

St Clement's Bible Study Notes: Esther

Introduction

- **Where does Esther come in history?**
- About 480 BC, during the rule of Xerxes I, when the Persian Empire was at its height, spanning 127 provinces. The Persians had swallowed up the Babylonian empire, which in turn had annexed Judea. By the time of Esther, Judea itself had some autonomy (King Cyrus had allowed the exiles to return and rebuild the temple in 538 BC) but was still part of the empire, and so the king's edict would have reached there too – Haman's plan would have annihilated the Jews completely, if it had been allowed to proceed unchecked.
- King Xerxes' father was King Darius, who had married King Cyrus' daughter Atossa – so Xerxes was the grandson of Cyrus. Herodotus, a Greek historian writing only 25 years after Xerxes died, characterised him as 'the tallest and most handsome of the Persian kings, an ambitious and ruthless ruler, a brilliant warrior, and a jealous lover'. He was assassinated in his bedroom by his close advisors.

- **Who wrote it and when?**
- We don't know who wrote it, or when. It could possibly have been Mordecai, but more likely it was written a bit later, perhaps in the 4th BC, though by a Jew who lived under Persian rule outside of Palestine and was familiar with Susa and the Persian court.

- **What is the purpose of the book?**
- The explicit purpose is to explain why Purim is celebrated and perpetuate this tradition. It worked, because Purim is still celebrated today, on the 14th day of Adar (in February/March). Children are given rattles to drown out the name of Haman when he is mentioned in the story. People also exchange gifts and give food to the poor. It has become a general celebration of Jewish survival despite all the attempts to annihilate them.
- Is it also addressing the question of the covenant status of Jews who had not returned to Judea after the exile?

- **What are the main themes?**
- Divine providence – this is the main one. The story is full of 'coincidences', e.g. Esther becoming queen just when the Jews were going to be threatened, Mordecai overhearing the plot against the king, and the king's insomnia. God is behind all of this, working out his good purposes for his people. Even our sin can't thwart his plans – he uses our sinful mistakes to fulfil them. He is at work in our individual lives, through ordinary things. Often we don't have a clear word from him when making a decision – neither did Esther! And often our good intentions produce bad results, or vice versa. We see that in Esther too. But God is in control, not us. And no matter how bad things might look, he is trustworthy, sovereign, and good.
- Human responsibility – Esther and Mordecai (eventually) show courage and resourcefulness, accepting that God has put them in positions of power for a reason. Of course God is sovereign over their actions, but this does not absolve them of responsibility.

- The absurdity of wickedness – Haman is a classic villain, arrogant and vindictive, and his downfall is a picture of where all wickedness will eventually lead. Related to this is the theme of reversal – e.g. 9:1, 9:22. The fate of the Jews is reversed, and Haman and Mordecai’s roles are reversed.
- **Why isn’t God mentioned?**
- Perhaps it was to make the book less risky for Jews living in Persia to read?
- Or maybe it’s a reflection of the spiritual climate in which it was written – was God on the back-burner?
- Or, most likely, it’s to make a deliberate point – when God appears to be absent, he is in fact very present. The Jews in Persia were wrestling with the question of whether or not God’s covenant promises still applied to them. They had no land, no temple, no sacrifices – did that mean Yahweh had abandoned them? No! In fact, he uses them to save the Jews back in Jerusalem (who would also have perished as a result of the king’s edict). He’s not mentioned, but he’s obviously at work. But we can only say this because we interpret Esther through the rest of Scripture – e.g. Daniel 4:35, Romans 8:28. If we read Esther in isolation, without knowing the rest of the Bible, we couldn’t say God was at work, because we wouldn’t even know he existed!
- **Are we to assess Esther and Mordecai broadly positively or broadly negatively?**
- They’re developing characters, whose actions are sometimes ambiguous. Should Esther have willingly joined the king’s harem? Tried her best to become the wife of a pagan king who was already married? Should Mordecai have told her to hide her identity? Or refused to bow to Haman and so cause a huge racial crisis? We don’t know. But they did speak out and take risks at the crucial moment.
- **How does the book point to Jesus?**
- Esther is a ‘type’ for Jesus, a shadow, a queen who is willing to lay down her life to save her people.
- As Christians, the book is part of our heritage – if the Jews had been wiped out, Jesus would never have been born, and we would still be lost in our sins...
- The cross is the greatest ‘reversal’ in history – the perfect Son of God becomes sin for us, that we sinners might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor 5:21). The defeated, crucified Messiah rises from the dead to reign forever, giving eternal life to those who deserve only death.
- **What is the main application?**
- It might seem that God is absent in our world, as he might seem to have been absent in Esther’s. We live in a pagan city, where many people are hostile to the gospel. But through the cross, God has brought about the greatest reversal in history, guaranteeing that he is sovereignly at work in our lives to conform us to the image of his Son and bring us safely into the new creation. Nothing can thwart him, not pagan rulers, not personal or national disasters, not even our own sin.

- Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 BC)
- Evil-Merodach (562-560BC)
- 3 short-lived reigns (560-550 BC)
- Belshazzar (550-539 BC)
- Cyrus (539-530 BC) – in 538 BC, he issued a decree saying the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1).
- Cambyses (530-522 BC) – son of Cyrus.
- Darius (522-486 BC) – he's the son-in-law of Cyrus – he married Cyrus' daughter Atossa, and Xerxes was their son, making Xerxes the grandson of Cyrus.
- Xerxes (485-465 BC)
- Artaxerxes (465-424 BC) – King in Nehemiah's time, permits him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

Esther 1

- **Intro: How does Esther fit in to the rest of the Bible?**
- The Jews had been taken into exile by the Babylonians (king Nebuchadnezzar) in about 600BC, but then about 70 years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home and rebuild the temple.
- Esther takes place about 50 years after that, in 480BC, when Xerxes, the grandson of King Cyrus, was king.
- It wasn't until about 30 years after Esther that more exiles returned home to Judea with Ezra, and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt under Nehemiah (c.450BC).
- So Esther takes place at a time when the Jews were mostly scattered around the Persian empire, although some of them had returned to Jerusalem already.
- This 6-month-long banquet in chapter 1 was probably a war council, where Xerxes could gain support for his invasion of Greece by impressing leaders from all over his empire with his great wealth. (Incidentally, he was unsuccessful in his invasion of Greece, and is most remembered for this failing. The author of Esther is being ironic in describing his court so opulently – another reversal.)
- Explain that each week we're going to be asking: How is God at work; How does this point us to Jesus?
- **Why is the feast described in such detail? (vv.1-9)**
- Ironic – Xerxes is most remembered for his failed invasion of Greece, so it would have been setting him up as a slightly ridiculous character.
- **Why does Xerxes command that Vashti be brought in? Why might she refuse? (vv.10-12)**
- It's the pinnacle of the feast, and now he'll show off his prize possession...
- Maybe she's indisposed, or just doesn't want to be ogled by hundreds of drunk men...
- **Why is Vashti's refusal a big problem for Xerxes?**
- All his important officials are there, massive embarrassment...
- **What do we think of the advice Xerxes is given?**

- It makes him look like even more of a fool! Now everyone in the whole empire knows of his wife troubles...
- **What impression do we get of Xerxes? Character study...**
- Very powerful but also unpredictable, impulsive, and quick-tempered – a dangerous combination. Living under his reign was not safe. We see here a foreshadowing of how the Jews get into such trouble in chapter 3.
- Easily manipulated, listens to bad advice – foreshadowing what Haman will do later on.
- **How does it point to Jesus?**
- The perfect king we're longing for! The opposite of Xerxes! See Mark 10:42-45.
- **How is God at work in this chapter?**
- In the character flaws of Xerxes – for the risk to the Jews, but also the deliverance of the Jews.
- He's clearing the way for Esther to become queen!
- A little picture of the whole story of redemption – why did God allow the fall? Why did God allow Xerxes to be so weak and cause this crisis? So we could praise him for his glory and grace in rescuing.
- **How does it apply to us?**
- God is at work even when he seems to be absent! Examples?

