

Gladness and Joy

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[0:00] In the verses we studied last week, Esther finally told the king that she was Jewish.

! During the second banquet with the king and Haman, Esther said that she and her people had been! to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. That mirrored the wording of Haman's decree almost exactly. And when asking the king to counteract the decree, Esther could not appeal to the king's sense of decency. We remember the king only cared about himself. Instead, she appealed to the king to counteract the decree based upon the loss of tax revenue and the loss of his honor if her queen were dishonored. You'll remember that when Haman fell on the queen to beg for his life, that gave the king the perfect excuse he needed to go ahead and have Haman killed. So Haman wound up being hanged on the very gallows that Haman had prepared to use on Mordecai. The role reversal continued when Mordecai was elevated to the position of top advisor to the king. And to set the scene for tonight's passage, go ahead and look at verses 1 and 2 of chapter 8. They say, 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 sent Mordecai over the house of Haman. So by this time in the book, many issues have already been resolved.

The villainous Haman has met his end with the aid of his own 75-foot pole. Esther and Mordecai also have received their reward at the beginning of chapter 8 in the shape of Haman's confiscated escape, estate, I mean, and a promotion for Mordecai. However, Haman's edict to exterminate the Jews was still hanging over their heads. And perhaps it would turn out that the laws of the Medes and the Persians really could not be changed, and all of Esther's efforts would be wasted. And much still hangs in the balance at this point in the story. As we finish chapter 8 tonight, we'll see many of these questions resolved. The people once saddened by Haman's edict will have their emotions changed to gladness and joy. And more importantly, we'll see another example of how God keeps his promises.

[2:32] So let's go ahead and read the rest of chapter 8. These are verses 3 through 17. Chapter 8, verses 3 through 17 say, 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. And she said, If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For 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 given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. 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. The king's scribes were summoned at that time in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written according to all that

Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. And he 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 torses 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, on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus on the thirteenth day of the twelfth 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, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. So the couriers mounted on their swift horses and were used in the king's service, rolled 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 gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday, and many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

We'll go ahead and break tonight's passage into five sections, and we'll start with the request. So the request is the first section, and that request comes in verses 3 through 6.

So listen to just those verses again. It says, 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 he had devised against the Jews. When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, If it pleased the king, and if I found favor in his sight, and if the thing seemed right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamanathah, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who were in all the provinces of the king. For 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?

King Ahasuerus may have thought that everything had been taken care of with the disposal of Haman, but in fact it hadn't. Queen Esther had to go once more before the king to plead for her people's lives, and this time the cool calculating strategy was abandoned as Esther threw herself down in front of the king. She was weeping and pleading with him to make Haman's evil plot go away. Esther had saved the Jews from Haman, but not from his planned handiwork, the death document, because that was still in force. The original edict itself was still in place, and it had been approved by the king and sent to all of the provinces for the destruction of the Jews on the 13th day of the 12th month. Before, Esther had retained her royal dignity, always appearing as a stately queen before the king, but now she threw herself down like a common beggar. She was crying and asking desperately for mercy on her people.

[7 : 48] The similarities and differences with Haman in the previous chapter are striking.

Remember, he fell down before Esther, but his concern was simply to plead for his own life, and he was unsuccessful in his request. Esther fell down before the king to plead not for her own life, but for the lives of her people, and she was granted what she asked. This time the king's scepter was raised to show that Esther was more than welcome in the king's presence. Some believe that Esther again risked her life by going into the king's presence without being called, but others suggest that verse 3 is just a continuation of the scene described in verses 1 and 2, and that in that case, the king's act of extending the scepter was simply an encouragement to her to rise and speak. Her request itself was very simple. She wanted a second decree written and sent out which would override the first decree.

