

God's Empire Prevails

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[0 : 00] Well, we turn to our Bibles now for our reading this evening, and you'll find it in the Old Testament in the book of Esther. And we're beginning to read at verse 3 of Esther chapter 8.

I think that is page 414, if you have one of the visitor's Bibles. And we're picking up the story. Do you remember last week we had this extraordinary dramatic turnaround where the uncle of Esther, the Jew Mordecai, was facing death at the hands of Haman, the enemy of the Jews.

Indeed, the whole Jewish race was facing extermination by his command through the edict that he had managed to persuade the king to announce by deception.

And everything looked very, very dark indeed. But we saw that extraordinary turnaround with Esther, the king's wife, facing death herself by daring to go into the presence of the king.

And yet God turned it absolutely around. Quite extraordinary. And Haman's downfall was swift and terrible. And all that he had was given over to Queen Esther.

[1 : 14] But the big issue of the Jewish people still remained. And so we pick up the story at chapter 8 and verse 3. 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 pleased the king and if I find favor in his sight, if the thing seems right before the king and I'm pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, 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 upon 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've given Esther the house of Haman and they've 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 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 script and their language.

[3 : 03] 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.

On the day, one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the 13th day of the 12th month, which is in 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 the swift horses that were used in the king's service. They rode 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 place 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.

[4 : 32] And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves to be Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them. Now in the 12th month, which is the month of Adar, on the 13th day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred.

The Jews gained mastery over all those who hated them. The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm, and no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces.

For the man, Mordecai, grew more and more powerful. The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them. And it is they pleased to those who hated them.

In Susa, the citadel itself, the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, and also killed Parshadantha, Dalfon, and Apitha, Paratha, Adaliah, Aradatha, and Parmashtha, Erasai, Erudai, and Vizatha, the ten sons of Haman, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of the Jews.

[6 : 03] But they laid no hand on the plunder. That very day, the number of those killed in Susa, the citadel, was reported to the king. And the king said to Queen Esther, In Susa, the citadel, the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men, and also the ten sons of Haman.

What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your wish? It will be granted to you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled. And Esther said, If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict.

And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows or on the stake. So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged.

The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they killed 300 men in Susa. But they laid no hands on the plunder. Now the rest of the Jews, who were in the king's provinces, also gathered to defend their lives and got relief from their enemies, and killed 75,000 of those who hated them.

But they laid no hands on the plunder. This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar. And on the fourteenth day, they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness.

[7 : 29] For the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they sent gifts of food to one another.

And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of the king, as of Harris, both near and far, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and also the fifteenth day of the same year, year by year, as the days on which Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness, and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another, and gifts to the poor.

So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman, the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, the enemy of the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast poor, that is, cast lots, to crush and destroy them.

But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that the evil plan he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.

Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term poor. Therefore because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, the Jews firmly obligated themselves, and their offspring, and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days, according to what it was written, at the appointed time, every year, that these days should be remembered, and kept through every generation, and every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

[9 : 36] Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihel, and Mordecai the Jew, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew, and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves, and their offspring, with regard to their feasts, and their lamenting.

The command of Queen Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing. King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land, and on the coastlands of the sea, and all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?

For Mordecai the Jew, was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews, and popular with a multitude of his brothers.

For he sought the welfare of his people, and spoke peace to all his people. Amen, and may God bless to us his word.

And a very fitting reading indeed, isn't it, for Remembrance Sunday, with all that talk of vital remembrance. I'll please do have Esther, chapters 8, 9, and 10, open in front of you.

[11 : 16] Page 414, as we conclude our time in this book. So Esther, from chapter 8 to the end. Now, the great war, the great war will be on many of our minds today, won't it, as we remember the fallen, 100 years since armistice to the day.

And what a day of overwhelming relief that must have been for millions of people across Europe, indeed across the whole world.

A day that, for many, must have seemed like it would never come. No doubt you've seen films covering some of the events of the great war.

And you see that key moment when, on the field of battle, a key victory is won. And the relief is palpable.

A key enemy's been defeated. A hard-won victory is savored. But then you remember. You remember the date of those events.

[12 : 30] And you're somewhere in the middle of 1916. Yes, a key battle is won. But the bigger war is still unresolved.

And that is a situation we find ourselves in here at the start of chapter 8. Yes, we have wonderfully seen the defeat of the great enemy of God's people, Haman.

