



JESUS IS A BETTER MISSIONARY

Part 9 of Esther

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Esther 8:1-17 | November 11, 2012

SIN, SUFFERING, AND STEWARDSHIP

Howdy. Well, it was about twenty-three years ago Jesus saved me, I became a Christian, and immediately I got a strong appetite for the Bible, wanted to learn and study. And recently, as I was looking at the story of Esther and sort of pulling back to look at the story of the whole Bible of which it's a part, I noticed three major themes. And I see in the Bible sin, and I see suffering, and I see stewardship.

Different books deal with different aspects of this three-fold narrative. Certain books like Romans are going to deal a lot with our sin, and certain books like Job are going to deal a lot with our suffering, and certain books like Proverbs are going to deal a lot with our stewardship. And what happens is if you're a prophet, you read the Bible, you're going to immediately see all the sin parts just jump up, and if you're a priest, you're going to see all the suffering parts jump up, and if you're a king, you're going to see all the stewardship parts jump up, and they all bring us to the Lord Jesus.

And I would say, as you're studying, be consciously thinking, "Where am I weak? Do I tend to gravitate towards certain kinds of Scriptures, or as I study are certain things more obvious to me and I need to pay careful attention to those things that I'm more prone to overlook?" But they all bring us, invariably, to Jesus Christ. The whole Bible is ultimately about him, and he died on the cross, in our place, for our sins, and on the cross, he identified with our suffering, and on the cross, God so loved the world that he gave, and he was stewarding. So, it all brings us to Jesus.

As we open the book of Esther, I see these three themes working together. Early in the book, it's a lot about sin. We see King Xerxes, the great Persian king, and Haman, his right-hand man, and they're sinful men. I mean, Xerxes, we've seen he's a drunken man, he's a perverted man, he's an irresponsible man, and then he delegates his authority to Haman, who's a godless man, and a violent man, and a proud man. A lot of sin.

And then the storyline shifts to really focus a lot on suffering. Esther's married to a horrible man that sometimes she doesn't see for, in so far as we can tell, upwards of thirty days at a time because he's got a harem, and a bunch of other wives, and he's worshiped like a god, and he's a drunken powermonger. So, she's suffering, and Mordecai, her adoptive father, who, to some degree, is complicit because he didn't fight her marriage to this godless king, he's suffering as he's trying to keep an eye on his daughter that he's handed off to be in a dangerous situation. And Haman sends out a decree that he decides he's going to murder all of God's people, and the death sentence is set, and the date is put on the calendar, and the clock is ticking, and God's people are emotionally suffering, and they are about ready to suffer physically through genocide of a whole people group.

And then today, in Esther 8:1-17, where we see that Jesus is a better missionary, a lot of the focus shifts to stewardship. What are Esther and Mordecai going to do with the power that they now have, with the money, and the influence, and the affluence that they now steward? What are they going to do? Because Haman, in a great reversal in chapter 7, he built an enormous gallows in his yard and he was going to hang Mordecai on it, seventy-five feet high in the air, and in a great reversal, Haman was crucified in his own yard, and he is put to death, the enemy of God's people.

And then Mordecai, as you'll see today, is going to take his place, but the death sentence still lingers over God's people. Mordecai's life has been spared, but the death sentence for all of God's people is still in effect and it cannot be reversed because of something called the Law of the Medes and the Persians, which is that once the king makes a sovereign decree, it is irreversible, and so though Haman is dead, the death sentence remains.

WHAT MAKES MORDECAI AND ESTHER GREAT LEADERS?

And so what we're going to do, we're going to look at three questions in chapter 8 of the story of Esther. The first question, in verses 1 through 8 is: What makes Mordecai and Esther great leaders? And we see here that God gifts both men and women with leadership gifts and that he brings them into influential, powerful positions. Those here are political in nature, and we're going to see that Esther is the queen and that Mordecai has assumed Haman's position in authority.

1. Authority

And so here we go. Chapter 8, verse 1, we see three things that make them great leaders. The first is their acceptance and exercising of authority. "On that day King Ahasuerus," that's his Persian name, Xerxes is his Greek name, "gave to Queen Esther," and this is important. Esther here is in her position of queen. She is in this position of authority. I want you to see that.

"The house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the king took off his signet ring, that he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman."

Here's what's happened: Haman was in authority, and then in a reversal, Haman was crucified in his own yard on the impaling rod that he built for Mordecai, and then Esther tells the

king, “Mordecai’s my adoptive father. A death sentence was put out on his head. Haman, who you empowered to sentence him to death, is a godless and evil man. You need to destroy him.” And he’s destroyed. And then, we see a reversal where Mordecai takes Haman’s position.

Now, Haman is like—in our context, he’d be like the vice president. He’s the second in command. And he now has a great deal of wealth because what happens is that not only does Haman die, all of his estate goes to Mordecai. So, Mordecai just went from being powerless to powerful, not having access to the king to having access to the king, and from being, in so far as we can tell, fairly poor to being very rich, and from a very low-level job near the city gate working for the government to being the vice president, in a day. That’s the favor and grace of God on the life of Mordecai.

And importantly, the story is told that he is given the signet ring of the king, and the signet ring is exceedingly important. In our day, this is the equivalent of the legal power of attorney. Alright? If someone is sick, or elderly, or struggling, or dying, they will give power of attorney to someone who is trustworthy and will look after their affairs and their estate. They then have the legal right to make decisions on behalf of that other person. Giving the signet ring to Mordecai means that he now has the legal authority of Xerxes, the most powerful man on the earth.

And I want you to see here that they, Esther and Mordecai, God’s people, they accept their position of authority. Here’s my question to you: what authority do you have? What authority do you have? Every one of us has some degree of authority. And here’s what God wants you to do: humbly accept it. That’s what they do.

