

Trading Places

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Preacher: Jeremy Martinson

[0 : 00] Just a couple of weeks left in the book of Esther, chapter 8, chapter 9, and then chapter 10, which if you've peeked ahead is a bit of a shorty. Just a couple of verses there in chapter 10.

But yeah, here we are. And I have the privilege today of reading for us. So if you would, look in your Bible. We'll back up just a little bit as we sometimes do to give ourselves some context on this story. So back up into Esther chapter 7 and see if you can find verse number 7.

Esther chapter 7 and verse number 7. You ready? Here we go. And the king arose in his wrath from the wine drinking and went into the palace garden.

But Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?

As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king said, Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, 50 cubits high. And the king said, Hang him on that.

[1 : 37] So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated. Chapter 8 and verse 1.

On that day, King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her.

And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Good Father, would you please bless to us the reading of your word. And now this time as we continue in worship, by sitting under the preaching of your word, help me to be faithful to this text, to this story, to the things that you want us to hear.

Please guard me from error. Keep me from saying anything that would be foolish and unhelpful and distracting. Cause your people to be discerning and careful as they listen, testing whether these things are so by comparing scripture with scripture.

[2 : 52] Father, we ask that you would work among us in our hearts as we have already prayed. In Jesus' name, we give you thanks. Amen. In order to highlight the events, the relative importance of particular events, the authors of scripture slow down time.

Now, I don't mean that they use a time machine. What I mean is that they divinely dawdle their storytelling. And they do this to alert us to the importance of a particular event.

Consider the gospels. Now, I know that the gospels were not broken up into chapter and verses when they were originally written. But just bear with me for the sake of the argument.

89 chapters in the gospels. About a third of those chapters deal with just one week in the life of Jesus. Why? Well, because the authors of the gospels want to slow down time and want to call our attention so that we pay most attention to what is most important in this story.

They loiter, if you will, at the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Esther does the same thing.

[4 : 12] From chapter 1 to chapter 6, nine years have passed, give or take. But then chapters 6, 7, and 8 all cover one single day.

Why? Well, because this day is so important. And so we are still divinely dawdling here as Esther chapter 8 begins.

The author of Esther wants us to notice at least 10 dramatic reversals in this text. You may find more. And no one experiences these dramatic reversals more than Mordecai.

It is as though Mordecai and Haman are trading places. Notice the first two reversals that happen.

According to Persian law, after Haman's execution for treason, his estate becomes the property of the empire.

[5 : 16] King Ahasuerus gives all of it to Esther. Esther gives everything the splendor of Haman's riches, as we read about in chapter 5. Esther gives everything, all of it, to Mordecai.

First reversal. But in addition to his property, Mordecai gets Haman's position, including the signet ring which grants him the king's authority.

Second, dramatic reversal. Now the king seems to return to his throne, perhaps believing that since he has dealt with the threat on his queen's life, he has done all that he needed to do.

But not so. Despite these first two reversals, the Jews are not out of the woods. They are not in the clear.

Why? Well, because Haman's decree of death is still the law of the land. And in just nine months, every Jew in the empire will be exterminated.

[6 : 28] I find it ironic that despite the king's triple affirmation that he would be generous to Esther and give her anything she wanted, the king is unable to put an end to the decree of death.

He cannot cancel Haman's decree. So Queen Esther makes a second uninvited visit to the king. And again, she receives the golden scepter.

Let's pick up the story, chapter 8 and verse number 2. The king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, gave it to Mordecai, and Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman, the Agagite, and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.

When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king.

[7 : 47] Now I want you to notice this as we continue. There's an interesting reversal that happens. I have this down as the number three, the third reversal, and this is Esther's Jewish identity.

Up until this point in the story, the word Jew appears 12 times. 12 times up until this point in the story of chapter 8.

But guess what happens beginning here in chapter 8? In chapter 8, the word Jew is used 14 times and 26 times in the last two chapters of the book of Esther.

Esther's hidden identity is now very much a central part of this story. She appears before the king on behalf of her people, the Jews.

Verse 5, Esther rose and stood before the king and she said, if it pleased the king. And if I have found favor in his sight.

[8 : 58] And if the thing seems right before the king. And I am pleasing in his eyes. I want you to notice this. The queen's speech begins with four conditional statements.

They begin with the word if. If you're taking notes, you can circle these. They begin with the word if. She is not appealing to the king's sense of right and wrong.

She is not appealing to his sense of justice. And whether justice has been done to her people. The queen appeals to what is right in the eyes of the king.

That's conditional statement 1 and 3. What is right in the eyes of the king. I think this is an interesting little thing. The word right is the word kosher.