The one who, only a couple of days earlier, had seemed so powerful, so in control. And suddenly, it all came crashing down as the invisible hand of God brought about his downfall.

A great reversal has taken place in the very heart of the Persian government. And Mordecai, the Jew, he expected to be on the gallows, but now he finds himself in the position that Haman once occupied.

It is a staggering reversal of fortunes, isn't it? And yet, as the camera zooms back, as it zooms away from Mordecai there in Susa, we remember there is a whole empire of Jews whose days are numbered.

[13 : 45] The edict that Haman issued, that is still valid. It still stands. There is still that date in the diary, the 13th of Adar, when they will be destroyed, killed, annihilated, men, women, and children.

That date, still there in the diary. So yes, a key battle has been won. Haman's been got rid of.

But the war, it still rages. And so we see in this final section in the book of Esther, we see that God's people, once under an unjust sentence of death, they end up safe, whilst their bitter and determined enemies, those who were determined to annihilate them, they are justly punished.

So we'll look at this chapter in three sections and see how the rescue of God's people all across the known worlds, all across the Persian Empire, how their rescue unfolds, and how it is then remembered.

So look first at the start of chapter eight. We'll look at verses eight, sorry, verse three to the end of the chapter. And the heading here is the rescue of God's people is declared.

[15 : 08] So we see here in chapter eight that the rescue of God's people is announced and it's never really in doubt. Many across the empire side with God's people for fear of what is to come.

Now Esther's request, remember back in chapter seven, that has only been partially addressed by the king. Yes, the one responsible for the terrible edict to annihilate the Jews, he's been impaled on his own gallows.

Haman is no longer. But the edict, it still remains, it's still intact, and that must now be dealt with. And so Esther, she goes again to the king.

Look there in verse three. 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 devised against the Jews.

And then in verse five, she asked the king, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite. And the king, well, he agrees.

[16:21] Look at verse eight. You may write as you please with regard to the Jews in the name of the king and seal it with the name of the king. For an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.

You see, that was the problem with Haman's first edict. It couldn't be revoked. It was sent in the king's name. It was sealed with the king's ring. Therefore, it couldn't be revoked.

The king couldn't just overturn Haman's edict. And that is why we get the edict now issued by Mordecai from verse nine. He can't issue an edict overturning the previous one.

So instead, he issues another one. And this edict instructs the Jews across the whole empire to be prepared to defend themselves against those who attack them.

And it's for one day only, the 13th of Adar. And notice here how careful the writer is to draw comparisons with Haman's earlier edict back there in chapter three.

[17:28] In both cases, the scribes are summoned. The edict is issued to all 127 provinces. It goes to the satraps, the governors, the officials, and all the languages of the empire.

It was sent quickly by couriers. And the language of the edict is similar too. To destroy, to kill, to annihilate. But notice, this is not an edict that permitted unrestrained violence on anyone the Jews took a disliking to.

No. Notice verse 11. The king is, through this edict, he is allowing the Jews to gather and to defend themselves.

They are permitted to defend themselves against attackers. It's an edict of self-defense. And Mordecai's decree effectively reverses Haman's and it turns that promise of destruction back onto the enemies of the Jews who are seeking to destroy them.

And in issuing this decree, Mordecai succeeds where his forebear, King Saul, had failed.

Remember King Saul? He had a very clear instruction from the Lord himself to destroy completely King Agag and all the Amalekites, that ancient enemy of God's people.

[18:51] The one from whom Haman was a descendant, that great enemy, that ancient enemy. And Saul, well, he failed. But Mordecai does what Saul didn't.

He issues the decree to destroy the followers of Haman, the Agagites, the enemy of the Jews. And notice also the total contrast in response to Mordecai's edict compared to Haman's.

After Haman's edict, back in chapter 3, Mordecai, remember he wore sackcloth and ashes. The Jews across the whole empire were in mourning.

The city of Susa was thrown into confusion. But look here, look at verse 15. After Mordecai's edict, what is he wearing now?

Well, he's wearing royal robes. The city of Susa, no longer in confusion, it's shouting, rejoicing. And the Jews, verse 16, had light and gladness and joy and honor.

[19:58] Verse 17, in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and the edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews. Total contrast to Haman's edict a few months earlier.

There was great joy amongst the people of God as a decisive victory has been won at the very heart of the empire with the death of the great enemy.

