

A Tale of Two Celebrations
Esther 8:1 – 10:3

Friends, because I'm a guy I must admit that I like stories with action in them – especially action movies that have a good car chase scene.

You know the ones where the cops are chasing the bad guys through the city, people are jumping out of the way, fruit stands and street vendors merchandise is flying everywhere as the cars plow through it.

And eventually the bad guys car smashes into a fire hydrant and water is spraying all over the street – and the cops rush out and arrest the bad guys and haul them off to jail...and we move on to the next scene with no thought about the trail of destruction which this car chase has left and the impact it will have on the lives of the people it affected.

But why would there be...it's just a movie, and the people who are affected by the car chase aren't the main characters, the story isn't about them - so we don't have to pay any attention to

them or worry about how their business was ruined in the car chase – it's really inconsequential to the story.

So we watch the movie and experience the cathartic exhilaration of the car chase, and cheer on the good guys as they defeat the bad guys – who get what's coming to them, and their evil plot is foiled!

And then we go home - we've been entertained for a couple of hours, taken a bit of a break from our day to day routine, we've enjoyed a good story - but the story we just watched doesn't really change our reality, it's not really about us – we're inconsequential to that story and once we leave the theatre... it is inconsequential to our lives as well.

There's no epilogue that follows up whatever movie we watched, which examines the impact and the effects which the plot had on the lives of those who were the spectators, bystanders, or collateral damage in the story.

And brothers and sisters, we're so used to stories being presented in this way it's easy to expect the same kind of conclusion from the story of Esther.

You could be forgiven for thinking that things had come to their natural conclusion in Scene 3 last Sunday.

Esther risked her life to interrupt the King's court and it paid off. She was able to expose Haman's evil plot to the King and how it endangered her own life – so the King executed Haman and put an end to the threat against her life and also stopped Haman's plan to execute Mordecai.

So, the villain gets his just deserts, the main characters' lives are saved, Mordecai has been honored - everything is wrapped up for our main characters – the End.

It was an entertaining story, well written, well-acted, well produced, well...so what?

We've enjoyed some food, and a break from the normal Sunday services, and that's enjoyable... but isn't this story and these events which happened thousands of years somewhat inconsequential to our lives today?

And if the story of Esther actually had wrapped up last week, and without the help of a good preacher (ahem) to point out the revelation which this part of scripture reveals to us... it would be inconsequential to us.

But the story of Esther did not wrap up last week – we still have one last scene – an epilogue which reminds us that the story of Esther doesn't end when the main characters have come overcome their personal challenges.

Scene 4 in this story shows how the local events which occurred between two individuals, in the King's court, in the citadel of Susa, created implications that impacted hundreds of thousands of people throughout the entire empire... from India all the way to Ethiopia.

This last scene is about what happens to those inconsequential people in a story who are left to deal with the aftermath of a car chase - in this case a “car chase” between Haman and Mordecai fueled by their personal vendettas.

Today we discover that the danger to God’s people hasn’t passed just because Esther and Mordecai are safe and Haman is dead.

Haman had issued the decree to destroy all the Jews on the 13th day of the month of Adar – in the King’s name! and sealed it with the King’s signet ring! and that meant this order could not be revoked or overturned...

And even if it could be, Haman wasn’t the only one in the Persian Empire who hated the Jews – God’s people had many enemies.

You only need to read the book of Nehemiah – which tells the story about a handful of Jews who went back to live in the Promised Land and attempted to rebuild the temple and the

opposition they faced from their neighbors - to realize that Haman’s decree would have been eagerly received by many local rulers across the empire who were only too happy to comply with it and profit from it.

So even if Xerxes was able to send out a dispatch to rescind the order, there was no way to ensure that all the local rulers across the empire would comply with it.

Communications being sent from Susa would take weeks, even months, to reach the far corners of the empire.

So regional rulers who hated the Jews and wanted to annihilate them and take their property and goods for their own could always plead ignorance for not having received the memo that this genocide had been called off.

So the story isn’t over yet – even though the source of the plot has been executed, it’s effects and implications cannot be called off and are still going to occur – so what to do with this dilemma?