Now, they would have had innumerable excuses why they would have not felt fit for this role. Esther could have said, “Well, I don’t come from a royal bloodline. I’m not ready to be the queen. I’m young.” She’s probably in her early- to mid-twenties at this point. “I don’t have an MBA in leadership. I’m not ready to be the queen.”

Mordecai, all we know of him is he’s a bad leader, and that’s all he’s done so far is lead kind of badly. And now all of a sudden, he’s vice president, he’s ruling over the nation, he’s got the power and the authority to decree life and death. It could have been easy for Mordecai to say, “I don’t really feel like I’m the best person for the job.” We’d all say, “Yeah, he’s sort of see that too.” But if you’re humble, you love God, you love people, you do your best, in the grace of God, it’ll be alright.

Some of you have resisted the positions of authority and leadership that God has opened for you, and maybe God wants you to assume those positions because it’s not about you and your fear of failure. It’s about people and an opportunity to help them. And sometimes the people who feel least qualified for leadership are most qualified because they have the first prerequisite, which is humility. Humility. So, number one, what makes them great leaders is they accept their authority.

2. Passion

Number two, we see great passion. People don’t just believe what a leader believes, they get excited about what a leader’s excited about. Chapter 8, verse 3: “Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot he had devised against the Jews,” God’s people. “When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther,” that’s him accepting her. Kind of like knighting in a British court.

“Esther rose and stood before the king. And she says,” and notice how respectful she is. A woman can be very powerful and very respectful, and sometimes by being very respectful, that helps her be very powerful. “If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and if I am pleasing in his eyes,” lots of respect, right?

Then the powerful request. “Let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha.” Like I always say, read it fast, read it competent. Nobody else knows how to say it either. “Which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king,” the whole nation. “For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?”

You see her passion? Esther, up until this point, has not been a very emotional woman, at least as revealed in the story. She doesn’t cry a lot, she doesn’t fall to people’s feet all the time begging for things. So, what I love about Esther is she’s not been an incredibly emotional woman, but at the right time for the right reasons, she’s very passionate in the right way. She throws herself at the king’s feet. Wow. She doesn’t do this. This must be very urgent, very important.

Here’s my next question for you and for your Community Group discussion. What are you passionate about? What are you passionate about? She’s very passionate about God’s people, about God’s people. See, her life is safe. She’s the queen. She’s rich, she’s powerful, she’s famous, she’s safe. Why is she so emotional? Well, she’s not concerned about herself. She’s concerned about God’s people.

There are only two things that are going to spend eternity with us in the kingdom of God: God and his people. That’s it. All the stuff we have, we’re not taking it. All the things we’ve accomplished, they’ll come to an end. All the pursuits that we’re striving toward, they will cease. The Lord and his people will be together forever. You know what really matters? People. Things are fine, people really matter. People really matter, and they really matter to Esther. She cares about God’s people. She has passion for the well-being of God’s people.

What do you have passion for? What are you excited about? What, when you speak of it, your voice changes, your eyes open, your tone becomes obvious? Some of us get very excited about sin, some of us get very excited about folly. She gets very excited about the well-being of God’s people, and that’s the mark of a great leader.

3. Love

Number three, what also makes them great leaders, Esther and Mordecai, is love. Chapter 8, verse 7: “Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, ‘Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king’s ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked.’”

She’s very passionate. She’s saying, “What about the people? What about our people? What about God’s people? I’m passionate for God’s people.” And the king says, “What else do you want? I crucified Haman in his yard and I gave Mordecai all of his wealth. Now he’s rich. And I put him in a position of leadership, and so he’s the vice president and you’re the queen, and now you guys are going to be powerful, and rich, and famous, and safe. What else do you want?”

And Esther says, “It’s not about me, it’s about the people. “They’re not safe, they’re not blessed. They’re in danger and there’s a curse on them.” Now, she’s a young woman. She’s probably early- to mid-twenties. I mean, she’s an orphan girl, didn’t grow up with her parents. She doesn’t even have a mom. We hear about Mordecai, we don’t hear about any mom. You see where she’s come into a real transforming relationship with the God of the Bible, and she’s growing and maturing, and unlike so many twenty-somethings who come from broken, dysfunctional homes, she’s not thinking about herself anymore. She’s thinking about God’s people and she loves them. She loves them.

Next question for you: Who do you love? Who do you love? Who do you love? I would beg you, I would plead with you, I would invite you to love God’s people. To love other people, to love all people, but to have a particular affection for the family of God. She does. She loves God’s people.

And let me tell you this: I love you more than I’ve ever loved you. And I think that’s the heart of God, that he loves his people. And what we see here in Esther is the heart of God. She loves God’s people. And I could tell you, I’ve not probably said it enough, but I love you. I don’t want to go anywhere. I don’t want to do anything else.

And I would ask you: who do you love and do you love your church? Do you love the brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you love the family of God? Do you love the people of God? And what I particularly appreciate here about Esther— and she could have said, “You know, hey, I’ve got a hard life, my husband’s a jerk, I don’t have a mom, my family’s a wreck, I’m in my twenties. It’s about me.” She says, “No, it’s about God’s people.” And a good leader is one who exercises authority humbly, they demonstrate passion appropriately, and they love people genuinely. And that’s what we see.

WERE MORDECAI AND ESTHER JUSTIFIED IN KILLING GOD’S ENEMIES?

Second question: Were Mordecai and Esther justified in killing God’s enemies? This will be an emotional shift. We went from love and hugs to murder the women and children. Okay? Now we’re going to talk about something very complicated.

By way of preface, how many of you have had a non-Christian family, friend, coworker, neighbor, college professor mock the Bible, critique the Bible, judge God, saying, “It’s a horrible book. God tells his people to kill women and children. It sanctions genocide. It’s filled with racism, and sexism, and nationalism. It’s an outdated, horrendous book, that Bible you proclaim to believe in.” Have you ever heard that? More softly suggested or more loudly proclaimed, how many of you have heard that?