Which is where we get our word kosher. She says, is this kosher? If this is kosher for you. But then, conditional statements 2 and 4.

[10 : 05] Esther uses herself. Do you see those there? She says, if I have found favor with you. If I am pleasing in your sight.

Let an order be written. To revoke the letters devised by Haman. The Agagite. The son of Hamadotha.

Which he wrote to destroy the Jews. Who are in all the provinces of the king. For, Esther says. How can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people?

Or, how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred? Then, King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther. And to Mordecai the Jew.

Behold. I have hanged. I have hanged. Sorry. Behold. I have given Esther the house of Haman. And they have hanged him on the gallows.

[11 : 11] Because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. Now, it seems here at first. That the king is somewhat defensive. It seems like he's saying.

Look. I've dealt with Haman. I took care of him. You've got all of his stuff. What more do you want? Like, what else do I have to do?

Can we just move on? Perhaps the king assumes that Esther is like him. Self-centered. Driven by his own interests.

But Esther is different. She cares about her people. Not just herself. And even if the king's heart is two sizes too small.

Esther's two rhetorical questions here in verse number six. Seems somehow to grip the king's empathy. Do you see them there in verse six?

[12:14] How can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?

And so the king says, verse number eight. But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews in the name of the king and seal it with the king's ring.

For an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked. Now, let's talk about this idea that Persian edicts cannot be revoked.

Revoking a decree was not legally impossible. It was practically unmanageable. Remember the size of this empire.

It's massive. It's the whole known world. Imagine the management problem. The challenge that you would have of sending out a decree from Sousa and it begins to go out and spread out.

[13:23] And then you say, whoops, changed my mind. Revoke that decree. I am recalling that. Control C, undo. Control Z, undo that decree. You can't do it, right?

Because this first degree hasn't even reached the outer edges of the empire yet. And now it's already being revoked. What a management nightmare. It would only cause more confusion.

There was no mechanism to recall or reverse the effects of a law. This would be like spilling Sour Patch Kids at the beach.

Picking up the Sour Patch Kids, trying to kind of dust them off and put them back in the bag and eating them later. You would not do that. You might pull that off with M&Ms.;

I was thinking about this illustration a little bit. You might do that with M&Ms.;, but not with Sour Patch Kids. You just can't get them back into their original way they were coming out of the bag.

[14:36] So what can be done? What can we do about this decree? Well, the king says, write as you please. Write a new decree in the name of the king and seal it with the king's ring.

I want you to notice as we continue reading. Notice the words, the king and royal, as we continue through this text. The king and royal. Verse number nine.

The king's scribes were summoned at that time in the third month, which is the month of Sivan. I don't ever want to have to memorize that one verse.

Look how long that is. And he, Mordecai, wrote in the name of king Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring.

Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods.

[16:17] On one day throughout all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, on the 13th day of the 12th month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, as the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies.

So the couriers mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, and they rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command, and the decree was issued in Susa, the citadel.

Now, we're going to come back to this in just a moment, but I want you to notice the words of the decree in verse 11.

Under Haman's decree, all Jews would be destroyed, killed, annihilated, and plundered. But under the new decree, reversal number four, the Jews can destroy, kill, annihilate, and plunder anyone who attacks them.

Reversal number four. Verse 15. I love this.

[17:42] Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown, and a robe of fine linen, and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.

The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor, and in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews,

a feast and a holiday, and many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

What an incredible scene. In chapter four, after Haman's decree, because he was mourning and wearing sackcloth, Mordecai, you'll recall, chapter four, could not appear before the king.

But now, there's a great reversal that has happened. Mordecai now comes from the presence of the king. Before, he couldn't go before the king. Now, he comes from the presence of the king, and he is not wearing torn clothes.

He is not wearing rough sackcloth anymore, nor is his head covered in ashes, symbolic of his deep grief. Reversal number six, Mordecai wears royal robes.

[19 : 20] And reversal number seven, he has a great golden crown on his head. The city of Susa was thrown into confusion by Haman's decree.

But now, that same city shouts and rejoices. Reversal number eight, what once brought fear and dread, now brings delight.

And the Jews, who previously, in chapter four, mourned, and fasted, and wept, and lamented, in desperation, at Haman's decree of death, now experience light, and gladness, and joy, and honor. Reversal number nine, their sorrow has completely reversed. Under Haman's decree of death, no one in their right mind would want to be associated with the Jews.

Now, reversal number ten, Persian citizens align themselves with the Jews.