Now brothers and sisters, I need briefly pause here and point out that it is these kinds of dilemmas, occurring on a divine scale, which are responsible for the way in which the story of scripture turns out.

And when we are presented with such a dilemma on a human scale it become easier to understand how and why it occurs on a divine scale with God and gives us a better understanding of it. I'll say more on that in a bit...

So how does this dilemma of an irrevocable decree of the King to destroy the Jews get resolved?

Well, Xerxes suggests that Esther and Mordecai, with his newly granted power, write up another decree – one which also cannot be revoked – which would counter the previous decree.

So Mordecai comes up with a clever solution and issues a Royal decree that on the day which the Jews were to be destroyed, they would have the right to form local militias to

defend themselves with lethal force and take the property of anyone who would try to take advantage of Haman's decree and destroy them.

It's a brilliant solution that uses the very circumstances which created the dilemma – to provide a solution to prevent the dilemma.

People may try to destroy the Jews but the Jews are authorized to defend themselves – and they do so very effectively, defeating the goal of Haman's edict to annihilate them and destroying their enemies instead.

And... showing themselves to be of better character than those who hated them – for it is mentioned twice that none of the Jews took any plunder from those whom they destroyed.

But the story of Esther does not end here either – not even after including an epilogue about what happened to all those “inconsequential people” affected by the struggles between Haman and Mordecai...

Not even after making sure that we understand that as far as this story goes, these people are not inconsequential at all – but... the fact that they were all spared is actually the main point of the whole story – and there is still more to this story.

We have heard in weeks past – these not-so- inconsequential people were God’s chosen people, they were the heirs to the promise which God made to their Father Abraham – *“that he would bless those who blessed them and curse those who cursed them and that all nations on earth would be blessed because of them.”*

And even though this story does not specifically mention God and His Promise, this just emphasizes all the more the way in which God was working behind the scenes in orchestrating this deliverance for His people.

The events and results of this story proved to the Jews that they were still God’s people, at a time when many of them wondered if they were...

Because all of their significant markers of this identity had been taken away – the Promised Land, the Temple, their King and it was difficult to maintain their identity in a foreign land.

It was a challenge to keep the celebrations and festivals and worship practices which marked them as God’s when the culture around them celebrated worshipping other gods.

But now they could see that although exile and scattering was a low point in their covenant relationship with God – He had not abandoned them, He would not allow them to be destroyed – and not just because He had a plan to bring salvation to the world through them...

No – but because God loved His people... they didn’t deserve it, they hadn’t earned it... but He loved them. That is the grace of God... and when God is gracious it calls for a response from those who receive it.

And so, just as so many other things in this story occur co- incidentally, Mordecai and Esther just happen to decide that

these events by which the Jews had been spared from annihilation must be commemorated, and they issue a decree that all *“these days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews—nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants.”* (Esther 9:28)

Because when they celebrating the details of this story, God’s people will remember that even when God does not seem to be present, even when God seems absent – He is at work and He will find a way to keep His promises to His people.

And this is an important development for the Jews friends, because as the history books show, from this point on they will never again return to their golden days as the nation of Israel, with a King in Jerusalem with the freedom to worship God and celebrate all the major highlights of their history with Him as they had before...

They would be a scattered people, displaced and conquered – even when many of them had returned to the Promised Land and a second Temple was built - it would never be the same as it used be...

So the story of Esther and how it led to the establishment of the celebration of Purim is a new identity marker for God’s people in a new phase of their existence – one that is... dare we say even more appropriate for them while they are in exile than the Passover would be??

One which called the Jews to live by faith – not by the sight, not by the usual items of Promised Land and Temple and King and their prosperity which assured them of their identity and God’s presence...

It takes faith to see that it was God’s hand at work in the story of Esther and not just fortuitous circumstances occurring.

It requires one believes that once God has spoken His covenant promises, that they cannot be revoked, that He will

not go back on them – and that even when circumstances appear to say differently, God will find a way out of that dilemma – often by using the specifics which created the dilemma.

Now I said I would say a bit more on this whole concept and how it moves the story of scripture along...