Alright, maybe you’re a new Christian. You’re like, “I don’t know. Jesus loves me, I’m forgiven. Sounded good, I signed up. I’ll go get a Bible. Okay, let me see what’s in the Old Testament.” You start reading, you’re like, “Golly, that is a complicated section right there. Wow. Yeah, I missed that. Kill them. What?” How many of you have been on your heels then? You’re like, “Gosh, I don’t know. That is sort of tough. I don’t know what to say.”

We arrive at one of those sections of Scripture today. And let me say, it comes in an election season, it comes around Veteran’s Day. I didn’t think about it all, but God’s providence brings us to chapter 8 at a very appropriate time on the calendar. And at Mars Hill, we like to go through books of the Bible, and it means sometimes I have to deal with things that I would not normally deal with.

I would not do a topical series on all the times that God’s people were given jurisdiction to kill women and children. Part 11, bring your friends. You know? I wouldn’t necessarily do that. You know? So, as we go through books of the Bible, we hit sections where you’ll go, “Wow, I didn’t see that. Nobody’s ever talked about that,” or “I haven’t really considered that.” But here’s our conviction: all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable. That’s what it says. And so everything in the Bible is from the Lord and it’s important.

And when you come to sections like this, you have a couple of options. You can ignore it. You can say, “I don’t know, I just ignore those parts.” You can change them and say, “Well, I’m sure we could find a scholar educated beyond their intelligence with more degrees than Fahrenheit that gives us an interpretation that isn’t what it means but makes me feel better.”

Or, you can apologize for what God said. Say, “Well, you know, that’s the Old Testament. We now live in the New Testament and those were like God’s junior high years. You remember what junior high was like, and thankfully you’re not like that anymore. That’s like this for God. This is God in seventh grade. And, you know, I’m sorry he was like that, but he’s really gotten a lot better. By the time you get to the New Testament, it’s hugs, muffins, and angels. It’s way better.”

The other things you can do is teach it. Just say, “God said what he said, God did what he did, and we need to study and learn.” So, my job today is to teach, and I want you to hear, pray, study, consider, get into your Community Group, kick it around, do additional homework. But, before we judge God, let’s listen to him.

Chapter 8, beginning in verse 9, here’s the question: Were Mordecai and Esther justified in killing enemies? Some say this is the longest verse in the Bible. We’re going to read it and then continue. “The king’s scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia,” religious leaders, “127 provinces.” Huge nation, most powerful nation on the earth, 3 million square miles.

“To each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus,” Persian name. His Greek name is Xerxes. “And sealed it with the king’s signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king’s service, bred from the royal stud.” This is their postal system, and they’re using the good horses. This is an important message and it’s an urgent message.

“Saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included. And to plunder their goods, on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king’s service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king’s command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.”

Let me explain. Haman set forth a decree. On a particular day, all of God’s people could be killed, men, women, and children, and all of their goods plundered. And then their enemies were preparing. They’re getting their weapons, their battle plans, who’s going to kill that family, who’s going to kill that family, who’s going to rape that woman, who’s going to take those children, who’s going to get that land, who’s going to get that livestock.

The plans are being made. God's people know it. This shows the utter depravity of the human heart when it's unrestrained. Part of the goal and function of law, according to the Lord, is to restrain evil. That we are evil, we are sinners by nature and choice. And here, the human heart is unleashed in its full capacity of evil.

Some of you would say, "I just don't think people are that bad." This is kind of like Nazi Germany, where the Jewish people were targeted for genocide and their goods were literally plundered to fuel the war machine of their enemies. It's like that. This didn't just happen once. It happens over, and over, and over. It's happening today in places like Syria and in Egypt, where the enemy of God's people is rising up to harm them, to burn down churches, to threaten violence, to try and put in Sharia law so that God's people can be arrested for evangelism or serving Jesus. Persecution and martyrdom still continue against God's people.

And this death sentence is issued, and because it is issued with the signet ring of the king that was, at that time, on the finger of Haman, it's, according to the Law of the Medes and the Persians, irreversible. And so now, Mordecai and Esther, they cannot reverse that decision, but they can put out another law, again with the ring of the king now on the finger of Mordecai, and it allows God's people to defend themselves against their attackers.

EIGHT REASONS WHY KILLING ENEMIES WAS JUSTIFIABLE

And the question, then, is: Was this justified? You'll hear of things like "just war" and "self-defense." This fits in the rubric of that philosophical understanding of whether or not what was done was permissible in the eyes of God. My great honor today is to teach you the Bible. I love teaching the hard parts of the Bible. I never want to ignore, change, or apologize for the Word of God. I want to teach it, and so I want to give you, now, eight reasons why killing the enemies was justifiable. You ready?

Number one: Haman was an Agagite, a people determined to eradicate God's people. We know Haman is a bad man. Just say his name. Agagite! It just sounds like somebody who doesn't come with hugs, and muffins, and good intentions. Amen? If somebody knocks on your door: "Hi, I'm with the Agagites," you'd be like, "I need to shut the door. Alright? This is not going to end well."

Okay, now, the Agagites are first mentioned all the way back in the book of Exodus, and the story is this: that God comes to a man named Abraham and he tells him, "I'm going to bring a people from you." It's these people, God's people. "And from your people will come one who is Savior, Jesus Christ, one from the family line of Father Abraham." And then God declares, "Those who bless you, I will bless. Those who curse you, I will curse. You're my people, I will protect you." It's like a dad looking at his family, saying, "You're my kids and you're going to be safe because Dad will look after you."

I want you to know that God's desire has always been to have a people. The Bible uses the language that God's people are a people for his own possession. God says it this way, repeatedly in the Old Testament: "I will be your God and you will be my people." This is like a dad walking into an orphanage and saying, "I'm going to be your dad and you're going to be my kids." That's something that God desires, that's something that God declares, that's something that God does through Jesus Christ.