Again, she was willing to be known as a Jewess. She spoke of her people and her kindred. The original edict of the king could not be overridden, but a counter decree was possible. You notice how Esther prefaced her request. It was a long preamble in four parts. She said, If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes. That all comes from verse 4. And two of these clauses dealt with the matter to be discussed, and it dealt with whether it was acceptable to the king. The other two ask whether Esther herself was acceptable to the king. And these themes are linked together. The only real reason for the king to grant Esther's request was his favor toward her. Esther made no reference to right and wrong, justice or injustice. Those were things that never registered with the king. All she could do was to appeal to his self-interest as it related to her. So in essence, she was saying, if you really love me and want me to be happy, you have to grant my request. And her people's destiny hung upon the king's response to her personally. So if watching her people and kindred being destroyed would cause her great pain, what she was really saying was, how could anyone who

really loves me bear to see that? So she was trying to lay a guilt trip on him there. And verses 7 and 8 tell us whether that request works. In verses 7 and 8, we see the response. So the response is the second thing we see from the chapter. And look at verses 7 and 8 to see that. They say, Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. 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. So what did the king really say there?

In effect, in verse 7, he said, Look, I gave you all this money and killed your enemy for scheming against your people. What more could you possibly want? He assumed that Esther was just like him, concerned only about herself and her own self-interest. But even though Esther had once concealed her identity because she thought she was protecting herself, now that she'd finally identified with her people, she had a new perspective that stretched beyond her previously narrow self-interest.

Salvation for herself was not enough if it came without salvation for her people. Notice that Ahasuerus was true to his character there because he again evaded responsibility and passed the buck. He once abdicated his power to Haman. He did so again, but this time to Mordecai and Esther.

He handed over to them the whole responsibility for the reversal of Haman's edict. In verse 8, the king says, In essence, I've done my part. It's now up to you to do yours. He couldn't undo his former edict because it was irrevocable, but he had no problem with Mordecai and Esther writing a contradictory edict, which would also become irrevocable. So in his mind, it would be a case of may the best edict win.

[12 : 18] And what's more, even after he had once been manipulated by his top official into signing a deadly edict, he personally encouraged his new second in command to send out another edict, sight unseen. Really, isn't that kind of silly of the king? He's making the same mistakes that he's done before. But that's the whole point. The empire is so law-bound that it's tied up in impenetrable bureaucratic knots, and its emperor really cares nothing about the people. He's just trying to follow his processes that he's set up. And immediately after receiving the king's permission to counteract Haman's edict, Mordecai swings into action. So we've seen the requests and the response.

Verses 9 through 12 show us the results. So let's go ahead and read verses 9 through 12 to look at the result. And we'll see that the result is what they hoped for. Starting with verse 9, it says, the king's scribes were summoned at that time in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the 23rd day. And an edict was written according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their scripts and their language. And he 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.

Mordecai had now been granted the power that Haman earlier possessed so that he could counteract Haman's edict, and he didn't waste any time, but he immediately sent out an edict of his own to all 127 provinces of the empire.

And you probably noticed, as we read the verses, that Mordecai's language deliberately echoed that of the original edict in order to highlight their parallel nature. The main difference is that these messages were not only committed to couriers, but this time he used couriers riding on specially bred fast horses, because the message had to get to all the provinces in time, even to the most distant parts of the empire.

Let's talk about the edict itself for a little bit. The edict is one authorizing Jewish self-defense. You notice they were given all of these rights. They were given the right to gather an armed assembly.

[15 : 18] They were given the right to defend themselves against any and all armed forces that might attack them. And they were given the right to utterly destroy any of those attackers, and also to plunder their goods. The wisdom and justice of this edict is pretty clear, because the onus now rests on their enemies. The enemies still have the legal right to attack the Jews, but they're now

made aware of the possible consequences of that attack. So if greed or hatred persuade the enemies to avail themselves of this opportunity, they can still do so, but they have to do so at their own risk. And if they're smart enough and wisdom prevails, then peace will be assured, because if there's no attack, there'll be no reprisal. So the enemies of the Jews are the architects of their own destiny. And once again, we see how God leaves the door open to repentance, because if people planning the attack decide not to do so, then they won't be in any danger themselves. And you probably noticed another reversal here.

