

Purim

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[0 : 00] The story of Esther is a great story, and even at the level of a story, it's worth retelling.

Even beyond the significance of it, at that level alone, it's a story worth telling and retelling and remembering. And the Feast of Purim was instituted to ensure that the story of Esther, the story of God delivering His people through Esther, was a story that should never be forgotten.

And it is the feast that concerns us. But the manner in which we're going to consider the feast is in the following way. We, first of all, need to consider what we're calling the reason for the season. And that will involve, in a condensed manner, telling the story. We can understand the feast in the absence of the story that explains it, and so we will tell the story. It's useful at that pragmatic level of explaining the reason for the season. It's also fitting that we should do so, because as the Feast of Purim is celebrated, even to this day, that is a central element of the celebration, the reading of the story. From start to finish, we will do so, but in a condensed way.

But having done so, and having set the groundwork, as it were, we'll then consider, more briefly, the celebration of the season. Having established the reason for the season, then notice the celebration of the season, and some of the material for that is in the chapter that we read towards the end of the book of Esther. But then also, just notice, and really in many ways, this is at the heart of the whole matter, and that is the God of the season, the God who we could describe using the language of the chapter that we've read, or employing the language of the chapter that we've read, as our table-turning God, a God who turns the tables in a very dramatic and powerful way. But then finally, we'll just end by noting what we could call the challenge of the season, and think about what that challenge is for us today. So, we don't only look back and enjoy the story, maybe have our hearts warmed by the story, or encouraged by the story, but also consider what challenge is presented by the story for us.

So, let's listen to the story of Esther. What I'm going to do is read a condensed form, or version of the story. The reason I'm going to read is to ensure I don't extend myself beyond the time available. And by reading this condensed version, I have greater control over the time that is spent. So, it's in your interest that I do it this way. So, just listen with me. You don't need to have your Bibles open. You can simply listen to the story, the reason for the season, and that will allow us to then consider the feast, the festival that arose out of this story.

[3 : 16] The scene is the citadel of Susa in western Persia, the city of Shush in southwest Iran. 2,500 years ago, in the palace of Xerxes, king of the most powerful empire in the world that extended from India to Ethiopia. King Xerxes, in an extravagant display of his wealth and the splendor of his majesty, throws a banquet lasting 180 days. On the final day, he summons Queen Vashti to display her beauty to his guests. And to King Xerxes' dismay and deep indignation, Queen Vashti refuses to comply with his demand. What was the king to do? The humiliation was bad enough, but the humiliation would be compounded by chaos as other women followed suit. And this could not be allowed to happen. So, Queen Vashti must be punished and she must be replaced. And in order to find a new queen, the advice is given that a beauty pageant should be held, with beautiful virgins from all the empire taking part. And this advice appealed to the king. And of all the young women selected, there was a Jew called Esther, an orphan cousin of Mordecai who had brought her up as his own daughter following the death of Esther's parents. And Esther won the special favor of the eunuch responsible for preparing the women to meet the king. And when the time came, she was the one selected to become the new queen.

How strange that of all the young women from the 127 provinces of the empire, the one Jewish last should be the one selected. Though, to be clear, on the instructions of Mordecai, she had kept her nationality hidden. In parallel to events in the palace, two of the king's officers are planning a coup and the assassination of King Xerxes. Mordecai gets wind of the plan and informs Esther, who in turn warns the king, warns the king. The rebels are identified and executed, and the actions of Mordecai are recorded in the annals of the kingdom. How strange that Mordecai, of all people, should have discovered the plot that was afoot. King Xerxes reshuffles his cabinet, and the big winner is a man called Haman. He becomes the king's right-hand man with more power than any other noble or official in the kingdom. An evidence of his favored position is the decree that all must kneel before him as he passes by, and all do so except Mordecai. Haman is informed and is livid, and his blood-curling revenge involves the killing not only of Mordecai, but of all the Jews in the kingdom. This is nothing short of the Holocaust. King Xerxes authorizes Haman's plan and seals the decree with his own ring.

