

Main Idea: Two scenes in Esther 9 demonstrate the truth that when God delivers His people, it's time to celebrate.

- I. Scene #1: God delivered His people (1-17).
 - A. The big day arrived (1-4).
 - B. Here's what happened in Susa (5-15).
 - 1. The Jews struck down their enemies (5-6).
 - 2. The Jews killed the sons of Haman (7-10).
 - 3. The Jews completed the edict on the second day (11-15).
 - C. Here's what happened in the rest of the empire (16-17).
 - 1. The Jews defeated their enemies.
 - 2. The Jews did not touch the plunder.
- II. Scene #2: The people celebrated what God did (18-32).
 - A. Purim is explained (18-28).
 - 1. Here's *how* it was celebrated (18-19).
 - 2. Here's *who* initiated the celebration (20-22).
 - 3. Here's *why* the celebration continues (23-28).
 - B. Purim is authorized (29-32).

Application: Some lessons for us...

- 1. God is true to His Word.
- 2. When God delivers His people, there's reason to celebrate.
- 3. One of the reasons we don't celebrate is that we settle for cheap substitutes.
- 4. When we celebrate what God did in the past, it renews our hope in what He will do in the future.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 34

We're celebrating in Ohio these days. Well, at least a lot of us are. Which is why tens of thousands gathered in the cold weather in Columbus yesterday to celebrate the national championship that the Ohio State Buckeyes brought home after defeating Oregon two weeks ago.

You can tell a lot about a person by observing what they celebrate. And what they *fail* to celebrate.

If anybody has reason to celebrate, it's God's people. Is that not true? Think about this. What gives us cause to celebrate is not an event that will matter for a year (until another champion is crowned), but something that will matter for eternity. In fact, it's not some *thing* but some *One*. It's what this Someone did, and does.

At this point I want to state a basic truth that we'll see in action in our study of God's Word this morning...

When God delivers His people, it's time to celebrate.

I remember the day that God the Holy Spirit took the blinders off my eyes and convinced me that Jesus Christ could save *me* from the eternal judgment I feared and deserved. When God rescued me, He took away my fears and gave me the certain hope that I would spend eternity with Him. And I celebrated!

Didn't you? Has God delivered you and given you eternal life? If He has, you have reason to celebrate! The Lord doesn't want those He delivers to take His gracious work for granted. He wants them to remember and rehearse continually what He did for them.

But it's not just what He *did*--past tense. Isn't God still delivering us? If we are in Christ, He is. The moment we trusted Christ, He delivered us from sin's penalty. But

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¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Esther series at WBC in 1999.

every day His Spirit works to deliver us from sin's power. And when He does, we ought to thank Him.

It's true. *When God delivers His people, it's time to celebrate.*

The Word of God illustrates this important reality for us in Esther 9. It's worth noting that Esther 9 is the longest chapter in the book of Esther. It's full of details. There's lots of repetition in the thirty-two verses. The slow moving narrative forces us to slow down and pay attention to the celebration.

Let's be honest. Most of us spend a lot of time asking God for His help, but then, when He intervenes, we say a quick "Thank You" and move on to the next challenge. We need to learn how to bring our celebration to God as well as our supplication.

Basically we can sum up Esther 9 as follows. There are two scenes that demonstrate the reality that when God delivers His people, it's time to do some celebrating!

In scene one, God delivered His people. That's verses 1-17. In scene two, the people celebrated what God did. That's verses 18-32.

I. Scene #1: God delivered His people (1-17).

Here's how it happened...

A. The big day arrived (1-4). "On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them.² The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them.³ And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them.⁴ Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful."

The big day finally arrived. It was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. In our calendar system that's March 7, 473 B.C.

What happened that day? The text says that the edict commanded by the king was carried out. Actually, there were two edicts, as we've seen in Esther 1-8.

The first had been instigated by Haman eleven months earlier. The first edict stated that on this day all the Jews in the Medo-Persian empire were to be killed and their possessions plundered. It's sad, yet true. There were (and are) people in the world who hated the Jews. It's called Anti-Semitism.

But two months and ten days after Haman's edict came a second edict. Through a series of providential acts, Haman's diabolical intent was uncovered. Haman was executed, his estate given to Queen Esther, and a second edict put in place. The second edict in effect neutralized the first, for the second edict allowed the Jews to assemble, protect themselves, and even attack their enemies.

For the past eight months and twenty days the Jews have been preparing themselves for *this* day. Public opinion toward the Jews changed, so much so that "other nationalities were afraid of them (2)."

How do you explain that? The Jews are a minority. They're outnumbered. They'd been carried into exile a century earlier, and though some Jews had returned home, the promised land was still under Gentile control. Basically the Jews were second-class citizens in the Medo-Persian empire.