Mordecai wrote an edict of life for the Jews. Haman had earlier written an edict of death for the Jews. You would think that Mordecai's letters should be effective to counteract Haman's original edict, but still the people must be ready to defend themselves. According to verse 9, the decree Mordecai wrote was sent out in the third month, which was equivalent to June or July 474. So this was a little over two months after Haman's decree. And so that meant the Jews had nine months to prepare themselves for the conflict. And so the readiness is the fourth thing that we see from this passage.

Again, that's the readiness. And we see that in verses 13 and 14. So let's see how Mordecai brings about this readiness. Verses 13 and 14 say, a copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples. And 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, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command, and the decree was issued in Susa, the citadel. So you can see just by looking at the verbs in 14 and the descriptions there, how critical they took this. It says they mounted their swift horses, they rode hurriedly, they were urged on by the king's command. And the verb used in verse 13 to describe the action for which the Jews are to be prepared indicates a retribution for a prior wrong. So those who like Haman sought to destroy the seat of the Jews in accordance with Haman's edict would wind up sharing Haman's fate. It's interesting, isn't it, that the authority of the empire now backed up the threats of the Abrahamic covenant against those who sought to harm the descendants of Abraham. But it was the Jews themselves who would have to carry out the sanctions of the covenant in a kind of holy war against their enemies. And we have one final section to look at tonight. We've seen the request, the response, the results, and the readiness. In verses 15 through 17, we see the reaction. The reaction is the last thing. 15 through 17 say,

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 of the people of the country declared themselves Jews for fear of the Jews had fallen on them. After he wrote and distributed the edict, notice how Mordecai left the palace. So check out all of the reversals we see in these verses. Because after the issuing of Haman's edict, Mordecai was clothed in sackcloth and ashes, unable to go before the king. But now after the second edict, Mordecai emerges from the presence of the king clothed in glory. And this was not a temporary glory of the kind he received in chapter 6 as a reward for his service. This attire was Mordecai's now by right as second in command to the king.

And after the issuing of Haman's edict, the city of Susa was thrown into confusion. We read about that way back in chapter 3, verse 15. But after Mordecai's edict was published, the city rejoiced. [20:10] The Jewish community that had responded to the first edict with four kinds of distress, chapter 4, verse 3 says they responded with mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing. Now they respond to the second edict with four kinds of delight. Chapter 8, verse 16 says they had light and gladness and joy and honor. In particular, the fasting and sorrow of chapter 4 were turned into feasting and joy by the announcement of this latest edict. The most poignant reversal of all, though, is surely the concluding note of the chapter. It says, 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. How ironic is that? No sooner had Esther conquered her fear and revealed her true identity with respect to her Jewishness than many of the pagans around her apparently chose to pretend to be Jewish, motivated by precisely the same type of fear.

We know that some may indeed have been genuinely converted, motivated to join God's people by the fear of the Lord, but others were motivated by their fear of the Jews. So let's consider what we

can learn from this section. In addition to being a true story, this chapter reminds us of several things. The first is that our only hope is the king's mercy. But in this case, we're talking about the king with a capital K.

Just think about how we saw Esther tonight. In the first verse of our study, we saw Esther falling at the king's feet and weeping. She could only plead the king's mercy and hope that the king would respond favorably. A similar situation applies in our approach to God. We know that we all have sinned and that death should be the result of that sin. But unlike Esther, who never was sure how her earthly king would react, we can be certain of how our true king will react. Listen to how God described himself to Moses in Exodus 34 verses 6 and 7a. It says, So we see that unlike Esther, who had to worry about how the king would react, we can be certain how our king will react when we beg him for mercy. The second thing we can see is that God gives sinners the opportunity to repent. In the verses that we studied tonight, we see that the people who may have been planning to attack the Jews have been given time to repent and change their ways. In the previous chapters of Esther, Haman himself had had many opportunities to repent right up until his death.

