

The Gospel According to Esther

The Shadow Sovereign-Part 9

Esther 9:16-10:3

My wife and I took a quick trip this past summer to Kill Devil Hills at Kitty Hawk. It happens to be the place where a monument stands celebrating mankind's first flight in what would become known as the airplane.

Two protestant pastors kids had solved the riddle of flight – figuring out what was called wing warping – a system that manipulated the edges of the wings – using the wind to elevate the plane or descend; to turn or fly straight.

On December 17, 1903, Orville Wright won the toss of the coin and climbed aboard their homemade craft – created in their bicycle shop back home. The airplane coasted down the sand bar on a wooden rail and then rose into the air for all of 12 seconds. It had traveled 120 feet.

While we were there, I picked up the 500 page biography of Orville and Wilbur Wright and just recently finished it. It's called, The Bishops Boys – and it catalogs the invention of these two creative engineers as well as the years they spent in court defending their patents.

One of the things that intrigued me as I read the book was the fact that their father was originally quoted as saying that mankind was not meant by God to fly.

Just 6 years later, he climbed aboard with Orville at the controls. They would stay in the air for nearly 7 minutes circling a field below. The boys had been concerned about their father's reception of their invention – in fact; he had never asked to fly with them before. But at one point during the flight, their 81 year old father leaned close to his son's ear and shouted above the combined roar of the engine and

propellers these unforgettable words, "Higher, Orville, higher."ⁱ

Now, on a ninety foot hill stands a 60 foot high monument to the memory of Orville and Wilbur Wright – and their invention which, in many respects, changed our world forever.

I personally think it's a great idea to build monuments and memorials. It's a good thing to set aside seasons to specifically remember and rejoice.

Like Thanksgiving – a time originally set aside by the Governor of Massachusetts to give thanks to God for His providence and His preservation of the colonists in the New World.ⁱⁱ

We have added to that day other moments to remember and reflect.

Our country is dotted with memorials and calendar events dedicated to moments long past; the sacrifice of our veterans; the Holocaust Museum and the sacrifices of World War II; the efforts of past presidents like Lincoln and Washington and Jefferson.

These special days and beautiful monuments give our *past* due significance – and because of that, provide better perspective on our *present*.

There are moments worth remembering.

The last few paragraphs in the Scroll of Esther are nothing more or less than the establishment of a Jewish Thanksgiving Day celebration.

Esther and Mordecai weren't about to let the narrow escape of the Jewish people go unnoticed by future generations.

And get this – what they established nearly 500 years before the birth of Christ is still being observed by the Jewish people to this day.

It's called the Feast of Purim.

If you'll turn back to Esther and look at *chapter 9*, you'll notice that the memorial began, really, as a spontaneous celebration – *verse 17 of Esther chapter 9* tells us that after the fighting stops and the Jewish people are rescued from certain death throughout the kingdom, feasting begins.

Notice the latter part of *verse 17* – Ezra comments that *feasting and rejoicing* basically broke out all over the kingdom.

The war was over . . . their lives were spared. It was literally bedlam with celebration.

Like the celebration that spilled into the streets after the news hit the airwaves that World War II had just ended, people danced and laughed and hugged each other – total strangers – it didn't matter.

Perhaps you've seen that classic photograph of the crowd at Times Square just after the news was delivered . . . in all the hubbub a sailor grabbed a young nurse in his arms who had just come from the hospital and planted one on her – total strangers.

And that was just fine for two reasons: one, because the war was over and, two, because she wasn't my daughter . . . it was okay.

We frankly can't imagine the euphoria of the end of life threatening war unless you've lived through it.

Mordecai defines what will become a holiday tradition down in *verse 21*, *obliging the Jews to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar* (that's the month of March) . . . v. 22. *Because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and it was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food (or gifts) to one another and gifts to the poor.*

It was actually two days of celebration – March 14th for those living throughout the kingdom – and March 15th for those living in cities that were walled – which would have included Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ

This was Thanksgiving and Christmas all rolled into one celebration.

It was their day of deliverance.

The Book of Esther would become a national monument to Jewish deliverance, and the Feast of Purim would become a national holiday.

I found it interesting that during World War II the Nazi's hated any mention of the Book of Esther – for obvious reasons.

In fact, one historian recorded this little side note that if a Jew arrived at one of the concentration

camps in the possession of the Book of Esther, that Jew was immediately put to death.^{iv}

The Nazi's wanted no message of hope or deliverance mentioned inside the death camps.

