

Day of the Dead

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[0 : 00] Thank you for joining your voices. Thank you, friends, for serving us this morning. What a wonderful time of centering our attention and affection on our God and our Father and our Savior, the Lord Jesus, and on the Holy Spirit who is holding us fast. You can turn on over to Esther, and we're going to start in Esther chapter 8. We won't be there for very long. We just want to pick up a little context here in Esther chapter 8, and Corey is going to read starting at verse number 13. So Esther chapter 8, verse number 13, and he's going to read down on through chapter 9 and verse number 1. A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province being publicly displayed to all the peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance over their enemies. So the carriers mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, wrote out hurriedly urged by the king's command, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. 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 a gladness and joy among the

Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jew for fear the Jews had fallen to them. Now in the 12th month, which was the month of Adar, on the 13th day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on that very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain mastery over them, the reverse occurred. The Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.

Father, thank you for the privilege of having your word, and thank you for the opportunity that we have now to open it together and to consider the things that are written to us here in Esther chapter 9.

Thank you for preserving your word for us, and thank you for being so kind to give it to us in our language. We remember those who suffered and those who died so that we could have English copies of the scripture, and we are grateful for your kindness, Father, to see to it that we would have copies of your word, that we could learn and grow and be pointed back to Jesus again and again and again. Would you help us as we take this time now and turn our attention to the preaching of your word? Help me to be faithful in the preaching. Keep me from error and foolishness. Help me to say those things that are clear and concise and compelling and Christ-centered. And would you also help each of us as we sit under the preaching of the word to listen carefully and discerningly and to test whether these things are so? Would you help us to believe and obey what we find here? In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen.

Do you ever wonder, God, what are you doing? Maybe I should ask the question this way. When was the last time you wondered, God, what are you doing?

[4 : 16] We say that God is good, and yet the world that we live in is so full of bad. We say that God is love, but then what is this feeling so sudden and new? This is loathing.

And our world is full of it. Culture is drenched in contempt and hate. On our best days, we remember that God's grace is sufficient. But on our worst days, we are reminded that life is hard. We hold pages full of God's promises to us. And yet every life has enough heartache and disappointment to make even the strongest among us want to tap out. If God holds this world together, then why does it feel like my world is falling apart? If God is at work in every event, every situation, every circumstance, then why can't I see what he is doing? These are real questions that we ask. And the book of Esther highlights Esther is a Jewish orphan. She is living in Persia with her cousin Mordecai. She is taken from her home and placed in the king's harem. And when it's her turn, she wins the king's favor and she is installed as queen of Persia. Not long after this, cousin Mordecai saves the king's life by exposing a plot to assassinate the king. But rather than rewarding

Mordecai, Haman is exalted.

Haman is wealthy. He is politically powerful. He is poisoned with pride. And when he is installed as prime minister, injustice scores another point. Doesn't it feel like injustice is just doing the tush push all the time? If you watch football, you know what I'm talking about, right? Like they line up and you just know what's going to happen. You cannot stop this. That's the way injustice feels.

Like it's scoring touchdown after touchdown after touchdown in our lives. And there's nothing that we can do to stop it. And so we ask, God, what are you doing? What are you doing?

Through the next three chapters of the story, the author builds up the suspense. Chapter three, with the king's authority, Haman writes a decree of death, ordering Persian citizens across the empire to exterminate God's people, the Jews. In chapter four, Mordecai appeals to Esther regarding this decree.

[7 : 44] And she agrees to help. But her last words there in chapter four reveal that she does not have much hope about appearing before the king uninvited. Do you remember what she said? If I perish, I perish.

Chapter five, at her first banquet, we expect that Esther is going to expose Haman's horrendous plot, but she doesn't. And that night, Haman builds a 75-foot stake. And he sets his alarm to wake up early because he's going to go to the king and request permission to execute Mordecai immediately.

While wickedness advances, God's people wait. God, what are you doing?

