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God Moves in a Mysterious Way

Esther 5 - 10

In the Two Towers, the second book of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, much of the story centers around the Battle of Helm's Deep, where the valiant warriors of Rohan draw back to their fortress in the mountains to defend their people against the oncoming, innumerable hordes of evil orcs led by the dark wizard Saruman. It's a heroic and noble, but desperate and seemingly hopeless fight, which becomes clearer and clearer as the battle wages on. In the movie, an army of elves shows up to help them before the fighting starts - but that never happens in the book. It's just them against overwhelming, desperate odds, stuck between a mountain wall and an endless army of orcs. Finally, the gates are broken into, they have to keep falling back, but they don't give up. They take what they believe will be their final, last stand. But then, on the third day of battle, another army appears, seemingly out of nowhere: an army of moving trees leading a living forest that moves into the valley, swallowing up their foes from behind! They have no idea where this came from or how it happened. Then, at dawn, Gandalf appears with the sun, leading an army of warriors they thought long gone, who join the battle. It seemed hopeless and impossible, yet their victory came miraculously, and yet no less hard-fought.

We can read that, love the story, and then shrug and say, "Yeah, but of course something amazing like that could happen *in a book*. It's fiction. But stuff like that never happens in real life." But then we come to the book of Esther. And it sounds pretty similar in a lot of ways, doesn't it? It sounds a lot like where we left Esther last week, on a cliffhanger, faced with impossible, overwhelming odds, her entire people, the Jews, being threatened to be wiped out by the hordes of their enemies all around, she's being asked to risk her life, and she valiantly says, "If I perish, I perish." And then, in the second half of Esther, as we're going to see today, all of the sudden, what seems like impossible, overwhelming, helpless odds are seemingly reversed, *just like that*. It's amazing and miraculous! Mordecai and Esther risk their lives and take a valiant stand, the Jews fight hard - but ultimately, they are delivered not by a mysterious living forest, but by the mysterious hand of the living God who stands sovereign behind all things, moving and orchestrating all events, big and small, according to His will, for the good of His people.

When we read or hear about God's faithfulness towards His people like this - whether its answering prayers in amazing ways, providing abundantly, doing miracles, or bringing about

incredible resolutions from the worst situations - we may readily believe that it happened, but we may have a hard time believing that He'll do the same for us, in our own lives. It's far too easy for us to have a jaded, disenchanted view of the world and to not let ourselves get too hopeful about what God might do, reminding ourselves to be "realistic." And then, if the impossible *does* happen, we can be far too quick to downplay it, explain it away with normal, rationalistic explanations rather than acknowledge it as God's miraculous providence and answer to prayer, and say something like, "I guess it wasn't that big of a deal after all; what was I getting so worked up about?" This is a common, modern, materialistic view of the world that downplays and disbelieves in the sovereignty of God, and we must be very careful to guard against this way of thinking in our hearts. We must fully embrace the sovereignty of God, both while we're in the thick of crises and situations that feel out of our control, *and* after that crisis is resolved and the prayers are answered in amazing ways. And I think the book of Esther helps us do just that.

The book of Esther reminds us of God's sovereignty over the nations to overturn the plans of the wicked on their heads, protect His people and bring about their salvation, and raise up kings and principalities to do His Will. Therefore, we as God's people should remember this principle, and remember what God has done. We must remember God's sovereignty and faithfulness in all the circumstances of our lives. So let's walk through the rest of the book of Esther, seeing this theme unfold throughout the rest of the story, and then conclude with a few points of application, just like we did last week.

Outline of chs.5-10:

- A. Esther intercedes before the King, is spared, and throws her first banquet (5:1-8)
- B. Haman plots to publicly execute Mordecai (5:9-14)
- C. The King makes Haman publicly honor Mordecai (ch.6)
- D. Esther's second banquet and Haman's execution (ch.7)
- E. The King authorizes a decree to save the Jews (ch.8)
- F. The Jews' victory over their enemies and the celebration of Purim (ch.9)
- G. The exaltation of Mordecai (ch.10)