Esther 2

- **Read passage.**
- **How much time passes between Vashti's dismissal and Esther becoming queen? (See 1:3 and 2:16.) Why? How might Xerxes be feeling?**
- 4 years. During that time, Xerxes had embarked on an unsuccessful invasion of Greece. He's come home humiliated, poorer in wealth and reputation. According to Herodotus, he spent the rest of his life wallowing in 'sensual overindulgence'.
- **Given what we saw last week of Xerxes character, are his actions here surprising?**
- He's manipulated yet again! Doesn't seem to have a mind of his own!
- **What do we learn about Mordecai? Why do you think he tells Esther to hide her nationality?**
- He's a Benjaminite – one of the 2 faithful tribes. It's very important that Mordecai and Esther are clearly established as members of God's covenant people, especially in light of God not being explicitly mentioned in the book.
- He seems to have some kind of court position (v.19). Maybe he knew anti-Semitism was rife and so thought it would hinder Esther's chances if people knew she was a Jew?
- He is putting into practice Jeremiah 29:7 – seeking the welfare of the city where he's in exile, by warning the king of this plot. More on this next week...
- **Note** – *only bring this up if anyone asks: Mordecai himself probably wasn't among those carried away by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC, because that would make him over 100 years old. The passage could be talking about his great-grandfather, Kish, but that's an unusual reading of the Hebrew. Instead, maybe it's the storyteller's way of associating Mordecai with the original exiles – the solidarity of God's covenant people.*

- *Also, he's linking Mordecai with the family of Saul – Kish was the name of Saul's father. This could be an instance where 'son of' means 'descendant of' – this Kish could actually be Saul's father. This link with Saul's family helps make more sense of what happens between Haman and Mordecai.*
- **What choices does Esther make?**
- V.8 – she goes to the palace willingly.
- V.9 – she chooses to do her best to win favour with Hegai.
- V.10 – she chooses to obey Mordecai in not revealing her identity. This means she must have been eating the pagan food and doing whatever else they did – against God's law.
- V.15 – she chooses to take Hegai's advice about how to impress the king – she's really going for it.
- V.17 – she chooses to 'please' Xerxes and willingly marries this pagan king – against God's law.
- **What do we think Esther's motives might be in all of this?**
- We can't know for sure. Is she seeking personal advancement and happiness outside of God's revealed will? Or is she trapped between bad choices?
- If she'd refused to be taken, she might have been killed. Should she have resisted anyway?
- And if she'd failed to please the king enough to be queen, 3 paths lay before her: 1. She would never be called by the king again, and live a half-life, shut up in the harem with no family of her own. 2. She would become a concubine, called upon occasionally by the king, but shut up in the harem the rest of the time. Any children would be illegitimate and become officials in service of the king. 3. She would become a wife, lower in status than the queen, but her children would be heirs.
- So we can understand why she wanted to please the king as much as possible – the more she pleased him, the 'better' her life would be.
- She's morally ambiguous at best – we're not to take her as an example in the way Joseph, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were.
- She's stuck between 2 worlds, as her 2 names suggest... 'Esther' is Persian, and 'Hadassah' Jewish. These 2 identities will come into sharp focus as the story progresses...
- **How should we respond to Esther here?**
- She makes a pretty terrible start! But God is using her! Even our sin is within his sovereign control. All is not lost when we mess up – quite the contrary.
- We face similar choices all the time – God's way or the world's way (which is really our way)? What if it's not clear and only bad options seem to lie before us?
- **How does this point us to Jesus, remembering last week's study?**
- Jesus 'marries' us not because we are beautiful, either externally or internally, but to make us beautiful.
- **How is God at work in this chapter?**
- The next stage of his salvation plan is in action! Esther is queen, in a position to go to the king for help, and Mordecai is in his good books, quite literally.
- **How does this apply to us?**
- How are we doing at being distinctive for God in our pagan world? What should we do when we don't know what is right?
- Don't despair when you mess up and think you've missed God's plan! 'Even if we make the "wrong" decision, whether through innocent blunder or deliberate disobedience, our God is so

gracious and omnipotent that he is able to use that weak link in a chain of events that will perfect his purposes in and through us.' (*Jobes, 115*)

- Remember that God looks at the heart – are we cultivating inner beauty, becoming more like Jesus?