Where are you? Only a miracle can save Mordecai now. And we are short on miracles in the book of Esther, aren't we? God seems absent.

What is going to happen? But then on that night, the king has insomnia. Kids, do you remember what that means? Insomnia?

[9 : 16] What? Alice? You can't sleep. He is sleepless in Susa. He can't sleep. And from this point in the story, from chapter six, verse one, when the king can't sleep on, the story begins to reverse.

In chapter eight, Mordecai publishes a second decree. What for? Well, it authorizes the Jews to defend themselves against anyone who attacks them.

Now, given how the author has told this story, we expect another twist, don't we? We expect some more suspense to be built up. We brace for it.

But that is what makes Esther nine so interesting. The tension vanishes. From the very first verse, the tension is gone.

There is no suspense. Look at verse number nine. Notice how the author piles up these opening phrases. Now, in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on that very day, when the enemies of the king hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred.

[10 : 47] No plot twist. The reverse occurred. The Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.

CSB, the Christian Standard Bible, says the opposite happened. I think the NIV is helpful also. It says, the tables were turned. We know that phrase, don't we?

The tables were turned. Eleven months earlier, the Jews had marked this date on their calendars. And they waited, knowing that their enemies would rise up against them.

To what? To kill and to destroy, to annihilate, to plunder. This was a day of doom. A certain day of the dead. But then, when that day finally arrives, the reverse happens.

The day of the dead became their day of deliverance. Verse number two. The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, to lay hands on those who sought their harm.

[12 : 08] And no one could stand against them. For fear of them had fallen on all the peoples. All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews.

For the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai was great in the king's house. And his fame spread throughout all the provinces.

For the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. This is a little thread you can pull on if you'd like. You see that there? The man Mordecai.

I think some translations drop that. The man Mordecai. Moses is also referenced this way. Back in Exodus chapter 11. The man Moses grew great in the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of the people.

God's people. Here it is. The man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. Verse five. The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword.

[13:16] Killing and destroying them. And did as they please to those who hated them. Remember back in chapter one verse number eight. The Persians were drinking as they please.

The king's rule was you need to drink as you please. Here it has reversed. And now the Jews are doing as they please to those who hated them.

In Susa the citadel itself. The Jews killed and destroyed 500 men. And also killed. Parshandatha. And Delphon. And Aspethah. And Parantha. And Adalia. And Eredotha. And Parmashda. And Erezai. And Eredi.

And Vazatha. The ten sons of Haman. The sons of Hamadatha. The enemy of the Jews. But they laid no hands.

[14:13] On the plunder. The king receives an update. Verse number 11. That very day. The number of those killed in Susa the citadel. Was reported to the king.

And the king said to Queen Esther. In Susa the citadel. The Jews have killed and destroyed. 500 men. And also the ten sons of Haman.

What then. Have they done in the rest of the king's provinces. Now what is your wish. It shall be granted to you. And what further is your request.

It shall be fulfilled. The king offers Esther whatever she wants. She doesn't even have to come and ask. The king is actually being generous to her this time.

You can have whatever you want. You don't even have to ask for it. And there's no golden scepter required. And like every other suggestion in this story.

[15:12] The king does as he's told. Esther said. Verse 13. If it please the king. Let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also.

To do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows. So the king commanded. This to be done.

A decree was issued in Susa. And the ten sons of Haman were hanged. The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the 14th day of the month of Adar.

And they killed 300 men in Susa. But they laid no hands on the plunder. Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives.

And got relief from their enemies. And killed 75,000 of those who hated them. But they laid no hands on the plunder.

[16:13] Why does Esther ask for another day of killing? Does this seem just a little bit excessive?

Some argue that Esther's request is an abuse of her power. Perhaps Esther, they say, is no more fit to rule than Haman was. But I think several details in the text point us toward a better way of understanding this difficult portion of Scripture.

And in addition, I want to remind you that we need to remember this story is part of a larger story of God's dealing with the Amalekites.

