

Triumph And Tragedy

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[0 : 00] Well, today we are coming to the end of the series that we've been doing in the book of Esther, and we're going to read again just at the start of chapter 9, where it says, In the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth 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 those who hated them.

So, our title for this series has been The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Beautiful, and we chose that title because that's exactly what we've seen throughout the whole of the book of Esther.

We've seen many things that are good, many things that are far from good. We've seen behavior that is ugly, and yet woven into it all is the beautiful hope of the gospel.

All of that has shown us that Esther is a messy book, and that's what makes it extremely helpful and relevant to us because our lives are the same.

My life is full of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful. Throughout the whole series, we've been highlighting the fact that the book of Esther, our own lives, and the whole of human history is the context for a conflict, a conflict between the kingdom of God and the domain of sin and darkness.

[1 : 25] God is the architect of everything that's good and beautiful. Sin is the source of everything that is bad and ugly. And in human history, in the book of Esther, in our lives, all of that collides.

And what makes Esther such a captivating book is that as the narrative progresses, that tangled web unravels.

And that's a glimpse of what is going to ultimately happen to history and to humanity. Because in eternity, that conflict between good and evil will unravel.

And as I have said every week, we're all going to find ourselves on one side or the other. And so the book of Esther is the most secular setting of any book in the Bible.

We're in Susa in the Persian Empire, miles away from Jerusalem and Israel and all the other focal points of the Old Testament. God's name isn't even mentioned throughout the whole book.

[2 : 29] And yet all the time, Esther is getting us to think about the biggest questions of life and faith and truth and destiny. As we finish, our final title is Tragedy and Triumph.

And we're going to unpack it under three headings. Tragedy and Triumph in Persia. Tragedy and Triumph in Our Lives. Tragedy and Triumph in Eternity. We'll be a wee bit longer on the first one as we explain a few things that we read in the passage.

And then the second two will really be points of application for us as we come to the end. So thinking first of all about tragedy and triumph in Persia, we come to chapter 9 and the fateful day that the whole narrative has been leading up to finally arrives.

It's the 13th day of the 12th month. On that day, Haman's edict. So Haman, who had been elevated to a position of authority in the Persian Empire and had formulated this plan to destroy all the Jews in the empire, he had set this edict allowing the enemies of the Jews to attack them on the 13th day of the 12th month.

But as we've seen over the past few chapters, Haman's evil agenda has been exposed. He himself has been killed. And another edict written by Mordecai was also passed that gave the Jews the right to defend themselves.

[3 : 53] And so you're in this situation where on the 13th day of the 12th month, you've got Haman's original edict says everyone who hates the Jews can attack them. Now you have Mordecai's edict saying the Jews can defend themselves.

And I think it's important for us to recognize that because of the correspondence between those two edicts, the best option by a mile was a ceasefire. And so the enemies of the Jews had the authority to kill, destroy and annihilate them.

The Jews had the authority to kill, destroy and annihilate anybody who attacked them. And the deliberate echoing of the language, the kind of, the level, the fact that the level of threat and response was mutual, tells us that by far the best decision would have been for all sides to have sought peace.

But many did not do that. And so despite the fact that the second edict of Mordecai had granted powers to the Jews to defend themselves, still many enemies of the Jews sought to take this opportunity to attack them.

And it's all showing us that all along the threat to the Jews is real. And so there were many other people who wanted what Haman wanted. They wanted the destruction of Mordecai and all of his people.

[5 : 11] But in this chapter, we see that the response from the Jews is strong. So you see that as we see. And in fact, on the day that the Jews were supposed to be destroyed, the reverse occurred, is being highlighted in this chapter.

And we actually see that many people had aligned themselves with the Jews. So at the end of chapter 8, it told us that some people had declared themselves Jews who otherwise hadn't done so.

And it tells us in 9.3 that actually many of the ruling classes of Persia aligned themselves and supported the Jews. And it all means that the Jews are successful in overcoming their enemies.

They are granted a wonderful victory. And Haman and his sons are destroyed once and for all. And so in terms of the book of Esther, that victory for the Jews is resolving the tension that's been building through the narrative.

That tension between Haman and Mordecai, between the Jews and their enemies, that tension's been building all the time. It now gets resolved at the end of the narrative.

[6 : 19] But what we need to notice is that this is also resolving a tension that actually has its roots way earlier in Old Testament history. And if we're going to understand some of the emphases in these last couple of chapters in Esther, we need to understand a little bit of the history that lies behind it.