God still gives sinners today many chances to repent. And the urging of Ecclesiastes is still appropriate. Listen to Ecclesiastes 7, 17. It says, Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?

In his dealings with sinful men under threat of his righteous judgment, God makes the same plea. Essentially, he says, cast away from you all the transgressions that you've committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God. So turn and live. And this comes from Ezekiel 18, 31 and 32.

[24:06] So if any message still echoes down through the centuries from this sad and sorry story, it's surely this one. It's why will you die, repent and live? God's judgment can still be escaped.

Unlike Haman's edict, which would have allowed for no escape for God's people, Mordecai's edict condemned only those who attacked the Jews and their families. Those who were not hostile to God's people were not condemned by the second edict. And we saw that many people from other nations joined the Jews and avoided the fates of their enemies. The message is clear. And that message is there is a way out of judgment through real identification with God's people.

How can it be though that because we're sinful ourselves, we can still be forgiven of that rebellion and sin? How really can any of us stand in the presence of a holy God when we ourselves have rebelled against him in thought, word and deed? So who is going to deliver us from the edict of death that still stands against us in the heavenly court? We really need an Esther of our own, someone who will put aside personal interest in safety and risk dignity, honor and even life itself to plead our case before God, the great King. And of course, we know who that is. Such a mediator is ours in Jesus Christ.

He left the glories of heaven and took on the form of a servant, not simply humiliating himself, but going all the way to death for us. So our King put his own son under the curse of holy war and cut him off because of our sin. Just as Isaiah had predicted, our King's son had no family or descendants of his own, but he was bruised for our transgressions, wounded for our iniquities, dishonored for our glory, and plunged into the darkness that we sinners really should have been plunged into. And he did that so that the people who believe in him would actually see the light. And so really, we talked about a bunch of reversals tonight in the story, but this is really the grand reversal to which all the other reversals in Esther point. The story of Jesus' death on the cross, crucial though it was, is not the end of the story. It wasn't even over when the women gathered at the tomb to mourn, and it wasn't over when the angels sang celebrating Christ's resurrection and his ascension to glory. It's still not over now because he stands before the great King and he pleads with the Father for all of his spiritual children. We can be confident of this. He's actually saying, Father, this is one of my people. How could I bear to see the destruction of this one for his sin? Yes, I know that's what he deserves, but I died so that this person might live. So the true King then will respond to the son's plea by saying, welcome them in, bring them into my presence forever because of the love that

I have for you, my son. Your people are my people. Your spiritual family shall be clothed in glory and honor with all the splendors of heaven because of your faithful obedience. And for scriptural proof of that, listen to Jesus's words in John 12, 26. Jesus said, if anyone serves me, he must follow me. And where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

That last sentence is critical. Jesus says, if anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. And that's why, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, we can boldly approach the throne of grace. Listen to Hebrews 4, 14 through 16.

[27:53] It says, since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God. Let us hold fast our confession for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need. How different then is our approach to the true king because of Jesus than how Esther approached King Ahasuerus. She had no idea how he was going to react. She just had to hope that like we said earlier, we already know how our true king is going to react. The third thing we can see from this chapter is that the message of salvation needs to be proclaimed with urgency. The news of Mordecai's edict of salvation for the Jews and invitation to life for their enemies was dispatched without delay all the way through the empire. Similarly, the Christian church is the custodian of a far greater edict than that, and that's the gospel of Jesus Christ. What gives urgency to our task is the fact that

God's nature hasn't changed. His edict of death against rebellious sinners still stands, and all women young and old must ultimately bow before Christ or be eternally damned. There's no middle ground in that.

We're either part of the Lord's people or among his enemies, and the wrong allegiance will be eternally fatal. I found an old hymn by William Wildman, and it was quoted in several places, but none of them actually gave the title, but here are four short verses from it. It says, Go quickly, for the fading hours with haste are sinking to the west. Exert with zeal thy ransom powers, nor think it yet the time for rest. Go quickly, for the sons of time are journeying toward a hopeless grave, and tell to earth's remotest climb of him who came to seek and save.