Last week, we looked at the first 4 chapters, and ended on a massive cliffhanger, where it seems like the entire world is stacked against Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews, that everything is spiraling out of control and they're facing impossible, overwhelming odds. The Jews scattered abroad and functionally still in Exile; that it feels like God is silent, emphasized to us by the fact that the God is not directly mentioned anywhere in this whole book; Esther was taken into the King of Persia's harem and then made Queen, but she's still captive to the whims of the volatile tyrant king,

just like Queen Vashti who she replaced; Mordecai, Esther's cousin and adoptive father, is not being honored or recognized for his faithfulness in saving the King's life from assassination, but instead Haman is seeking to persecute Mordecai and all the Jews simply for their faithfulness in bowing down to God alone; and now, an official decree has gone out sanctioning the death and genocide of all the Jews at the hands of their enemies in all the provinces of the world-wide Persian empire. Yet even amidst all this, Mordecai and Esther do not give up hope but trust in the Lord's sovereign hand of Providence over the nations, trust that God will indeed save His people, and seek to walk faithfully where God has put them. It ends with Esther listening to Mordecai and agreeing to using her position as the Queen to go in and beg for the King - King Ahasuerus, also known as King Xerxes - to reverse the decree and put a stop to the pending genocide of the Jews, God's Old Covenant people, and the line of promise.

But there's a problem: going into the King's presence without being personally summoned is a death sentence. I opened by talking about Lord of the Rings, so I'll risk mentioning it once more: you've probably seen the popular meme of Boromir, saying, "One does not simply *walk* into Mordor." Well, one does not simply walk into the presence of the King of Persia. If you do, you'll be executed, even if you're the Queen - unless, of course, the King decides to have mercy and extend the golden scepter, sparing your life. It all depends on what mood the king is in and how he feels about you that day. So Esther agrees, but asks Mordecai and all the Jews to join her in praying and fast, essentially seeking the Lord's favor and will, and then, after three days of this, she goes into the King's presence, in chapter 5:1-8. And thankfully, "when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand" (v.2). Phew, huge sigh of relief, right? She's avoided the death sentence. But that was just to get in and see him. Now she has to reveal that she's a Jew, one of the group sentenced for genocide, a secret she's kept thus far. And then she has to ask the king to deal with Haman, his most trusted advisor, and *then* to reverse the decree: and that's no easy thing. The King of Persia is supposed to be this all-powerful tyrant whose word is never defied or changed or repealed - not even by himself or a successive king. A royal decree from the king cannot be revoked. So one impossible hurdle down, a few more to go. Once in his presence, the king asks what her wish is, promising to grant it up to half his kingdom - a popular thing we see in ancient kings, not a literal offer but showing his pleasure and generosity. So she tells him that her wish is for the King and Haman to join her for a private banquet she's prepared. That may sound a bit anticlimactic - risking her life just to ask her own husband and his friend to come eat a meal she made him? But again, we're not talking about the ordinary lives you and I have in the modern world; we're talking about the dangerous court of Persia, where not

even the Queen can interrupt the king's schedule like this, at least not normally. But the king agrees and sends for Haman immediately, and they go eat with her.

At the end of the banquet, the King asks again, "What is your wish? It shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled" (v.6). In other words, he knows there's more coming, that she's buttering him up with food and wine. But she asks for the King and Haman to come to a *second* private banquet the next day, where she'll make the request known. We see rich literary irony at work here: the book began with the King summoning the Queen Vashti to a banquet, and she refuses, leading to her removal as Queen. Now the story climaxes with her replacement, Queen Esther, asking the King to come to *her* banquet, and he accepts. Again, this reminds us of the hand of God, quietly but pervasively at work behind the scenes.

But there's still the problem of Haman to deal with. In ch.5:9-14, Haman leaves the banquet utterly pleased with himself for being so high and mighty and getting to dine privately with the King and Queen. Utterly pleased with himself - until he runs into Mordecai in the palace complex, and Mordecai still refuses to bow down before him, or stand and acknowledge his presence, or even tremble in fear before him. So Haman goes home, pouting like a spoiled child. He gathers his wife and friends, and starts boasting: "Wife, friends, I have tons of money, 10 sons, look at all these promotions I've gotten at work, let me tell you how the King has honored me, and even the Queen invited me to an exclusive dinner with her and the King!" Her pompous arrogance is nauseating, isn't it? But his point is that even with all this, he's miserable because of that one guy who refuses to bow down before his pride and stroke his ego: Mordecai the Jew. So his wife and friends tell him to build a giant gallows to hang Mordecai on. We hear the word gallows and think of the medieval type, but this would have been a very tall pole, possibly to hang him on, or possibly sharpened to impale him. Either way, a gruesome execution, meant to be very public.

