

Triennial Torah Study – 3rd Year 15/12/2012



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Num 32		Esther 3-10	1 Corin 13-14
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Tribes to Settle East of the Jordan (Numbers 32)

The tribes of Reuben and Gad had a lot of cattle. The land of the Amorites had just been conquered (Numbers 21). And, with much good pastureland for grazing, these tribes decided that it would be a good place to settle down and make a home. So they let their desire for settlement be known to Moses. But Moses, all too familiar with Israel's past rebellions, was angered—and rightfully so. After all, there were still battles to be fought in the Promised Land, across the Jordan. Moses was concerned that their actions would discourage the other tribes if they bailed out now. And refusal to enter the Promised Land was the very sin for which God had punished Israel with its decades of wandering. Moses brings up the past, in effect asking, "Do you want to go through 40 more years in the wilderness?... Your fathers who spied out the Promised Land came back and discouraged everyone, causing about three million people to die in the wilderness. Do you want to do the same thing?" (compare verses 8, 13). "You are doing the same thing your fathers did, and you too will bring the wrath of God on us," Moses basically told them (compare verse 14).

The Reubenites and Gadites reassured Moses that they would fight alongside the other tribes to subdue the land of Canaan. But they requested that they be allowed to construct settlements for their children and cattle on the east side of the Jordan River, explaining that the men of fighting age would then leave them there while they went to help secure the land across the Jordan for all the rest of Israel. They would only return when the Israelite conquest of Canaan was complete and everyone had received his inheritance (verses 18-22). Moses agreed that this would be acceptable as long as they didn't back out of the agreement (verse 23). He wasn't going with them, so he had to pass the decision on to Eleazar and Joshua, who would lead Israel across the Jordan (verse 28).

It isn't until the end of the chapter that we learn that half of the tribe of Manasseh would also have its inheritance east of the Jordan. Yet there were still some Amorites whom the Manassites had to dispossess at this point (verse 39). In the end, as we will later see, about

40,000 men of war from the two and a half eastern tribes do accompany Joshua into the Promised Land (Joshua 4:12, 13).

Ester 3-10

Haman's Genocidal Plot (Esther 3)

In chapter 3 we are first introduced to the villain of the story—Haman. A few years have gone by since the events of our previous reading. The date of Haman's promotion is not given but his casting of lots soon afterward to determine when to destroy the Jews occurred in the first month of the 12th year of Xerxes (verse 7)—that is, in the spring of 474 B.C.

Haman is referred to as the son of Hammedatha the Agagite (verse 1). Some link the term Agagite with a district of the empire. "An inscription of Sargon mentions Agag as a district in Persia" (Expositor's Bible Dictionary, footnote on verse 1). Many others see Agagite as meaning a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites in the days of Saul (see 1 Samuel 15).

Josephus refers to Haman as being "by birth an Amalekite" (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 11, chap. 6, sec. 5). And Jewish tradition agrees. The Amalekites, a branch of the Edomites, were ancient enemies of the Israelites (see Exodus 17:8). God had ordered Saul to wipe them out but he did not comply, sparing Agag whom the prophet Samuel then put to death.

The name Agag, seeming to denote "prime ruler," could have been a title borne by all Amalekite kings. As was explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah, it is likely that the Edomites ranged widely over the ancient Middle East. It even appears that some of the Amalekites eventually settled in Central Asia, so it could well be that the Persian province of Agag was made up of Amalekites.

Haman's identity as an Amalekite would explain Mordecai's refusal as a Jew to bow to him (see Esther 3:2-4). It was not wrong to bow to human leaders (compare Genesis 23:7; 27:29; 1 Samuel 24:8; 2 Samuel 14:4; 1 Kings 1:16). Some, though, believe that what Xerxes expected with regard to people bowing to Haman was tantamount to worship. That could be, but the fact of Haman being an ancestral enemy—belonging to a people that God Himself had ordered utterly destroyed—would be reason enough. The Expositor's Bible Commentary states, "The most probable reason was, as a Targum suggests, Mordecai's pride; no self-respecting Benjaminite would bow before a descendant of the ancient Amalekite enemy of the Jews" (note on Esther 3:2-4).