So let's look first at the details. First, the details in the text. According to Mordecai's decree in chapter 8, the Jews were authorized to kill, destroy, and annihilate.

But I want you to notice in verse number 5 what happens. The Jews. Do you see it there in your Bible? They killed and they destroyed.

[17:29] Do you spot those two words in your Bible? But do you notice the one word that's missing? The word annihilate. Now, in such a carefully and beautifully written book, certainly this is intentional.

We are supposed to notice that the Jews, though they had permission to kill, destroy, and annihilate, stopped short of annihilating.

We should notice that. They did not abuse their power. According to Mordecai's decree, the Jews could avenge any attack with a counterattack and kill men, women, and children.

Do you remember that from last week? But notice, when we read about the results of these two days, the text only mentions the number of men that were killed.

There's no textual evidence that the Jews also went ahead and destroyed women and children of those who attacked them. They did not abuse their power.

[18:41] Esther's request for a second day was not vindictive. Recall also, the Jews were authorized to defend themselves.

That means they could not attack first. What does this tell us about these 800 men in the city of Susa and 75,000 men across the empire?

Jews had lots of enemies. The scope of hostility against the Jews should catch our attention.

Esther's request for a second day was not vindictive.

This was not an abuse of her power. This was a necessary, strategic safeguard against future hostility against her people.

With these details in mind, let's also remember that Esther is a story within a larger story. These two days of killing in the Persian Empire is one battle in God's long holy war against the people known as the Amalekites.

[19 : 58] Why is God at war with the Amalekites? Well, just after God delivered them from centuries of slavery in Egypt, when his people, the Jews, were most vulnerable, the Amalekites attacked them.

You can read about this in Exodus chapter 17. And because of this unprovoked attack, when his people were most vulnerable, God declared a permanent war against the Amalekites.

Now we read about another battle in this war in 1 Samuel chapter 15. Now I want to call your attention to this because it's relevant for our text.

Here's another battle, an earlier battle in this larger war. God directs King Saul to strike down Amalek and to devote everything they have to destruction.

But I want you to notice what King Saul does in 1 Samuel chapter 15. This is verse number 7. King Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.

[21 : 19] And he took Agag, the king of the Amalekites, alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword.

But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs and all that was good and would not utterly destroy them.

But all that was despised and worthless, they devoted to destruction. Saul disobeys God's command.

In his long war with Amalek, God tells Saul, go take care of this guy. Destroy Amalek, destroy King Agag, destroy all of this stuff.

And Saul disobeys. He spares Agag. And generations later, Agag's descendant, Haman, shows up in Esther, in Persia, to destroy God's people.

[22 : 30] If Saul obeys God in this larger war with Amalek, there is no Haman. So while Esther's request for a second day of violence may be very difficult for us to accept, Esther's commitment is to her people.

And by her request for a second day of violence, Esther shames King Saul. He spares Agag.

Where Saul fails, Esther finishes. There's one more piece of evidence that points to the events of Esther chapter 9 being part of God's larger holy war against the Amalekites.

Here, in 1 Samuel 15, you'll notice King Saul reserves the best of the plunder from his battle with the Amalekites. And he tells Samuel, look, I was going to use all of that to make sacrifices to the king.

Mm-hmm. You should have just obeyed. That's Samuel's short answer to him. The longer answer is to obey is better than to sacrifice. Mordecai's decree, you'll recall, authorized the Jews to what?

[23 : 59] Kill, destroy, annihilate, and plunder. Do you remember? It was a matching decree with Haman's decree. But the author assures us three times in chapter 9 that the people did not take any plunder.

Why? Because when God's people act as agents of his righteous judgment, they are not allowed to profit personally by taking the plunder.

Under Mordecai and Esther's leadership, the Jews in Persia obey where King Saul disobeys. I think this is an interesting discussion for scholars to poke at and try to sort out what was Esther doing?

Is this the right thing to do? I think it's an interesting discussion. But I also think it's important to note that the author of Esther makes no attempt to either vindicate or vilify Esther.

