

Who are Your People?

Esther 8

Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 22 October 2023, AM Service.

God is so gracious... isn't he?

What immense patience he shows his people.

In Exodus, the Israelites began to miraculously grow in number... God had promised Abraham to make them a great nation.

And as a result, Egypt feared them. A new pharaoh arose that had forgotten Joseph... who had served as the second in their kingdom...

And having forgotten Joseph, what did the Egyptians do? They sought to kill all the male children and enslave the rest.

The Israelites cried out to God... and God heard them, redeemed them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

And how did they react? They resented him for it. They complained in the wilderness because of the hardship. They said: let's set a leader up of our own choosing who can lead us back to Egypt... we were better off there.

But God graciously and patiently led them to Canaan.

How did they react? They were in fear of the other nations... forgetting the nature of God.

And so God disciplined them for forty years in the desert.

But he brought them back... And he gave them a land flowing with milk and honey... he defeated their enemies by his own hand...

And how did they react? They did what was right in their own eyes... They forgot the God who had poured out blessing upon them.

So God drove them into exile...

Some of them, such as Ezra and Nehemiah repented, and returned... after the 70 years which had been prophesied.

But some of them chose to remain away. They preferred the rule of a king of the other nations.

And yet what have we seen? God is still patient with them.

Next week, we'll see how he brings judgement to his enemies for their treatment of his people. He uses the Jews to do so. We'll pick up some of the strands that we can already see at the end of chapter 7 and this chapter as well.

But today I want to focus on the first major element of God's grace to his wayward people here: although he hasn't led them out of Persia, he has already lifted them up from poverty to riches... from mourning to joyfulness.

And yet I ask you: what is notably absent in this chapter... and even in the feast of Purim in chapter 9, for those of you who have read ahead? What is notably absent? The mention of God.

And in what way is it notably absent? Or in other words, in contrast with Ezra and Nehemiah, and even Joseph and Daniel, what do you expect to see, but don't see any of?

The worship and adoration of God for his redeeming hand... the celebration of God's work for an undeserving people.

There are a couple of ways the text kicks us in the gut in this respect.

First, we have Esther and Mordecai's interactions with Achashverosh.

Esther throws herself at the feet of her king... imploring him with tears to counteract the evil of Haman... There's a strange parallel to Nehemiah being sad in the presence of Artaxerxes...

But Nehemiah had already cried out for help to God first. Esther hadn't.

But what's particularly interesting here is that Esther also looks to Achashverosh to counteract the evil of Haman.

There's no mention of the evil of Achashverosh.

No... he is presented here as the benefactor... the one who facilitates the redemption of the Jews from their death sentence.

But the cracks are showing aren't they. Esther asks him to solve the problem, but his hands are tied by *his own laws!*

And yet as much as he submits to those laws on the one hand, he works to undermine them, as well as his own authority, on the other.

How? Well, he hands his signet ring to Mordecai, and tells him to do as he pleases. And whatever Mordecai comes up with, will be done. That's not really showing an interest in what happens in his empire. Or in the intent of the function of the law itself.

And so that's what Mordecai does, writing a law which completely undermined the previous law, effectively legalized civil war in the empire.

This is the king they're wanting to serve? This is the king they prefer over God? Really?

And as if that wasn't bad enough, the second way this text highlights a problem is the confusion regarding what it means to be a Jew.

You may not have picked this up from verse 6, but for someone who was content to completely give up her Jewishness earlier in the book, Esther has changed her tune pretty significantly. Once they were not her people, but now she 'can't endure' it if evil or destruction comes to them (she says it twice).

Born a Jew... denied her Jewishness to become Persian (in contrast to Daniel and his friends)... and now lays claim to them once more.

But congregation, this is a bitter pill. Why? Because the Jews were only called Jews because they were associated with the line of Judah.

What does the name Judah mean? "Praise of God".

And what had happened to the kingdom of Judah... they were driven into exile and currently enslaved to a foreign nation for their sin against their God.

Rather than praising God, we have Mordecai the Jew... "Praise of God" whose name means worshipper of Marduk.

And he is being lifted up in the empire of Persia. To the same position as Haman in the empire... And there is great joy... but no praise of God... not mention of his name.