And there was also great joy at the pronouncement of this edict which promises a final deliverance from the enemies that are all around them. And that is very much the position that God's people today find themselves in, isn't it?

We do rejoice at the decisive victory that Jesus has won over the great enemy on the cross. But, we still wait for the final deliverance to come.

Enemies are all around us still. But the turning point, the turning point is now behind us. The outcome for God's people today, the outcome is a foregone conclusion.

[21:08] The victory, it is sure. And so, as well as rejoicing God's people today, we also have a task to go on with as we await for that final deliverance.

We are to go about declaring peace terms to those who currently stand as enemies of God. It's not too late. We live now in the day of salvation.

We wait for that final judgment to come. And the marching orders of the army led by the Lord Jesus are found at the end of Matthew 28. He says there to his followers, Go, therefore.

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you.

And behold, I am with you to the very end of the age. So our task as we wait, as we look back on that decisive victory, as we look forward to the final one to come, we are to call all people, to appeal to them, to hear and heed the warning of the gospel, to hear the peace terms declared by Jesus, to join his side.

[22 : 29] And it's something very similar here at the end of this chapter, isn't it? This edict, it's not merely to bring comfort to the Jews. It also serves to provide an opportunity for many to choose their side.

Look at the second half of verse 17. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews for fear the Jews had fallen on them.

Remember at this point, the 13th of Adar is still a little way off. It's some months down the road.

There was still time to distance yourself from the Agagite clan, to no longer describe yourself as an enemy of the Jew, but rather to join with them, to side with them.

And many of them do. Many see that the victory of God's people over their enemies is inevitable.

The writing is on the wall. Remember how it went for Haman.

So for almost nine months, the citizens of the empire knew about both of these decrees. They could choose their side, the Agagite enemies of the Jews, or they could choose to side with God's people.

[23 : 52] As Christopher Ash puts it, there are nine months of gospel proclamation before judgment is enacted. That many declare themselves Jews, it seems, well it seems very sensible indeed, doesn't it?

Their leader in Haman, he's met a grisly end and the people of God, they now seem to have the upper hand. Everything's changed in the capital. Total reversal in the city center.

And wisely, many choose now to side with God's people. And that is the situation you and I find ourselves in today.

decisive victory accomplished, peace terms announced, a judgment day is coming. A very sensible thing to do is to side with God's people.

In fact, it's more than being sensible, it's an imperative, isn't it? Eternal destinies are at stake.

Christ's return, that is a foregone conclusion, it's coming.

[25 : 01] his victory, his final decisive victory, it's a foregone conclusion. So we see here in the start, in chapter 8, the rescue of God's people is declared.

Now is the time of gospel proclamation before judgment is enacted, it's coming. let's look on then to the start of chapter 9, our second point, chapter 9 verses 1 to 19, the rescue of God's people delivered.

We see here that God's people will have the victory over their enemies and that their salvation, it requires the destruction of those who set themselves against them.

So the start of chapter 9, we fast forward a few months to that fateful day, the 13th of Adar. And that day, which once held so much fear for the people of God, it turns out to be a very different day, doesn't it?

Look at verse 1, which gives us the headline for all that follows. Look at the second half of verse 1, on that very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain mastery over them, the reverse occurred.

[26 : 24] The Jews gain mastery over those who hated them. The victory over their enemies having been announced and declared is now delivered.

And it's more than a mere deliverance, isn't it? This is a total reversal of fortunes. This is the incident with Haman writ large over the whole empire.

Rather than God's people being mastered by their enemies, they have the mastery over their enemies. Total reversal, total turnaround. And this was a victory that was never really in doubt.

Most of the empire was in fear of the Jews. They had heard what had happened to Haman, they had read or heard the edict. The people, we saw at the end of chapter 8, they were in fear of the Jews.

Again, you see it there in chapter 9, verse 2. The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm.

[27 : 26] And note again that they were defending themselves against attack and no one could stand against them for the fear of them had fallen in all people.

All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. So it wasn't just the Jews, was it?

It wasn't merely the Jews defending themselves. It seems they had the full backing of the whole Persian government. All the officials, the satraps, the governors and the royal agents, they were all with the Jews.

So you really did have to be a very bitter and determined enemy of God's people to still try and carry out Haman's edict that day.

Put yourself in one of their shoes. You've seen what's happened to Haman, you've seen the edict coming out, you've seen the full backing of the government siding with the Jews and still, still you want to go and take them down.