It simply reported what she did. And what she did was to ask for an extra day. An extra day of violence for the sake of her people to finish what Saul refused to finish.

[25 : 32] our text concludes with an explanation for these two days of celebration. Look at verse number 16 again.

Esther chapter 9 and verse number 16. Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them.

But they laid no hands on the plunder. This was on the 13th day of the month of Adar and on the 14th day they rested and made that day a day of feasting and gladness.

But remember the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the 13th day and the 14th day and then rested on the 15th day making the 15th that day a day of feasting and gladness.

Therefore the Jews of the villages who live in the rural towns hold the 14th day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting as a holiday and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another and this is why there are two days.

[26 : 48] I think it's worth reflecting one more time on the stunning reversal that occurs in this story. A reversal that starts with Haman trading places with Mordecai and ends with the Jews as a whole.

Do you remember Haman's arrogant boasting back in chapter 5? Here's what he said. Chapter 5 verse 11 Haman recounted to them to his wife to his friends the splendor of his riches the number of his sons all of the promotions with which the king had honored him and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king.

Haman was honored by the king but then hung in shame on the gallows that he built for Mordecai honor to shame.

He was wealthy but after his treason all of his property is given to Esther who gives it all to Mordecai politically powerful the prime minister and now that's Mordecai's job and the ten sons that we sort of laughed at when we read chapter five the first time how funny it must have been for his wife to hear that he had ten sons those ten sons that he took so much pride in they are now also dead and not just dead but also hanged in shame Haman's fall predicted by his own wife and wise men is complete Esther's request that Haman's ten sons be hanged like their father may sound kind of petty to us you know I mean they're already dead but this detail in the story again points to something greater and that is hanging is symbolic of

God's curse we read about this in Deuteronomy 21 it says this and if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death and you hang him on a tree his body shall not remain all night on the tree but you shall bury him the same day why a hanged man is cursed by God wait a minute if hanging means that you are under God's curse then Esther was saying something about the ten sons of Haman wasn't she she's saying they are under God's curse but if hanging means being under

[30 : 07] God's curse then that also says something to us about Jesus doesn't it you and I have broken God's law again and again and again and again sometimes we do this intentionally other times we do this unintentionally thoughtlessly but every time we break God's law our failure to obey is evidence of our inability to be right with God by doing more by trying harder by being better in Galatians chapter three Paul writes about this Galatians chapter three and verse number ten for all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse that's interesting if you try to get to

God on your own in your own way by your own efforts by your own doing by being good enough by trying harder by being better if you try to get to God in your own way the scripture says you are under a curse why for it is written cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law to do them why are you under a curse because you can't do it you can't do enough to be right with God on your own you can't do enough to manufacture or stir up or make a relationship with God and every time you try you are just revealing that you are under God's curse you cannot do enough good to get rid of this curse but when you are willing to admit your need when you are willing to admit

I'm under this curse and I can't be right with God on my own when you turn to Jesus as your only hope then Jesus will save you and three verses later Paul writes this chapter three verse 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law how by becoming a curse for us for it is written cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree there it is Paul brings forward this ancient law from the book of Deuteronomy!

that Esther seems to be picking up on in chapter nine Esther says they deserve to be under God's curse and Paul picks up on this ancient law and says this is how God did it Christ became our curse how did that happen because he was hung on a cross and he bore!

the curse that was yours have you been redeemed what a beautiful word this is have you been redeemed are you a Christian is Jesus your savior by grace through faith can you say I have come

out from under God's curse well how is that so because Jesus was made a curse for me God cursed his son in my place won't you get out from under that horrible horrible curse today won't you do it right now I mean what are you waiting for you don't want to be under God's curse and Jesus has taken the curse of sin come to Jesus the