Esther 3-4

- **Why did Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman?**
- Could it be because he feels he should have been promoted to Prime Minister instead of Haman after what he did at the end of chapter 2? Unlikely, because as many as 5 years have passed (cf. 2:16 and 3:7), and Mordecai's colleagues can't work out why he won't bow – if it was because Haman had been advanced above him, they'd have known.
- Or is it because he will only bow to God? Also unlikely, because bowing to officials wasn't a religious thing but a protocol thing, like curtsying to the queen.
- So it is personal, specific to Haman? Haman is introduced as an Agagite, and Mordecai as connected to Saul's family (see 2:5). Agag was the king of the Amalekites when Saul was king of Israel – so does the animosity between their ancestors carry through to Haman and Mordecai?
- The Amalekites were the first people to attack Israel when they left Egypt, and God promised that they would be at war for generations until he eventually wiped out the Amalekites (Ex 17:8-16, Deut 25:17-19). Years later, God told Saul to destroy them, along with all their valuable possessions. Saul disobeyed, sparing their king Agag, and the best of the livestock (1 Sam 15). David also fought and defeated the Amalekites in 1 Sam 30 and 2 Sam 8:12.
- Subsequently, other enemies of Israel were called Agagites, even though they weren't ethnically connected to the Amalekites. So Haman may have been a literal descendent of Agag, (although Agag himself was killed by Samuel, so did he have any descendants?) or he might just be generally anti-Semitic.
- As a court official himself, Mordecai would have known this about Haman, though it seems Haman didn't know Mordecai was a Jew until he asked (v.6).
- **Haman character study?**
- He's proud, hot-tempered, self-important, vengeful, manipulative, clever, superstitious, patient, organised, callous...
- **Why does Xerxes go along with Haman's plan?**
- He's so easily manipulated! All Haman has to do is say there's a group of people who don't keep his laws and offer to pay the king lots of money, and he gives permission – no questions asked!
- He seems very happy about it – he sits down with Haman for a drink after the proclamation has gone out, while the rest of the city was in turmoil (3:15). He just longs to assert and maintain his power, and wiping out a nation seems as good a way as any...
- **How do Mordecai and the Jews react to the news? Why? Why has the author done this?**
- Passover was the 14th of Adar – so the king's edict goes out on the eve of this great festival. Joy turned to devastation. Will God still rescue his people, even though they're in exile and have broken the covenant utterly?
- Sackcloth and ashes were a sign of mourning, and accompanied by prayer. No prayer is mentioned, but we can assume they would have been praying – perhaps the author is just making a point about God seeming absent by omitting it.

- **What do we learn about Esther in 4:4-11?**
- It seems she lives a very sheltered life in the palace – she doesn't even know about the edict! And she's obviously still not told anyone she's a Jew! And after 5 years of marriage, it seems the king isn't quite so keen on her – she's not been called for a month.
- She fears for her life – she wants someone else to sort this problem out! We've seen what Xerxes is like – it's not unlikely that he will just kill her.
- **How and why does she change her mind (v.14)?**
- Interesting! Mordecai tells her she'll die if she doesn't! Is this scare-mongering or faith? Some commentators think he's threatening her – is he going to reveal her Jewish identity if she won't co-operate? Or even kill her? In that case, she might as well go to Xerxes, because at least she'll stand a chance with him.
- Or it might be that he thinks divine judgement will fall on her for not trying to save her people?
- Either way, he believes that the Jews will be saved – he seems to be trusting God's covenant promises. He sees a greater purpose in all that has happened to raise Esther to the position of queen.
- At any rate, by the end of the chapter, we can say that Esther is willing to risk her life for what is right, when in chapter 2 she did what was wrong to preserve her life. She is at last becoming a pro-active character, rather than a passive one. Whether this is out of fear or faith, we don't know – was Mordecai threatening her, or has she been convinced by his explanation of God's big plan? She asks them all to fast, and presumably prayer is included in that, so some element of faith is present.
- **Is God at work here? How?**
- On the surface it seems like he's not – why on earth would he allow a plot to develop in which all of his people are to be murdered? The wicked are prospering and God's people are suffering a catastrophe.
- But the lot was cast in the first month, and fell in the 12th – the last month of the year, giving the Jews lots of time to be saved! Prov 16:33!
- And Mordecai wasn't honoured at the time – so that he can be honoured at the propitious moment later on!
- And Esther is queen – a Jew within! And God enables her to take action, using Mordecai to convince her, even if his motives were ambiguous.
- **How does this point to Jesus?**
- At the cross, the wicked prospered spectacularly – see Acts 4:27. All the dark powers of the world gathered together against God's Son, and killed him. But in the next verse, we see that it was all for God's greater plan. Jesus didn't make atonement for us in spite of these evil schemes, but through them, using them.
- **How does this apply to us?**
- When it seems like the wicked are prospering and we're suffering for doing what's right, how should we respond? What hope is there? Esther, Mordecai and the Jews are in a very bad place by the end of chapter 4, but they are trusting God. They don't know what will happen, but they are obedient to the One who has the power to save. We are in a much better position – we have a guarantee of salvation through Jesus. Whatever happens, we know where we'll end up – safe in our Father's house. So we don't need to fear the consequences of our obedience. Easier said than done though...