What happens is as soon as God has people, God's people also have enemies, and those enemies are empowered by Satan to destroy God's people, ultimately so that they would be eradicated and that Jesus could not come through the people of God. This is about the salvation of the nations. Yes, people's lives are at stake and their eternal lives are at stake as well, because if Jesus doesn't come, there is no Savior.

Now, what we see, then, in Exodus chapter 17, is the Agagites rise up. They're a people who are intent and determined to eradicate, genocide all of God's people. All of God's people. And some of you would say, "Well, these people, I'm sure they're good people. They have good hearts. If we just give them time, they'll stop hating God's people. They'll start loving God's people." From the first appearance of the Agagites in Exodus to the days of Esther, it's been one thousand years. Patient, yes or no? Yeah.

If somebody lived next door to you and they said, "We're going to kill your whole family," and they tried and failed, and then their kids grew up, got the house, tried and failed, and then died, and then their grandkids grew up, and tried and failed, and you waited one thousand years, I think it would be reasonable to say, "I don't think they're coming around. I don't think, ultimately, this is going to be a real peaceable coexistence. Because all they do is they teach their kids to kill our kids, and if they fail, then their kids grow up and teach their grandkids to kill our kids."

It's a hatred. These are the kind of people you can't negotiate with, you can't mediate with, you can't arbitrate with. Because if you ask them, "What do you want?" "I want you dead." "Well, it's hard to find a middle ground where we can come together, because I'm voting for living."

And so you guys need to understand the context, because sometimes, we can pull back and say, "God's a cruel God. That was a long time ago. They were a primitive people. We have now evolved." C. S. Lewis calls that "Chronological snobbery." Chronological snobbery.

And so the Agagites were a people that were supposed to be eradicated in 1 Samuel 15. Again, they declared war on God's people and tried to kill them. This happens over, and over, and over. And God tells King Saul, "Get rid of the Agagites. Destroy them. Get rid of them. If they live, they're going to continue to multiply. Eventually, they're going to get an army and they're going to try and kill your descendants, so you've got to get rid of them." It's one of those situations where they pull their gun, you pull your gun. Somebody's going to get shot, so pull the trigger to protect your family.

King Saul, he sins against the Lord. He disobeys. He plunders them but he doesn't kill them all, and so the Agagites continue until, in the day of Haman—Haman, we're told repeatedly in the book of Esther, he's an Agagite. It tells us repeatedly that Mordecai and Esther are Jews. They're God's people. The war continues. It continues one thousand years into the days of Esther. And so defending oneself against the Agagites is acceptable in the eyes of God because these are people who've been trying to kill you for one thousand years.

Number two: Mordecai and Esther's decree was an exact reversal of Haman's. If you look at their decree and say, "That doesn't seem very loving and fair. It mentions women, and children, and plundering of goods." All it is, it's a direct reversal of the edict given by Haman the Agagite in chapter 3, verse 13. A careful reading of Scripture answers a lot of questions most of the time.

Over in Esther 3, Haman sent forth a decree to all the Agagites telling them what they could do to the Jews. Esther and Mordecai come along, they take the exact language of Haman's decree, and they reverse it, saying, "If the Agagites attack, God's people can defend themselves. They can defend themselves against women, and children, and they have the right to plunder goods." All this is justice. If you're going to do this, then we get to do that. We get to meet your assault with equal justice.

Number three: the violence was limited to one day to reduce injustice. It says here that they gave one day for God's people to defend themselves. It's not that this continues for weeks, or months, or years, or generations. It's not like the Hatfields and McCoys where it just goes on forever. They had a decree that said they could attack God's people on one day. God's people are given a decree saying, "You can defend yourself, but only on that day." This gets rid of vigilantism; this gets rid of an abuse of authority. This means if they attack you today, you can defend yourself today, and if tomorrow you wake up and you're very angry, you can't go out harming people.

Number four: the Bible distinguishes between killing and murder. This is important because most people don't understand the difference. The Bible in the Ten Commandments does not say, "Thou shalt not kill." It does say, "Thou shalt not murder." They're different. Haman wanted to murder Mordecai. The Agagites want to murder God's people. If God's people defend themselves, they're not murdering, they're defending, and that may include killing. But killing is different than murdering.

If someone tries to murder you and you spare your life and your family's life and the innocents, including women and children, you're not murdering. You're killing a murderer, and that's justice. That's justice. This is like a police officer gets out of their car, and all of a sudden they come under heavy fire, and they're ducking behind the door. If they return fire and they hit the person who's trying to murder them, they're not guilty of sin. That person was a murderer and they were defending themselves.

Similarly, a soldier going off to war. If someone comes upon them, ambushes them, fires upon them, first soldier to return fire is not murder. Someone is trying to murder them, they're defending themselves and that may include killing.

Now, because human life is made in the image and likeness of God, we value human life greatly, and it is sad when anyone has to die, but sometimes, the most just thing is to kill the murderer before there is atrocity for the multitudes. Sometimes the only way to protect people is by engaging evil, and that's not evil. That's holy.

Here, the decree has been sent forth. All of God's enemies who've been making plans now know, if you show up, they will defend themselves. It's very loving, right? This decree went out. Everybody knows. All the guys making plans now have an opportunity to rethink it. "Well, we were going to go slaughter them and take all their stuff, but now they can defend themselves. I think I'm going to back out of that commitment." And if you don't, the families need to be protected.

Number five: only self-defense was permitted. It doesn't say, "Go out in the streets and look for Agagites." It doesn't say that. It says, "If they show up at your house and they're trying to harm your family, you can defend yourself in that moment." That's different. It's only self-defense. That's all that it is. God's people aren't to be out looking for people to hurt; they're to defend themselves if people come to hurt them. There's a difference, right?

Number six: though defense against women and children was permitted, there is no report that it occurred. If you read the Scriptures here, it says, echoing in chapter 8 the decree given by Haman in chapter 3—in chapter 3 it said that you could attack women and children, and you could plunder their goods, and so then the reverse decree to help negate the first decree comes and it says, "And you can defend yourself against women and children and plunder their goods." But there's no report that women and children were harmed in any way.