We touched on this a few weeks ago, but it's worth just picking it up again, that at several points in Esther, Haman is described as an agagite. And that's the kind of word that we can read and it means absolutely nothing to us.

But once we see that in the context of Old Testament history, we realize that that's actually a very, very loaded title. And it points to a very important backstory.

Several times this happens. So Esther 3, Haman the agagite. Same in Esther 8, Haman the agagite. And same in 9, Haman the agagite. And that name, Agag, sets a contrast between Haman's ancestry and Mordecai's ancestry.

So Haman is an agagite. And Mordecai is a son of Kish. And one of Kish's sons was Saul. And so these connections are important.

[7 : 37] You've got agag here. And you've got Saul here. And those names have come up earlier in the Old Testament. Kish was the father of Saul, who was the first king of Israel.

Agag was king of the Amalekites. Amalekites. And the Amalekites and the Israelites were bitter enemies.

It all goes back to the Exodus, when Israel were coming out of Egypt. They were confronted by the Amalekites. And the Amalekites sought their destruction.

Israel defeated them. And in the aftermath of that, Moses declared that the Lord will have a war with Amalek from generation to generation. Now, going forward from the Exodus into 1 Samuel 15, Saul had been commanded to fight against Agag, the king of the Amalekites.

And he was told to destroy them. They were to be devoted to destruction. That was the plan. But Saul only half obeyed.

[8 : 50] So when he went into this battle against Agag and the Amalekites, Saul decided that he was going to spare the life of the king and he was going to keep some of the best of the spoils of the battle.

So Saul had been instructed to go and to destroy the Amalekites completely. He took matters into his own hands, did his own thing, and effectively set his own judgment above the judgment of God.

And that's what led to Saul's downfall as king. So the key point is that Haman comes from an ancestral line that were bitter enemies of Israel.

And Mordecai comes from a line that had failed to administer judgment against the Amalekites. All of that means that when we have Mordecai and Haman standing together in Persia, there is history.

And there's unfinished business. And so when Moses said there's going to be a war between the Israelites and the Amalekites from generation to generation to generation to generation, this is how far it reaches, all the way down to the Persian Empire.

[10 : 07] And this is why in the chapter, a lot of detail is given regarding the death of Haman's son. So you can see that in 6 to 10. So Haman had been killed a couple of chapters earlier.

His sons wanted revenge. And so they attacked the Jews. They were killed. And one of the reasons why that's emphasized is because had they not been killed, this conflict would have passed on to yet another generation again and again and again.

So the killing of Haman's 10 sons is like the end point, the resolution of this conflict. Now, all of this is kind of connecting us with a bigger issue in the Old Testament that we have to mention and think about if we're going to understand Esther properly.

What we need to notice is that when you come to Esther 9 and 10, this is actually echoing the language of the warfare that you see back in books like Joshua, Judges, and Samuel.

And if you read those books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, you have what's described by scholars as holy war on behalf of the Israelites.

[11 : 21] And that's when we see various battles that the Israelites have to engage in against their enemies. And the language here in Esther is echoing it. So this maybe seems a bit strange and it's not the kind of thing you notice when you first read it, but coming to the end of Esther, of Esther's narrative, is basically saying all of this is echoing the wars of earlier in the Old Testament.

And that subject of holy war in the Old Testament is a difficult subject. And it's complicated and yet it's a very important aspect of Old Testament history. And so if you do go back to these books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, there is tons of fighting.

And there's a phrase that you see quite often that particular people are devoted to destruction. They're to be destroyed by the Israelites. So there was an example of that with the famous battle against Jericho, that the Israelites came to Jericho, they surrounded the city, the walls fell down, and they devoted the city to destruction.

And Esther 9 is echoing this pattern. And what's particularly interesting is that in Esther 9, there's a phrase that comes up again and again, that they engaged in battle against their enemies, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

And then it says again, they laid no hands on the plunder. And then it says again, they said laid no hands on the plunder. And again, you read that, and you think, well, that doesn't seem particularly important. But it's really important in the context of the history.

[12 : 55] Because if you remember, King Saul had gone to attack the Amalekites. He was told to destroy everything, not to keep anything for himself. But Saul was like, oh, no, no, I'm not going to kill the king, and I'm going to keep the stuff.