So why were the other nationalities afraid of them? The short answer is this.

God. God can change the hearts of people. When the non-Jews heard how Haman was executed and Mordecai elevated, and how the first decree was reversed by the second, they began to think, "Wow! There's something special about the Jewish people! They've got Someone on their side that we need!"

And people who were once indifferent to the Jews began to help the Jews. And even chose to *become* Jews themselves. What a day it was for God's chosen people!

Now, without question, this chapter raises some very difficult questions for us. Like, why all the killing? And why an *extra* day of killing in Susa? The answer seems to be connected to an event that happened five hundred years earlier.

There's a helpful footnote in the *NIV Study Bible* that explains, "This incident is presented as the antithesis of 1 Samuel 15."

Antithesis. Something that is the direct opposite of something else. Esther 9 is the direct opposite of 1 Samuel 15.

What happened in 1 Samuel 15? God commanded King Saul to do something, namely, totally destroy the Amalekites and their plunder.

Why do that? It goes back 1,000 years to when the Hebrew slaves were journeying to the land of promise. According to Exodus 17:8, the Amalekites attacked the Israelites. Moses sent Joshua to fight them, and as long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites won the battle.

Then the LORD said in Exodus 17:14, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

Later Moses wrote this in Deuteronomy 25:17-19, "Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"

Three hundred years later that was the assignment that God gave to King Saul. But King Saul failed to do what God commanded. He didn't destroy all the Amalekites. Instead, he spared King Agag, and then he took the best of the plunder. Saul's sin cost him the kingship.

It also nearly cost God's people their existence. We're told that Haman was an Agagite (3:1), likely, a descendant of Agag the Amalekite.

So here's the antithesis. In 1 Samuel 15 King Saul did *not* finish the task of blotting out the name of the Amalekites as instructed in Deuteronomy 25:17-19. In Esther 9, Mordecai and Esther determine to finish it once and for all. They eliminated Haman, Haman's sons, and all who sided with Haman's deadly plot.

So the day of destiny arrived. The following verses tell us what happened that day, first in the capital city and then in the rural regions throughout the empire.

B. Here's what happened in Susa (5-15). First...

1. *The Jews struck down their enemies (5-6).* "The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them.⁶ In the citadel of Susa [KJV has "Shushan the palace"], the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men."

I've circled the words "enemy" and "enemies" in chapter 9. They appear six times. Please realize this was not indiscriminate killing. There were limits to the slaughter. The victims were known enemies of the Jews, and secondly, people who "hated" the Jews.

Only those who took the initiative to reveal that they "hated" the Jews were killed. The text indicates that if a person did not take the initiative to attack the Jews first, he was in no danger.² But five hundred men in Susa did, and they were struck down by the Jews.

What else happened in Susa? Something very specific according to verses 7-10.

2. *The Jews killed the sons of Haman (7-10)*. "They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha,⁸ Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha,⁹ Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha,¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder."

Why are the names of Haman's sons given in the text? When God includes something in His Word, it's for a reason. We believe in verbal inspiration and inerrancy. That means that *every* word that men recorded in the original manuscripts was God-breathed. God doesn't throw in "filler." So why are the names given?

Honestly, I'm not sure. It's interesting that all the names have a characteristic 'a' vowel just like their father's and grandfather's names have. That feature binds them all together. And since back in 5:11 Haman boasted about his many sons, my hunch is that they, too, were infected by the same anti-Semitic attitude of their father. And what bound them together took them down together.³

Please note that the plunder was not touched. More about that in a moment. For now, notice a third detail about the events in Susa in verses 11-15. We're told that...

3. *The Jews completed the edict on the second day (11-15)*. Here's why: "The number of those slain in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day.¹² The king said to Queen Esther, 'The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted.'"

Stop there for a moment. We've already learned that it's impossible to figure out Xerxes. He's the most powerful man in the world of his day, and he does what he wants--and there's no rhyme nor reason as to why at times. Why he would give Esther another blank check offer--apparently inviting more bloodshed of his subjects--seems irrational. But he did, and here's Esther's response.

Notice verse 13, "'If it pleases the king,' Esther answered, 'give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on gallows.'" Apparently, Esther felt there were still others who posed a threat to the Jews. In addition, a public display of Haman's sons would be a strong deterrent against further Jewish persecution.⁴

Verses 14-15 record the king's response, "So the king commanded that this be done. An edict was issued in Susa, and they hanged the ten sons of Haman.¹⁵ The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder."

So there's what happened in Susa. On the first day, five hundred enemies of the Jews plus Haman's ten sons were killed. On the second day, another three hundred opponents were destroyed. But that was just in the capital.

² Verse 1 says the enemies affected were those who "had hoped to overpower" the Jews.

³When these verses are read during Purim today, the names of the ten sons and the word 'ten' are read in one breath because they all died together (Huey, 834).