Because brothers and sisters, if we can appreciate how King Xerxes could not undo a decree that He had signed into law, then we can begin to appreciate how much more God is not able to go back on His Word once He has spoken it.

In fact since God has spoken everything into existence, our reality, this world, the universe and everything in it continues to exist because God has not gone back on what He has spoken.

As 2 Peter 3:7 says *“But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved..”*

And Colossians 1:17 says *“He (Christ – the Word made flesh) is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”*

So, when God creates Adam and Eve and makes them stewards over the garden and makes the Covenant of Creation with them and says *“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”* (Gen 2:16-17) This is God’s Word – it is not something than can be revoked...

So when Adam and Eve disobey it, God must enact the consequences which He spoke, God cannot and will not go back on His Word, even if He might want to... which is the dilemma.

Adam and Eve must die – but instead of enacting immediate execution... God speaks another decree – death will not be immediate but eventual, life will be hard, there will be suffering and pain but not immediate death. The earth will provide food, and children will be born and life will continue.

And then God speaks a promise – that one of Eve’s offspring would one day crush the head of Satan, who was responsible for deceiving Eve and Adam into disobedience.

And now with this new decree in place – where Adam and Eve will work the soil by the sweat of their brow and give birth to children in pain... but with the promise of the defeat of their enemy on the horizon – the storyline of the scripture begins.

And time after time as the story moves along we see God put in dilemma because He has spoken a promise, where He has given His Word, He has made a covenant with Human beings and He must keep His Word - even when it appears that doing so would wipe out and annihilate humanity because they continue to be unfaithful to God.

Do you understand what I’m trying to explain about God being in a dilemma?

God’s connection to us and His whole creation is by His Word and the Covenant He has spoken - which essentially boils

down to this: Obey me and there is life, if you rebel against me it is death (because I am the source of life)

Yet we as human beings continually choose to rebel and receive death instead of life – and God is bound by His Word that this must be, even though this is not what He wants for us. So God is in a dilemma... just as Xerxes and Esther and Mordecai were in a dilemma.

What will God do? Well God speaks another Word, He decrees that His Word will become a human being, and this human being will continually choose to be faithful to God and receive life – and do so on behalf of the rest of humanity.

Furthermore God decrees that whomever puts their faith and trust in His Word made Flesh will receive the life they need instead of the death they deserve.

You see brothers and sisters this summarizes of the story of the scriptures, it is this dilemma and God’s solution to it that takes us from Adam and Eve to Noah, to Abraham and Isaac

and Jacob, to Moses and the nation of Israel in the Promised Land, to King David and all the Prophets...

Then finally to Jesus Christ – to His life, His death and His resurrection and His ascension...

But –the story of scripture is not over yet... even though God has solved the dilemma of not going back on His Word by having His Word become Flesh – there is the epilogue part of the story that we live in now...

Where God’s decree that solves the dilemma, and this good news... needs to go out to every part of the world, in the language and script of each nation just as Xerxes second decree went out to his whole empire...

So that all people may put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ – and receive life instead of death!

So brothers and sisters – I hope you can see that so far as the story of scripture is concerned you and I are not

inconsequential bystanders – but that God’s ability to enact a plan to save us is the whole point to the story of scripture.

In fact the events by which God brought about this salvation are so significant that they too *“should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city...”*

The birth and life and death and resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus should never fail to be celebrated by his people – nor should the memory of His work die out among their descendants.

Do you know this is why Christians gather each Sunday morning – on the day our Lord rose from the dead – and worship Him... it is to celebrate and remember and shape our identity.

And of course it is why we observe and celebrate the Christmas season all the way up to Good Friday and Easter Sunday!

So – friends, the story of Esther is not inconsequential to our lives at all – in fact it gives us a precedent for how we ought to celebrate and observe and remember God’s saving work in order that it might shape our identity and remind us that we are God’s people – in Jesus Christ.

The story of Esther leaves us with a question and challenges us to determine what celebrations are really shaping our identity and what stories do those celebrations embody?

Because there is only room for one story in our life friends...

Let us be sure that it is the story of the scripture – Amen.