

Triumph means judgment

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[0 : 00] So Esther chapter 8, reading the whole chapter. That same day, King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews.

And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai.

And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate. Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews.

Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther, and she arose and stood before him. If it pleases the king, she said, and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman, son of Hamadatha the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces.

For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family? King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up.

[1 : 21] Now write another decree in the king's name and on behalf of the Jews, as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring, for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.

At once the royal secretaries were summoned. On the 23rd day of the third month, the month of Sivan, they wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces, stretching from India to Kush.

These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people, and also to the Jews in their own script and language. Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.

The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies.

The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality, so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.

[2 : 46] The couriers, riding the royal horses, went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold, and a purple robe of fine linen.

And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. For the Jews, it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honour. In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating.

And many people of other nationalities became Jews, because fear of the Jews had seized them.

Amen. So do you have Esther chapter 8 open in front of you if you're able to?

We'll be considering together what God has to say to us there. It ain't over till it's over. Or at least not until the fat lady sings, depending whether you prefer a baseball flavour or a more operatic one to your aphorisms.

We use these kinds of phrases often in fairly trivial examples. Now, don't count your chickens before they're hatched. Don't get ahead of yourself. Sometimes things seem to be over before they

really are.

[4 : 08] And sometimes the reality is much more serious, is even much more sinister than, you know, those more trivial examples. Consider this.

May the 2nd, 2011. Osama bin Laden was killed by the U.S. Navy SEALs. I imagine many of you remember that happening, remember it being reported.

Many of us breathed a sigh of relief at that moment, I imagine. But of course, to a wise analyst at the time, and certainly to many, to most of us looking back with the benefit of hindsight, it's apparent, isn't it, that the war on terror was not thereby won.

The organisations that had masterminded the attacks that prompted said war on terror, those organisations were still operational, still a threat. A battle was won, but the war was far from over. And a very similar situation is here, as we consider chapter 8 of the book of Esther, because Haman is dead. Haman has been impaled on his own ludicrously oversized pole.

[5 : 16] It is a significant victory. Esther's planning and preparation has paid off in this success thus far. And verses 1 and 2 of the chapter, we see further evidence of reversal, further encouragements for the Jews, further assurance for Esther and Mordecai.

We see the king giving Haman's estate to Esther. Remember, Haman died as a traitor to the empire for his purported attack on the queen. So it's no surprise that Haman's fortune is forfeit to the state. And whatever Xerxes faults, a lack of generosity doesn't seem to be among them. Maybe that's because his wealth is so vast that he can just throw such over-the-top banquets and bestow such sizable estates on a sheer whim.

But in any case, he gives the estate to his queen, who appoints Mordecai as steward over it. So it's good news. The chief antagonist is dead and disgraced.

Mordecai ascends to Haman's place, ascends to his place both in relation to his own household and his place in relation to the king. He's given the signet ring reclaimed from Haman.

[6 : 24] And remember, Haman received that ring as a subsequent step quite some time after his rise to office. You know, that specific edict that he had permission to enact, that's when he gets the ring.

But by contrast, Mordecai receives the ring right up front. As soon as he's appointed to this office, he gets the ring. He has that higher authority of being able to do things not only in his own name, but in the name of King Xerxes.

Maybe this is being presented to us here in these verses as an establishment of what ought to have been already. Remember that jarring shift when we move from chapter 2 into chapter 3.

We're here at the end of chapter 2 of Mordecai saving the king's life of the lengths that he went to to uncover the plot. And then Haman honored for some unknown reason.

So maybe here Mordecai is being presented as receiving the reward that he kind of ought to have received back then. Maybe it's a writing of wrongs or maybe it's just the capricious whims of a king who doesn't care that much what happens or what anyone else does so long as his wine keeps flowing.

[7 : 35] But in any case, this is victory, isn't it? This is vindication for the Jews. And whatever the motivations might be for King Xerxes, well, it is readily apparent to us what stands behind this bestowal of honor upon Mordecai.

Psalms 75 verse 7. It is God who judges. He brings one down. He exalts another. So it's excellent news at the start of this chapter, isn't it?