Implication: Congregation, we need to be very careful when we read a book like Esther. You know this for lots of reasons. But allow me to point out one more: When God gives a group in the bible wealth, and peace, and comfort, that does not necessarily mean they're in his favour.

For all the examples of godly people who are made wealthy by God for their faithfulness, there are countless others who are unfaithful, or blatantly in rebellion against God, and yet gain power and influence and prosperity.

Why does God do this? Well there are lots of ways to answer this question... but given where we are in this book, Romans 2:4 is particularly helpful... Paul has just spoken about how all men are utterly depraved and pursue the passions of the flesh... God gives them over to their desires... And then he says this: Verse 3: *"Do you think this, O man... that you will escape the judgement of God? Or do you despise the riches of his goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"*

Judgement will come for all men... and when he gives good things to wicked men, is that a reward? Far from it... it is supposed to drive them to repentance and thankfulness to the God who gives every good thing.

I think it's fair to say that we can observe this in all men. Desiring to receive good things from God and yet not thanking him for it. You see this at non-Christian weddings... great expressions of joy... but God is notably absent in the celebrations. Celebrations of the birth of a child... but no praise to God for new life... Celebrations of graduations and promotions and retirements and paying off a mortgage and on and on... and no mention of the God who gives these benefits.

And if this is true of unbelievers... how much worse do you think a lack of thankfulness is for those who should know better? The people of God themselves?

Great celebration... but no worship... Great reason to celebrate... but no praise of God.

For some of us, it's hard enough to remember to go down on our knees when we're going through terrible stress and hardship.

But how much more difficult is it to spend appropriate time to praise him for all the good he does in our lives? How quick are we to forget to celebrate him when things are going swimmingly?

How often have we cried out to God for healing, or peace, or a lifting of a heavy burden... and he has graciously answered our prayers... and then, having received such an answer, it takes barely a moment... before we simply get on with the rest of our lives. And move onto the next item on our shopping list.

God had technically and practically brought the exile of the Jews to an end. An edict had gone out to all the Jews to do what? To return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple—the place of God's worship... the place where he dwelt among his people... the place where they could come into his presence with sacrifices of praise and joy.

But there is no mention here of the intention of the Jews throughout the empire to do that. Great joy yes, but no mention of God.

And yet, before we're too judgmental here congregation, I would put it to you that we have the same heart as they did. This is one of the reasons why, even in our day, there is such a disinterest in the Sabbath day and in church attendance.

People think the primary reason to go to church is what they get out of it. And yes, Christians should certainly get something out of it. Why? Because God pours out his Spirit upon them... because he feeds them with the bread of life... because he encourages them with the fellowship of the saints and the Sacraments.

But that's not the primary reason the people of God assemble before his throne.

What is the primary reason? To worship him... to adore him... to celebrate him... to make much of his holy name.

Why do we do that? Because he is worthy of it. Because every good thing you have experienced this past week was given at his hand. Because he is your confidence even in the hardships... that they are temporary *and* that they are not futile... but that even through them God bears the fruit of righteousness in your lives and hearts.

You feel delighted by God's goodness? You praise him with all the saints... you feel weighed down and burdened by life... you find people hard... and your own sin too much for you... You praise the God who has lifted those burdens from you and placed them on Christ... that though your soul feels downcast, you are welcomed before the throne of grace and your heavenly father loves you, his adopted child.

And if you are a Christian, the worst that you can feel right now, is the worst you will ever feel. Because this life of pain and struggle will give way to an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. And so you are drawn, by the Spirit himself, to come and praise your God in the midst of your hurt.

Brothers and sisters, we are not to God like the earth is to the sun... that we just revolve around him enjoying his light and don't give anything back. We also aren't to God as a car is to a gas station... that we do our business until we need a refill...

God is the very reason for our existence in the first place. Our reason for joy... our reason for hope... our reason for love.

His work for us to provide salvation, not from Haman, but from death and the Devil... his work to save us from our own sin in the person of Christ, is deserving of an eternity of worship and adoration.

Is this your attitude to your God?

Is this what the world sees of you on a daily basis?

Is this why you are even here this morning? To hunger and thirst after him... to celebrate him... to praise his most Holy name?

I trust that it is.

And what a delight that he has set aside an entire day for us to worship him with. What a blessing.

May we use it for his glory.

Amen.