[28 : 38] You had to be a very bitter, determined enemy of God's people to still go ahead. Your chances did not look good, but still some did and there was bloodshed.

On the 13th of Adar, 500 in the citadel in Susa were killed. The sons of Haman too and another 300 were killed in Susa the following day, following another request from Esther there in verses 13 to 15.

15. And then you get the figures from the whole province, the whole empire, 75,000 killed. Well, that sounds like a large number.

It is. But remember the scale of the empire. It was a massive area, many millions of people across the empire. And these, well, they were a relatively small number of very determined enemies of the Jews.

And this reporting of it, it is good news. A whole empire of God's people who were once under an unjust sentence of death, they are now rescued, they're safe.

[29 : 54] And those who were killed, they weren't innocent bystanders, they were determined enemies. They were the ones who were going ahead with it regardless of the edicts issued and the government siding with the Jews, they were still determined.

It was self-defense from God's people. There's no personal gain in this for them apart from saving their own lives.

Notice that they do not take the plunder of those they defeated. Several times you get that. They did not take the plunder. That is the language of holy war.

It was in those conditions that the Lord would send his people into battle on his behalf to defeat his enemies. They could not take the plunder. Remember the book of Joshua?

That was Achan's sin. He took what he shouldn't have taken. He took some of the gold and silver belonging to those they had defeated. They could not do that when they were defeating God's enemies.

[30 : 58] And that seems to be the situation they were operating under here. They were operating under the limited conditions of holy war against the enemies of God's people, outlined in Deuteronomy. It's not revenge, self-defense against those who were determined to kill God's people.

And it's a holy war that finds its fulfillment in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we may wince at the description of bloodshed here, but there's far more to wince about in the New Testament.

The way the Lord Jesus talks about the judgment that is to come, that all men will face one day, far more terrifying than what you see here. And the Lord Jesus, he waged the decisive war against sin and evil on the cross on behalf of the people that God will deliver from final destruction that is coming.

He's done that. And so for us, as God's people today, as we await that final victory, that final salvation that is coming, that final destruction of our enemies, we still await the conclusion of all that was guaranteed by Jesus' earthly work.

But it's a sure thing, certain. We know that our victor reigns at the right hand of God. He is disarmed and publicly crushed the head of Satan on the cross.

[32 : 32] And because of that, we know how things will play out in the end. And the message for us today from Esther is don't doubt what God has promised to do.

Don't doubt that he will bring to completion what he has started. The apostle Peter brings this reality to bear for the New Testament people of God, encouraging them to live by faith in light of this reality, in light of the coming salvation, and not merely by what we observe.

Listen to this from the apostle Peter. You should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires.

They will say, where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.

But they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these, the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

[34 : 01] But by the same word, the heavens and earth that now exist, they are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

People will scoff, but this is the word of the Lord. It's a day that is coming. And so we as God's people today, we must take hold of, believe, know with certainty the deliverance, the great reversal that has been guaranteed for us.

The enemy has been vanquished, the power of sin has been broken. But the full and final victory, that is yet to be experienced, but it is.

It is an absolute certainty. So lay hold of it, grasp it, live with that hope, live with the joy that is expressed by God's people here in Esther, light and gladness and joy and honor.

These things are yours as we wait for Christ's return. God's return. So we see then, in the first half of chapter nine, the rescue of God's people delivered.

[35 : 26] And for us, we still await that final deliverance, don't we? But it's guaranteed, it's a sure thing. Let's look on then to the end, from chapter nine, verse 20, to the end of the book.

and we see the rescue and restoration for God's people is remembered. We see here that God's people are to purposefully and regularly remember his astonishing acts of deliverance and reversal. Mordecai and Esther, in these closing sections of the book, they issue letters commanding God's people throughout the whole empire to remember this remarkable turning of the tables. Look at verse 20.

Mordecai records these things and he sends letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same year by year as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies.

And as the month that has been turned for them from sorrow into gladness, from mourning to a holiday, that they should make them days of fasting and gladness. Days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

[36 : 46] God's people have enjoyed a complete reversal. Things have turned from them, they've turned from sorrow into gladness.

What once seemed a day of certain death, it has turned into abundant life, a day of feasting and gladness. days. And it was a day that they were to remember.

