

# ESTHER

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] rest. Most people say to me before I leave, I hope you have a good rest or I hope you have a good break, that sort of stuff. It's not so much sleep that I need. I tend to sleep fairly well. I've got one of these Fitbit things that tells me when I need to go to bed and wakes me up at the right time and what sort of quality of sleep I've had. It's more the freedom from deadlines and the day-to-day burdens to be able to step out of those things and do something very different. That is rest for me. And so tonight I will crawl into bed and not have my mind on work commitments for the next day. And that will feel good. That will feel really good. I had experience recently for a long weekend where I did that, crawling to bed on a Sunday night and I wasn't thinking about, oh, I don't have to go to work tomorrow. That felt good. Now rest is a big theme in the Bible. Right the beginning. God created the world and it says that he rested from all of his work in creating.

And the rest there is a picture of harmony and peace. Everything is as it should be. However, the rejection of God and the devastating effects of sin destroyed that rest. And much of the Bible from that point on is this process of God revealing his plan to undo that and to bring his people back to a state of peace and rest with him. And as we come to the end of the story of Esther today, we notice that the upshot of all that Esther has achieved was that she got rest for God's people from rest from all of their enemies. And so let's track back a little bit. Remember what's transpired to this point. Esther is the young orphan Jewish woman who became Queen of Persia around two and a half thousand years ago. In the first couple of chapters, she hides her Jewish identity. She's compliant. She wins Miss Persia beauty pageant 480 BC. And her prize is to be the wife of the most powerful man in the world at the time, King Xerxes. In chapter three, she's living the high life in the palace when all of everything turns bad. Having been convinced by the narcissistic Haman, Xerxes issues a decree to his whole empire to kill, destroy and annihilate the Jews. They're Esther's people. They're God's people.

And this was all because Esther's older cousin Mordecai wouldn't acknowledge how important Haman was. Chapters four and five, Esther finally does identify with her people, goes to Xerxes to mediate a plan on behalf of those people, a rescue plan. She risks her life and uses her position in the palace to work to save God's people. Chapter six, although Haman plots to execute Mordecai, Xerxes honors Mordecai in just the time to save his life. And from that moment on, Haman's downfall is swift. In chapter seven, there's a sense of poetic justice as he is executed on the stake that he himself had built to execute Mordecai on. And Mordecai then rises to Haman's place of power. A counter edict is drawn up saying that the Jews could now defend themselves when they are attacked and they could take the plunder of their enemies. Now, I suspect that Esther and Mordecai would have been hoping with the, that edict, counter edict being drawn up, that they could put the whole thing to rest and that people wouldn't be bothered now to attack the Jews.

And as we see in chapter nine, many tried anyway. The whole thing wasn't put to rest. There was an enormous amount of bloodshed and many of the Jews were killed. Clearly, there were quite a few who were willing to carry through on the original edict. They really did hate the people of God. And even in the citadel, the seat of power and influence, there were more than 500 who wanted to kill the Jews.

[ 4 : 2 1 ] This is in the palace, more than 500. In verse 16, we see that 75,000 were killed by God's people in one day. And none of them are named, none of the killed were named, except in verses seven to nine, the 10 sons of Haman with names that are impossible to pronounce. Why are they named? I think for two really important reasons. Firstly, at the end of chapter five, when Haman's ego was bruised by Mordecai, he goes home, he gathers his family and his friends around him, and he just has a little boast session, tells him how great he is. And he boasts about three things. His wealth, his authority, his sons.

In chapter seven, his position was taken away from him, given to Mordecai in chapter eight. In chapter eight, his wealth is taken away from him and given to Esther. And in chapter nine, his sons are no longer.

They are hung on a pole as a public spectacle. The proud has been brought low. His boasting is gone. There is nothing left to boast about. And secondly, I think the death of Haman's sons marks the reversal and the end to a mistake the king saw make back in one Samuel chapter 15 that Deb spoke about a number of weeks ago. God had instructed Saul to go and attack the Amalekites and to wipe them out and not to touch their plunder. And Saul didn't wipe them out and he took the plunder. And with the death of Haman's sons, we're meant to see the end of the Amalekites, the enemies of God's people.

God had not forgotten his plan to judge the Amalekites. He might take his time, but his justice will end up catching up. He always punishes his enemies. And at the very least, we ought to all at this point be considering our state before God very clearly. God's silence on our sin does not mean his absence or his lack of care for it. Now, let's be frank. Many people struggle with these parts of the Old Testament that portray God's people executing God's judgment on others.