But Mordecai is under special protection from the Lord. And God moves to sovereignly give Mordecai special protection from the king. That night, in ch.6, the King can't sleep. So, he gets up and orders his servants to bring the books of records and start reading to him about the memorable deeds and chronicles that have occurred. (I guess if you're a servant of the king of Persia, if he can't sleep you can't either). As they're reading off these different accounts, they read about how Mordecai discovered and foiled an assassination plot, from two door guards posted at the King's threshold, and saved the King's life. The King asks, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" (v.3). The servants answer, "Nothing has been done to him." So he asks who happens to be in the court at the moment; a theme we see is that the King never makes a decision on his own but always asks what to do from his advisors, and he does that here. They tell him Haman, his most

trusted advisor, is sitting around in the court, waiting on him (perhaps very early in the morning at this point or something like that), so he summons him in, and asks Haman, “What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?” (v.6). Now Haman, a very prideful and self-centered man, thinks to himself, “Ooh, boy, look at this! Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” So he starts telling the king how he himself wants to be honored: “Let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set.” Basically, dress him up like the king; then have the king's most noble official trot him around town on the king's horse, declaring loudly, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” Imagine, for example, Tom Brady giving you the Jersey he won while winning the Super Bowl and letting you wear his super bowl ring; or imagine the President of the UNited States having you sit at his desk in the oval office, holding his pen, and having a picture made of it, and having you flown around on Airforce One for everyone to see him honoring you. This would be a huge honor. You're not even allowed to talk to the King unbidden; being dressed up in his clothes to look like him would have been a huge deal.

But then the irony strikes: the King says, basically, “Great, good idea, Haman. Now go and do everything you said to Mordecai the Jew, the guy I want to honor.” You can just picture Haman's face falling in cartoonish comedic fashion. But he obeys the King, dresses up Mordecai like the king, puts him on the king's horse, and totes him around town proclaiming the honor of his enemy. It's honoring Mordecai and utterly shameful for Haman, the enemy not just of Mordecai and all the Jews. So at the end of the day he goes home, mourning and ashamed and utterly beside himself. He tells his wife and friends, thinking they'll comfort him, but they don't. They soberly tell him, in v.13: “If Mordecai before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.” They were all for hanging Mordecai, but once this happens, they remember how, all throughout history, though the Jewish lose badly sometimes, they can't deny that there's something unique and special about them. This is a pivotal, telling statement in the book of Esther that clues us in on what's going on and what this is all about: even the enemies of the Jews here are acknowledging the sovereignty of God and His mysterious protection over the Jewish people. The tide has turned, and even God's enemies recognize it.

In chapter 7, things finally come to a head. The king's eunuchs arrive to escort Haman, and while at the private feast with Esther and the king, Esther finally tells the king her request, in vv.3-4: “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.” The king seems shocked, asking who would dare do such a thing,

ironically so since this decree went out in his name and was approved by him, when Haman offered him a small fortune in return for this favor. But Esther rightly points the finger of accusation at Haman, who's awkwardly sitting right there at the time with them. It was his evil scheme.

I like to picture Haman as awkwardly caught mid-bite, eyes wide with alarm, as Esther points the finger at him. "What, who, me?" The king arises in fury, and as he's out in the garden trying to think what to do, Haman begs at Queen Esther's feet to spare his life. But he falls on top of her in the process, and with impeccable timing, the King walks in right at that moment, so that it looks to him like Haman is trying to assault his wife, the Queen. And this is the last straw. One of the servants mentions that Haman has a massive pole set up in his backyard to kill Mordecai, "whose word saved the king." So the King has Haman hanged on it instead. The great threat to the Jewish people, who seeks to annihilate them all, has thankfully been taken care of. But there's still the decree that's gone out: the day is coming when all the Jews across the empire will be slaughtered by all their enemies.

In chapter 8, the king gives Mordecai and Esther his signet ring, which he had given to Haman previously. Mordecai now has Haman's position and estate and power, a complete reversal of roles. After Esther risks her life to intercede for the Jews *again*, and the king lifts the scepter to spare her *again*, he authorizes them to forth a new decree in the name of the king: on that day that was meant to be the genocide of the Jews, now it is decreed that the Jews are authorized by the king to gather on that day, defend themselves, destroy every enemy who attacked them, and even plunder their goods. In chapter 9, this is carried out, yet the Jews, in every place, refuse to take any plunder; three times this is mentioned. After its completed and 75,000 enemies are destroyed, 500 just in the capital, and even the sons of Haman who might have sought revenge, the king asks Esther what she wants to happen now (again, we only ever see the king ask others what to do in this whole book, he never makes a decision himself). She says that the same thing should happen on the next day, in the capital city of Susa. Some people think this sounds cruel and bloodthirsty and are surprised she said this, but the next day 300 more attack the Jews in the capital and are killed. This shows Esther knew what she was doing: there were hundreds of angry, hostile enemies left who still wanted to kill them and were plotting to get revenge the very next day. In the providence of God, they were wiped out and the Jews were delivered. We're told three times that the Jews did not plunder their enemies, even though they were authorized to. This shows us that they were not being greedy and opportunistic, but were waging a just and holy war; they were fighting in self-defense against the enemies of God.