⁴Haman's sons were already dead. The purpose of the hanging (actually they were "impaled" according to the Hebrew) was to show the public what happens to such opponents of the Jews.

C. Here's what happened in the rest of the empire (16-17). "Meanwhile, the remainder of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of them but did not lay their hands on the plunder.¹⁷ This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy."

What happened outside of Susa? Basically the same thing only on a larger scale.

1. *The Jews defeated their enemies.* 75,000 to be precise. But...

2. *The Jews did not touch the plunder.* The text reiterates this fact three times. According to verse 10 the Jews didn't lay their hands on the plunder of Haman's sons, nor the plunder of the enemies in Susa (15), nor the plunder of the enemies outside of Susa (16).

What's the big deal about the plunder? For one thing, to leave the plunder went against human nature. Others did it. Plundering defeated enemies was an accepted practice in that day. But by leaving the plunder the Jews demonstrated self-denial, and communicated to non-Jews that this killing was not motivated by greed.

But there's a more important reason we're told about the plunder. The writer is making a point, a contrast. Back in 8:11 he informed us that the Jews were given permission to take plunder, but they didn't. Five centuries earlier, in 1 Samuel 15, Saul was forbidden to take plunder, but he did. The difference is unmistakable.⁵ An *antithesis*.

What's the significance of all this? We'll get to that in a moment, but first, let's take a look at scene #2. In the first scene, God delivered His people. In the second...

II. Scene #2: The people celebrated what God did (18-32).

To this day the Jews celebrate a holiday called Purim that finds its origin right here in Esther 9. What is Purim?

A. Purim is explained (18-28). Esther 9 answers three questions about Purim for us in this section: how, who, and why.

1. *Here's how it was celebrated (18-19).* "The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

¹⁹ That is why rural Jews -- those living in villages -- observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other."

The author explains that Purim is celebrated on two different days. In most towns the Jews observed it on the 14th (that included the Jews back in the Promised Land), but the Jews of Susa observed it on the 15th day of Adar. Today Jews observe Purim on the 14th except in Jerusalem, where it is observed on the 15th.

Purim was (and is) a celebration. It's a day of feasting and joy (18), a day for giving presents (19). When it comes to Purim, not everyone celebrates the same way, but everyone celebrates!

And what did they celebrate? Simply, they celebrated what God did.

God wants His people to celebrate what He does for them. That's why we sing. That's why we gather on the Lord's day. Did you realize that God actually put on Israel's calendar a series of holidays ("holy" days)? For this reason, so His people would remember what He did for them.

⁵One commentator remarks (Baldwin, 105), "With the memory of this incident in mind the author seeks to reverse the curse on King Saul and ensure blessing for Mordecai and his contemporaries."

We can learn from this. So often our schedules are full of other things. Not bad things. Just things. No, we don't hate God. We just *ignore* Him.

I hope you guard your Lord's Day, for many reasons. We need the teaching of God's Word, and the fellowship of God's people. And our brothers and sisters need us, and the encouragement we give them as we gather together. But on top of this, God deserves for us to celebrate what He's done for us. That's what happens when we sing, and dig into His Word, and come to the Lord's Table. We're celebrating what He's done for us and given to us. And when we're not here, we're missing the opportunity to celebrate.

Verses 20-22 answer a second question about Purim--the question of *who*.

2. *Here's who initiated the celebration (20-22).* "Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, ²¹ to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar ²² as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor."

Who initiated Purim? Mordecai did. He sent letters to Jews all over the empire to encourage them to celebrate the memory of the victory. According to verse 21 Mordecai insisted it be an *annual* celebration.

But why? Why wasn't once enough? Why did Purim become part of the Jewish calendar? The question *why* is answered in verses 23-28...

3. *Here's why the celebration continues (23-28).* "So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them."

That's why Purim began, because Mordecai got the ball rolling. But why does the celebration continue? It's because the people wanted to remember something very special that God did in 474 B.C.

Verses 24-28 retell the story briefly: "For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. ²⁵ But when the plot came to the king's attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ (Therefore these days were called Purim, from the word *pur*.) Because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews took it upon themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. ²⁸ 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 cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants."

God wants His people to remember what He does for them. Why? For starters, He knows we're prone to forget. But more importantly, when we remember He is glorified.

Do you recall what God did right after He delivered the Jews from bondage in Egypt? He gave them a holiday called Passover. Why? So that every year they would remember what He did for them.

Later, after the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, they didn't leave the spot immediately. What happened? According to Joshua 4:20-24, God told them to take twelve stones and build a memorial so that future generations would remember the miraculous deliverance of the Lord.

Before Jesus left the earth, He gave specific instructions to His disciples regarding Communion. "Do this in remembrance of Me," He said (1 Cor. 11:25).