Haman's reaction of hatefully desiring to exterminate the entire Jewish race (verses 5-6) also seems best explained by his Amalekite heritage. Josephus says that Haman determined to abolish the whole nation "for he was naturally an enemy to the Jews, because the nation of the Amalekites, of which he was, had been destroyed by them" (sec. 5). This would make the issue one of revenge—not just personal revenge against Mordecai but national revenge for the loss suffered so long before by Haman's own people. Indeed, the ancient animosity and envy over Israel's blessings goes all the way back to the conflict between Jacob (ancestor of the Israelites)

and Esau (from whom the Edomites and Amalekites were descended). In the Middle East, as is still the case today, old antagonisms die hard.

In verse 7, “the non-Hebraic word *pur* (probably the Akkad[ian] word *puru* {‘die’ or ‘lot’}, which is explained by the Hebrew *goral* {‘lot’} anticipates the institution of Purim (i.e., ‘lots’) in chapter 9” (Expositor’s, note on 3:7). The Jews had at times cast lots to determine God’s will—as even the apostles would later do to replace Judas Iscariot (see Acts 1:23-26). But Haman’s use of lots, besides his evil intent, was occultist and pagan. “The fact that the lot was cast at the beginning of the year to determine the best time to destroy the Jewish people fits with the culture of the day. The Babylonian religion maintained that the gods gathered at the beginning of each year to establish the destiny of human beings” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 7).

Verse 8 gives us Haman’s accusation against the Jews, though he does not name them up front—and perhaps he never did name them. Shmuley Boteach, a Jewish rabbi, wrote the following in a recent WorldNetDaily column: “For 2,000 years, Jews have asked themselves the question an increasing number of Americans are now asking: Why do they hate us? Is it possible that the underlying causes of anti-Semitism are similar to the underlying causes of anti-Americanism?”

When I lived in Oxford, I heard all kinds of academic theories proffered as to the cause of anti-Semitism, but few seemed as straightforward as the reason given by the first documented, genocidal anti-Semite—the biblical Hitler—Haman. In asking King Ahasuerus for the authority to slaughter all the Jews in the ancient Persian empire, he says: ‘There exists a people, dispersed and scattered among the nations, in all the provinces of your kingdom. And yet their values are entirely different from everyone else’s.’ Jewish singularity, Jewish peculiarity, a refusal to blend in and be like everybody else is what foments hatred in Haman’s breast. Why do you Jews hold yourselves aloof? Why don’t you just become like everybody else?

Do you think you’re better than us? Add to this the Jewish penchant for promoting social justice and a steadfast commitment to espousing morality and you have the perfect formula for hating the foreigner who not only rejects your way of life while living in your country, but makes you feel inferior, to boot. The Talmud says that Mount Sinai (literally, ‘mountain of hatred’) was given its name because after the Jews [i.e., Israelites] received the Torah and committed themselves to lives of ethical virtue, the enmity of the world’s inhabitants—who now stood out as immoral—descended heatedly upon them” (March 12, 2004, online at http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=37551).

Of course, virulent hatred and persecution has been directed toward true Christians for very similar reasons. Jesus said: “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). Jesus referred to Himself and His followers as the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5; Matthew 5:14). And in John 3:19-20 He explained: “This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the

world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” God’s people are indeed peculiar and different—and their message and way of life exposes the shortcomings and outright wickedness of the society around them.

On verse 9 of Esther 3, Expositor’s comments: “In order to obtain the king’s permission to destroy the Jews, Haman appealed to the monarch’s greed, offering to put ten thousand talents of silver of his own private fortune into the royal treasury to pay the men who would carry out the pogrom.... It is impossible to determine the value of the silver in current monetary equivalents. It was a fabulous sum that is estimated to weigh approximately 375 tons. It has also been estimated to represent the equivalent of two-thirds of the annual income of the Persian Empire.... Perhaps Haman planned to acquire such a large sum by confiscating the Jews’ property.”

Verse 11 might seem to say that the king was giving the money to Haman—or at the very least refusing to take Haman’s money. Yet Esther 4:7 makes it clear that Haman promised to pay the money into the king’s treasury and Esther later described her people as being “sold” (7:4).

It could be, as many suggest, that the king was pretending to refuse the money in the common method of Middle East bargaining (as in Genesis 23:7-18). However, scholar Carey Moore in the Anchor Bible translates the king’s response to Haman as “‘Well, it’s your money,’ i.e., ‘If you want to spend it that way, it’s all right with me’” (Expositor’s, footnote on Esther 3:11).

The giving of the king’s signet ring to Haman in verse 10 seems to have effectively made him a prime minister or chief of staff. That it constituted more than a mere formality needed for issuing the immediate proclamation is evident from the fact that Haman bore the ring until his death (see 8:2). Indeed, Haman at one point remarks about his position that the king “advanced him above the officials and servants of the king” (5:11).