- Also, what is our motive in obedience through trials? Fear or faith? Do we think it'll impress God and he'll give us what we want (which could potentially have been Esther's motive?) Or is it faith, love and gratitude for what he has already done for us? Do the people around us know we're Christians?
- Even though our motives are mixed at best, God graciously works in us and in our circumstances for our good.

Esther 5-7

- **How do you think Esther is feeling in 5:1-3?**
- High tension! She's risking her life – will the king order her execution there and then? Or will he be pleased?
- Such a relief when he holds out the sceptre!
- And he's actually delighted to see her – offers her half his kingdom! This probably wasn't literal, but was a way of expressing how much she pleases him – like Herod and the daughter of Herodius.
- Grateful to God?
- **Why doesn't Esther just get straight to the point? Why the elaborate dinners?**
- She's going to be asking for a truly massive favour – the more she pleases the king, the better! And who doesn't like a feast?
- The king is implicated in Haman's plot – he gave the ok! She's got to be very careful not to get on the wrong side of him or give the impression that he's been a right idiot...
- **What do we learn about Haman's desires in 5:9-14 and 6:6-9?**
- He longs to be worshipped! He's glory-hungry. He sees himself as king and wants others to acknowledge this.
- He's empty inside and trying to fill himself up with the praise of others, so he feels powerful and secure.
- **In what ways do we see Haman-like tendencies in ourselves?**
- Do we think 'if only I could ... [lose weight, know the Bible better, have successful children, have a nicer house] then people would be impressed with me and I'd feel superior to them and better about myself'? Or 'I'm so glad I've got this [job, husband, family, house, body, talent, brain], I'm so much better than everyone else'?
- **What is the turning point in the story?**
- It seems to be the king's sleepless night! Haman can't ask the king if it's ok to hang Mordecai now! His wife seems to realise that things have changed irrevocably in 6:13 – he shouldn't have tried to mess with the Jews, God's chosen people...there's an inevitability in 6:14...
- **What ironic reversals are there in the passage?**
- Haman:
 - He goes from boasting about his close relationship with the King and Queen (5:12) to being terrified of them (7:6).
 - He goes from joyfully planning Mordecai's death (5:14) to the humiliation of leading Mordecai through the city (6:11).
 - He begs Esther for his life (7:7) – when he'd plotted to kill her and all her people!
 - He's hung on the gallows he built for Mordecai (7:10).

- Mordecai goes from wearing the sackcloth and ashes of mourning (4:1) to the king's royal robes (6:11).
- Esther goes from risking her life before the king (5:1) to she and her people being vindicated before the king (7:4) and Haman destroyed instead.
- **How is God at work here?**
- 5:2 – Esther wins favour! She's not killed! In fact the king is very pleased to see her (v.3)!
- 5:8 – Esther asks them to come back the next day – if she'd gone ahead with her request on the first day, how different things would have been!
- 5:9-14 – it was this particular day that Mordecai got to Haman so badly that Haman builds the gallows for him.
- 6:1 – the king can't sleep and asks for the chronicles to be read!
- 6:2 – the page about Mordecai is read!
- 6:4 – Haman just happens to be there! He definitely can't hang Mordecai now!
- 7:8 – the king enters at just the wrong time for Haman! No man was allowed within 7 paces of the queen. His fate is sealed.
- **As you look back over your life, how has God used seemingly insignificant events or choices to bring you to where you are today? How does this encourage us?**
- How did you end up at St Clement's? How did you meet that person?
- **How does this passage point us to Jesus?**
- Redemption is the greatest reversal ever. We were cast out of the garden, in exile, deserving death – but because God himself was born as a baby and died on a cross in our place, we have eternal life. Our sorrow is turned to joy. It's so unexpected and unprecedented! 2 Cor 5:21!
- The wicked who seem to prosper will end up like Haman. All wickedness will be forgotten (Prov 10:7). It's futile to run after wickedness! And deadly.