In fact, if you jump forward to chapter 9, you can look at it this week. The body count for the men who died does not include a body count for the women or children. There's no indication, there's no evidence, in or outside of Scripture, that any women or children were harmed. But what it does permit is if a guy shows up with his wife and his kids and they're going to kill your family and steal your stuff, you can defend yourself against whoever shows up to harm you.

Number seven: God's people did not plunder their enemies. Again, the decree given to the Agagites was, "You can plunder them and steal all their stuff." And then the report is given in chapter 9 that when certain Agagites did attack the Israelites, the Israelites did not plunder their goods. You can read ahead in chapter 9. They didn't plunder. They didn't take their possessions, they didn't take anything from their estate. And what this shows you is it wasn't about the money, it wasn't about greed. It was only about self-defense. Only about self-defense.

Would you do me a favor and pray for those who are in law enforcement? Would you pray for soldiers, that they would act in ways that are just, like this? That's why we have Military Mission and we give lots of resources away to soldiers, and their families, and those in the field. We know that they are put in very difficult, hard situations, police officers and soldiers, where they're having to make these kinds of very complicated, philosophical, theological decisions in an instant, under duress, with their lives in danger.

And sometimes, those of us who are idealistic and pacifistic, we can stand back and sort of pretend that the world is a lot simpler, but it's not the world that we live in. It's the world that others live in, and we stand back to criticize.

And in this instance, God's people act in a godly way. They don't plunder their enemies. It's not about the money. They're just trying to protect their family, and then they bless the other families with the inheritance and the estate.

Number eight: God does not establish this as normative behavior. It doesn't say, you know, "Therefore, go find Agagites and bury them. Go ye and do likewise. Destroy all your enemies." This is not talking about holy war, and trying to conquer others, and incarcerate innocents. It's not doing or saying that at all. This is a very unique situation in history. This is a very complicated moment for God's people. What's at stake is their survival and the family line that leads to the coming of Jesus.

So, this is not normative. We're not to get from this, you know, "Go to the gun range, boys, and get ready for the end of the world, and tell your wife to churn more butter and fill up your crawl space with canned goods. The end is near and we're going to kill them all." That's not what I'm saying, just to be clear. Just to be clear, I'm not condoning irresponsible violence. I'm not condoning or in any way encouraging sinful harming of anyone. I'm not talking about escalating a conflict.

All I'm saying is soldiers have a right to defend themselves, police officers have a right to defend themselves, citizens have a right to defend themselves, and it's sad when they have to, but when they have to, they have to. Amen? That's exactly what's happening.

MOURNING AND REJOICING

And so what happens is in one day, you're going to see it in a moment, there is mourning and rejoicing. And when justice comes, there is simultaneously mourning and rejoicing for all those who died, and there's a big body count in chapter 9. There are funerals where mothers, and fathers, and sisters, and brothers, and wives, and girlfriends are mourning. Meanwhile,

you'll see in a moment, there are parties, and feasts, and festivals because God's people are rejoicing. When justice comes, there is simultaneously rejoicing and mourning.

So it is at the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God, lives without sin, dies on the cross in our place for our sins. As we think of that, there is mourning. We killed God. There's rejoicing. He died for us and for our sins.

So it will be upon the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to judge the living and the dead, and you'll stand before him and give an account, as will I. For some, it will be a day of mourning as they remain in the spiritual heritage of the Agagites, enemies of God, doomed for death and justice, and their eternity is a hellish funeral. For the people of God, it'll be like the spiritual descendants of Esther and Mordecai, a day of feasting, and gladness, and joy, and rejoicing. We are forgiven and our enemies of Satan, sin, and death have been forever conquered, and we now live in peace without any threat against the people of God.

WHY WERE ESTHER AND MORDECAI SUCCESSFUL MISSIONARIES?

Third question: why were Esther and Mordecai successful missionaries? Esther 8:15-17. Let me unpack this for a moment. Let me preface the reading of Scripture. Mars Hill is a missional church. We've been using that language since the mid-'90s when we started, and that is that God sends missionaries into pagan cultures to bring justice, and love, and mercy, and truth, so that people who don't know God will come to know the God of the Bible. That's a missionary.

Sometimes a missionary is intentionally sent by God's people. So, some of you, maybe you're thinking, "Okay, I want to go to Bible college or seminary. I want to qualify as a missionary. I want to be sent out by the church or a missions organization, and I want to be relocated to another place where it's a bunch of pagans that don't know Jesus so I can tell them about Jesus and plant a church." That's one way missions is done.

Sometimes the way missions is done is, in the providence of God, God's people are already scattered in pagan places, like Portland, or Albuquerque, or Seattle, hypothetically. They're already scattered in pagan places, like Orange County. And God's people are there, and they're there on divine assignment and appointment. Acts 17 says that God determines the times and the places in which we live. We're there not by happenstance, or circumstance, or chance, but by providence.

Now, Esther and Mordecai, they should have been in Jerusalem. They shouldn't have been in Susa. They're supposed to be with God's people near God's presence in the temple and instead they're living far away. But even then, God comes to be with them and uses them as he would you. Some of you are in places you should not be physically. Some of you are in places you should not be relationally, but God can meet you there and God can use you if you'll repent and grow to be a missionary, to see others meet the God of the Bible and have a life change and for a people of God to come into a place where there are not yet a people of God. We call that the church.

One way to examine mission is to look at the story of Esther and Mordecai. They're God's people in a pagan place, Persia. They're in a pagan culture. They've not revealed their identity that they worship the God of the Bible. They've sort of concealed it for a long time. And then they come out of the proverbial closet and identify themselves with God's people. And they're not doing so as clergy, they're doing so as politicians. And some of you will do this as business leaders or professors. It's a man and a woman, working together as the people of God for the glory of God and the good of God's people.