And so he kept the plunder that he wasn't meant to keep. In Esther 9, they did not touch the plunder, even though they actually had permission to do so. And it's all trying to just bring a resolution to what had been failed to be done back in 1 Samuel 15.

And the key point in all is that it's a reversal of what Saul had failed to do. So Mordecai, the descendant of Saul, is finally doing the thing that Saul had failed to do.

So I'm conscious that I'm just giving you a very, very fast-forwarded version of history. So if there's any of that that doesn't make sense that you want more information about, ask me, and I'll happily give you more details.

The big thing that I want you to see is that in all of this, we are seeing tragedy and triumph. So there's triumph at the end of Esther because the Jews get success.

[14 : 09] But there's tragedy in that the whole thing is awful. It's violent. And there's death. And the fact that all of this tension and hatred arose in the first place is tragic.

And that's true of all the wars and all the conflicts that we see in the Old Testament. Now, in terms of understanding those wars, I want to say that it's helpful to remember three things when you look at the wars in the Old Testament.

The three things that you need to remember when you look at the wars in the Old Testament is, first of all, that the New Testament is always very, very clear that such conflict is appropriate. Now, when I say appropriate, I'm not saying that, you know, that it's, you know, war is great and fine.

I'm not saying that at all. But we're saying it's appropriate in the sense that those who were destroyed was always in response to their sin.

And there's a crucial verse here in Deuteronomy 9 where God says to the Israelites, when you go out and you drive out your enemies, do not think that that's because you're good or because you're important.

[15 : 22] The reason these nations are being destroyed is because of their wickedness. And it's crucial for us to remember that, that God is not picking on, like, perfectly nice people.

It's, it's, everything is in the context of nations whose behavior and practices have been abominable. And you can read about that in the Old Testament in more detail if you want to.

So, appropriate. Second thing that we need to remember is that holy war was always avoidable. And again, you see that again and again in the Old Testament.

It was always avoidable in that there was always a warning. A good example of that is Rahab. So, remember, I mentioned Jericho a while ago. Jericho was one of the first examples of this. The city, the Israelites surrounded the city, the walls fell down, the whole city was to be destroyed.

But Rahab and her family were saved. And, and one of the fascinating things that we hear about Rahab is that, that she said to the Israelites that she spoke to, she says, we heard about you.

[16 : 30] And we knew you were coming. And, and what she's revealing by that is that she knows that this danger is approaching. And she actually chooses rather than to engage in conflict against them, but to recognize that she needs to align herself, herself with the Israelites, which is exactly what she did.

So, there was always a warning, always an awareness. It was always avoidable. And, that goes back to what we were saying, that these edicts that you see in Esther actually come out months before the day that they're actually going to be administered.

And, and everybody knew what was coming. Everybody had a warning. And these 10 sons of Haman, they know, they have been absolutely told, if you attack the Jews, they can fight back.

And so there was, it was completely avoidable. But yet they chose not to do that. So it's, what was appropriate, it was avoidable. But the third thing that's really important to remember is that it's analogical.

Now that maybe sounds like a weird word. What I mean by that is that this is serving a purpose to teach us something. And so, the, the conflicts in the Old Testament that we see in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and here in Esther, they are an analogy that's teaching us something.

[17 : 55] Because everything in the Old Testament is an analogy that's teaching us something. It's real events, but they are serving an analogical purpose. They function as a shadow to teach us about something bigger.

And that warfare and conflict that we see here is teaching us a lot. It's teaching us about the ugliness of sin. And so, when you see people fighting, whether it's in the Old Testament or even today, all of that's telling us that sin is just so devastating and destructive.

And it's one of the many reasons why God hates sin because of the damage it causes. The conflicts are also teaching us about the inevitability of judgment because these wars are an act of judgment against sin that's provoked that judgment.

And it's interesting that the hanging of Haman and his sons on the gallows is highlighting that because to be hung like that isn't just highlighting that you're dead, it's highlighting that you're cursed. and it's a judgment against the kind of the relentless evil desires that are seen in Haman and in his family.

So you see the ugliness of sin, you see the inevitability of judgment, but the third thing you see that's maybe the most important is that you see the ineffectiveness of violence. And this is such an important thing for us to see that when we talk about things in the Old Testament as analogies, they are always two things.

[19 : 22] The analogies in the Old Testament are always informative and inadequate. Informative and inadequate. So whatever you see in the Old Testament, whether it's the temple or the city of Jerusalem or the land or the kingdom or the wars, they are informative and inadequate.