But God's anger here at his enemies is not a cranky explosion. It is his settled opposition to the cancer which is eating the insides of the human race, the race that he loves with his whole being. The Bible says that God's anger flows from his love and his delight of his creation. He is angry at evil and injustice because it is destroying the peace and the integrity of what he has made.

[ 7 : 38 ] It's quite noticeable that a couple of times in chapter 9 that we are told here that the Jews did not take the wealth of their attackers, even though the edict gave them permission to do so.

And that just helps us see here, just for a moment, that this bloodshed here was simply an act of self-defence. It's an act of justice on wrongdoers. This bloodshed was not an imperial action by which they were enriching themselves and increasing their power. They were simply wanted and needed relief from their enemies. And that's what they get in chapter 9, verse 17. They rested and made it a day of feasting and joy. And at this point, they ended up consecrating a new annual celebration to remember the time that they got relief from their enemies. And yet, they've been here before, many times.

God's people have a track record of getting rest that doesn't last. Moses gave it to them for a little while. Joshua gave it to them for a little while. David gave it to them for a little while. Solomon gave it to them for a little while. Esther and Mordecai gives it to them for a little while. But this, even this rest that they have in this moment does not last.

Tacked on the end of Esther is this awkward little postscript in chapter 10. Just a few verses. It's kind of awkward. It reads, King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire to its distant shores and all his acts of power and might together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai whom the king had promoted.

And at first glance, it appears, what's that there for? Why end with those words? What's the purpose of it? But if you put them in the big picture of the enormous reversal which has been experienced in the book of Esther, they show us that in the end, not a lot has actually changed.

[ 9 : 58 ] Xerxes is still king. And don't forget, it was his cold indifference that saw him write a law that allowed for the destruction of the Jews throughout the whole empire.

And he's still on the throne. His personal interests still remain paramount regardless of the cost to his subjects.

That's what it means when it says here that he imposed tribute throughout the empire. A tribute is not a...

Good on Mordecai. A tribute is a new tax. It's a new tax. Or, and most likely both together, it's also conscripting people into forced labour.

God's people have received rest from all of their enemies except Xerxes. And he's still on the throne. It's a temporary rest.

[ 11 : 02 ] It's a fragile rest. And that's why the later prophets in the Old Testament, like Isaiah and Daniel, began to prophesy that someday the Messiah would come and he would give God's people the ultimate rest, the final rest, the final peace that God longs for.

In fact, Daniel chapter 7 talks about the Son of Man who comes and he wages war, just warfare against all evil and injustice and who will bring final rest.

And along comes Jesus. Jesus, 500 odd years after Esther and says, I am the Son of Man.

But he wages war against God's enemies differently. In Luke chapter 9, there's a place where some people reject Jesus and they show themselves to be enemies of Jesus and enemies of God's people.

And the disciples turn to Jesus and ask Jesus whether he wants them to call down fire on these people.

[12:19] It's like the disciples are sort of saying to Jesus, you know, Jesus, you're the Son of Man, right? And you've come to wage war, you know, final warfare on all of the enemies of God's people and to give us rest.

So do you want to start now on these people? Because we don't like them. Fire down on these people? That'd be good. And Jesus rebukes him.

He says, love your enemies. Forgive your enemies. And it doesn't make sense.

How can that bring us rest from our enemies? And then at the very end, when his enemies come for him at the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples finally got it.

And that's when they ran. When they got it. This is the moment when Jesus, the Son of Man, is arrested and Peter draws his sword ready to die for Jesus because he thinks that this is the moment where we are going to bring destruction upon the enemies of God.

[13:31] It's finally a rise. This is the moment when Jesus is going to rise up and he's going to defeat the Romans. And Jesus says, Peter, put your sword away. And Jesus goes with his enemies and he dies on a cross.

He utters incredible words from the cross. He says, Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing. He forgives his enemies.

Now, it's at this point that many people think there's a difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. You may have heard it before. The God of the Old Testament is a bloodthirsty God who's angry, capricious, evil.

He doesn't like evil injustice and he's just always smiting things. Always obliterating things, annihilating things. But he's mellowed a bit by the time he gets to the New Testament.

Gotten a bit older or something. Mellowed a bit and Jesus is love. Jesus just loves everybody. He just accepts everybody and little kittens and children and lambs love him.

[14:43] And yet Jesus believed in the judgment of God on evil. Jesus talked more about hell and judgment than everyone else in the Bible put together. Of course he believed in the reality of hell and the judgment of God on all sin and evil injustice.