[34 : 46] Jews waited for nine months wondering if Mordecai's decree would really be enough they didn't know how things would turn out and so when chapter nine begins we expect that the author will give us some suspense but then there is none the author gives away the ending before he even tells the story this is like a preacher who gives away the plot twist to the book when you still haven't read the end of the book no suspense no drama why not why not because the ending of this story was never really in question it was never really in doubt even though God is unmentioned in the text even though he is unseen in all of the middle of the drama when the suspense and the tension is so high this story was always going to end with

God keeping his promise with God's enemies being destroyed with God's people being delivered sisters and brothers we live here here in the middle of the story just before Esther chapter six if you will when the tension and the drama is still high and we look around at the world and we don't know what's going on and so we ask God what are you doing our lives often feel like the first half of the book of Esther unjust uncertain unclear unstable life is full of conflict pain hardship undesirable! medical diagnoses divorce abuse shame and so we ask God what what are you doing what are you doing I wonder if the disciples asked that same question on that middle day the day after Jesus hung as a curse on the cross the day after he was taken down from the cross the day after he was placed in a tomb and the tomb was sealed when all hope seemed lost I wonder if his disciples on that middle day cried out God what are you doing the emptiness and the fear on that middle day must have been nearly overwhelming the religious leaders the religious elite have won Jesus is gone his enemies have killed destroyed and annihilated the

Messiah but then the stone was rolled away and the first day of the week became the most glorious day of the dead so glorious in fact that it's still a day that we talk about now what do we do we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes we proclaim the day of the dead why because Jesus is alive Jesus is alive when the forces of evil appeared to have triumphed the reverse occurred thank you NIV the tables turned the one who hung cursed on the cross rose victorious over sin and death and hell and the devil himself Jesus is alive and his resurrection power now flows to you through your union with him and by grace and the

Holy Spirit's help you and I can wait right here in the middle while our God works out the end we can wait right here in the middle while our God works out the end you don't need to have answers to all of your questions I don't need to have answers to all of my questions you and I need to remember that your story will end with God keeping his promises your story will end with God's enemies being destroyed your story will end with God's people being delivered Mark Vrogup in his helpful book *Waiting Isn't a Waste* says it like this live live on what you know to be true about [40 : 08] God when you don't know what's true about your life how how do we do this because while we are waiting in the middle our God is working out the end your past may be full of pain your present may be entirely overwhelming!

your future may be horribly unclear You may walk the valley of the shadow of death you may be overwhelmed with present circumstances that no one but you and God even know about your adversaries may seem to win again and again and again and again you may live with injustice for the rest of your life it's okay to cry out in desperation God what are you doing and then remember what's true about God when you don't know what's true about your life while you are waiting in the middle like the God of Esther he is working out the end and it is not in question or in doubt because of Jesus' resurrection no matter how awful your middle of the story is the end of your story remains unchanged what is waiting in the middle look like waiting means trusting God even when you don't understand waiting means walking in obedience to his word and helping others to obey encouraging others to press on in the faith waiting means holding on to God's promises!

Waiting means worshipping because you remember that while you think you're the one holding on to him he is actually the one as we sang this morning holding on to you will you trust him when you find yourself in the middle and will you remember that it is because of his great love that we are not overcome let's pray father we are grateful to be your people humbled that you have called us out of darkness into your marvelous light we are grateful for the death of our savior Jesus that he took the

curse that was ours and that he suffered and he died hung there on that cross in order to redeem sinners like us who had no hope of making a right relationship with you thank you lord jesus for saving sinners like us father would you please draw to faith someone who did not expect to be confronted with the gospel this morning grant life grant repentance so that some humble sinner responds by repenting and believing the gospel father would you also stir up fresh faith in the hearts of my brothers and sisters would you stir up our perseverance and our endurance in waiting in the middle confident that you are working out the end father as we prepare to celebrate the lord's supper together would you please come by the power of your holy spirit and do work in our hearts father we recall that it is your kindness that draws us to repentance and so we confess your kindness again and as we have repented with genuine hearts thank you for the forgiveness that is ours through our savior the lord jesus we confess and we believe there is now no condemnation for those who are in christ help us as we continue to worship in jesus name amen