Dispatches are sent around the kingdom, indicating the date of the massacre, the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar. Mordecai becomes aware of the royal decree and informs Esther, indicating that she must approach the king and plead for mercy. Esther is unsure. The proposal is dangerous, as she can only approach the king when summoned. To do so any other way is punishable by death.

Mordecai insists, assuring Esther that she too will die as a result of the king's decree. Esther fasts and determines to follow Mordecai's instructions.

I will go, she determines, and if I perish, I will perish. Esther approaches King Xerxes and is warmly received. Indeed, the king inquires what her request is, assuring her that he will grant her up to half the kingdom. How strange that King Xerxes should have received her in such a manner.

[7 : 59] Esther's request is seemingly a modest one. She invites King Xerxes and Haman to a banquet. Haman is well pleased. He has surely arrived, the only dignitary invited to accompany the king to Queen Esther's banquet. His joy, however, is overshadowed by the Jew Mordecai continuing alive.

Haman's wife and friends encourage him to secure the death of Mordecai immediately, not waiting until the decree is fulfilled. And they encourage him to build a gallows in his garden, 75 feet high. And in the morning, having built the gallows, he would seek permission from the king to execute Mordecai just before the banquet to which he had been invited. How strange that Haman, a mover and shaker of the highest order, knew nothing of the fact that Esther was Mordecai's adoptive daughter. Well, that night, the night before the banquet that Queen Esther had arranged, King Xerxes can't sleep. And how strange that on this night, of all nights, King Xerxes can't sleep. What to do? Well, no doubt there were many options for an emperor when he could not sleep. But it would seem that there was no better cure for insomnia than the reading of the annals of the kingdom. And in this rather bizarre episode of nocturnal reading, the king just happens to read the page that relates the loyalty of Mordecai in informing of the assassination plot, an event that had occurred four years before. How strange. The king inquires as to whether Mordecai has been rewarded for his loyalty. And on discovering that he had not been rewarded, he determines to rectify this omission and inquires as to what officials are in court to arrange for this recognition. Well, what official is there in the early hours of the morning? Why, Haman, of course, with a view to securing the king's permission to execute Mordecai on his gallows that very day.

The king asks Haman, what should be done for the man the king delights to honor? Haman, assuming the king is referring to himself, waxes lyrical in his reply, a royal robe, a royal crest, a procession through the streets of Susa to the sound of a prince proclaiming, this is what is done for the man the king delights to honor. Do it, declares the king, for Mordecai the Jew. Haman is distraught, and yet he obeys.

That same day, he must attend Queen Esther's banquet, and during the banquet, Esther explains the danger she and her people are in, and on being asked by the king, identifies Haman as the one responsible for their disgrace. The king, in a rage, leaves the banquet, and Haman remains and begs Esther for his life. King Xerxes returns and discovers Haman falling on Esther's couch and orders his immediate execution. A very helpful eunuch suggests the gallows in the garden of Haman would serve the purpose.

The decree of the king ordering the killing of the Jews cannot be repealed, but the king issues a new decree granting the Jews the right to defend themselves, and indeed to destroy, kill, and annihilate any who seek their destruction. The tables had turned, and on the appointed day, the enemies of the Jews were routed. This is the story. This is the reason for the season. This is the cause of the Feast of Purim.

[12:19] But having established and having listened to the story that explains the feast, let's just notice the celebration itself. What was it that emerged out of this great event? Let's describe the feast.

The liberation of the Jews that we've thought about as we've told the story sparked, again as we've read, spontaneous celebration and feasting by the Jews in Susa and across the empire. It could be no other way.

What other outcome could there have been other than celebration and feasting? But it soon becomes clear to Mordecai and Esther that the scale of deliverance merits a continuing annual celebration.