And so as we see how Esther and Mordecai behave as missionaries in culture, let's just say they're not exactly like Daniel, a counterpart. They don't start amazingly godly from beginning to end. They start off like some of us: pretty compromised, a bit worldly, and not super impressive. But, in the grace of God, they grow and mature and they become very gifted, utilized, mature missionaries.

Read with me, chapter 8. "Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king." And Mordecai gets a wardrobe upgrade. Alright? He gets to go shopping. "In royal robes of blue and white." I mean, he's got a chariot now with rims. I mean, he's rolling hip-hop style. I mean, he's looking good. "With a great gold crown and a robe of fine linen and purple," which is the color of royalty.

"And the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced." He's a rock star. He's like a war hero. Everybody knows this guy. These are now the two most famous believers in the whole Persian Empire, Esther and Mordecai. I mean, Twitter's blowing up with them, they're on the cover of *Time* magazine, they're getting all the late-night talk show interviews. They've gone from nobody to somebody, from poor to rich, from unknown to well-known. Everything's changed for them.

"The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor." God's people, it's a holiday, right? Somebody find a kazoo, get a casserole. We're the people of God, we need to have a potluck. It's a holiday for them. "And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was," what? "Gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday."

Again, when justice comes, there's mourning for the unrepentant, there's rejoicing for the people of God. There's no excuse for those who died, because the decree was given: "Don't attack God's people. They will defend themselves," yet some remained unrepentant, continued forth with their evil, and paid the ultimate price, giving their own life. And God's people are rejoicing. "We were spared in the grace of God."

"And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them." There it is. Careful reading of the text. Don't read it too fast. It sounds like a minor detail, but it's of major importance. "Many people." How many people? Many people.

How many people does God want to save? Many people. How many people does God want to bring to Mars Hill? Many people. How many churches does God want to plant? Many churches. How many Community Groups does God want us to have? Many Community Groups. How many people does God want in those Community Groups? Many people. How many deacons does God want? Many people. How many elders does God want? Many people. Friends, again, only two things are going to be entering the kingdom of God: Jesus and his people. Many people. Many people. That's God's heart. Mars Hill, that's my heart. I hope, I trust, I pray that's your heart.

"Many people identified themselves with the Jews." Now, some may have just identified culturally. "Okay, we've got a Jewish vice president, we've got a Jewish queen. The Jews get to kill their enemies. Yay, Jews!" You know? They may have just culturally identified for less than spiritual reasons. But at least some, let's say many, got converted. They started worshiping the God of Esther and Mordecai. "Tell us about your God who saved your life. Tell us about your God who changed your character, because we've seen you change. Tell us about your God who has you treat us in a way that our king doesn't. He uses us and you love us. Tell us about this God. We want to know him."

The question for you this day is: who are you evangelizing? If you're a Christian, you're a missionary. You're sent into school, or work, or business, or neighborhood, and you're there as a missionary. Some of you say, "But, I'm not in vocational ministry." Neither were Esther and Mordecai, but they were effective missionaries because they were in the pagan culture.

God calls you into the pagan culture, and to be a missionary is to be simultaneously faithful to the Word of God and to be in the context of pagan people. If you're only in the context of pagan people but you're not faithful to the Word of God, you're not a good missionary, you're a sinner. And if you're only faithful to God but you're not in the world with the pagan people, you're a sinner of a different kind. The first is just a wicked rebel; the second is a self-righteous religious person. God wants you to be faithful to the Scriptures and absolutely involved in the lives of the culture in which the pagan people live so that many might come to know the God of the Bible.

HOW CULTURE CHANGES

Now, what I'm going to do now is I'm going to explode a very common evangelical myth and give you an alternative for how culture changes. Missionaries are concerned about two things: people meeting the God of the Bible, and cultures changing. It's both things. Right? Because let's say you have a culture where women are oppressed and mistreated. If everybody becomes a Christian, but all the women are still oppressed and mistreated, that's not good enough. You want people to meet the God of the Bible and the culture that surrounds them to change to reflect the love, the grace, the mercy, and the Father heart of the God of the Bible.

Okay, so how does this happen with Esther and Mordecai? Now, the prevailing evangelical cultural myth is this: that culture is the outflow of the individual human heart. It's a prevalent myth, and it's particularly powerful in the west where we tend to believe this narrative myth that one person fully devoted to a cause can change the whole world.

It doesn't matter if in one generation it's the Lone Ranger, and in another generation it's Rambo, or in another generation it's Iron Man. It doesn't matter. It's a prevailing cultural myth. The one person with a heart fully devoted to a cause can change the world, because change starts here and it infects and affects everyone and everything. Not true. Not true. See, Mordecai had been wailing, weeping, mourning, protesting, fasting, praying, sackcloth and ashes. Nothing changed until he got into a different cultural position.

What happens then is some say, "Well, all we need is more hearts to change and then the culture will change. Let's just do mass evangelism and not worry about the social structures, just the individual hearts." Well, the problem is that the culture didn't change because people were in agreement with Xerxes. The truth is people were in disagreement with Xerxes in large numbers. When he gave the permission for Haman to send forth the decree of genocide, we read in chapter 3, verse 15 of Esther, "The city of Susa was thrown into confusion." Chapter 4, verse 3: "In every province, where the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes."

Mordecai's individual human heart was broken and the culture didn't change. God's people's collective heart was broken and the culture didn't change. The Persians who lived in the city of Susa were broken and the culture didn't change.

And then others come along and say, "Well, then we need to change the human hearts by affecting law and by imposing laws that force people to act in moral ways so that they'll have a heart change." And the law never changed. It was the Law of the Medes and the Persians. The decree of death was never eradicated. Another more just law was brought along to help negate it, but the law was unchanged.

I'll tell you a few things about law as well. Number one: law does not change people, law follows people. Here's how it works: everybody's doing something, even if it's wrong. We then vote for somebody who's going to represent us and make it right. That's it. And then Christians get all frustrated. "It's wrong!" Yeah, that's what the majority of people want. That's why they voted for the person who changed the law to permit what God forbids, but that's what sinners do. And so laws tend not to change people, laws tend to follow people who are unchanged.