The destruction of the Jews was to be accomplished in March of 473 B.C. (compare 3:13). “Critics say Haman would not have promulgated a vindictive decree for the extermination of the Jews and then waited eleven months to carry it out, as it would have given them time to escape or to prepare for defense. [One commentator] says Haman resorted to casting the lot to determine a propitious day for carrying out his slaughter and had such confidence in the power of magical decisions that premature publication would not change the Jews’ fate. [Another] says that the Jews’ flight would not have been unwelcome to Haman as he would still accomplish his purpose of confiscating their property” (Expositor’s, introductory notes on Esther).

As the decree of mass genocide is sent out, the king and Haman contemptibly “sat down to drink” (verse 15)—perhaps toasting the action—heartless to the horrendous nature of the coming atrocity. Yet in the king’s case, he may have been somewhat misled as to the wording of the decree, having placed complete trust in Haman. He may not even have realized that the Jews were the ones condemned or, if he did, that all of them were to be destroyed—especially given his later honoring of Mordecai. We do see in verse 15 that at least the people at the

capital of Susa or Shushan did not relish what was happening. They were utterly bewildered at this order. It was certainly not typical of Persian rule, which was normally characterized by cultural pluralism and mild treatment of conquered peoples. Indeed, we may be sure that there were evil spiritual forces working behind the scene in an attempt to eradicate the Jewish people through whom the redemption of all mankind would eventually come. But God's great plan will not be thwarted.

“For Such a Time as This” (Esther 4)

On hearing all that had happened, Mordecai engaged in public mourning—as did the Jews in all provinces where the new decree arrived (4:1-3). Indeed, we see in verse 3 that the mourning was accompanied by fasting—a spiritual tool linked with prayer in Scripture (see 1 Samuel 1:7-10; 2 Samuel 12:16-17; Ezra 8:23 Nehemiah 9:1; Isaiah 58:2-5; Jeremiah 14:12; Daniel 9:3; Joel 1:14; Zechariah 7:3-5; Acts 13:3). Even though God is not directly mentioned, the clear implication is that the Jews in the Persian Empire, threatened with imminent extermination, urgently cried out to Him as they fasted.

Encouragingly, we see signs of God's overseeing care in the very fact of what Mordecai had learned of the situation—information that would prove important to opposing the aim of the decree. “If Mordecai had not been appointed as a high official at the king's gate, it is unlikely that he would have known about Haman's bribe to the king. He was providentially placed by God in an exalted position in a foreign government, as were Joseph (see Gen. 41), Daniel (see Dan. 2:48), and Nehemiah (see Neh. 1:11)” (Nelson Study Bible, note on Esther 4:7).

Mordecai informed Esther of her need to plead the case of her people before the king. Yet her Jewish identity was still a secret. Given the circumstances, it no doubt seemed that revealing it at that time would have been extremely dangerous. Moreover, Esther was at first fearful to act for another serious reason. She instructed her attendant “to return to her cousin to remind him that no one could approach the king in the inner court without a royal summons. The penalty for such a transgression was death. On occasion the king had been known to extend his golden scepter to an uninvited person as a gesture of mercy. Herodotus (3.118) mentions the Persian custom that anyone who approached the king uninvited would be put to death unless pardoned by the king. Herodotus also said, however, that a person could send a letter to the king asking for an audience.

Why this procedure did not occur to Esther can only be surmised. Since she had not been summoned by the king for a month, Esther did not know whether he would forgive her if she approached him without a royal summons. She may have concluded that she had lost the king's favor. It appears that initially Esther was more concerned about her own welfare than about her people” (Expositor's, note on verses 9-11). But that was about to change.

Mordecai responds in verses 13-14 with the central message of the entire book. His confidence that deliverance for the Jews would come from another place even if Esther refused to act is

more than simple optimism. It embraced the whole of Jewish national history. There was no question as to why the Jews still existed as a people. They had been delivered, time and time again, by the God of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel). Over the centuries, God had made many promises that could not be fulfilled if the race was wiped out. Mordecai knew that God would save His people even now. The statement that Esther refusing to act would lead to her and her father's house perishing was probably a warning of divine judgment, reminiscent of Christ's later remark, concerning the end time, that "whoever seeks to save his life will lose it" (Luke 17:33). And then the remarkable statement at the end of Esther 4:14: "Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" The obvious suggestion is that it was no mere coincidence that the young Jewish woman Hadassah had become queen of the Persian Empire at this very time in history. It was the work of God. Of course, the all-powerful God clearly did not need her. But He had placed her in her current position to use her if she were willing. And if she were not willing, then He would reject her and work out the deliverance of His people another way.