Still, many of the inmates of Auschwitz, Dachau and Treblinka produced written copies of the Book of Esther from memory and then huddled together, reading it quietly in secret during the Feast days of Purim.^v

There were times to rejoice – there were better days to remember . . . even inside a camp that had marked them for death.

What a convicting thing it is to consider a concentration camp as a context for remembering and rejoicing – with tenacious hope and trust in an invisible God.

As I've studied this Book over these past few months, I have found in the Book of Esther wonderful analogies and illustrations of the gospel.

I'll simply call our study, "The Gospel According to Esther." It's a wonderful gospel illustration which leads us to ultimately remember our deliverance from eternal death; a gospel which leads us to rejoice in that coming, final, eternal reversal – when God makes everything right and new.

1. A Commoner Becomes a Queen

The first thing that struck me, early in this study, was the fact that a commoner could become a queen.

For the first time in Persian history, the King reverses centuries of tradition and allows the crown to rest on the head of a common peasant.

An orphan, a foreigner – a child of the exiles no less, becomes the bride of the King.

Is that great or what?

We, fallen sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, as C.S. Lewis so poetically described us – common sinners alienated from God are born again by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8).

We are adopted as sons and daughters into the family of God – given full rights and privileges as if we were of the same biological family – *adopted to sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself according to the kind intention of His will. (Ephesians 1:5)*

And then, if you can imagine it, in the future we will be elevated and crowned as the bride of Christ – our future destiny is to reign with Him in His coming kingdom (*2 Timothy 2:12*) and to reign with Him throughout all of eternity (*Revelation 22:5*).

I need to remind myself, I'm not preaching today to commoners. I'm preaching to royalty. I'm not encouraging peasants – I'm expounding the word to princes and princesses – future Kings and Queens.

What happened to Esther will happen to every one of you.

There's a coming day of final and ultimate reversal!

- One day you're gonna lay aside the common clothes of mortality and put on the royal robes of immortality;
- You're gonna move out of houses made with bricks and sticks and plaster and plastic and move into a home made out of jewels built on shimmering gold;
- One day you're gonna lay down your burdens of failure and imperfections and pick up a glorified body that's sinless and perfected in holiness;
- One day you're gonna put away sorrow and sadness and enter into His courts with praise and never have to leave;
- A day is coming when you'll put off fear and uncertainty as you speak to your invisible King to that day when you look directly without hesitation and with perfect love and confidence into His face.

Why? Because you've been chosen . . . a commoner . . . to be wedded to the King!

2. The Irrevocable Edict of Death

The second analogy that strikes me from this Gospel according to Esther is bound up in the edict of death.

The king has allowed that wicked Haman to publish a decree of death. It is an irrevocable decree.

So likewise, all of humanity is under an irrevocable edict of death.

The Bible says, It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment. (Hebrews 9:27)

I'm also struck by the fact that the Jewish people during the days of Esther were not condemned to die because of what they had done. They were condemned to die because of who they were.

They were Jews. It was as simple as that. And that alone carried the death penalty in Persia.

They didn't have to commit some list of crimes or really wicked deeds in order to fall under judgment – they simply had to belong to the Jewish race.

So today, all of humanity is under the edict of death. You don't have to do bad things to fall under it.

The murderer and the moral man will experience the same thing; the good person and the bad person – the educated and the wealthy stand on level ground with the illiterate and the poor.

The graveyards are a silent testimony to the impartiality of this irrevocable edict.

God signed into law the edict – “***The wages of sin is death***” (*Romans 6:23*).

The paycheck for simply belonging to a fallen human race is death. And as far as I can tell, the death rate lately is 1 out of 1.

Another analogy in this edict of death is seen in the fact that under this edict the Jews were unable to defend themselves. They were literally defenseless.

And the Persian Pony express galloped throughout the kingdom with the news – if you belong to the Jewish people, you are condemned to die!

There was no hope.

So also the edict of death has been delivered to the world – written on the heart of every living person – if you belong to the human race, you are condemned to die.

There isn't any secret way out – there isn't any escape clause – the edict of death will be carried out on us all.

I read recently of Oliver Winchester and his wife Sarah who lived in New Haven, Connecticut. Oliver Winchester was the inventor of the Winchester rifle, the first true repeating rifle, and it was put to great use by the Union Army during the Civil War. Government and private contracts made him incredibly wealthy – almost beyond belief. Four years later, they gave birth to a little girl named Annie, but the baby died when about two weeks old. Sarah was so shattered that she withdrew into herself and nearly lost her mind.