Haman is dead. Long live Mordecai. The battle has been won. But the truth is the war is far from over. There's this sword of Damocles hanging over their heads.

The threat to all the Jews still remains. The edict that Haman enacted, that edict still stands. And so Esther and Mordecai can't rest easy.

Of course they can't. The larger crisis remains unresolved and it's no small matter. Because what Esther now comes to the king to ask, what she's trying to get the king to do, she knows can't be done.

[8 : 37] She asks him to cause to pass away a law of the Medes and Persians, which according to chapter 1 verse 9 cannot be repealed. She asks the impossible.

There is no legal provision to repeal a law. Whatever public opinion might be, whatever the opinion of the king, of his prime minister, of his advisors, whatever they might wish, these laws cannot be repealed.

I mean, you might think that given that irrevocable nature of the laws, that a little bit more care would be taken over what the laws say in the first place, rather than, you know, angrily declaring that Vashti must never enter the presence of the king again.

Or this present matter, you know, the law that the Jews be destroyed, killed and annihilated. You might think that the emperor would interest himself enough to find out who, to consider carefully whether it was wise or not.

You'd think he'd be careful about these kind of unalterable decrees, but apparently not. And, you know, he hasn't even learned his lesson at this point, has he? Even as he's had to, you know, deal with Haman who brought this law in the first place, he still hasn't learned his lesson, because, well, he's still going to just hand over authority to someone else and wash his hands of the whole affair.

[9 : 52] So Esther and Mordecai still faced with this looming crisis, and therefore she comes to Xerxes. She comes to Beck. She comes pleading with him to put an end to Haman's evil plan.

And she knows, again, that her hope rests on whether or not she has found favor in the king's eyes. Her appeal here is to the distress that she knows she will experience if disaster falls on her and her people and her family.

She's maybe trying to attempt a loophole in these unalterable laws. She kind of suggests that at this stage they're merely dispatches, verse 5. Not yet enacted, therefore not yet a law.

But, well, like a rashly worded 2 a.m. email, there is no undoing what is written and sent. The king's response is hardly encouraging, is it?

Verse 7, he replies to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, because Haman attacked the Jews. I've given his estate to Esther, and they've impaled him on the pole he set up. Now, write another decree in the king's name on behalf of the Jews.

[11 : 00] This seems best to you. And seal it with the king's signet ring, for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked. I've given you his money. I've killed him for you.

What more do you want? It's as if with their personal safety, functionally secured, well, he can't really wrap his head around why they care about anything more.

He's no interest in working with them to find a solution, no interest in the affairs of his empire, no apparent empathy for the people who he previously ordered killed. The best he's willing to say is, go and do whatever you like.

You have the signet ring. You have the necessary authority. You go figure it out. Again, we see as we consider the actions of Xerxes, we see the character of this king.

And against him, we see the character of the true king of the universe, don't we? Sharp contrast between the two. One who just says, go and get on with it. Do whatever you like.

[12 : 04] And the king of the universe in his fatherly care for his people. And his willingness even to cost himself to preserve those he loves.

We see that fatherly care displayed, not least in the rest of this chapter. Because it would have been a pretty disappointing story if this is where it ended, wouldn't it?

And it easily could have ended here. Because if Mordecai and Esther were different people, well, they might well have been content to secure their own safety and say, job done. Let the chips fall where they may.

But God's placed the right people in the right place. And so they do indeed devise a plan. Another decree is written. So you can't revoke the first edict.

But a fresh edict can come and rob the first of its power and deadly effect. It still stands, but its impact is removed or at least reduced.

[13 : 04] But before we get to finding out what exactly they put in place with this fresh edict, we have, and again, an account of its preparation and distribution. The scribes are summoned.

The edict is written. Like Haman's edict, it's written in each and every script and language of the empire, this time with the explicit addition of the language of God's own people. Again, the edict is sent to the satraps, the governors, the nobles.

Again, it's written in the king's name. And again, it's sealed with his ring. And again, it's sent out in great haste by the royal post. And in fact, it's sent out by the superior service version, verse 14.