Esther 8:1-9:19

- **How do you think the king is feeling?**
- Embarrassed! He's been made to look like a total idiot – he's accidentally sentenced his queen and her people to death by being easily manipulated, and now he can't even think of a way to sort it out – only he delegates to Mordecai this time instead of Haman!
- **What is the problem with saving the Jews and what clever plan does Mordecai come up with?**
- The king's edict can't just be revoked (v.8) so Mordecai has to come up with another edict which will mean the Jews aren't wiped out.
- The new rule is that when the Jews are attacked, they're allowed to defend themselves. Civil war has been legalised. (Presumably if they'd tried to defend themselves before, they'd have been arrested and executed anyway. And they didn't have anywhere to escape to – the empire was vast. Now they can amass weapons etc., and also they're much less likely to be attacked if their attackers know they're authorised to kill them!)
- *Note: the NIV translation is a bit wonky for 8:11. It's actually parallel to 3:13 – the woman and children of the Jews are to be killed in 3:13, and in 8:11 the women and children are included in those attacking the Jews and therefore to be killed by the Jews...*
- **Why does Esther ask for another day of fighting in Susa?**
- Perhaps there were still armed men in Susa who were determined to carry out an attack?

- Or perhaps the power has sinfully gone to her head? We're not told; again, God is using ambiguous characters to bring about his good purposes.
- **Why don't the Jews take any of the plunder?**
- Mordecai had included this detail in the decree to make it an exact reversal of Haman's decree. But it seems that the Jews (rightly) understood this as a holy war, and therefore applied the rules God had given them previously in their history – not to take the plunder, but to devote everything to destruction. This was where Saul went wrong in 1 Samuel 15 with the Amalekites – he took the best of the livestock! They're not making the same mistake here – they take nothing. They obey where Saul disobeyed.
- **What about forgiveness? How does all this killing apply to us post-Jesus?**
- They're not just lashing out unprovoked – these people are trying to kill them! And they don't take the plunder, although they were allowed to.
- God is just. This means that he must punish sin and evil. In the Old Testament, he uses his chosen people (the Jews) to bring about this justice. But after the cross, things change. Jesus has paid for the sins of Christians, so we are to forgive them. And those who are not Christians will pay for their own sin – so we are to forgive them too (and warn them!) Either way, it's not up to us to make retribution – it's up to God.
- Remember too that the Jews were to be God's representatives on earth, distinctively reflecting his holiness and worshipping him. And they were also the raw material for his great salvation plan. So when the evil surrounding nations threatened to destroy or absorb them, God had to take action. No Jews, no Jesus!
- However, the Jews were no better than the surrounding pagan nations – Deut 9:4-6. Eventually, God destroyed the northern kingdom and sent the southern kingdom into exile in judgement of their sin.
- This illustrates the truth that no one at all is righteous – 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' and 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 3:23 and 6:23). None of us even deserve to be alive, and God is being just in the Old Testament when he commands the Israelites to wipe out sinful people. What is most remarkable is that God doesn't totally wipe the Israelites out too! Instead they were his chosen instrument to bring about his promise of salvation for all nations.
- The perfectly good God who rightly hates sin loved sinners so much that he himself took the punishment for our sin, so as to be simultaneously 'just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus' (Romans 3:26).
- Our battle is no longer 'against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph 6:12) – we're fighting a battle with sin, taking place in our own hearts, and victory is guaranteed by the cross!
- **What reversals are there here?**
- Mordecai gets Haman's ring (8:2; cf.3:10) and power (9:3-4). He has risen from being condemned to death to taking the position of the one who tried to kill him.
- The second edict precisely counteracts the first one.
- The Jews have 'light, gladness, joy and honour' (8:16) instead of mourning (4:3), and Mordecai leads a joyful procession through the city (8:15) instead of crying through the city (4:1-2).
- People actually declared themselves Jews (8:17) because Mordecai, a Jew, has immense power, when before, that would be the last thing you'd do!