When we built our current house of worship in 1990, we took some beams out of the 112 year old former house of worship and made a cross that we see every time we leave this room.

We need to remember what God did for us.

That's what Purim was all about. Remembering, so as to celebrate to the glory of God, again and again. In verses 18-28 Purim is explained. In the concluding verses of the chapter...

B. Purim is authorized (29-32). "So Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter concerning Purim.³⁰ And Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews in the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Xerxes -- words of goodwill and assurance --³¹ to establish these days of Purim at their designated times, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had decreed for them, and as they had established for themselves and their descendants in regard to their times of fasting and lamentation.³² Esther's decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records."

The question that comes to my mind is this. What authority did Esther and Mordecai have to declare that Purim be an annual Jewish holiday? They weren't prophets who could speak for God. There's no mention that God told them to do it. Again, God isn't even mentioned in this book. Why then was Purim authorized?

Every so often God does something so dramatic that no one else can take the credit for it. In vivid fashion He reminds a sinful world that He will have the final word.

In Noah's day, He sent a flood. In Moses' day, He parted the Red Sea. In David's day, He toppled Goliath. In Isaiah's day, He slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. In Esther's day, He turned a near holocaust into a great Jewish victory.

When God does something great how should we respond? Esther says to us, "When God delivers His people, it's time to celebrate!"

Application: Some lessons for us...

I'd like to suggest four practical lessons that grow out of this account.

1. *God is true to His Word.* When God makes a promise, He keeps it. Two thousand years before Christ God made a promise to Abraham regarding His descendants, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse (Gen. 12:3)."

God *meant* what He said. And God *did* what He said He would do. Throughout history He has come to the aid of His people and brought judgment on those who would harm the apple of His eye. We can be sure of this--God is true to His Word.

That's why we should treasure God's Word, and study it, and believe it, and share it. I hope you have a good Bible reading plan for 2015. If not, there's one on the table in the back. Put this Book at the center of your life, for God is true to this Book, His Word.

2. *When God delivers His people, there's reason to celebrate.* May I remind you of something? We were born in sin and under God's wrath. We were powerless to save ourselves. We were without God and without hope.

But God did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. Out of His sheer grace He chose to save us. He sent His Son to save us. The Son of God became one of us. Jesus Christ came on a mission to rescue sinners. The cost? His life for ours. He gave His life as a one-time, sacrificial payment, and three days later He put an exclamation on the transaction by rising from the dead.

Romans 10:9 states, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Have you confessed that Jesus Christ is your personal Lord and Savior? If so, God rescued you.

And if that's true, you have reason to celebrate! In fact, to fail to celebrate what God has done for us is a great insult to God. Psalm 107 offers this exhortation (1-2), "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say this--those he redeemed from the hand of the foe."

If we've been redeemed, the Psalmist calls on us to *say so!* We the redeemed have reason to celebrate.

In practical terms, how do we celebrate God? Again, we do it when we carve out time for corporate worship on the Lord's day, when we come together to sing praises to our worthy God. When a person says, "Why do I *have* to go to church?," something's wrong. Why would we *not* want to come and celebrate God? The psalmist once shared, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked (Ps 84:10)." He knew He had cause to celebrate.

But don't restrict celebrating to Sundays. Another way we can celebrate God's deliverance is by living God-honoring lives all week long. Hebrews 13:15-16 puts it this way, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." We are to *continually* offer God a sacrifice of praise--using both our lips *and* our lives.

3. *One of the reasons we don't celebrate is that we settle for cheap substitutes.* I believe it was C. S. Lewis who gave the illustration of the little boy who was playing in a mud-puddle in a slum. When offered a trip to the ocean beach he refused because he'd never experienced the beach before. He chose his mud-puddle over the ocean.

Lots of people on the planet are settling for cheap substitutes. You may be one. The reason you're not celebrating God is because you're filling your life with cheap substitutes. When a person says, "I've got too much to give up to become a Christian," what he has to "give up" are cheap substitutes.

This may surprise you, but it's true. For many people, *religion* is a cheap substitute. Churches are full of devout attendees this morning who view Christianity as *mere duty*. They've reduced the Christian life to a cold list of do's and don'ts. They've forgotten (or never learned in the first place) how to celebrate.

Is Christ real in your life, or are you settling for cheap substitutes?

4. *When we celebrate what God did in the past, it renews our hope in what He will do in the future.* Several years ago the Israeli leader, Moshe Diane, was in New Dehli, India. The press asked him about the miracle victory in the Six-day war. Could he explain the amazing turn of events and how the Israelis won against such amazing odds? Moshe Diane replied, "The God who was, is. The God who did, does."

God is still delivering those who call on Him. Has He done something great in your life? Then it's time to celebrate!