Number two: even good laws are disobeyed. I'll tell you what: do you guys know this? The first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, more than six hundred laws. Perfect, good, God-given laws. You know what we do? Disobey them. Even if you get good law, there's defiance against it. That's why, even in culture, if a good law is passed, people don't obey it. Even God's people don't obey good laws.

So, how does cultural change come? Let me transition to a sociological perspective. Some ask, "Pastor Mark, how come you're not more involved politically? How come you're not, you know, one who's a moral crusader? How come you don't, you know, go to war on certain issues?" Well, it's not because I'm a coward and it's not because I'm afraid of controversy, right? My job is to teach the Bible, and to be a good missionary, seeing people meet Jesus, and I need to pastor people regardless of their political affiliation or persuasion.

In addition, I do want to effect cultural change, and I'm not afraid to say that. And I think sometimes, God's people need to stand up for just laws and they need to vote out of biblical conviction, but I want us to be wise and I want us to look at things from, I would say, a more powerful, biblical, gospel perspective. Okay?

And I'm going to take this from a man named James Davison Hunter. He wrote a book called *To Change the World*. He's a sociologist, and he is a Christian, and he's looking historically at how cultural change happens. And he says that it is not the majority who define and shape culture, it's a powerful minority; that in the history of the western world, hundreds, maybe thousands of people—I'm summarizing a very complicated argument—are responsible for the totality of what is western civilization.

He goes on to illustrate his points by saying things like, "Most Christians would agree that the culture's getting worse, right? The way it treats women with pornography, and sex trafficking, and sexual assault. You'd say it's getting worse, that the murder of the unborn, the fact that 50 million people can't vote this election because they didn't make it out of the womb. That culture's getting worse and darker, and what's on TV, and what's in movies, and what's on the Internet, and what's happening to children, and how men are irresponsible. It's getting worse, yet the majority of Americans would say, 'I believe in God. I believe the Bible is God's Word.' The majority would say they believe in the God of the Bible, and the question is, well, how can the majority believe one thing and everything becomes worse?"

Conversely, he will use certain minority groups, by percentage of population, and show that they have inordinate influence. So, in the United States of America, about 3 percent of people are Jewish, but they're powerful. What percentage of people, according to the more recent Gallup polls, do you think identify themselves as homosexual? 3.4 percent. That's not a huge number of people, but that's a very influential community of people.

And so he uses these illustrations to point out this fact: it's not one human heart that changes culture. It's not a whole bunch of human hearts that change culture. People shape culture depending upon where they're positioned in culture. He uses this analogy: we each have different financial capital, right? Some of you, your net worth is far greater than others. As it is financially, so it is socially. Some of you have much social capital, some of you have little social capital. And what he's saying is it's not just one person, but where they're positioned culturally who is able to effect the most change.

I'll give you an analogy, a simple analogy. If you've been around Mars Hill, you've heard it. Many of you are new so I need to repeat it. I went to India some years ago to meet with a church planter of ours we've partnered with for many years, a very great man of God, and we got in a rickshaw, which is kind of like a car made by Jack Kevorkian out of a bicycle with a motor on it, okay? And so we get in a rickshaw, and we're following the path of this river.

And the river starts toward its head more up toward a mountain, and it's pretty clean up there, but then the further you drive along this river for hours, and hours, and hours, it gets dirtier, darker, grosser, and stinkier, because it's open sewers. Everybody flushes their toilet, it flows through an open sewer in the street, and goes where? Into the river. And people throw their garbage in the river. Anything you don't want, you're like, "Man, this is nasty. I don't want this near my house," you throw it in the river. You're like, "Oh, it's gone." There are dead animals in the river, people are going to the bathroom in the river, trash is going in the river.

What this means is as you follow this river downstream, pretty soon it does not smell well. It's like Satan's breath. I mean, that's what it smelled like. I don't know what else to compare it—it was horrible. I was like, "Oh my gosh. This is horrible." And people live there. Culture is like that. Alright? It has a source that it flows from, and it flows downstream.

Now, to use my analogy, if you wanted to clean up that river, the key would be to start as far upstream as possible, right? If you're down at the end of the river saying, "Oh, I gotta fish all of this garbage and sewage out of the river," it's never going to change, and everyone along the way is going to be sick. So, to effect change, you get as far upstream as you can, and try to stop that flow of filth. So it is culturally. So it is culturally.

Esther and Mordecai were downstream. She's an orphan, he's a single guy raising a young girl with just a regular old job. They couldn't change the culture. They could fast, they could mourn, they could protest. Others could fast, and mourn, and protest, but God's people needed to get upstream and change things at the highest levels. If you want to change law, have people who love Jesus be the professors at the law schools who train the lawyers who go into practice and become the judges. Upstream.

Similarly, I'll use another analogy. Let's say, hypothetically, there's a suburban grandmother who doesn't like rap because it denigrates women. She can get very frustrated, but the truth is she won't effect change unless she can get upstream, or maybe her grandson who owns a record company, if she can drag him to church and he meets Jesus and repents, he has an opportunity to now change what is distributed and sent out on the airways.

Culture is made upstream in cities. That's why we've heard repeatedly that they were in Susa, they were in Susa, they were in Susa, the most powerful, affluent city in the world. Cities are places where there are universities, there are lawyers, there is banking, there are culture-shapers and makers. It's why culture, and education, and art, and transportation, it emanates in the city and then it goes out to the rural areas.

It's why if you're a great musician and you live on a farm somewhere and you want to make it in country-western music, you have to move to a city, because that's where the clubs are, and that's where the record labels are, and that's where the media is, and culture goes from that place.