In the rest of the chapter, the Jews celebrate their deliverance from death by their enemies by inaugurating a new feast day to be celebrated every year: the festival of *purim*, which means 'to cast lots,' named after the fact that Haman cast lots to determine which day to kill the Jews on, yet God

turned it into the day of the Jews' deliverance. And the book closes in chapter 10 by recognizing that Mordecai has been exalted to the right hand of the King of Persia, second only to the king. He's like a new Joseph in Egypt, or a new Daniel in Babylon. And ultimately, this points us to Christ, the true promised King exalted in victory through seemingly impossible means in order to deliver us, His people, from our seemingly inevitable destruction and deliver us from our enemies.

We see this in the War of the Seeds, the war between the offspring of the promise of God vs the offspring of the Satan. We see this played out between Mordecai and Haman, between the Jews and their enemies. We see this war begin in Gen. 3:15, where God foretold of this ongoing war, but then promised that an offspring would come who would win the war and crush the head of the serpent, even as his heel was bruised in the process. The book of Genesis shows us that this promised offspring, this Messiah, would come through the line and family of Abraham, the people of Israel. In the book of Numbers, we need a pagan named Balaam, and God sends prophecies through him about this promised Messiah offspring to come, and in Numbers 24, he mentions the Amalekites and Agag in particular, which is striking, because Agag doesn't come around until hundreds of years later. In Numbers 24:7, we read it prophesied about Israel, "Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted." Then, in v.17, we read, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth." Then in v.20, "Then he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said, 'Amalek was the first among the nations, but its end is utter destruction.'" Fascinatingly, this tells us of an Israelite king, an seed/offspring, who will arise out of Israel as King and defeat Agag, crush the forehead of Moab like the offspring crushing the head of the snake, and destroy the Amalekites, first of the nations.

Later, we see Saul, the first king and scepter to arise out of Israel, defeat the Amalekites, yet fail to utterly destroy the offspring of the serpent; but then, in the book of Esther, we see this rematch: you have Mordecai, whose name literally means "little guy," facing Haman the descendant of the giant tribe of the Amalekites and Agag whose name means "lofty," like David versus Goliath; then you have Esther, whose name means "star" being raised up as Queen, the scepter raised to her by the King, and she intercedes for Haman and all the enemies of God's people to be crushed and destroyed utterly! Mordecai and the Jews, unlike his ancestor Saul,

destroy their enemies; and unlike Saul, who disobeyed God and plundered Agag's possession when he wasn't supposed to, Mordecai and the Jews *didn't* plunder their enemies.

Ultimately, this points us to the true promised offspring and seed of the woman, the true child of promise, Jesus Christ, the true King of God's people, the start and scepter of Jacob, who was raised up, even from the dead, crushing Satan to death, even though He was killed yet rose again, like it was just a bruising on his heel, to save and deliver all of His people from Sin, Satan, and Death, our worst enemies and the utter destruction we deserve! If we repent and believe in Jesus Christ, He delivers us from our greatest enemies, Sin, Satan, and Death! And that means we can trust Him with everything smaller than that, too. So let's look at four brief sermon points, to unpack the significance of these chapters and apply them to our lives today.

I. Remember that God is the true sovereign King reigning over all the nations according to His glorious Will

First of all, the book of Esther is all about the sovereignty of God. It shows us and reminds us that even when it feels like God is silent, God is sovereign over *everything*, even the nations. The book begins with the King of Persia, the most powerful man on the planet at the time in history, throwing a massive party to show how powerful he is. Yet all throughout the book, we see him pictured as an incompetent, impotent, and ignorant king. He is disobeyed and shamed by his own wife. He's manipulated by his advisers. He can't make a single decision on his own without asking others what he should do first. He doesn't even know what's been done in his name or whether or not the man who saved his life has been rewarded.

Meanwhile, God emerges as the true King who is Lord and sovereignly rules over all things. He is all-powerful, all-wise, and all-knowing. He perfectly orchestrates all things to the counsel of His *own* will (Eph. 1:11). He is the glorious Sovereign King over all of human history. And that includes today. Nations rise and fall at the word of God. The kings may rage and shake their fist at him, and try to persecute His people, but He who sits in the heavens laughs (Psalm 2). Brothers and Sisters, when you watch the news or scroll through your feed, you may feel infinitely small and the world's problems may feel overwhelming and impossible to solve, but never fear: God is in control of it all. He is the true sovereign King over everything; His Will will be done and His glory made known. And this is good news for us, because....