Both edicts are sent by couriers, we're told. But this time, they're riding horses from the royal stables, the best possible horses for a first-class service to deliver this edict.

Also, God's people can have the most possible warning, verse 13, so that they can be ready. So with the edict sent, we have to ask, what is its nature?

[14:03] What are they written? And the first can't be rescinded, but it can be robbed of its power. People are still left, by virtue of the first edict, still left with the legal right to attack the Jews on that day.

But what this new edict grants is that the Jews have the right to assemble and to protect themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate any who might attack them.

Again, a repetition of language from the first edict. Now, there are a few questions that we might be inclined to ask of this circumstance of this edict.

And first, I think we have come to ask, does it actually make any difference? Because we might wonder whether, well, weren't they going to do this anyway?

Did anyone really think when the first edict was sent that the Jews would just roll over and take it? That when the attackers came, as a result of Haman's edict, the Jews would just kind of stand there and say, here I am, kill me.

[15:08] Aren't you just telling them to defend them exactly like they would have done anyway? And to a certain extent, that's true, I think. But the permission to gather for defense is really quite significant.

Because without official sanction, the Jews who are described in chapter 3 as dispersed among the peoples, without that, for the Jews to gather together and to arm themselves, well, that probably wouldn't have been well received by the authorities of the empire, would it?

But dictatorial regimes don't tend to look favorably on the formation of citizen militias. But here, now, they have permission to gather.

And this gathering to defend as one is quite significant and quite effective. Because suddenly it's not one man against a mob, it's, okay, a smaller group perhaps than the attackers, but still a much more significant force.

And they now have explicit permission to protect themselves. Permission without which any who did successfully defend themselves, at the cost of the life of their attacker, well, wouldn't they have then found themselves in something of legal hot water?

[16:22] After all, they have, in the eyes of the law, committed murder. But this second edict takes that away. It gives them legal permission to gather, to defend themselves.

And thirdly, whilst the legal permission from the emperor to attack the Jews, whilst that legal permission still stands, the second edict is clearly going to have an impact on how that permission is viewed by the people of the empire, isn't it?

How will they perceive what the emperor actually wants to happen? The second edict now shows an emperor who is best ambivalent to his earlier plan, and especially in a context where everyone knows he can't just rescind the earlier law, well, this will be interpreted in that light.

It becomes apparent to wise people across the empire that getting carried away too much with the first edict may not be terribly well received. So they've devised a reasonable, a realistic countermeasure to nullify the effect of the previous law within the constraints of their situation.

So it's an effective law. But the bigger question, the second question as we consider this edict, is much deeper and frankly much more troubling. Because the second question is around the justice of this second law.

[17:45] As Mordecai sends out his edict, is it reasonable? In the province of a merciful God, really are his people to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate?

What happened to the moral high ground? These Jews are suddenly no better than the Amalekites who were attacking them before. Now, when we tackle that second question, there's a few things that's helpful to understand.

And I think it is good for us to think through the ethics and the morality of these kinds of questions. Because, well, how we see this affects how we view who God is, doesn't it?

And it affects how we give a reason for the hope that we have found. Who we understand God to be, how we see him as acting, affects how we speak of him.

So in that light, the first thing that we want to notice here is that this isn't license for the Jews to engage in indiscriminate slaughter. Verse 11, what they're given is license to protect themselves.

[18:57] It's the people who might attack them whom they have license to destroy, kill, and annihilate. Now, admittedly, they seem to have permission from Mordecai to go a little bit further in

that defense than we might wish that they did.

There's mention of the plundering of the property of their enemies, which implies a little bit of taking the fight to them rather than just standing and waiting. But as events transpire, they decline to go and plunder their enemies.

So it's those who attack them that they're defending against. That's the first thing to bear in mind.

Secondly, what we see as we consider this edict is that this is a proportionate response.

Because remember, the terminology of this second edict is identical to the first one, destroy, kill, and annihilate. That is what their enemies intended for God's people.

And that's the response they're permitted to make. This is one of the foundational principles of justice in the Old Testament, that you respond in kind, that the punishment fits the crime.