The river doesn't flow two ways. It doesn't flow downstream—upstream. It flows upstream—downstream. Cities are upstream. Cities are two things: density and diversity. More people, more kinds of people. And the infrastructure for transportation and communication is in the cities. They're in Susa, a city, they get upstream, it's the queen and the vice president, and then change happens and people's lives are spared.

It's why Paul, in the New Testament, as you read the book of Acts, his missionary journeys are from city, to city, to city, to city, to city, to city. Wayne Meeks, Rodney Stark, ancient historians, they'll investigate this and they'll say he avoided the rural areas. In the early days of the church, the "pagan" literally meant the one who lives on the farm. But the people who lived in the cities tended to be Christians. They were trying to get upstream and make a cultural difference. What we see with Mordecai and Esther is this: getting upstream allows God's people to effect change that would otherwise not be possible.

So, let me say this: you need to examine how upstream you are. What influence, what authority, what opportunity has God given you to effect change at whatever point you live in the river? Along that continuum of culture, where are you and what change could you effect there?

Number two: how could you get further upstream? Some of you don't need to go into vocational ministry, you need to be bankers, and lawyers, and politicians. You need to be musicians, you need to run record labels, you need to do the nightly news, you need to be the reporters who are telling the stories about God's people. You've got to try and get as far upstream as you possibly can.

And for those of you who are upstream and you don't yet know God, or you're one of God's people, but you've lived in the closet because you resist the kind of opposition that could come to you as Mordecai and Esther did, will you come to repentance and know that God has provisionally placed you upstream? Not for your own wealth, not for your own fame, not for your own comfort—that's what Haman thought, and look at what happened to Haman. He's crucified in his own yard because he got upstream but he didn't love God and he didn't serve God's people.

If God has placed you upstream, will you go public with your faith and will you fight for justice? Will you give a voice to the voiceless? Will you empower the powerless? Will you use your money and your opportunity to do good for all people, but firstly for God's people? That's the question.

And Mars Hill, this is why we plant churches in cities. It's strategic, and it's missiological, and it's biblical, and it's why I'm encouraging, I'm exhorting, I'm inviting you to raise your kids to get upstream, to take your opportunities to get upstream. And when you get there, don't act like Haman and get offended because it didn't go the way you wanted. Act like Mordecai and Esther and do what's right in the eyes of God and good for the people of God.

Mars Hill, some of you are very powerful, some of you are very rich, some of you are very gifted, very talented, and very successful. Those are all gifts that God has given you. "To whom much is given, much is expected."

Secondly, some of you are on your way. There are many young people and new Christians at Mars Hill. I want you to see your vocation as part of your mission. I want you to study hard, to work hard. I want you to grow your business. I want you to maximize your opportunities.

And for those of us who are praying for them and serving them, let us not judge them. Let's wait to see what they do with the money that they receive, and the power that they enjoy, and the position that they are given. Perhaps we could just have another few missionaries like Mordecai and Esther in our own ranks.

And ultimately, this all points to the Lord Jesus who himself comes into a pagan culture on the world. He leaves heaven and comes to earth. He joins a people, he speaks a language, he goes to feasts and festivals. He's without sin but he's a missionary, calls people to repentance, and they try to kill him, and they do kill him, and he dies.

And it's a day of mourning and a day of rejoicing because we killed God but he saved us. And then Jesus rises from the great city of Jerusalem. It's interesting that Jesus started rural, but to really go upstream, he had to go to Jerusalem. He died, he rose, he ascended into heaven, and right now Jesus is as upstream as it gets, Mars Hill.

JESUS IS A BETTER MISSIONARY

Jesus is a better missionary. People could not save themselves, so Mordecai acted as their earthly savior, but Jesus serves as the heavenly Savior for sinners who cannot save themselves. Mordecai was sentenced to death but rose up to save people from death and rule like a king, but Jesus actually died and rose up to save people from eternal death and rule as the King of kings.

Mordecai wrote down a message of life and had it translated into many languages and sent to the people, but Jesus has sent his perfect Scripture and had it translated into thousands of languages.

Mordecai allowed God's enemies to be killed for their sin, but Jesus came to die for our sin, though we were his enemies. The death of enemies allowed God's people to live, and Jesus died in the place of his enemies that we might live. The sentence of death could not be reversed, but it was rescinded for some. Likewise, through sin, all die, but through Jesus, some have their death sentence rescinded.

Death came to Persia only to those who did not turn from their sinful ways, as the problem was not racial or national but moral and spiritual. Likewise, Jesus only destroys the unrepentant and will forgive anyone and everyone for anything and everything from every race and nation.

Without Mordecai, people would have endured deadly wrath, and without Jesus, people will endure deadly, eternal wrath. And just as God's enemies were destroyed in one day, so will all of God's enemies be destroyed on the one day of the second coming of our great God and Savior, the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father God, I pray for us as a people. God, first I pray for those who are not yet your people, that as we saw in the days of Esther, many became your people. May today, and every day, many become your people at Mars Hill Church and in all the churches that love you. Lord God, we pray for our enemies that, Lord God, you would allow us to love them, to influence them, to evangelize them. God, we pray for the law enforcement officers and the soldiers who defend our freedoms and liberties. We pray for their families as well. And Lord God, help us to be good missionaries as we go after cities, hard places where there are not a lot of God's people. Allow us to be good missionaries who are faithful to Scripture and connected to culture. Allow us to get as far upstream as we possibly can, to make as big a difference as we can so that as many as possible would be saved and as much cultural change as is possible would occur. God, it's a sober word, but it's a hopeful word. Everything changed for God's people in Susa, and so, God, we find much comfort that even though the day may be dark, it's certainly no darker than a death sentence for all of your people. And even though we may struggle with leadership, our leaders are nowhere near as horrendous as Xerxes and Haman. That Lord God, your people upstream can make a difference, so we pray for your people upstream: the rulers, the kings, the authorities, those who run businesses, and companies, and media outlets, and universities. And we pray for your people, Lord God, that love you that they would get upstream and that they would do good in the name of Jesus, amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.