And so the Feast of Purim is established. And we could just notice some aspects of this feast as we're told about it in the chapter that we've read, and also beyond the chapter in extra-biblical data on this feast. First of all, the name of the feast is worth understanding, the Feast of Purim. Well, we're given an explanation, or at least a measure of explanation, as to why that is the name that it was given. In verse 26 of chapter 9, we're told, therefore these days we're called Purim, from the word poor, simply the plural of the word poor. And the word poor is the word that means lot. And the reference is to the lot that was cast by Haman to determine the most propitious day for the slaughter of the Jews. And so a lot was cast, a day was determined that Haman imagined would have a certain outcome, but as we've discovered, had a very different outcome. And so in remembrance of that lot that was cast, this is the name that was given to the feast. And of course there, there is a sense in which the very name would remind the Jews of who it is who controls even the lots that are cast. Well, that was the name of the feast, but then we've also, in the reading of chapter 9, picked up something of the character of the feast. And the overriding character of the feast was and is one of joy.

This was a joyful celebration in which all were to participate. The reference that we have in the chapter concerning the giving of gifts, and particularly the giving of gifts to the poor, is a curious one because it's not perhaps for the reason that we might immediately imagine. Let's just notice what is said there in verse 22. In the second half of verse 22 of chapter 9, we read, this is Mordecai institutionalizing, in a sense, the festivities.

[15 : 12] And he says, or we read, 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. You read about gifts to the poor, and certainly when I read that verse, I thought, oh, isn't this good? That in the midst of the celebration, there's also this concern for those who are poor. Well, there is concern for those who are poor, but it would seem the primary reason why the Jews were to ensure that the poor received gifts was so that they could participate in the feasting. You see, if they were so poor that they had nothing to celebrate with, then they would be excluded. And this was to be a feast, this was to be a celebration in which all the people were to participate. And so this concern was to be had that gifts were given to provide, I suppose, a level playing field where all could equally celebrate and participate. To this day, the celebration of this feast is a fun celebration. I think last week I suggested that the Feast of Tabernacles would have been the most awaited and looked forward to feast by the children. The building of tents and living in them for a week must have been very exciting for the children. But the Feast of Purim is also one that is marked by fun and celebration. And one of the entertaining features of the celebration, though not mandated in the passage that we've read, is that when the book of Esther is read, as I mentioned just a few moments ago, there's this custom of reading the book from start to finish, that when the book of Esther is read, there is booing and hissing whenever the name of Haman is read out. I maybe should have said that at the beginning before we went through the story and got you guys to boo and hiss whenever Haman's name was read out.

Too late now. Well, you could do it from here on in, but I can't imagine you'll cooperate, so we won't even try. But that's the character of the Feast, joyful celebration. I shouldn't misjudge you, maybe you would participate. Anyway, we're not going to test it. So there's the name of the Feast, Purim, the character of the Feast, but also one other feature that we can notice is the perpetual nature of the Feast. The instructions are clear. In verses 27 and 28, we read there, the Jews took it upon themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family and in every province and in every city. And it goes on, this perpetual celebration.

It's difficult to judge these things with any measure of certainty, but it's certainly a case could be made to say that the celebration of this Feast by the Jews together with the other Feasts, but perhaps in a particular way, the celebration of this Feast has served to preserve a distinct sense of Jewish identity and also, crucially, to bring comfort and hope in circumstances of persecution when overwhelming odds were against them. They could look back to this story and be encouraged and be reminded that their God, our God, is a God who turns the tables, and we'll come to that in a moment.

The reason for the season, the celebration of the season, but let's think briefly of the God of the season, the God we're describing as our table-turning God and picking up on the language of verse 1 of chapter 9. On this day, the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand. The tables were turned. The whole story speaks of God's sovereign control, but we can identify this one verse that captures that reality, the one we've just read.