[20 : 43] They declare themselves to be Jews. What once was weakness is now strength. Instead of opposing the Jews, some seek to belong with them. Now, this is likely not genuine faith, like Ruth, or Rahab, for example.

These are ordinary Persian citizens, realizing, that given how Haman, and Mordecai, have traded places, siding with the Jews, would be a very wise choice.

Though he is hidden, and though he remains unmentioned, and unthanked, God turns every sorrow into joy, every danger into deliverance, every curse into a blessing.

You are sovereign over us. Let's return to Mordecai's decree.

Verse number 11. Let me read it again for us. Verse number 11. Here's the decree. Saying that, the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods.

[22 : 38] Under Haman's original decree, on the 13th of the month of Adar, Persian citizens are ordered to destroy, kill, annihilate, and plunder the Jews, men, women, and children.

Under Mordecai's decree, on the 13th of Adar, the exact same day, the Jews are permitted to destroy, kill, annihilate, and plunder Persian citizens, men, women, and children.

Sameses. Sameses. But notice this. Mordecai's decree only permits the Jews to defend themselves.

Do you see that there? In verse 11, they are allowed to defend their lives. Jews are not allowed to go kill all the Persian citizens.

They are only allowed to defend themselves against those who attack them first. We see this also down in verse number 13. The Jews will be ready to take vengeance on their enemies.

[23 : 44] The idea is a response to a prior wrong. You attack the Jews, the Jews are allowed to defend themselves against you.

But, even with this qualifier of self-defense, we still need to wrestle with this reality. Mordecai's decree permits killing women and children.

The women and children, non-combatants of those who attack Jews. And this is hard. This is hard. Why would Mordecai's decree include women and children?

children. The NIV attempts to ease this tension a bit for us by making the women and children part of the Jews who are being attacked.

However, in other words, that would be like the Jews can defend themselves if any Jewish man, woman, or child is first attacked. but this is not the natural reading of the Hebrew text.

[25 : 04] There is literary artistry here as well that I don't want to overlook. Since Jewish men, women, and children would be killed, Jews can kill men, women, and children.

This reversal is beautiful in its literary artistry, in its consistency, in its precision. But we need more than this, don't we?

I'm not content with this. In order to legally counter Haman's decree, and to see to it that this decree that has gone out, and this new decree that is now rushing out across the empire, that these two decrees fully counteract the other one.

Mordecai's decree must be equally precise. You might say, to the letter of the law. So, because Haman's decree includes men, women, and children, therefore, Mordecai's decree must include men, women, and children.

But even with these explanations, I admit that I am dissatisfied. no matter who commits it, mass murder seems reprehensible.

[26 : 40] So, let me offer a theological explanation. This event here in Esther, this event is part of a larger war.

It's a battle in a bigger war. It is God's holy war against the Amalekites.

Do you remember when we first met Haman? The scripture introduces him as Haman the Agagite. And then we saw it twice in our chapter here in eight. Two times we are reminded that Haman is an Agagite.

Why does this matter? Well, it matters because Agag was the king of a people known as the Amalekites. And the scripture introduces us to the Amalekites in Exodus.

It happens just after God delivers his people from centuries of slavery in Egypt. The Amalekites attack God's people without warning, without provocation.

[27 : 51] It's like a sucker punch. We read about this back in Exodus chapter 17. Exodus 17, look at verse number 8.

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. They have just been delivered from centuries of slavery in Egypt.

Do you think this group of people knows how to defend themselves? Look what God says down in verse number 14. Then the Lord said to Moses, write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

And Moses built an altar and called the name of it the Lord is my banner saying a hand upon the throne of the Lord the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

what is happening here in Esther is part of a bigger war. The Amalekites represent the enemies of God's people and therefore the enemies of God.

[29 : 33] Mordecai's decree is not about personal animosity towards Haman. Mordecai's decree reaffirms God's divine enmity, his holy war against the Amalekites.

Do you remember the second time that the Israelites need water in the wilderness? The first time they needed water God said go to that rock strike the rock water will come out.

The second time God said to Moses go and speak to the rock and water will come out. Moses is frustrated. This is a low moment in his faith.

He takes his stick and he strikes the rock. Paul tells us in the New Testament that rock was Christ. And now we have a theological problem, don't we? What did Moses do? He struck the rock a second time. What did we sing together this morning?

[30 : 48] Once for all. You don't get to strike the rock a second time, Moses. And for his lack of faith, he was barred from the promised land.

Why? Because Moses ruined that picture that the rock was supposed to be Christ. Whether he realizes it or not, Haman's decree does something similar.

Haman's decree distorts God's divine pattern. Haman's decree distorts God's divine pattern in this way by saying God's enemies will triumph over God's people.