And what we have on the cross is Jesus Christ loving his enemies, forgiving his enemies, dying for his enemies.

And yet it's the ultimate warfare and judgment on evil and injustice. He is concerned about destroying the sin and the evil and the injustice that he's eating away at the world that he loves. Galatians 3.13 says that Jesus was hung on a pole. He was on display as a public spectacle. It says, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

For as it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole. He redeemed us in order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

[16:03] You see, Jesus trades places with us and becomes a curse for us. He takes God's anger and his judgment for us.

He's made a spectacle for our sin and our evil and our injustice. You see, what the cross of Christ reveals is that God is concerned to destroy evil, injustice and sin but he's not so much concerned to destroy that enemy over there and that enemy over there.

he is very concerned to destroy enmity. He's very concerned to destroy enmity.

That is hostility. That's what he wants to destroy. In Ephesians 2 we are told that on the cross Jesus killed the enmity that divides me from you and you from you.

The enmity that divides us as people from God. the hostility that exists and he killed the enmity that exists. You see, if Jesus had said to Peter go nuts in the Garden of Gethsemane use your sword and in fact all the disciples let's all whip out our swords and go nuts on these guys and destroy the Romans he would have given his people in that moment temporary rest from one particular enemy but when he died on the cross for our sin he was destroying sin and evil and injustice and death itself.

[ 17 : 39 ] He became the curse he was hung on a pole and turned away the anger of God the cross is the ultimate warfare against God's enemies enemies because it kills the enmity the hostility.

This is so important to grasp. If someone wrongs you in some way maybe they've hurt your reputation or something most people would conclude that you have a perfect right to tell everyone else about it.

Tell them what's happened and therefore what you're doing in that moment is you're ruining their reputation. or if a person has robbed you of happiness or in love we tend to think that we have every right to withdraw from that person to withhold from that person our love.

We can go really cold with them and so that we hurt them and we hurt their happiness and their love. We're really good at this in marriage especially. Wife doesn't treat me the way I want doesn't give me what I want so I'm just going to go over here and I'm just going to go cold shoulder until I get what I want.

Great at that. That's our default human position. Our position in the human heart is to respond to evil force with hurtful force.

[ 19 : 09 ] Evil force hurtful force. Our default position is to whack the enemy even if it is our spouse.

And if you whack them hard enough you will get rest. That's because they're dead or they're gone or they're debilitated or they're in hospital they're humiliated or something's happened.

if you whack them hard enough you will win with that enemy for a moment.

On the train on Wednesday I was heading back up this way and there were a couple of guys standing beside me talking about some work scenario and from what I could gather and I tell you what it's everything to me not to jump in on this conversation but for what I could gather one of the guys had just finished up on a job and it ended fairly badly with the boss.

And these two guys were really bad-mouthing this guy and for what I could gather that this guy who finished up the job and his boss were bad-mouthing each other in their fairly small industry.

[ 20 : 29 ] And the other gentleman there was giving him advice on how he can win. And he mentioned a bunch of stuff and a few things that he could manipulate in the scenario and leverage to beat his former boss.

His conflict management advice included a heap of threats, manipulation and expletive laden sentences. Just say this to him and I'm thinking oh that's going to inflame it, that's going to inflame it.

You see what was happening in that moment evil force hurtful force. Someone will come out the victor, someone will lose.

You've whacked the only enemy but all you've done is made the enemy worse. That's all you've done. The enmity, the hostility between you and the enemy is still there.

It's still there. When you fight evil with evil you don't beat evil, evil wins. and it wins in two ways.

[ 21 : 39 ] Firstly, you become harder. You become colder. But most of all you become self righteous. You say things like I can't believe that person did that.

I can't believe they said that. I would never do that. So evil wins firstly that way. The second way that evil wins is when you whack an enemy back you make them more of an enemy.

even if they are dead. The children might come after you. Haman's a classic case here. Haman's bitterness towards God people was carried over from centuries before.

Or maybe the enemy will regroup and be more angry than ever. It just goes on and on and on and on. the best way to defeat evil and injustice the best way to defeat an enemy is with good.

The cross of Jesus Christ changes the warfare against evil and injustice so that now the way we handle enemies is by loving them and forgiving them.

[ 22 : 51 ] We overcome evil with good. We don't respond to evil force with hurtful force. we respond to evil force with something more powerful, grace.

Grace is powerful. Grace destroys enmity. There is nothing more formidable, nothing more violent in the best possible way than grace.

