

All Creatures Great and Small - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Esther 9:1-10:3** (#480)

Introduction: In 1972, one of the more influential books of that time was published – it was about a country veterinarian who served in the Yorkshire Dales of England in the 1930’s. Many of you may have either read this book or seen the BBC TV series that was later made from it: James Herriot’s “All Creatures Great and Small.” The TV series chronicles his life as a vet, indeed caring for all kinds of creatures and – perhaps just as much – how he cared for the people in the area as well. What you might not know is that the phrase “all creatures great and small” is taken from an Anglican hymn titled “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” which – itself – is thought to have been inspired by **Psalms 104, verses 24-25**.

Our challenge this morning, as we conclude the **Book of Esther**, will be to see how God has not only taken care of Mordecai and Esther, but ultimately how He has done the “great” and large work of rescuing His chosen people, by seeing His hand all throughout the book. The events of **chapter 9**, especially, might seem to reflect everything other than the Lord’s care, but I want to encourage you to compare and contrast how this story ends in a very different place from where it began. When you see that, I think you’ll also see the encouraging truth that it’s no different for everyone who trusts in Christ: His care for us makes all the difference from beginning to end...

9:1-15 We see, in these verses, two major themes. The first, **verses 1-2**, describes what the Jews did: on the day that Mordecai had commanded, they defended themselves against their enemies. They were successful, humanly speaking, because they gathered together. This led to the defeat of those who sought to harm them. Crucial to their victory, however, was not some sort of wonderful human strategy. It wasn’t because the Jews had great leadership or military prowess. Instead, we read that the “fear of them had fallen on all peoples.”

Now ask yourself: what would cause you to fear somebody? In this case: the Jews were a defeated people. They were scattered across the kingdom. It is doubtful whether they normally had access to weapons, and we do know that the Jewish

people weren't some sort of Middle East version of the Spartan warriors of Greece. In short, there was really nothing for the Persians to fear from them. I take it, then, that this fear was a supernatural one. We first read about it at the end of **chapter 8**, when it came upon the people in the land after Haman's downfall and Mordecai's edict. Now, here, we see that this fear was paralyzing, letting the Jews defeat the might of Persia – at least, those Persians who opposed them. Verses like this one are meant to tell us something: the Lord is at work, even when it isn't always obvious. I would challenge you to adopt that truth in your own life and circumstances: we each are tempted to go throughout our days with very little thought of the Lord. Yet, as the hymn tells us the Lord God made everything. The flowers, the birds, the rich, the poor, the mountains, the rivers, each sunset, winter and summer – God is in charge of all of this. I daresay that it would be pretty hard to think on the Lord and His work too much! So, given that truth, I must ask: do you fear God? Fear can be a good thing, if it means you fear opposing God or fear how your pride separates you from Him. Are you more afraid of crossing the Lord, or of offending people online? Which motivates you the most: serving the Lord or not sticking out in this life? What drives your actions: loving others according to what the Lord has commanded, or doing what seems best in your own eyes?

If these first two verses are the summary of what the Jewish people did, **verses 3-15** describe how they did it...

First, we see that many of the government officials sided with the Jewish people. That sort of leadership and power certainly made a difference. Note again, by the way, how fear was a tool used by the Lord to bring this about – here, it is the fear of “Mordecai,” no doubt because of his high position within the kingdom. We read that, ultimately, the Jews destroyed 500 men in Susa on this first day, and numerous others in cities throughout the kingdom, also including the ten sons of Haman – completing the downfall of his wicked and evil line.

These events are reported to the king, who – once more, showing his devotion to Esther – asks her what she would like him to do in response. Esther makes two

requests. First, that her people be allowed to continue their defense into a second day (if you'll recall, Mordecai's original edict only allowed for 24 hours of the Jews defending themselves). Second, she asks for the bodies of Haman's sons to be hung publicly. That might seem especially macabre or vindictive, but it was actually a very common practice in Persian culture at the time – the point being to serve as a warning against those who would act like the ones who were hung. The king grants these two requests, which leads us into what happens next...

9:16-32 These details might seem obscure to us, but what they describe is a feast that is still celebrated even today amongst some Jews. Due to the differing situations throughout the kingdom, getting rest from their enemies ends up happening on different days for the different groups of Jews – some on the 14th of the month, some – in the capital – on the 15th. On that day, there are feasts and gladness, for the people have been spared from the wicked edict that Haman had prepared against them.