Mordecai's message succeeded. Esther would go to the king about the matter even if it meant her death. But first she called for a three-day fast of all the Jews in Shushan. Again, the focus is clearly religious. What was the purpose for this fast if not for spiritual preparedness and direction and help from God? Yet again, God is not directly mentioned in the account in any way—which is most remarkable. As mentioned in the Bible Reading Program's introductory comments on Esther, even if it were written as a Persian state chronicle, we might expect the account to say something to the effect of "the Jews besought their God for help." But it does not. It may well be that the point is to teach us to see the work of God not in explicit references but in His general providential guidance of events for our welfare. As *The Bible Reader's Companion* notes on its introduction to the book, "God, although hidden from our view, works through circumstances and human choices to accomplish His own ends. Esther teaches us to see the hidden God revealed in the ebb and flow of personal and world events and to praise Him for His continual care."

And no matter what happens, like Esther all of us have the personal responsibility to do whatever is in our power to serve God and His people—even if it means sacrificing our own comfort or, should it be necessary, even our own lives. If we are in a position to speak out for the welfare of others in dire need, then that is what we must do. If human laws forbid us from obeying God, we must decide to obey Him anyway. Our task is ever and always to do the will of God—whatever it is. When hard times come and it's difficult to make the right choice, remember this scriptural example and ask yourself, "Who knows whether you have come to your particular situation for such a time as this?"

Esther's First Banquet (Esther 5)

When Esther goes in to see the king, he is receptive to her—she would not die. Xerxes knows that she must have some important reason for daring to approach him, and he reassures her of his favor, promising her up to half his kingdom—"probably an example of Oriental [i.e.

Middle Eastern] courtesy that was not intended to be taken too literally (cf. Mark 6:23)” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on Esther 5:3).

Esther’s response is not to immediately plead for her people. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet she has prepared for that day. Given the presumptuousness of her entrance, she may not have deemed it a good moment to compound the problem by possibly upsetting the volatile king in revealing that she, his wife and queen, had for all this time not disclosed her national identity to him. It could also be that she did not want to reveal this matter before all the royal officials who were probably present. But why invite Haman to the banquet? “Many suggestions have been made. To make Xerxes jealous. Perhaps so that Haman’s reaction, when Esther accuses him, might reveal his guilt. Perhaps Esther acted in the best traditions of her people, to confront Haman face-to-face rather than speak behind his back” (Bible Reader’s Companion, note on verse 4).

Xerxes realizes that Esther did not risk her life for a mere banquet. And he probably understood that she prepared the banquet so as to avoid discussing the real reason before all of his officials. At the meal, then, the king asks her for her actual petition. But she delays, asking the two back for a second banquet the next day—which, remarkably, the king does not question. “One may ask why Esther waited instead of disclosing what was on her mind. [Whatever her reason,] the delay providentially allowed time for the king’s sleepless night and the events that followed (ch. 6)” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 6-8).

Haman’s brief exultation is cut short by Mordecai’s disrespect (verse 9). His vanity caused him such hatred for Mordecai that he could not enjoy how well things seemed to be going for him (verses 10-13). Of course, in this case things were not going so well as he thought. “Haman’s boasting only accentuated his later humiliation and fall from favor (cf. Prov 16:18)” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on Esther 5:11-12).

The “hanging” proposed for Mordecai was, as the Word in Life Bible points out in a note on Esther 2:23, “probably not hanging as we know it. The gallows of ancient Persia was not a scaffold but a pole or stake upon which the victim was impaled. Execution by such impalement was a common practice of the Assyrians, who killed war captives by forcing their living bodies down onto pointed stakes. The Persians continued this grim means of execution. Thus references to hanging in Esther (5.14; 6.4; 9.14) probably refer to impalement, or possibly crucifixion.”

The Turning Point (Esther 6)

With chapter 6 we come to “the turning point in the book. Within this chapter we observe a series of events that unmistakably point to God’s sovereign hand [ultimately] controlling all events. Only because of his sleepless night did the king learn of Mordecai’s past bravery on his behalf.... The king might have been aware to some extent of Mordecai’s deed when it originally occurred. In 2:23 the author says that the events were written down ‘in the presence of the king.’

