

Esther 9-10 Sorrow turned to Joy
Tim Anderson 29/8/21

Twenty one years ago, the world was in a bit of a panic.
All the computers were set up, so it was thought,
with a date and time that would stop them working
when we ticked over to the new millennium.
Companies spent large amounts of money assessing their vulnerability.
It was a real boon for IT professionals,
who made mega bucks fixing problems.
But there was a real sense of nervousness in the community.
What was going to happen when the Y2K bug hit,
as the 31 December 1999 ticked over to 1 Jan 2000?
Would the electricity grid go down?
Would the hospitals stop working
as their computerised machinery failed?
Would planes fall out of the sky?
Would your car refuse to start?
Would the supermarket checkouts stop working
bringing the purchase of groceries to a grinding halt?
Well the clocks ticked over to the new millennium,
and pretty much nothing happened.
It was a complete fizzer.

At the end of last week's reading from Esther,
we were left in a similar state of anxiety.
A decree was proclaimed by the evil Haman.
On the 13th day of Adar,
anyone throughout the whole Persian empire
was allowed to kill, annihilate and destroy Jews
living in any one of the 127 provinces of the empire.
Another decree was proclaimed by the faithful Mordecai
that the Jews were allowed to gather together and defend themselves.
They were allowed to kill, annihilate and destroy
anyone who attacked them on the 13th day of Adar.

So what would happen?
 Would the Jews be able to defend themselves?
 As it turns out, the reality was a fizzer.
 You turn to Esther 9&10 and it doesn't even look like it was a fight.
 It seems like their enemies just capitulated.
 It was like the 2019 footy grand final.
 GWS didn't even turn up.
 Richmond wiped the floor with them.
 How was it
 that what seemed like it was going to be such a terrible problem
 turned out to be no big deal?
 Well as I've said all the way along in the series on Esther,
 in this book where God's name is not mentioned,
 you have to look at what God is doing.
 What is God doing in these chapters?

Well God is clearly active in these chapters.
 It seems strange when he's not even mentioned.
 But if you know what you are looking for,
 it stands out like a sore thumb.
 The first sign is in the word 'fear'.
 Sometimes when you have a battle,
 you will because you have a bigger army.
 That would be a human reason.
 But if God is fighting for you,
 often in the Bible that becomes plain
 because those who God is fighting against are filled with fear.
 Here's just one example.
 When Israel is about to begin the conquest of the Promised Land,
 Joshua sends some spies into the city of Jericho.
 The spies gain access to the city
 through the house of Rahab the prostitute.
 And they get talking to her.
 This is what she says, Josh 2:9
 "I know that the Lord has given you this land

and that a great fear of you has fallen on us,
so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you."
That fear is heard in Esther chapter 9 as well.

9:2 "No one could stand against the Jews,
because the people of all the other nations were afraid of them.
And all the nobles of the provinces,
the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped them,
because fear of Mordecai seized them."

This is not your normal fear of scary things.
This is a fear sent from God to paralyse his enemies.

Now I can't help but pause at this point to think about this issue for us.

We're not going to be fighting physical battles for the Lord.

That's not how it works for Christians.

But there are spiritual battles that we have to fight.

Way too many for me to list.

But here are a couple just to spark your imagination.

There is the battle to speak up
about some issue of faith or Christian living
when those around you would disagree.

There is the battle to make a costly sacrifice
because you want to live faithfully in following your Saviour.

What is the great enemy in fighting those battles?

It is fear.

Fear paralyzes us from doing what we know we ought to do.

You might fear what people will think of you if you speak up.

You might fear for your financial security if you live faithfully.

What does the Bible have to say about fear in the Christian life?

1 John 4:18 "There is no fear in love.

But perfect love drives out fear,
because fear has to do with punishment.

The one who fears has not been made perfect in love."

God gave the Jews in Esther's day victory
by filling their enemies with fear.

The evil one would like to paralyse Christians today

by filling us with fear.
Now that's quite a challenging word at the moment.
Many of us have realised
just how much we are affected by fear recently.
We wouldn't have thought of ourselves as fearful people usually.
But years of relentless negative news has made us quite fearful.
And yet we have this challenging word from the Scriptures,
"Perfect love drives out fear."
Now if you've been feeling fearful,
I don't want to add guilt to your fear.
People have enough to cope with at the moment.
But I do want you to know
that fear is a tool of the devil to paralyse you.
I do want you to ask God to fill you with his perfect love
and banish your fear.

Let's jump back to Esther.
We were looking at ways that we can see God is there,
actively fighting for his people.
The first thing was the fear of their enemies.
The second thing is the anticlimax of the battles.
From the build up of Haman's edict,
you might expect that what will be described is some pitched battles.
That there will be heroics of Jews on the battle field.
That there will be a great struggle but then God's people will prevail.
If that's what you were expecting,
you would be disappointed.
What is described is totally one sided.
So one sided in fact, that it can only be God.
Listen to verse 5 again,
9:5 "The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword,
killing and destroying them,
and they did what they pleased to those who hated them."
I can't think of a more one sided description of a battle.
Of course when the Israelites were conquering the Promised Land,

that's exactly how the battles went too,
so long as they were faithfully following God in obedience.
But the greatest one sided battle is in the book of Revelation.
We have chapters of build up,
there's a beast, a false prophet and a dragon.
There are the kings of the earth who oppose God,
gathered with their armies ready for battle.
And opposing them is the rider on the horse
with the double edged sword coming out of his mouth.
It's Jesus, fighting with the word of God.
And how does the battle go?
Rev 19:20 "The beast was captured and with it the false prophet."
Rev 19:21 "The rest were killed with the sword
coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse."
There is no drama.
No extended description of a great battle.
It's totally one sided.
What's the point?
When God fights there is no opposing him.
And that's how it is in Esther 9.
God is fighting for his people.
And we can see that by the description of the battle.
It's over before it started.