Several years later, Oliver contracted tuberculosis and died. Sarah became heir to the vast fortune, but no amount of money could remove her grief. At a friend's suggestion, Sarah sought to contact her deceased husband through a spiritist/necromancer. During the session, the medium informed Sarah that

her husband was in the room and had told her that the family had been cursed because of the Winchester rifle and the spirits are seeking vengeance. He also told her that she needed to move to a remote location and build a house for the spirits who had fallen in battle from the rifle. He told her, through the medium that if she never stopped building the house she would live. And if she stopped, she would die.

Sarah sold her home in New Haven, moved west with her fortune and bought a home that was under construction on 162 acres of land. She bought it all and then threw away the building plans. For 36 years her construction crew built and rebuilt, altered and changed and constructed one section of the house after another. The sounds of hammers and saws sounded day and night. Railway cars brought in supplies, and every morning Sarah met with the foreman to sketch out new rooms.

Rooms were added to rooms, wings were added to wings, and levels were turned into towers and peaks. Staircases even led to nowhere; doors opened to nothing and closets opened to blank walls. Hallways even doubled back upon them as the house became a vast, expensive maze, designed to both house and confuse the evil spirits that tormented her mind.

Sarah Winchester depleted her fortune by building and rebuilding, remodeling and renovating her vast, confusing, sprawling, unplanned mansion. And on the night of September 4, 1922, after another conference session in her séance room, Sarah Winchester went to her bedroom and died in her sleep at the age of 83.

She had believed that as long as she continued building, she would stay alive. She was wrong.^{vi}

Mankind is busy with hammers and saws – playing, enterprising, entertaining, eating, marrying, parenting, educating, working, investing, planning – and all the while trying to drown out the edict of the inevitable.

One journal article recently admitted that the health industry is passionate about one thing – and it wasn't just about living a healthier life – it was an all out attempt to avoid death.

Mankind is racing around . . . but it is merely racing to keep its appointment with death.

This is the king's verdict. There isn't a higher court to appeal – there is no jury to convince – there is no judge to influence – there is no loophole in the law of irrevocable death.

3. The Intercession of Esther

But then comes a ray of hope.

There is another analogy in this Gospel of Esther.

After 3 days of solitude, Esther suddenly appears without any introduction. Suddenly, standing in the presence of the King she intercedes on behalf of her people.

She willingly risks her life to save the life of her own people.

I discovered that many Jewish Rabbis and scholars have believed that the three days of solitude were connected mysteriously to the three days of Jonah in the whale.

Jewish tradition has taught for centuries that the dead will come to life after three days from the start of the final judgment. They base this on a misinterpretation of *Hosea the prophet's words in chapter 6, verse 2 – After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.*^{vii}

Properly understood, it provides a wonderful picture of the coming death and resurrection of Christ.

After three days in the tomb – experiencing the wrath and judgment of God the Father – not merely risking His life, but literally giving His life, He now stands before God the Father, interceding on our behalf.

Martin Luther the reformer wrote about this same gospel analogy, and I quote, "On the third day after judgment transpired on the cross, Jesus Christ arose, guaranteeing safety to enter God's presence to all who reach out in faith to touch the scepter which is in the shape of a cross."^{viii}

It's true isn't it? The Father gladly receives the petition of the Son and those who come through Him.

Jesus the interceder says in *John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father except by me."*

4. The Everlasting Edict of Life

There is another analogy in the Gospel according to Esther – it is the edict of life!

The writer of Hebrews said that Jesus is *able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He - Christ – always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25).*

You see, earlier I quoted a verse, but I quoted only the first part of it – ***For the wages of sin is death*** – that's the irrevocable edict of death; but the verse goes on, doesn't it? ***But . . .***

That's an important conjunction isn't it? But . . .

In fact, if you're talking to someone, what comes after they say, "but", is what really matters.

Your boss calls you in and says, "That was a great job, but . . ."

Your girlfriend says, "I really enjoy being with you and all, but . . ." You know what that means, don't you? It means you are now free to move about the country.

Your child's elementary school teacher calls you on the phone and says, "We really enjoy having little Hiroshima in our classroom, but . . . the devastation that follows."

You see, you're immediately clued in by that little word, "But."

There was nothing more that I dreaded when I was in the fourth grade than to hear my mother answer the telephone some evening and hear her say, "Well, hello Mrs. Jolly."

Mrs. Jolly was such a tattletale and I knew what was coming – an edict of death!

Maybe for you it was a client who called you up and said, "We've enjoyed doing business with you, and you've always done a great job, but . . ."

