrance. That's chapter 8 through to chapter 10 in the end of the book. This great reversal led to the king issuing a second decree

through Mordecai and sealing it with his signet ring.

The decree stated that the king allowed the Jews in every province to gather and defend their lives and to destroy and kill their enemies. Here begins the deliverance of the Jews and the people from the country declared themselves.

And we see in the text that there was much joy, there was much gladness among the Jews and the people from the country declared themselves Jews. So Mordecai and Esther's declaration of their allegiance to the Jews is being echoed in the wider population of Jews as their deliverance gathers momentum.

[21:10] It's important to note that often throughout redemptive history great acts of deliverance are often brought about by the means of weak finite leaders, imperfect leaders.

You think of Noah and the flood, you think of Moses bringing Israel out of Egypt, you think of Joshua and the conquest of the land, you think of the various judges in the book of Judges, you think of David and the Philistines, and I think you could put Esther and Mordecai in that category. These great deliverances that are enacted by these leaders that God has raised up, anointed by his spirit. But I think it's important we learn the lesson here that although the Jews, they were being delivered, they had to fight.

really important lesson. They had to exert themselves, they had to engage in warfare. The utter destruction of their enemies points to an uncompromising devotion.

Now we as Christians, we've been delivered, haven't we? If you're a believer, you've been delivered, you've been saved. You've been saved from your enemies, the devil, and sin, and the penalty of sin.

[22:27] But you do need to engage in a fight. There is a fight. It's a fight for our lives. Think of the New Testament. Paul uses many metaphors to describe the Christian life.

He likens the Christian life to being a farmer. He likens it to being an athlete. But one of the most prominent metaphors that Paul uses is a soldier. And what are soldiers trained to do?

They fight. They fight and they defend. The church this side of glory, we are the church militants. We're not yet the church glorified.

Paul and Timothy, when he speaks some of his last words, what does he say? He says, I have fought the good fight. Are we engaged in a fight?

Are we putting to death enemies? Now, I thought when I was preparing this, I thought of John Owen's very well-known quote. came to mind, be killing sin or sin will be killing you.

[23:33] We have to contend for the faith earnestly. The fight can be outside the church against the world's ideological assaults, and it can be within the church. It can be enemies of false teachers.

They can creep in. It can be within our own hearts. And I would suggest that's the best starting point and often the case. are you fighting against sin?

Are you praying earnestly for the advancement of the kingdom of God? Like the Jews in Esther's day, it is us that need to fight. But there is a kind of divine concurrency that's going on where God is fighting for us.

Our God is a fighter. He's a warrior for his people. It's in his strength that we fight. Now the Jews enjoy great victory and they commemorate their deliverance and victory with the feast of Purim. This feast was a way to remember how they got relief from their enemies. The month had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday.

[24:40] This became a time of feasting, a time of great joy. And we know this joy as believers, don't we? Because we are victors through the gospel. What does Paul say in Romans 8?

He says in all these things, talking about the persecutions, the trials, the sufferings that he previously mentioned, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Literally in the Greek, hyper conquerors. I was reminded of the Heidelberg Catechism and how it was structured by its authors. The Catechism starts with the state of misery.

It then speaks of deliverance, then it speaks of gratitude. So you have this structure of misery, deliverance, gratitude. And what the authors were trying to do very intentionally there, they were trying to convey that gospel pattern.

We often see it in scriptures, you think of the book of Exodus, you think of Romans, misery, deliverance, gratitude. And I think we see something of this when we think of Esther, the overview of Esther.

[25:45] Esther, they started in their miserable condition. I don't mean just subjectively miserable, I mean objectively. They were in a difficult place, weren't they? They were exiles. The situation with Mordecai was really difficult.

But then we see their deliverance, and then with the feast of Purim, gratitude, thankfulness, joy, celebration. Remembrance is an important thing in the scriptures, and it's important for us as Christians.

We remember the great work of Christ every time we have the little supper. As we come to the end of the book, we see the exaltation of Mordecai as a second in command, and his rise to greatness. And we see here what true greatness is in comparison to the beginning. It's not one of worldly pride. No doubt as he partook in the feast of Purim, he would have looked back, he would have probably, I don't know, but I'm sure he would have looked back and remembered all God had done for him and his people.

Now this reminded me again of another Puritan in his well-known words, John Flavill. Providence is like Hebrew letters best read backwards. God's ways are not always clear when you're in the midst of it.

[27:11] Often when you're in the midst of it, and we know this, you can't see clearly, but it's only, as John Flavill says, like Hebrew letters, you read God's providence backwards and you think, ah, that's what God was doing for the church.

What about us? Well, we may look back and be thankful for God's mercy and his deliverance towards us. In some sense, we are still in the midst of struggle difficulty, aren't we?

The situation with COVID, although we're coming out the other end, we're dealing with that still. The situation in the church, there's much uncertainty for our future. But we can trust in God's providence, always working, always sustaining, always upholding and governing in the details of our lives.

and we could also look forward knowing the sure promise that Christ proclaimed, that he will build his church.

That is a promise in the scriptures. So let us live lives of faith, hope and trust in him. He will uphold us in the midst of troubles.

[28:26] He'll carry us through the troubles and one day he will bring us safely out of the troubles when we are with him in glory. Amen.

Father, we do thank you so much for the wonderful truths that we have learned in the book of Esther. I'm sure there's so much more that we could ponder and consider in this great book, Lord. Please, I pray, Father, that you would take these lessons, take these truths and instill them into our hearts. May they give us spiritual backbone, steel in our backbone.

May they be a source of comfort and assurance for us as we face an ever difficult and challenging world as Christian believers, Lord. May we not be just hearers of the word, Lord, but may we be doers of the word.

Please change us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.