Mordecai acts as a historian, recording all of the events that have happened, and he ends up sending letters to all the Jews throughout the kingdom, with the effect of making these victory celebrations into formal feasts that are to be remembered down through the ages. These days are to be set aside not just for feasting, but for celebrating: they are days of remembrance for the relief that the Jews received from the Lord. Similarly, in the theme of moving from sorrow to joy, they are to use the days to send gifts to one another and to care for the poor.

A historical note comes out of the name of the feast: Purim, from the word “Pur” which means “lot,” as in, casting lots. This is what Haman had done back in **chapter 3**. Now, that might seem to be yet one more random note about a holiday that we – as non-Jews – don't really think about, much less celebrate, but I think this is actually a crucial point in the chapter: the feast is named for the casting of lots. Why? Wouldn't you name it something more like “Independence Day” or “Victory Over Our Enemies Day”? Names are usually an important part of holidays, and so it is here.

Are you familiar with **Proverbs 16**? Several times throughout that chapter, we read of how humans make plans, but the Lord is ultimately in control. So, **verses 1 and 2**: “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit.” Or take **verse 4**: “The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.” Now that’s both a sobering and a comforting thought, isn’t it? **Verse 9 tells us**: “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.” The next verses dip into the wisdom of honoring and following the Lord, before ending – in **verse 33** – with: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

This, then, is our point and – I believe – why the holiday is named after the lot which Haman cast: what Haman intended to be the destruction of God’s people, actually ends up bringing them to a position of power and influence in the kingdom. And this isn’t the only time that the Lord uses difficult situations for the good of His people – just think of Joseph and his brothers! By very intentionally remembering how the Lord worked, the Jewish people were called to remember His faithfulness. They were called to trust Him even when all seemed lost. So important is this to their identity that Esther adds her own command alongside Mordecai’s: this is a holiday that means more than a day of rest and feasting – it is a commemoration, a remembrance, to what the Lord has done for His people.

We live in an era where many traditions have fallen on hard times. That’s not all bad – empty traditions that no longer serve a purpose are ok to let go of. But there are other traditions which are good, which can fuel our faith, and stoke the furnace of following Jesus. Those are traditions that we ought to hang on to – or to reclaim, if they have been lost. So let me challenge to all of us, no matter your age or station in life: what do you do to remember the Lord’s work in your life? What traditions or celebrations do you have which remind you of His goodness and faithfulness?

Friends, we all need reminders – it isn’t an issue of knowledge or how smart you are; instead we need to see again and again the work of Our Lord. Think of

communion – Christ actually commands us to remember His work as we celebrate together (**Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24**). He does this not to give us some rule to follow, but instead because it is for our own good. In that sense, remembering – taking communion thoughtfully and intentionally – matters in more ways than we might think. Reminders from Jesus aren't nagging. They aren't legalism. Instead, they are simple graces that call us to remember the biggest grace: our sins being paid for by Jesus on the cross. We need that picture to give us ballast, so that our faith isn't swept away in the ever-changing currents of the culture. And we need remembrances so that we would have the perspective to see our times accurately and respond faithfully. If you don't have traditions of remembering the Lord's work, it is time to set some. I know folks who really like the concept of a spiritual birthday, setting aside whatever day they first trusted Christ on as a day to be thankful to Him and to remember His work. Others might commemorate an especially important answer to prayer, always marking or remembering that date. I'm not saying that these are the only ways to do things or that we should be legalistic about any of this; I am saying that you and I can grow in the faith when we intentionally remember the Lord's work. Find a way to do so.

Now, let's move to the end of the book...

10:1-3 It's something of a storybook ending, isn't it? Mordecai has risen to Haman's old position – the second highest in the kingdom. He has gone from mourning, from sackcloth and ashes, not even able to address the king to now having full access to the king. Most importantly, we read that Mordecai's greatness is a result of what he lived: he "sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people." Now that's the kind of leadership and sacrifice that I pray for, both here in the church and in our nation and world! Friend, do you see greatness as something that comes from seeking the Lord? Is His pleasure your goal? Do you seek power and influence as a means to worship God? The final lesson here is this: trust the Lord to bring you to whatever level of "greatness" He needs. Then, and only then, will you and I find our meaning and purpose as we follow and enjoy the greatest one, our Savior Jesus Christ.