Now the Lord led the king to this very text” (Nelson, notes on verses 1-3). The oversight in not having already rewarded Mordecai “must have disturbed Xerxes, as it was a reflection on him for not rewarding one of his benefactors. Herodotus indicated that it was a point of honor with Persian kings to reward promptly and generously those who had benefited them” (Expositor’s, note on verses 2-3).

In verses 4-5 we again see God’s hand at work. Xerxes wants to set things right with regard to Mordecai and asks if some court official is around who can attend to the matter. It was at this very moment that Haman arrived to recommend to the king that Mordecai be hanged. Perhaps it was early morning by this point.

There is great irony and humor in what follows. Haman in his prideful arrogance cannot imagine who the king could wish to honor more than him, so he proposes what he believes will be the pinnacle of public adulation showered on himself. Yet the one to be honored turns out to be none other than the hated enemy he has come to have hanged. Worse, he himself would have to stoop to leading Mordecai’s horse around and publicly extolling this person against whom he burned with rage. “Haman had no choice but to carry out the king’s orders. No writer, however gifted, could adequately describe the chagrin and mortification Haman must have experienced as he robed Mordecai and led him through the streets” (note on verse 11).

It is interesting that the king refers to Mordecai as “Mordecai the Jew” (verse 10)—having not long before issued an edict to eradicate the Jewish people. As mentioned previously, it may be that the king did not realize exactly whom Haman’s decree was meant for. It does seem that he would have come to know it by now, but perhaps not. It could be that he thought only some of the Jews were to be killed. In any case, that the king would so greatly honor a Jew did not bode well for Haman’s plan—a fact his own wife and friends recognized (verse 13). No doubt they also saw that it was no mere coincidence that Haman had been forced to honor someone he had meant to hang. They perhaps saw this as a case of supernatural forces acting against him—as indeed they should have. Furthermore, as Expositor’s notes regarding verse 13, “Most commentators think the author was injecting into the mouths of Haman’s friends the Jewish belief in the ultimate victory of the Jews over the Amalekites.” Indeed, it may even point to the fact that all God’s people will ultimately prevail over all their enemies—a fact prefigured in the outcome of this story.

Haman’s Fall (Esther 7)

At Esther’s second banquet, the king again asks her what this is really all about, promising to grant her request (verses 1-2). This time she makes her impassioned plea—for her own life and that of her people (verses 3-4). From the king’s response in verse 5, it may be that she did not yet reveal the identity of her people. For had she done so, and if he were aware that the Jews were slated for destruction—which seems likely on some level despite his honoring of Mordecai—he wouldn’t have wondered who was paying for their eradication, having himself been complicit in Haman’s decree.

Then, in verse 6, she lets the hammer drop—the enemy is Haman. It is this statement that actually reveals Esther as a Jew. The king is stunned and furious. He storms outside—dazed, full of emotional turmoil and trying to think. He may well have been unhappy with Esther herself for hiding her nationality from him for all this time. And had not Haman made a good case against those deserving execution? Was he not a valued, trusted adviser? Yet perhaps Haman was the evil, wicked person the queen claimed after all. And look at what he had allowed this man to talk him into. The wise and mighty Xerxes had let someone pull the wool over his eyes, making a fool of him. It was just too much to take in all at once.

The terror-stricken Haman runs over to Esther, pleading for his life. When the king returns, he finds “Haman...draped over the queen’s couch in a compromising position. Presumably, he was grasping at her with a desire to implore her favor. The king, on discovering this outrageous situation, wondered aloud if Haman intended to ravage the queen. The Persians had strict rules about contact with the harem by any male other than the king. The eunuchs were the only persons who had access to the rooms of these women. Haman was in danger merely by being near her. This sight enraged the king” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 8). Perhaps the king saw Haman as attempting through such an assault to force her to retract her accusation against him. In any case, it was all over for Haman the Agagite.

As the king spoke, the account says that “they” covered Haman’s face (verse 8)—evidently referring to the eunuchs mentioned in the next verse. We are not told whether they had been present the whole time or came in because of the commotion. “The king’s angry words were a sentence of death. Although there is no evidence that it was a Persian custom to cover the face of a condemned criminal before he was led away to execution, that was probably its meaning here” (Expositor’s, note on verse 8).