II. Remember that God is sovereignly working out all things for the good of His people, providentially watching over us

The God who is sovereign has promised to meticulously and providentially care for His covenant people - as a whole, and for each and every single individual believer. Haman's plot starts with *purim*, casting lots. The book ends with the festival of *purim* being inaugurated, celebrating God's deliverance. As Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." God would not let His people be destroyed, and even used the plots of the wicked to bring about His people's deliverance and exaltation.

So we should remember that God has promised to us, as His *New Covenant* people, that He is sovereignly working out all things for our good. Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purposes." Brothers and Sisters, if you have repented of your sins and are believing in Jesus Christ, then you have been called to Him, and He is providentially working out *everything* in your life for your good and His glory.

III. Remember that the day of final Judgment and Salvation is coming, when God shall destroy the enemies of His people once and for all

The whole book of Esther hinges around the coming day of destruction, when God's people are doomed to genocide - until it's reversed by the sovereign decree of God, the true King, who turns it into a day of deliverance and salvation for His people. But this deliverance occurs through His people arming themselves and physically killing their enemies. This part might strike us as off, maybe even morally wrong or revolting. But we shouldn't think that way. The Bible shows us over and over again there is no true salvation without true judgment of sin and true destruction of the enemies that threaten to destroy us. Esther, Mordecai, and all the Jewish people had real enemies seeking to steal from them, kill them, and destroy them. They were offspring of that ancient Serpent, the Dragon, Satan, our present adversary who comes to steal, kill, and destroy.

This is a reminder that we, too, have real enemies; Satan, prowling around like a roaring lion seeking to devour us, lead us away from the Lord, and drive us. The unbelieving world is full of evil people who hate God and hate His people and persecute Christians and do all kinds of evil things. Our flesh is at war with us, as our own evil hearts are inclined towards sin. And Death is the last enemy to be destroyed, and it awaits us all. Just like the Jews in Esther's day were on a deadline, watching a clock tick down closer and closer toward the time bomb of the allotted day for their genocide, so there is coming a day of Final Judgment, when Christ shall

return, and all shall stand before the throne of God, the true Sovereign and King of the universe. On that day, all our sins will be laid bare, and we *deserve* to be counted among God's enemies, destroyed and cast into Hell for our sins and rebellion against God. We all want to identify with Mordecai, but apart from Christ, we shall find ourselves thrown in with Haman and all the other enemies of God. Friend, if you do not repent and believe in Jesus, that will be your fate.

But thanks be to God, Christ came to deliver and save us from such a fate! Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again so that we can be saved! If we are in Christ, we shall be saved from the destruction we deserve. In fact, that day of Judgment will be reversed for us into a day of salvation and deliverance! The judgment that sinners dread becomes a day that the saved will rejoice in! On that day, every single enemy of Christ and God's people shall be destroyed. We who once were God's enemies but have been redeemed in Christ will rejoice as our sins are destroyed and shall be no more; the wicked world that constantly does heinous, unspeakable evil things shall be no more; those who wickedly persecute God's people and cause so much suffering and injustice shall be no more; Satan's reign of terror shall be no more; sorrow and suffering shall be no more; Death itself shall be no more!

That is what awaits us because Christ has already won the victory and conquered over our enemies through His victorious life, death, and resurrection. Let us never forget this, because this changes *everything*! Let us remember and celebrate this continually! The Jews remember and celebrate the deliverance that occurred in Esther by celebrating the feast of Purim every year. Israel did that with Passover every year, too. Similarly, Christ gives us a feast to remember and celebrate His death on the Cross to deliver us from our greatest enemies: our own sin, the World, Satan, and Death. AND we don't celebrate it once a year; we get to celebrate it once a week, every Sunday, the Lord's Day, when Christ victoriously rose from the dead and turned the impossible on its head with a miraculous victory!

We call this feast the Lord's Supper. If you are a baptized believer in good standing with a gospel preaching church, we invite you to join us in celebrating it in just a moment. But if those three things don't describe you, we ask you to not come to the Table, but to first get right with God, to make sure you are one of His people. Most importantly, repent and believe in Jesus Christ asking Him to save you from *your* sins. If you have any questions about this, we would love to speak with you after the service. Until then, let's have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the Table.