So they're informing us of stuff that we need to learn and understand if we're going to understand the gospel. Wars are teaching us about the seriousness of sin and about the reality of judgment. But these wars are also inadequate because like everything else in the Old Testament, they're not the final answer.

And we must never look at the wars in the Old Testament and think, oh, God wants to fulfill his purposes through violence. And many people have thought that and it's always ended in disaster.

Because the purpose of this analogy is to show you that war actually doesn't work. In the same way that having a building in Jerusalem as the physical temple that everyone has to come to actually ultimately doesn't work.

And having a king who's descended from David sitting on the throne over the kind of geographical region of Israel doesn't actually work. Because nothing in the Old Testament is there to ultimately work because none of it's the final answer.

[20 : 39] It's all telling us that we need the final answer. that we need Jesus. And the lesson that the violence of warfare is not the answer is confirmed to us in the New Testament by Jesus.

By two crucial things. One, there's a couple of times in the New Testament when people say to Jesus, let's get the swords and start fighting. And Jesus says, don't you dare.

So there's a couple of examples. Sorry, I'm forgetting to put my verses up on the screen. James and John says, we've called out fire from heaven to consume these people. Jesus says, no. And Simon Peter pulls out his sword and strikes the high priest's servant and cuts off his ear.

And Jesus says, don't do that. And Jesus makes it absolutely clear that his kingdom is not going to advance by violence. But the second thing that we see in the New Testament which is the utterly astonishing thing that we see is that back in the Old Testament you see those who are non-Jews who have set themselves as enemies against God's people, they are destroyed.

And holy war is poured out on them in judgment. But when God sends Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of his saving purposes, he does not pour out holy war onto all the Gentiles so that his people the Jews can be saved.

[22 : 16] Instead, God pours out holy war onto his son on the cross.

and he does that so that sin can be defeated and so that Jews and Gentiles together can be saved.

Because ultimately all this language that we see in Esther, this language of holy war, this condemnation of the guilty, this curse of being hung and all the horror of death is not telling you what is going to be done by Jesus.

It's telling you what's going to be done to Jesus. And it's also that you and I can be saved. Because the cup that Jesus drinks is the cup that takes all the punishment and all the responsibility and all the implications of my sin and yours as he dies in our place.

And so this violence in Susa that we see, this is the tragic consequences of sin but it's also pointing us towards the astonishing triumph over sin that God has accomplished through his son.

[23 : 42] Now that took longer than I wanted to but we're going to just very very quickly look at our second two headings and these are just really points of application for our own lives. we've been saying all along Esther's a messy book and so here we see tragedy and triumph as the mess of sin is kind of unraveled.

The book is a tangled web of the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful and as we've said many times our lives are the same. Our lives are a story of tragedy and triumph. There's moments of great joy and there's moments of great sorrow and just like in chapter 9 you can have tragedy and triumph woven together at the same time our lives are the same.

So even you think of conflicts today you think of the amazing triumph when peace comes is wonderful but yet all of that arises out of the awful tragedy that the conflict started in the first place.

And in moments of success that we enjoy on a much smaller scale we'll feel triumph and happiness but also at the very same time we're conscious of tragedy, conscious of people who are missing, conscious of difficulties still lying ahead, conscious of the fact that our triumphs have maybe come at a great cost.

And so there's moments in life when we're thinking why can't it always be like this? And there's moments when we're thinking why did it ever have to be like this? And that's the story of what life is like.

[25 : 13] It raises two very important questions that we need to think about. What is a triumph for you? And what is a tragedy for you? Or to put it another way, what are we celebrating and what are we lamenting?

Because in Esther 9 you see great celebration and that's contrasting with the lamenting that took place earlier in the book. And so we're looking at the Jews and at some points they're lamenting, at some points they're celebrating, they have tragedy, they have triumph.

It's all getting us to ask the question, what's a triumph for me? What's a tragedy for me? What am I celebrating? What am I lamenting?

Now there's lots and lots of good answers to those questions. So there are people in our lives who are so precious to us. There are moments that give us amazing memories, there are things that we achieve that are just fantastic.

And all that's good, I'm not in any way saying that that's not precious and to be celebrated, it absolutely is. But what I want us to think about is the fact that sometimes we can have misplaced triumphs and tragedies.