OK, another interesting detail of the battle.
There times after the victory of the Jews we hear this phrase,
"But they did not lay their hands on the plunder."
The people they defeated in battle had houses and possessions.
The normal thing in the ancient world
was that if you beat someone in battle,
then their stuff belonged to you.
And what's very interesting about that
is that Mordecai's decree in the previous chapter
specifically allowed the Jews to plunder their enemies.
But they don't do it.

Why not?

Well it could be that they recognise they are engaged in holy war with God fighting for them.

It happens in the book of Joshua when the Israelites conquer the land, that God tells them they are not to keep the plunder but to devote it to him.

That could be it.

It also could be that they want to make the point,

"We're not fighting here to enrich ourselves.

We are fighting because our enemies want to kill us.

And to demonstrate our pure motivation, we will not keep any of the plunder."

I'm not sure exactly why.

But it's repeated three times.

There no doubt it has significance for the writer.

The last major emphasis of our passage is the celebration that comes afterwards.

Est 9:20-22 "Mordecai recorded these events,

and he sent letters to all the Jews

throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far,

to have them celebrate annually

the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar

as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies,

and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy

and their mourning into celebration.

He wrote to them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor."

That is, the feast of Purim was established.

It was a new date on the Jewish calendar.

Beforehand they had celebrated Passover and Pentecost.

Now they celebrated Purim as well.

And they still do today.

2500 years after the events we've read about,

the Jews still celebrate Purim every year.

Now that might strike you as a little unusual.
We've all heard of Passover and Pentecost
because these Jewish festivals were events
where important parts of the NT happened.
The Last Supper happened at Passover.
The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.
But Purim doesn't even rate a mention in the NT.
I was even wondering if indeed the first century Jews
were obeying Mordecai's instruction from 500 years earlier
to celebrate it.
So I emailed Peter Adam
who wrote the book we've been reading on Esther.
Peter emailed me back a quote
from the Jewish historian of the first century Josephus,
which showed that the Jews
were definitely celebrating Purim at the time.
It's just not in the NT because nothing that Jesus and the disciples did
happened to overlap with the feast of Purim.

So what do we do with this festival
that some of you I'm sure hadn't heard of before?
Well there's no reason for Christians to celebrate it.
As Christians we aren't called upon to celebrate the OT festivals.
We do sometimes celebrate the Passover here,
but we only do that because we can celebrate how it is fulfilled in Jesus.
We don't celebrate the Passover because of the Passover.
What is the Christian fulfilment of Purim?
Well it's when God defeats evil.
The enemies of the Jews in Esther 9 were purely anti-Semitic.
They just hated the Jews for being Jews.
The Jews hadn't done anything to them.
And so today some people just hate Christians for being Christians.
I sent around an email this week
about what is happening to the Christians in Afghanistan.
The Taliban is killing Christians for having a Bible app on their phones.

They haven't done anything to the Taliban.
 They are just hated because of their Lord.
 Well God is going to deal out justice to the Taliban one day.
 It's when the rider on the white horse called faithful and true comes.
 When the Lord Jesus comes to judge.
 And when that happens,
 there is going to be such a party.
 A party that will make Purim look like having afternoon tea.

So I think the main application of this passage for us,
 is a promise for the future.
 It gives us a foretaste of what God is going to do.
 His people will be vindicated.
 His enemies will be defeated.
 I think because we haven't been oppressed
 like the Christians in some other countries
 we don't really feel that longing for the return of the Lord Jesus.
 But if you were a Christian in Afghanistan,
 you would be hanging out for the rider on the white horse.
 There's no human being who you can rely on.

The main application is for us to look to the return of Jesus.
 But we can look forward to little foretastes of God's victory.
 Foretastes like the Jews experienced in Esther 9.
 They will always be partial and incomplete.
 But we can celebrate the people of God escaping their oppressors
 and even seeing their oppressors face judgement in this world.
 I've been celebrating the flights
 snatching people out of harms way in Kabul.
 Yes it was too little too late.
 Nothing will ever be perfect until Jesus returns.
 But every person on those flights is a little celebration.

I'm not sure how many of you saw the women's 800m race
 on the track at the recent Olympics.

It was won by a 19 year old American woman Athing Mu.
But she's not a regulation American.
Her family comes from South Sudan.
They escaped to the US just a couple of years before Athing was born.
South Sudan is a place where Christian people have been oppressed
just as badly as they are oppressed now in Afghanistan.
And Athing Mu's family were some of those people.
Her and her parents and her six brothers and sisters.
She runs with a cross around her neck.
And the South Sudanese Christians have certainly had
to carry their crosses for the last 50 years.
Well I celebrated her gold medal
with as much joy as I celebrated Australian gold medals.
There was my sister in Christ having some victory on the world stage.
A measure of vindication after what they've been through.
Of course blitzing the field at the Olympics
is nothing compared to joining in the wedding supper of the Lamb.
But it's still worth celebrating
when our brothers and sisters in Christ have faced terrible persecution.

As we finish the book of Esther we see a picture of the victory of God.
It was a wonderful deliverance for God's people in Esther's day.
But there's a reason
that they were commanded to celebrate it every year.
It's because things like that don't happen very often.
When they do happen,
you've got keep reminding yourself of them.
The world that we live in is going to be characterised
by hatred and injustice for God's people.
We have to make the most
of the small victories God sends our way today.
While using those victories
and the victories that we read about in places like Esther,
to whet our appetite for the wedding supper of the lamb.
We've got to be hungry for the final day,

when our sorrow is turned into joy
and our mourning is turned into a day of celebration.