Or the doctor's office calls and says, "Everything looks good, but . . ."

Listen, whatever comes after that little word matters more than whatever came before it, right?

In fact, the latter has the power to nullify the former.

Well, here's a scriptural case where that little word, 'but', becomes a hinge word upon which eternity swings.

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Isn't that the greatest little word? Death . . . but . . . life. An irrevocable edict of death – *but* – an opportunity to receive an edict of life.

Through the work of Jesus Christ's intercession on our behalf, the edict of death has been countered with another edict

Jesus Christ said, ***I am the resurrection and the life; he that believes in me will live, even though he dies (John 11:25).***

In other words, none of us can avoid the edict of death – it is irrevocable; but all of us can, by faith in

Jesus Christ our Messiah, experience the edict of life.

With that comes peace – the battle is over.

In ***chapter 10, the last verse***, Mordecai is described in his new position of influence and power. We're told in the latter part of ***verse three*** that he was one who sought the good of his people and one who ***spoke for the welfare of his whole nation.***

Literally, the phrase reads, "***He spoke shalom***" That is, he spoke peace.

What a great way to summarize the interceding work of both Esther and Mordecai on behalf of their people. Peace.

Listen, there isn't peace anywhere on the planet except for one place – inside the heart of someone who's been redeemed by Christ and reconciled to God . . . I don't mean a state of never ending ecstasy – or a happy thrill every day you climb out of bed – I mean, peace.

It's settled . . . reconciled status between the believer and God.

The hymn writer put it – and we often sing it –

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea,
A great High Priest, whose Name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.

My name is graven on His hands
My name is written on His heart
I know that while in heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end to all my sin

Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me
To look on Him and pardon me

Can I tell you dear flock that these past few months have been so fruitful in the work of the gospel – so many testimonies of people coming to a place of peace through the gospel.

I'm hearing reports from so many different places within our ministry of reconciled, redeemed individuals.

One gentleman in our church told me a few weeks ago that he worked in New York for Wall Street. He was financially and professionally successful. His office looked out toward the twin towers. He told me that on 9/11 he saw everything – the airplanes crashing into the towers . . . their eventual collapse . . . the panic and terror that came because of it. This successful middle aged businessman eventually made it home where he and his wife agreed to sell everything and move. They eventually moved to North Carolina. Their search for spiritual answers compelled them to visit one church after church. Finally this past year they visited here. I asked him, "Why did you stop here and not keep moving on to yet another church?" He told me, "When I sat down in a morning service, I felt peace."

They listened intently. A few months later he prayed along with me as I wrapped up a service and he received Jesus Christ as His Savior. Just a few weeks ago, he and his wife came forward after a service where the three of us listened as she prayed to receive Christ.

A couple of days ago our sports ministry director told me how he had just partnered with another local church that shared our passion for disciple making. They organized a dozen teams of adult men for a flag football tournament. That's as close to organized murder as you can come.

Most of the men were unaffiliated with any church. Following the tournament, one of the leaders gave his testimony of personal faith in Jesus Christ – explaining the gospel and the claims of Christ. At the end of the program, 22 men accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Let me add that we're coming to the end of one of the most fruitful GreenHouse classes . . . we have 30 people planning to be baptized – several of them this semester have trusted in Christ alone as their personal Savior.

Several days ago we received a letter from a listener – a woman who was planning to take her life. She was a believer, but after several years of financial and physical setbacks – including 22 major surgeries and the recent death of her mother – her only remaining family member, she had decided to end it all.

She woke up on that fateful day, happened to turn on the radio and listen – she wrote to inform us that God used the program that day to give her hope and to change her mind – to keep going, to keep surrendering to will of God for her life, no matter what.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the gospel redeems life – and it sustains life!

I want to point out another illustration of spiritual truth relative to the gospel, seen in the Book of Esther.

5. An enduring reminder of deliverance

Notice verse 26 of chapter 9. It refers to the letters written by both Esther and Mordecai which ensured a lasting memorial day celebration. *Notice verse 26. Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, 27. the Jews established and made accustom for themselves and for their descendants and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they would not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation and according to their appointed time annually. 28. So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province and every city and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants.*

In other words, "let's make sure we never forget this day."

Let's build a monument . . . let's make a memorial to the providence of God in our deliverance.

Let's call it Purim. The name Purim comes from the plural form of Pur – an Akkadian loan word for dice – or lots.

It referred to the things allotted by the roll of the dice. It's interesting that the English word has the same kind of meaning.