[20 : 08] If you slaughter someone else's sheep, well, you pay them whatever it would have earned at market. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. So what the Jews are permitted by this edict is proportionate.

It's just to respond in kind to what is being done to them. But thirdly, and I think most significantly, as we consider the morality of this edict, what we have to understand is that this is presented in a certain light.

It's not just a kind of bare declaration, but it comes with context. It comes with a background. Now, this isn't just the Jews' own initiative. This isn't Mordecai's crazy idea.

Some people have tried to excuse God from responsibility by throwing Mordecai and the Jews under the bus. It's just Mordecai getting carried away. But it seems to me that attitude sits rather oddly in the context of a book that's so very keen to demonstrate how God is at work in the ordinary actions of everyday people.

And a lot of the phrasing actually points us towards seeing this as an instance of holy war. This edict is presented as righteous in God's eyes, is presented as in keeping with his desires.

[21 : 30] Because remember, back when we first met Haman, and throughout, the dispute between Haman and Mordecai has always been presented to us not as a personal disagreement between two people, but as a continuation of the prior issues between Haman's people and Mordecai's people.

And lo and behold, here in chapter 8, we're reminded again of who Haman is. Verse 1, Haman the enemy of the Jews. Verse 3, Haman the Agagite.

And again in verse 5. He's not just Haman. He's Haman, God's enemy. He and his people are opposed to God and his people.

Why are the Jews even in this situation, in the first place of needing to come up with this crazy second edict? Well, they're in this situation because Saul dropped the ball the last time around. Saul was commanded to wipe out the Amalekites, and he didn't do it. If he had done it back then, there wouldn't be Agagites around now to dredge up centuries-old grudges against God and his people.

[22 : 39] Complete protection for God's people necessarily involves judgment on God's enemies, doesn't it? Now, the degree to which that's fully enacted varies through the ages, but total protection requires total destruction.

And there's a few times through the course of the Bible, a few times in which God's people are instructed, often very explicitly, more explicitly than here, instructed to attack and kill other groups of people.

And we call this holy war. The conquest of the promised land is the quintessential example. You know, they're instructed to kill all the inhabitants of Jericho, for instance. But the key thing that we have to grasp about holy war is holy war is not about God's people deciding that they want what someone else has.

It's not war for most of the reasons that people normally go to war. Holy war isn't about conflict over resources. Holy war is about God's judgment.

Judgment enacted through human agents. So just as God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone, well, so too God destroyed the city of Jericho by means of the supernatural demolition of its walls.

[24 : 00] But also God destroyed the city by means of the people of God as the instrument of God, carrying out that which he intends. Why is this happening?

Well, these are instances of God's righteous judgment and justice. This isn't about people happening to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No, it's about people being sinners. It's about people being rebels against a holy God. The Bible is abundantly clear, isn't it? That this behavior, this rejection of God is always, always worthy of punishment by death.

The wages of sin is death. It's very straightforward. And whilst God in his grace doesn't always choose to carry out the sentence for those crimes immediately, we don't have the right to balk at it when he does do so more immediately.

But the other side of that is that even in the midst of judgment being enacted, we have instances of mercy on display.

[25 : 13] Rahab preserved from the midst of Jericho. And in this particular situation, notice verse 17 right at the end of the chapter. In every province and every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews with feasting and celebrating.

And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them. Some people have the wit to respond wisely to the situation.

Some people, faced with the evidence of God's power and authority, some of them realize that the sensible thing to do is align themselves with him. Faced with the same realization that Zeresh, Haman's wife, had at the end of chapter 6, that since Mordecai before whom your downfall has started is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him.

You will surely come to ruin. Faced with that realization, enacted in the form of this edict, that suddenly the Jews are a force to be reckoned with, the God of the Jews, it turns out, does have power to preserve his people, does have power to exert his will.

Faced with that realization, some people in the empire have the wit to respond, to see that the wise thing to do is convert, to align yourselves with this God.

[26 : 34] This is God's mercy on display. But even the arrival of judgment is a warning to others, out of the midst of it, the way is always open to God, even as this judgment draws very near.