In verse 9, Harbonah, mentioned near the beginning of the book as one of the eunuchs sent to summon Queen Vashti (1:10), speaks up about Haman’s just-built scaffolding meant for Mordecai, a man the king had honored the previous day for saving his life. The poetic justice demanded was all too clear. Haman was sentenced to the same grim fate he had planned for Mordecai (7:9-10).

A New Edict (Esther 8)

The same day as the events of the previous chapter, the king gave Haman’s estate to Esther (8:1). “Persian law gave the state the power to confiscate the property of those who had been condemned as criminals (cf. Herodotus 3.128-29...)” (note on verse 1). Esther revealed her relation to Mordecai, who was then brought in and given the king’s signet ring, making him the prime minister in place of Haman. Mordecai’s position is later explained to be “second to King Ahasuerus” (10:3). Having just honored Mordecai for saving his life, the king probably saw this man as one he could trust. And Mordecai being the adoptive father of the queen was another reason to accord him high status. In a further example of poetic justice, Esther commits

Haman's estate to Mordecai, making him very wealthy. Recall that Haman had sought to confiscate the property of the Jewish people (see 3:13).

Yet there was still a major problem, which Esther brought to the king—the decree to destroy the Jews was still in effect. As other scriptures show, Persian law could not be altered (see Daniel 6:8, 12, 15). But depending on the wording of a decree, a second decree might be able to effectively invalidate it. This is what the king instructed Esther and Mordecai to draw up in Esther 8:7-8. In verse 9 we see that it was the third month, still leaving almost nine months until the time set for the Jews' destruction in the first decree—thus allowing ample time to prepare for an attack at that time.

Verses 11-12 have led many to reject Esther as an uninspired book. The view is that Esther and Mordecai were evil in calling for such vengeance as to utterly wipe out their enemies, including women and children, when God had not ordered such a thing. Yet that is based on a misreading of these verses. If we carefully compare these verses with Haman's original decree, we can see that the original decree is actually quoted in them—so that the women and children are not those of the enemies but of the Jews. Note the wording of the original decree referred to in Esther 3:13: "And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions."

The counter-order in chapter 8 is to defend against anyone who would try to carry out the wording of the first decree. Notice in 8:11-12 that the Jews were to "protect their lives—to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the forces of any people or province that would assault them, [them being the Jews, including] both [as the original decree stated, the Jews'] little children and women, and [who would assault the Jews] to plunder their possessions, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar." That this is not talking about the Jews killing the women and children of their enemies and plundering their property in revenge should be clear from the fact that when the Jews carried out the decree, they killed only men (see 9:6, 12, 15) and they did not take any plunder (see 9:10, 15-16). The point of the new decree, then, was simply for the Jews to defend themselves against those enemies who would seek to cause them harm. However, this probably did include striking preemptively against those who had already shown themselves hostile to the Jews.

When the new decree came, the mourning of the Jews was replaced with great rejoicing (8:16). No doubt news also spread of all that had transpired. This was a cause of great fear of the Jews among the people of the empire (verse 17)—no doubt due to a perceived supernatural favor that must have rested on them. Surprisingly, this sparked mass "conversions" (see same verse). The phrase "became Jews" is interesting—as it shows the name Jew as applied not in an ethnic sense but as denoting one who was part of the Jewish religious community. Motivated by fear of the Jewish people, it seems likely that most of these conversions were not genuine. Many may

have merely claimed to be Jews without making any changes in their lives at all. Nevertheless, this all served to increase the acceptance of the Jews in the empire—and it enlarged their numbers to help dissuade would-be attackers. The real point here, though, is to see just how far the tables had turned. The change was so drastic that it was now deemed dangerous to not be a Jew.

Victory and the Celebration of Purim (Esther 9-10)

The day decreed for the attack on the Jews, and subsequently for the Jews to strike out against their enemies in self-defense—even preemptively if deemed necessary—finally arrives (9:1). The 13th day of the 12th month, Adar, corresponds to March of 473 B.C. This day had been determined by Haman’s superstitious casting of lots, but it seems likely that God had interfered in the process—causing the date to be sufficiently late enough for the Jews to both determine who their enemies were and to make preparations against them. On this fateful day that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to prevail, the opposite happened.

Besides the general fear that had come on the people of the empire because of the Jews’ apparent divine favor and help, we are told that the officials of the land helped the Jews on this occasion because of their particular fear of Mordecai’s growing influence in the empire (verses 2-4). They may have been trying to garner political favor with the new prime minister, and at the very least were trying to secure themselves against any possible reprisal.