Our God is the God who can and does turn the tables. He has the authority and the power to turn the tables. On another occasion, we thought about Esther and used it to develop what was, on that occasion, our text. In Proverbs chapter 21 and verse 1, the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a water course, whatever he pleases. Well, that is a truth stated. The story of Esther demonstrates that that is true. Our God has the authority and the power to turn the tables. But we also, as we think about this reality, we also recognize that our God turns the tables against the wicked. Haman thought himself invisible, but in God's time, he was brought to naught. And this reality can and must bring comfort and relief to believers in the face of bitter persecution. The wicked will not ultimately prosper. Justice will be done. The tables will be turned. We've sung there in the psalm that we sung of those who prosper in sin. And that is what we often see. And we wonder, well, will this ever be so?

[20 : 31] And the story of Esther reminds us that a day is coming and will come when the tables will be turned. God turns the tables against the wicked, but he turns the tables in favor of his people. This is the other side of the coin, but worth stressing. Everything God does has the welfare of his people in view.

Even when we think of the Purim, the lots, after which the feast is named, the Purim, the lots, ever fall in our favor. That is the truth that the psalmist was a conscious of. In Psalm 16, that we'll sing in a few moments, he celebrates that reality. In Psalm 16, verses 5 and 6, we have this language of lot or inheritance and how it ever falls favorably for God's people. Lord, you assigned me my portion and my cup.

You have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. Surely I have a delightful inheritance. And ultimately, that will be our experience, even if in time it often is not, there certainly appears not to be. Our table turning God. In previous feasts, we've examined how any given feast finds fulfillment in Christ. With the Feast of Purim, things are different. The very nature of its emergence, perhaps in part, explains that. There is no explicit or even implicit reference to the feast in the New Testament. So I don't think we can speak in terms of fulfillment in a strict sense.

That said, the God of Esther is the same God who sent his Son to turn the tables on the wicked and in favor of his people. And God turned the tables supremely at Calvary. The death of Jesus was, by all appearances, the moment of sweet victory for Satan and his hosts. And yet it was there that the tables were turned.

And yet, there where the tables were turned, Jesus, unlike the Jews in the days of Esther, did not escape the gallows. He did not enjoy some last-minute reprieve. Rather, it was by his death that the tables were turned definitively against the wicked and in favor of God's people. But finally, let's just close by noting the challenge of the season. The challenge of the season is to see the God of whom we discover in this story is the God who places his people and expects of his people. We often stress, and rightly so, God's sovereign hand in the story of Esther. And yet, though God is sovereign and does as he pleases, he uses his people. He placed Mordecai where he placed him, that he would hear of the plot. But not only does he place his people, he expects of his people. He placed Esther there in the palace of the king. But not only did he place Esther there for such a time as this, but he expected of Esther.

[23 : 54] And we know that Mordecai and Esther, placed by God, also delivered for God. And that is a challenge for you and me. God continues to place his people. He places you where he would have you be. He places me where he would have me be. And where he has placed us. Might it not be where he has placed you, that he has done so for such a time as this, to defend his cause, to stand up for him, to speak of him for such a time of this. And so the challenge is for each of us to ask ourselves the question, where has God placed me? What does God expect of me? Am I delivering? In response to what God has done and where God has placed me and what he asks and expects of me. We know that sometimes to deliver will be a difficult thing. There will be a cost to be paid. And there Esther reminds us of the attitude that should mark us as believers. Yes, there may be a cost. But if I perish, I will perish. But I will do the right thing. And God will honor that in the manner that he sees fit. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that you are indeed the God who turns the tables. We thank you that you are the God who orders the events of history, the rise and fall of nations, the rise and fall of emperors and kings and presidents and prime ministers. You order the very details of our lives and our conversations. You place us in the homes that we are, in the workplace where we are, even where we will be in a conversation or in a circumstance of one kind or another.

And so often you do so for such a time as this, that we might stand up for you, that we might be loyal to you, that we might do the right thing and do so in the confidence that you are the God who will honor those who do the right thing and seeking to live lives that are pleasing to you and bring glory to your name. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.