Look down to verse 26. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter and of what they had faced in this matter and what had happened to them, the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation in every clan, province and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

Now remember the bigger picture here. Yes, God's people were able to celebrate and remember a great reversal, a great deliverance, a great salvation, but they were still scattered amongst the whole Persian empire, weren't they?

A small number had returned from exile and were back in the promised land in Jerusalem. But for many of God's people, many of God's promises were yet to be fulfilled.

[38 : 29] That is why this act of remembrance, this feast of Purim was just so important. It was easy, even with the memory of this great reversal, easy to look around in the generations that followed and be discouraged by what was yet to be fulfilled.

They were still waiting, weren't they, for all that was promised. that is very much the situation for us today, particularly for us in the West. Yes, we look back on even greater reversals than they did. We look back on the greatest deliverance that this smaller deliverance made possible. If God's people then had been wiped out, then there would be no Messiah.

And so we look back on what these events enabled and anticipated. But don't we still get discouraged?

We are waiting for Christ to bring about the final consummation of all that he promised. We wait for the glorious new creation where we will live with him forevermore.

[39 : 41] But we don't see that yet. Instead, we see a culture unpicking itself, tearing at the very fundamental realities of our existence, the givens which for so long, the givens of the Judeo-Christian values which were so long assumed, the things that underpin everything.

And who knows how things will play out in the years and decades ahead. God seems in so many ways to be absent. It's easy to get discouraged.

Which is why it is so vitally important that we remember, that we bind ourselves and our offspring and all who join us.

Vitally important that we, without fail, remember all that God has achieved for us in that great reversal of the cross. Vital that we meet each week, Sunday by Sunday, to point ourselves and each other to those great realities.

The reality of what Christ has done, what he is doing, and what he will do one day. And God promises, he promises those who are in Christ, not only protection and survival collectively as a people throughout the generations of human history.

[41 : 12] He not only promises that, but also individually. He promises his people that after physical death and after the last day of history, we will be with him forever.

Wonderful promises. Jesus. But we need reminder, don't we? At least I do. The writer to the Hebrews instructs God's people.

People who are tempted to wander away from the faith. He says, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. For he who promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

So one key implication from this final section is not to give up meeting together. For it is here primarily, as we gather as God's people, that God strengthens his people today.

[42 : 25] We need each other. And if you neglect coming to church, you run the risk of forgetting what God is like, how he works, the certainty for which we hope.

It is hard, isn't it, in this world? It's hard. We have a real spiritual enemy. We can't go it alone. You're a fool if you think otherwise.

Do not neglect to meet together. Do not neglect to remember the great acts of deliverance, the great reversals that God has done for his people.

Rehearse the great saving acts of God. Rehearse the ways in which God was at work to save our forebears here in Esther. Invisibly at work through the seemingly normal events against seemingly insurmountable odds.

The God of Esther, the God of God's people there, and he is the same today. He is our God. And so we're to rehearse these very events. It's why we've been preaching through this book this last month.

[43 : 42] But we don't just rehearse the book of Esther. We rehearse the greatest moment in salvation history, the cross of Christ. So encourage one another.

Think about how you might do just that. How you as part of this congregation can encourage and help each other to remember all that God has done for his people.

Well, our time is gone, so we must finish. Esther is a book for our times.

It is a book to lay hold of, to read and absorb. When the forces arrayed against us seem all powerful, when to laugh, may be the only way to stay sane.

We need to grasp its message of astonishing reversals. We need to grasp its message of astonishing rescue by the invisible God working through the seemingly normal.

[44 : 58] And for us, to grasp that message is not, as one writer puts it, it is not to whistle in the dark, or to pretend that things are other than they are.

It is to clothe ourselves with the truth that God is sovereign, and to be reminded that he is always with us, even when he seems most absent, and that nothing, nothing can ultimately thwart his purposes.

That is the great encouraging message of the book of Esther for God's people today. He is sovereign. He is always with us, even when he seems most absent.

Let's pray. Amen. Our Father God, please help us, help us to be a people who, in the face of the empires of this world, which seem so powerful, which seem indestructible, help us to see beyond the visible to the hidden empire that will outlast them all, the hidden empire that will endure forever, and so please help us to be a people that live by faith as we've sung, to be a people living by faith and not by what we see, how we need your help, how fearful we often are, but please encourage our hearts and help us to be people that live by faith, for we ask it in

Jesus' name. Amen.