In verses 7-14 we see a return to the conflict with Haman in the killing of his 10 sons. “The patterns of reprisal and vengeance were so deeply ingrained in the cultures of the ancient Middle East that the survival of even one of these sons might mean trouble for the next generation of Jewish people. By listing each of the vanquished sons of their mortal enemy, the Jewish people celebrated the fact that the victory was complete” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 7-10). It could also be that these sons had taken or threatened action against the Jews at some point. Moreover, we may perhaps see in this a continuation of the carrying out of the ancient divine edict of destroying the Amalekites. King Ahasuerus granted Esther’s request that the bodies of Haman’s sons be publicly displayed on the gallows (verses 11-14). This was to serve as a deterrent against anyone contemplating harm against the Jews.

Having overcome their enemies on Haman’s determined day, the Jews set aside the next day, the 14th of Adar, as a holiday for celebration. The Jews at Shushan, however, were granted permission to continue fighting through the 14th. So they set aside the 15th as the day to celebrate (verses 13-19). Mordecai sent a letter directing the Jews to observe both days annually from then on and this became an accepted custom (verses 20-25, 27). The days were referred to as Purim, named after the word pur, meaning “lot” (verse 26; see verse 24; 3:7). Purim is the plural.

At some point Esther sent out a second letter with Mordecai confirming the tradition of observing Purim (9:29-32). Though God had not established this feast in the law, it was appropriate for the Jews to commemorate God’s intervention on their behalf in this annual celebration. Purim is

similar in this respect to Hanukkah, which was instituted three centuries later to commemorate God's help and deliverance in the days of the Maccabees. Jesus Christ apparently went to Jerusalem for the observance of Hanukkah (see John 10:22-23). And as a Jew it is likely that He also observed Purim, especially as its institution is recorded in Scripture. Yet as Purim and Hanukkah are national celebrations not commanded in the law, it is not required that Christians observe them. Indeed, non-Jewish Christians would not be expected to, just as non-Americans are not expected to observe the American holidays of Thanksgiving and Independence Day.

What about the "fasting" in verse 31? "No date is assigned for this fast. Jews traditionally observe the 13th of Adar, Haman's propitious day (see 3:7, 13), as a fast ("the fast of Esther") before the celebration of Purim. These three days of victory celebration on the 13th-15th days of Adar rhetorically balance the three days of Esther's fasting prior to interceding with the king (4:16)" (NIV Study Bible, note on verse 31).

In the three verses that make up the short chapter of Esther 10, we see a final mention of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and Mordecai. Xerxes reigned eight years beyond the events of chapter 9—dying by assassination in 465 B.C. We know nothing of what became of Esther and Mordecai. But they left an amazing legacy, having cooperated with Almighty God in His grand design to save His people.

1 Corinthians 13

The necessity and advantage of the grace of love. (1-3) Its excellency represented by its properties and effects; (4-7) and by its abiding, and its superiority. (8-13)

The excellent way had in view in the close of the former chapter, is not what is meant by charity in our common use of the word, almsgiving, but love in its fullest meaning; true love to God and man. Without this, the most glorious gifts are of no account to us, of no esteem in the sight of God. A clear head and a deep understanding, are of no value without a benevolent and charitable heart. There may be an open and lavish hand, where there is not a liberal and charitable heart. Doing good to others will do none to us, if it be not done from love to God, and good-will to men. If we give away all we have, while we withhold the heart from God, it will not profit. Nor even the most painful sufferings. How are those deluded who look for acceptance and reward for their good works, which are as scanty and defective as they are corrupt and selfish!

Some of the effects of charity are stated, that we may know whether we have this grace; and that if we have not, we may not rest till we have it. This love is a clear proof of regeneration, and is a touchstone of our professed faith in Christ. In this beautiful description of the nature and effects of love, it is meant to show the Corinthians that their conduct had, in many respects, been a contrast to it. Charity is an utter enemy to selfishness; it does not desire or seek its own praise, or honour, or profit, or pleasure. Not that charity destroys all regard to ourselves, or that the charitable man should neglect himself and all his interests. But charity never seeks its own

to the hurt of others, or to neglect others. It ever prefers the welfare of others to its private advantage. How good-natured and amiable is Christian charity! How excellent would Christianity appear to the world, if those who profess it were more under this Divine principle, and paid due regard to the command on which its blessed Author laid the chief stress! Let us ask whether this Divine love dwells in our hearts. Has this principle guided us into becoming behavior to all men? Are we willing to lay aside selfish objects and aims? Here is a call to watchfulness, diligence, and prayer.