Though it may be difficult for us to accept, Mordecai's decree authorizing the Jews to utterly destroy their enemies reverses Haman's reversal.

In other words, it sets right what Haman's decree made wrong. It confirms God's holy vengeance on his enemies.

[32 : 06] It reminds God's people that he protects and defends them, and it assures all who love him that no matter the circumstances, God's plan of redemption cannot be thwarted.

Listen, the inclusion of men, women, and children in Haman's first decree reminds us that this threat against God's people is very real.

What happens? What happens if every Jew in the world is wiped out? God's plan of redemption will be thwarted.

Jesus cannot come, and if Jesus cannot come, then you and I cannot be saved. We will not escape the judgment that our sins deserve.

The Amalekites represent God's enemies, and Mordecai's decree reminds us that every sinner, every sinner, every man, and every woman, and every child, is at enmity with God because of their sin.

[33 : 21] God's judgment. There are no good people who don't deserve God's judgment. Romans chapter 3 affirms this.

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Adam and Eve's sin in the garden reversed God's design.

God places all of humanity under this irrevocable decree of death. And there is nothing that you can do to undo or reverse this decree of death.

Just as the king could not undo Haman's decree. No good that you can do can reduce God's judgment or somehow earn you his favor.

But like Esther, Jesus intercedes. How? How can I bear to see the calamity that is going to come to my people?

[34 : 29] How can I bear to see the eternal destruction of my kindred? And in perfect unity with the father and with the spirit, Jesus comes from the king's presence.

Not with royal robes and a great golden crown. No, Jesus set aside all of the glory that was really truly fully his. And Jesus humbles himself.

And as Mordecai trades places with Haman, so Jesus trades places with sinners. Jesus takes our sin. He bears our judgment and in return gives us robes of his righteousness.

Through Jesus, God reverses what sin reversed in the garden. Have you been rescued from the decree of death?

death? Or are you still at enmity with God because of your sin? Can you say, my death became his so that his life could become mine?

[35 : 51] Come to Jesus. Believe in Jesus. Jesus loves trading places with sinners. sinners. Despite how it may feel to us, Mordecai's authorization of a holy war is not wrong or evil here in Esther.

It is not sub-Christian, it is not outdated or old-fashioned for God to judge his enemies. But hear this, and please hear this carefully and clearly because we are hearing different than this.

Hear this, brothers and sisters, we live in a different era of redemption. Because of Jesus, God's people no longer go on holy wars against God's enemies.

Karen Jobes writes in her excellent commentary on Esther, after the cross, the continuing practice of holy war is anything but holy.

In this era of redemption, God does not call his people to kill those who refuse the gospel. We do not conquer through power.

[37 : 16] The gospel advances as we embrace and model the love of our humble King Jesus. who traded places with his enemies.

But the great reversals of Esther 8 remind us of something else as well. They remind us that God's enemies will not triumph in the end.

As Mordecai's decree reversed Haman's, so Christ's victory assures us that evil will not have the final word. God's judgment is real.

His judgment is real and it will inevitably fall on those who refuse to believe in Jesus. So, like those, sent on the king's swift horses with this urgent message, let's go with the gospel.

Let's go with this gospel like Mordecai's decree. This is a matter of life and death. What are you waiting for, brothers and sisters?

[38 : 25] What are you waiting for? Go with this gospel. If you belong to Jesus, then the irrevocable decree of death no longer hangs over your head and that is very good news.

You live under a better decree. What decree is this? Well, it is the gospel. Your death became his so that his life could become yours. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And so, like the Jews across Persia, let's revel in the reversal of the gospel. And let's be people of light and gladness and joy and honor for the glory of God and the advance of his kingdom.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word.

Help us as we reflect on the things that we have heard. Call us to greater faith. Deepen our love and appreciation for being delivered from the decree of death that our sin deserved.

[39 : 50] Thank you that at just the right time, Romans 5 tells us, Christ died for the ungodly. We acknowledge we were ungodly and we acknowledge our hearts are still prone to ungodliness.

forgiveness. Holy Spirit, would you please do work in our hearts as we take a few moments in quiet to consider the things that we have heard, to evaluate whether they are true.

Cause us to submit to your word. Cause us to seek your forgiveness, to repent of our sin. Please do this work in our hearts as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Father, you are good and you do good. Thank you for the privilege of being here with this group of people at this time. Would you please stir up faith in one who has never repented and believed the gospel?

Call them to life and repentance so that they respond by repenting and believing this gospel. We ask this for their good and for your glory.

[41 : 11] In Jesus' name, Amen.