Go quickly to the realms of sin, invite as many as you find, and welcome all who enter in, the poor, the maimed, the halt, the blind. Go quickly with the living word sent to the nations from above, till every heart on earth is heard the tidings of redeeming love.

The fourth thing we can learn is that our outlook should be controlled by reality rather than perception. Think about the Jews in Esther's day. The actual fortunes of the Jews did not change significantly throughout the story. Their livelihoods were never ruined by Haman's edict, nor were their futures radically transformed by the new edict, which simply gave them the right to defend themselves and their property. But they thought that their lives were being threatened by Haman, and so they fasted and mourned. And then they felt that they had the threat lifted, so they responded with joy. The empire in which they lived was really no better a place to live in at the end of the book than it was at the beginning, but it was their perception that made them think that it was now better. Compared to their outlook in the middle of the story, it really was a wonderful new world. So should the Jews have been so quick to rejoice at the news of the second edict?

[31:22] We've already mentioned how the empire really hadn't changed, even though Mordecai was now the second in command. It's true they had a friend in high places now, but Haman's fate illustrated how quickly the king could turn on an advisor. And so what was to prevent Mordecai from suffering a similarly rapid demise from power, and then they would perhaps be right back in the same bad situation?

It made sense for them to rejoice only if their deliverance was something more than coincidence, but rather the expression of a more fundamental principle. Rejoicing then was warranted only if their deliverance was an expression of God's unshakable commitment to protect his own people, rather than being based upon a whim of King Ahasuerus. In other words, they should only rejoice if they realized that God's promise was rooted in what he promised to Abraham back in Genesis 12, 3, when he said, I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you, I will curse.

Consider us, though, for a moment. How often do we live like the Jews in this story? How often do we let our emotions and our actions be controlled by temporary feelings rather than the foundational truth of serving an unchanging God? Think about John chapter 16, where Jesus is warning his closest disciples about the troubles they will face. Jesus said this in John 16, 33. He said, I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world.

And just as we're seeing from our study in Philippians on Sunday mornings, our peace and joy is in Christ, rather than being in our worldly circumstances, regardless of whether our circumstances

happen to be good or bad at any given time.

The fifth thing then flows naturally out of all of these things, and that is that we should give appropriate praise for our salvation. Considering the outcome of our passage tonight, we might expect that the Jews' praise would be God-directed.

[33:32] Once again, though, this vertical dimension to their thankfulness is not evident here. Just as their earlier fasting and wailing didn't seem to be heavenly-directed, neither do their rejoicing and feasting.

It seems that there was plenty of relief from the disaster, but precious little genuine praise for the one who had averted it by his prominence or providence.

And the same is often true of us. When life goes badly, we're so quick to become anxious and despairing about the future and so slow to bring our concerns to God in prayer.

Meanwhile, when life goes well and our trials are removed, we rejoice and celebrate the good news of deliverance, but all too often forget to give thanks to the one to whom it's due. And so before we condemn the Jews for their attitude tonight, we need to realize that we often have the same narrow vision of the world.

We need to remember that no one and nothing in all creation can ever separate us from God's love. So let us daily celebrate our deliverance with unshakable and glorious joy.

[34:40] And when we do that, we'll let the peace that comes from Christ's victory guard our hearts and minds, and we won't fall victim to what's happening in the fallen world. Instead, we should look forward to the day when the end will come, when we too will be able to go along with all the redeemed saints to praise God and the risen Lamb in person.

And we should let the words of Psalm 150 be our words. And here are three verses from that psalm. They say, Notice it doesn't say anything at all about praise Him because He's doing good things for you.

It just says, Praise Him for His mighty deeds and praise Him according to His greatness. And that's why we can say, Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.