You may, for those who are cultural buffs amongst us, les mis, Jean Valjean, the interaction with the bishop right at the end when the bishop says, oh, you stole the candlesticks, I told you to take everything else.

Jean Valjean walks away from that moment and he says, grace did violence to his soul. Nothing more violent in the best possible way than grace.

And get this, this is so important. when you give somebody grace, when you forgive them, and especially your enemies, you give them the prospect of becoming a friend.

[ 24 : 10 ] And that is the only way to truly to destroy an enemy, is to make them a friend. It's the only way. God's God's God's enemies to God's friends.

He was changing us from being God's enemies to God's friends. Rather than smiting us and whacking us, he dealt with the righteous anger because of our evil by whacking himself to make us his friends.

the minute we grasp hold of that, the minute we grasp hold of that, it changes us from being an enemy to a friend of God.

And what that does is it sends you out into this world at truly being at rest with your enemies. enemies. If you understand the good news of what Jesus has done for you, you get rest from your enemies.

And this is how it works. Do you truly believe that Jesus Christ had to die for you because you are that bad, that sinful, that evil, that unjust? Do you believe that you are that sinful that nothing less than the Son of God dying on the cross could save you?

[ 25 : 37 ] That is humbling. The cross of Christ is tumbling. It inoculates you against what evil does to keep itself going in this world.

When someone does something wrong to you, when an enemy insults you, the first thing that happens is we jump on our high horse of self-righteousness, we get angry. And that's what helps evil continue to go around and around and around.

I'm not like that. You've whacked me, I'm going to whack you. the good news of Jesus dying on the cross for me tells me that I am no better.

I am a sinner saved by sheer grace and if that is your place of refuge, then the evil one and evil and injustice and sin doesn't have any place to get a foothold in your life.

The enemy of the Christian can no longer destroy them because they can't make you hate them. If you hate your enemy, then you don't know that you are a sinner saved by grace.

[ 26 : 52 ] You don't know that. If you haven't been humbled by the Christian gospel of God dying on the cross for you, if you haven't truly seen that, then you are so vulnerable.

if you don't have rest from your enemies, your enemies can destroy you and they can control you, they can manipulate you and the Christian gospel humbles you so that you are able to resist what the enemy does to you.

And now you can go out in the world and you can give enemies what you got from Jesus. You can forgive them, reach out to them, be gracious to them. More and more enemies will then become friends, not all of them, but many will become friends.

That's what we need. That's true and genuine and enduring rest. And that's what we all need and that's what the Lord Jesus has secured for us and promises us.

And it's a rest that we can have both now and a rest that just goes on and on into all the future and eternity. Jesus gives us rest for ourselves now.

[ 28 : 07 ] Jesus says this in Matthew 11. He says, Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Many people today speak about a deep hunger in the human heart. People are hungry for love and security and significance and meaning. And Jesus says, I'm the bread of life. Feed them mean you never be hungry.

Many walk in darkness and disillusionment and despair. And Jesus says, I'm the light of the world. If you follow me, you will never walk in darkness. Instead, you'll have the light of life. Others are fearful of death.

And Jesus says, I'm the resurrection of the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Others are burdened by worry and anxiety and fear and guilt.

And Jesus says, come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. That's the promise of rest for our souls right now as we come to Jesus.

[ 29 : 05 ] And yet the best is yet to come for those who trust in Jesus. Jesus secured final, perfect, never-ending rest in God's new creation. The rest of unspoiled love between you and God.

No enemies. The rest of temptation and our inbuilt drift away from God. The rest from the shaming cycle of failing, failure and confession and trying harder and failure and confession and rest from the opposition of the world, rest from all sickness and pain and disability and death, rest from everything that takes the gloss of this life.

And that is the rest that Jesus offers his people right now. It's what he has secured for you right now. And so we come to the end of Esther.

Six weeks looking at pride and identity in Christ and a bunch of other stuff. And the last verse of chapter eight is where I want to take some of you right now.

It says, Jews and many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

[ 30 : 21 ] That is, what was remarkable at the end of chapter eight is that many people across the Persian empire identified with the people of God.

They identified with the God of the Bible and they too enjoyed the rest of chapter nine and ten and the celebration of joy and happiness.

And so as we come to our time, the end of our time in Esther, this is a decision time for you. It might be that you don't have that place of rest right now.

And maybe today is the day that you need to make that decision to have that rest. Come to Jesus, end the warfare on God, and find true and enduring rest for your soul.

If that's you, I'd be really glad to speak to you after the service.