We refer to the lottery. We talk about our "lot in life."^{ix}

David the Psalmist used the same word found here in Esther when he wrote, "Lord you have assigned me my portion and my cup – you have made my lot secure."

In other words, David recognized that his lot in life was directly related to the providential work of God – it was all in the hands of God.

Even the roll of the dice is determined by the sovereignty of God. There is no such thing as chance.

And God in His sovereignty places us into position to stand for Him and in that commitment find our greatest joy.

It's no surprise then that Purim would be a time of joy.

And the Jewish people gather, to this day, to hear the reading of the Esther Scroll. When they get to chapter 3, wildness breaks out, one author wrote. At each mention of Haman's name, the audience delights in booing and hissing and twirling a noisemaker and stamping their feet.^x

What a celebration of life!

Let me wrap up our study of this wonderful Book with a couple of overarching truths.

- **First, the providence of God reflects His grace and should be remembered.**

We tend to build memorials to bad things – bad decisions – bad circumstances. And those memorials are most often made out of granite.

Take time to appreciate and remember the good things – the good decisions – the good circumstances – the good hand of God upon. Start a journal – make a list – share it with others.

The enemy of our soul loves to taunt us with past failures, past wrongs, past disappointments, disasters, calamities – turning our lives into one long dark tunnel – with no light at the end.^{xi}

It occurred to me that monuments were never built at places Orville and Wilbur Wright failed to fly . . . the places where they crashed or never lifted off. No, the memorial is located where they flew – and everything else, for the most part, has been forgotten.

This is part of what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote, *I forget those things which are behind and reaching forward . . . I press on (Philippians 3:13-14)*

- **Secondly, the providence of God is spiritually discerned, yet widely ignored.**

The last chapter of the Book of Esther shows the King imposing a tax on his kingdom. That's another

way of saying, "things went back to normal for him." Nothing changed in his life. There's no conversion to Esther and Mordecai's God – there's no mention of a palace revival.

We know from history that Ahasuerus did little more than build his harem and add on to his palaces before being assassinated in his bedroom a few years later.

The challenging truth for all of us who claim the God of Esther as our Lord is that we can go about life as usual – missing one event after another where God's hand is at work.

This is a wake-up call to be aware and alert – don't settle for the world's attitude that coincidences happen . . . random things occur.

No!

Whether we see it or not, there is significance in every event – every decision – no matter how mundane – every life – every step, no matter how difficult – as God continues to move us all toward His final and ultimate purpose.

Esther had no idea when she won the crown that there was a greater issue at stake.

She had no idea that God would bring about her husband's death at His perfect timing in order to bring to the throne Ahasuerus' son – a king who would have a similar experience.

One of his trusted officials would stand before him one day, with sadness written all over his face. A Jewish man named Nehemiah – whom the king would show great favor.

Influenced, no doubt, by the woman sitting in the courtroom with him on the throne – the Queen, Nehemiah chapter 2 informs us, was sitting there when Nehemiah petitioned the king.

This would have been a highly unusual practice in the Persian court – as we learned in the Book of Esther. The Queen didn't sit on a throne near the King; which has led others – including myself – to believe that this is a reference to the Queen mother – the wife of the former King – who would have been none other than Queen Esther.

So Esther's influence would continue 21 years later as Nehemiah received permission to go and rebuild Jerusalem.

My final principle finds us here, at the end of our study, exactly where we were when we began . . . and it's simply this;

- **The providence of God is physically invisible, yet ultimately invincible.**

At the end of the Book, He is the hero. He alone is deserving of all our praise – His providence has revealed that He keeps His promise – and His promises yet to come.

As Charles Wesley penned it,

Ye servants of God,
Your Master proclaim,
And tell out abroad his wonderful name;
The name all-victorious of Jesus extol,
His kingdom is glorious, He rules over all.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/20/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Tom Crouch, The Bishop's Boys (W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 12

ⁱⁱ Charles R. Swindoll, Esther: A Woman of Strength & Dignity (Word Publishing, 1997), p. 179

ⁱⁱⁱ Karen H. Jobes, NIV Application Commentary: Esther (Zondervan, 1999), p. 214

^{iv} Jobes, p. 220

^v W. H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures, November 6-9, 1979 (Bibliotheca Sacra, Dallas Theological Seminary, April-June 1980), p. 112

^{vi} Robert J. Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 181

^{vii} Jobes, p. 146

^{viii} Ibid. p. 147

^{ix} Jobes, p. 215

^x Knute Larson & Kathy Dahlen, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (Holman, 2005), p. 375

^{xi} Swindoll, p. 175