Even as people are under immediate threat, there's still this way. Now, for you and I today, we have to be clear that this kind of holy war, that this is not a universal course of action, that this is not something that you and I are called to participate in.

I don't imagine that's a great shock to you, that we don't need to be setting out on a crusade. But why that is perhaps requires some thought, because what we have to grasp is that it was a particular plan for particular circumstances.

So, for instance, when Jesus began his journey down to Jerusalem in Luke chapter 9, and some of the villages rejected him, and the disciples want to respond by calling down fire on those villages that rejected him.

Well, Jesus teaches them that for Christians, holy war is not part of our calling. Now, that is not because holy war is wrong, or because it's sub-Christian, or because now in the 21st century, we've reached a higher level of morality.

[28 : 00] No, no, no. There is no such thing as being more moral than God and his laws. No, it's not our calling simply because we live in different days.

Not so much different technologically or morally, but different days in the sweep of redemption history. That we live in days of an abundant outpouring of grace.

God's mercy on full display. Ian Duggett says, now we fight with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, which instead of turning live foes into dead corpses, can transform dead sinners into live saints.

Now we wrestle in prayer, seeking God's enlivening work in the hearts and souls of our friends and neighbors. What a joy to be called to such work.

But it's a vital task. It's an urgent one, because that edict still stands. God's nature doesn't change. The edict of death is there.

[29 : 03] And this task of seeing dead sinners transformed into live saints is only something that is possible for us to be involved in, because we ourselves stand in the presence of God, not as the rebellious sinners that you and I once were, but because we stand there as those who, despite our wickedness in thought and word and deed, as those who are washed clean by the blood of the Savior.

See, we also once stood under that edict of death, didn't we? And we stood there rightly because of our sins and failings.

And we are delivered from that edict because we have someone like Esther, someone who's willing to set aside personal safety, someone who's willing to lay down dignity and embrace humility.

My friends, that is the character of our Savior, the nature of our mediator, the one who came down from heaven, embracing the identity of a suffering servant, dying and agonizing death under the curse of God for our salvation.

And one day, one day Christ will return, and he will return to enact the holy war to end all wars, holy or otherwise.

[30 : 26] He will ride out in vengeance, in justice, in triumph. And these previous holy wars, these outpourings of judgment in the past, these are a foreshadowing of what is to come when the judge of all returns.

When Christ returns in his glory. John saw a vision of that day, and he describes it in Revelation 19. I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True.

With justice, he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

[31 : 39] On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Now that is a terrifying picture, isn't it?

The dominant picture in that is of power, judgment, threat. He comes as the conqueror, as the soldier riding to war, the commander of heaven's armies.

But even as he does that, notice how he is dressed. Verse 13, his robe is dipped in blood. My friends, how did his garments come to be soaked in blood?

It's not the relic of a former war. It is his own. It is his blood shed for you and for your salvation.

This is our God. This our God who thousands of years before he will one day ride out in judgment.

This is our God who first soaked those robes in his own blood.

[32 : 51] To protect his own people. To preserve all who call upon him. He was pierced for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. This is he who stands even now interceding for us.

Pleading with the Father on our behalf. This is our mediator who says, look at my blood-stained robes. There is no longer an edict of death standing.

the price has been paid. The death has been died. This is our God.

Let's pray. Lord God, we sometimes tremble at the revelation of your character.

As we see your power, your majesty, your authority. As we think of your coming in judgment. when you come to judge the living and the dead.

[34 : 01] To make a separation. To bring punishment. Lord, we tremble at the thought of that day and we tremble at the thought of the implications of that day.

mercy. And yet we rejoice that even in that context there is mercy in view. That you have made a way by which we may stand in the face of that judgment.

A way to which we call one and all. Lord, give us boldness.

boldness. As we consider these things, as we recognize the righteousness of justice, of judgment, of the coming of death.

Give us boldness to respond to that as those who accept your will, who acknowledge your goodness in these things and who call others to find the narrow road that leads to life.

[35 : 17] Thank you, Lord God, for speaking to us. Amen.