Charity is much to be preferred to the gifts on which the Corinthians prided themselves. From its longer continuance. It is a grace, lasting as eternity. The present state is a state of childhood, the future that of manhood. Such is the difference between earth and heaven. What narrow views, what confused notions of things, have children when compared with grown men! Thus shall we think of our most valued gifts of this world, when we come to heaven. All things are dark and confused now, compared with what they will be hereafter. They can only be seen as by the reflection in a mirror, or in the description of a riddle; but hereafter our knowledge will be free from all obscurity and error. It is the light of heaven only, that will remove all clouds and darkness that hide the face of God from us. To sum up the excellences of charity, it is preferred not only to gifts, but to other graces, to faith and hope. Faith fixes on the Divine revelation, and assents thereto, relying on the Divine Redeemer. Hope fastens on future happiness, and waits for that; but in heaven, faith will be swallowed up in actual sight, and hope in enjoyment. There is no room to believe and hope, when we see and enjoy. But there, love will be made perfect. There we shall perfectly love God. And there we shall perfectly love one another. Blessed state! how much surpassing the best below! God is love, 1 John 4:8,16. Where God is to be seen as he is, and face to face, there charity is in its greatest height; there only will it be perfected.

1 Corinthians 14

Prophecy preferred to the gift of tongues. (1-5) The unprofitableness of speaking in unknown languages. (6-14) Exhortations to worship that can be understood. (15-25) Disorders from vain display of gifts; (26-33) and from women speaking in the church. (34-40)

Prophesying, that is, explaining Scripture, is compared with speaking with tongues. This drew attention, more than the plain interpretation of Scripture; it gratified pride more, but promoted the purposes of Christian charity less; it would not equally do good to the souls of men. What cannot be understood, never can edify. No advantage can be reaped from the most excellent discourses, if delivered in language such as the hearers cannot speak or understand. Every ability or possession is valuable in proportion to its usefulness. Even fervent, spiritual affection must be governed by the exercise of the understanding, else men will disgrace the truths they profess to promote.

Even an apostle could not edify, unless he spoke so as to be understood by his hearers. To speak words that have no meaning to those who hear them, is but speaking into the air. That cannot answer the end of speaking, which has no meaning; in this case, speaker and hearers

are barbarians to each other. All religious services should be so performed in Christian assemblies, that all may join in, and profit by them. Language plain and easy to be understood, is the most proper for public worship, and other religious exercises. Every true follower of Christ will rather desire to do good to others, than to get a name for learning or fine speaking.

There can be no assent to prayers that are not understood. A truly Christian minister will seek much more to do spiritual good to men's souls, than to get the greatest applause to himself. This is proving himself the servant of Christ. Children are apt to be struck with novelty; but do not act like them. Christians should be like children, void of guile and malice; yet they should not be unskillful as to the word of righteousness, but only as to the arts of mischief. It is a proof that a people are forsaken of God, when he gives them up to the rule of those who teach them to worship in another language. They can never be benefitted by such teaching. Yet thus the preachers did who delivered their instructions in an unknown tongue. Would it not make Christianity ridiculous to a heathen, to hear the ministers pray or preach in a language which neither he nor the assembly understood? But if those who minister, plainly interpret Scripture, or preach the great truths and rules of the gospel, a heathen or unlearned person might become a convert to Christianity. His conscience might be touched, the secrets of his heart might be revealed to him, and so he might be brought to confess his guilt, and to own that God was present in the assembly. Scripture truth, plainly and duly taught, has a wonderful power to awaken the conscience and touch the heart.

Religious exercises in public assemblies should have this view; Let all be done to edifying. As to the speaking in an unknown tongue, if another were present who could interpret, two miraculous gifts might be exercised at once, and thereby the church be edified, and the faith of the hearers confirmed at the same time. As to prophesying, two or three only should speak at one meeting, and this one after the other, not all at once. The man who is inspired by the Spirit of God will observe order and decency in delivering his revelations. God never teaches men to neglect their duties, or to act in any way unbecoming their age or station.

When the apostle exhorts Christian women to seek information on religious subjects from their husbands at home, it shows that believing families ought to assemble for promoting spiritual knowledge. The Spirit of Christ can never contradict itself; and if their revelations are against those of the apostle, they do not come from the same Spirit. The way to keep peace, truth, and order in the church, is to seek that which is good for it, to bear with that which is not hurtful to its welfare, and to keep up good behavior, order, and decency.