- Instead of the Jews being killed by their enemies, they kill their enemies! 9:1-2!
- **How is God at work?**
- In saving his people, even though they're in exile and might have thought he'd totally abandoned them.
- If the Jews had been wiped off the face of the planet, Jesus would not have been born and God's promises and purposes would have been thwarted.
- **How does this point us to Jesus?**
- The king can't revoke his decree – he needs to issue a counter-decree instead. God can't just revoke his decree of justice at the fall – the wages of sin is death. Instead, he issues a counter-decree – but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23)! Sin is still paid for by death, but not by our death!
- Jesus wages the ultimate 'holy war' – the war to end all wars – the war against sin. He was the only one who had clean hands himself and so could take our place, bear our sin, be punished for it, defeating sin forever. It's not up to us to be the instruments of God's justice like the Israelites were – he's done it himself! It's our job to explain this to people – Jesus pays, or they pay.
- **Application?**
- God keeps his promises!
- God is at work though often unseen.
- Forgive! Don't repay!

Esther 9-10

- **How is the situation different now compared to the beginning of the book?**
- The Jews are, humanly speaking, much more secure (though we're always secure in God's hands!) – Esther and Mordecai are working for their good in positions of great power, and their enemies have been wiped out.
- Esther has gone from a nobody to a true Queen, writing decrees and advising Mordecai and the King at times.
- Haman has risen and fallen.
- But Xerxes still seems to be as ineffectual and weak as ever.
- **Why do the Jews celebrate Purim?**
- To remember God's deliverance – he keeps his promises to his people!
- It's not directly commanded by God, like Passover, feast of unleavened bread or tabernacles – it's more a response of praise.
- **Are there any equivalent Christian festivals?!**
- Christmas and Easter aren't commanded directly – they're to help us remember and worship. But they've become ridiculous! What should our attitude be?
- **Why is the name 'Purim' significant?**
- Pur is a Persian word. Haman was appealing to his 'gods' to choose the right day for the destruction of the Jews – but his gods were false, non-existent, and the one true God used the Pur for his own purposes. Prov 16:33!
- **How does this apply to us? Do we really believe that God directs everything, large and small, achieving his good purposes? What difference would it make if we lived believing this?**

- Small frustrating things are ok! God is in control and we can trust him!
- Huge disasters are ultimately ok too.
- **What does Purim mean today, for the Jews and for us as Christians? How does this point us to Jesus?**
- Difficult for the Jews post-Holocaust, when many of them declared God 'dead'.
- But Jesus has endured much worse than even the Holocaust, for us, so that Jew and Gentile alike could be God's children.
- **How do we know that the church, as God's people now, will never be wiped out?**
- See Rev 1:17-18. The Romans had risen against the church – would it be destroyed? No! Jesus has the keys to death and hades, and he is the living one, the first and the last. His people will definitely endure, forever!
- Matt 16:18, all of Revelation, especially chapters 21 and 22, Ps 25:3, promises to David in 1 Sam 17, Matt 28:20, John 14:3, 1 Pet 1:3-5, Heb 12:22-24
- **How has Esther encouraged/challenged you?**
- When God seems absent, he is working behind the scenes to bring about his good purposes.

Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 BC) ---

--- *604BC Daniel* taken into exile in Babylon

--- **600 BC**

--- *586BC* Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians



Belshazzar (550-539 BC) ---



Cyrus (539-530 BC) ---

--- *538BC* Cyrus permits exiles to return

--- *536BC* temple rebuilding begins



Darius (522-486 BC) ---

--- *516BC* temple in Jerusalem completed

--- **500 BC**



Xerxes (485-465 BC) ---

--- *480BC* events of **Esther**



Artaxerxes (465-424 BC) ---

--- *458BC* **Ezra** and some more exiles return

--- *445BC* **Nehemiah** begins wall reconstruction

--- **400 BC**