[26 : 24] And so maybe there's times in our lives when for us it would be an absolute tragedy if we didn't get the house we wanted or if we got overlooked for a job or if somebody spoke negatively about us at work or in school or if our standard of living dropped or if our car got damaged.

Sometimes these things can be seen as tragedies. Now I'm not saying that these things should never bother you, they are disappointing but the danger is that we have a disproportionate level of lament to things that aren't that serious.

And in the same way we can look in the wrong places for our triumphs. Now at a not so serious level I think if you're anything like me there are people in here who are like me where your mood can be, the connection between your mood and the football results can be a little bit too strong.

And that's sometimes something we've got to guard against but it's not too serious. More seriously is when we might think it's a triumph if we get someone back who's hurt us. Or we might think it's a triumph if we're going to work tomorrow with a big juicy piece of gossip.

Or we might think it's a triumph if someone hurts us and we just draw a firm line and we never ever ever consider forgiving them. When that happens our triumphs are in very real danger of becoming tragic.

[27 : 46] So two good questions to ask ourselves what's a triumph for me? What's a tragedy for me? Most importantly though as we bring our study in Esther to a close we need to think about tragedy and triumph in eternity.

Esther has a very interesting ending. Let me run through to chapter 10. That's the whole chapter 10 on the screen. It's only three verses long. It speaks about taxes, speaks about securing a historical record, speaks about the success and status of Mordecai.

One level it all seems fine. But I think we have to agree that Esther chapter 10 is a bit underwhelming. And I think it's deliberately underwhelming. Because the success of Mordecai is not the ultimate solution.

The celebration of Purim is not the final solution. And the deliverance of the Jews from Haman's plan is not the final solution. That's because nothing in the Old Testament is the final solution.

Instead, all of it is pointing towards the final solution. The book of Esther is telling us that life is a mix of the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful.

[28 : 57] In Esther, all of that collides and eventually it untangles. So we've been saying throughout this whole series, that's a picture of human history.

God's ultimate purpose is to untangle the good and the beautiful from the bad and the ugly. Everything in the Bible is in the context of eschatology.

By that we mean the end times, the fact that there is an eternity beyond this life. And that eternity is what God cares about most. And that makes sense because it's way bigger than our lives.

And one of the key truths that the Bible emphasizes is that in the end, in eternity, forever, the untangling is going to be forever.

Right now, the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful are constantly, constantly getting tangled up together. In eternity, the untangling is going to be forever. And so the Bible speaks of heaven where all the good and all the beautiful is established and secured forever.

[30 : 18] And everything that's good and beautiful in your life right now is a glimpse of that. God's bad and the ugly is going to be set apart and confined to hell.

Now, all of this, these concepts of ultimate separation, of ultimate good, and the condemnation of evil and hell, these are difficult things for us to think about.

But if they are true, then we absolutely have to think about them. And when we talk about hell, it's such a difficult topic to think about. And you know, those of you who hear me every week, you know that it's not something that I mention often, but it does need to be mentioned from time to time.

And what the Bible speaks about hell, in many ways, what we said about holy war is teaching us something, that hell is appropriate. Because if heaven is going to be heaven, that's only good and only beautiful.

That's only possible if the bad and the ugly is separated forever. And hell is avoidable. Oh, if there's anything that I can teach you, week to week here, is that that is avoidable.

[31 : 30] And that the whole reason Jesus came and died is so that you can avoid it and that you can be safe. And if you want a glimpse of what hell is like, we look at the cross, and the amazing thing is that as you look at the cross, you see Jesus experiencing the agony of hell so that you never have to.

And so just like holy war is appropriate, so is hell. And just like holy war is avoidable, so is hell. But hell is not an analogy. It's a reality.

The good and the bad and the ugly and the beautiful will unravel. And we all need to think about what side we're going to be on. And as we close, Esther, I just want you to think about all the beautiful promises that are revealed in this book and in the whole of the gospel.

And I want you to think about the fact that today Jesus is meeting you and me in all the mess of our lives and the fact that we are complicated and messy people, that he's come to save us, to secure you, to protect you, and to hold you forever.

And all he is asking of you and me is to say, Lord Jesus, please save me. Please help me to follow you. I cannot take a single step without you. And the most important thing in my life is to know you, love you, and follow you.

[32 : 57] Thank you so, so much for all the ways in which you've listened to Esther. Esther, and I hope it's been helpful, and I hope that you can see just how beautiful the gospel is in amongst all the ugliness of life.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus,