

Christmas Message LET'S CHRISTMAS PARTY!

Esther 9:18-28

Nate Irwin

It's Christmas time! So I thought it would be a good time for a story—actually 3. Each story has four acts. The story of the Jewish festival of **Purim**, from the book of Esther; the story of **Christmas**; and the story of **you**.

"The biblical story," says Timothy Laniak, "calls its readers to enter its world, to be captivated by its characters, intrigued by its plot, and affectively engaged through suspense and complication till its final denouement. Biblical stories invite us into a world contoured by ancient conventions, yet pulsing with continuous relevance."

I think you'll find that true in this story from Esther. It has everything a good story could want: a beautiful heroine, a strong hero, an evil villain, a powerful king, opulence and decadence, ethnic rivalry, and civil war.

Act One: Destruction Planned (3:1,9,13)

All was going well in the kingdom of Persia. The year was 474 B.C. Xerxes was the ruler over one of the largest and most magnificent kingdoms the world had ever seen, spanning 3 continents, from Egypt, through what is now Turkey and the Balkans, and then west all the way over to India, 127 provinces, perhaps 80 different ethnic groups. To put it in historical perspective for those of you who remember our study of the book of Nehemiah, Xerxes was the father of Artaxerxes, the king of Persia we met in our study of the book of Nehemiah, so our story today is set between the time of the return of the Jewish exiles and the rebuilding of the wall under Nehemiah.

The new queen had been on the throne for four years, the lovely Queen Esther. Orphaned as a child, she had been raised by her cousin, Mordecai, in the citadel of Susa, the winter capital of the Persian court. Her beauty was pure and stunning and she was entered into the competition to succeed Vashti as queen. Now, 2:17, "The king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."

There was only one problem—she was a Jewess, one whose ancestors had been taken into exile some 100 years earlier, she was a minority, which wasn't a problem until. . .

The entrance of the bad guy. Every good story needs a bad guy. What would Batman be without the Joker? Where would Westley be without Prince Humperdink? What would Inspector Callahan be without the Scorpio Killer? And so in chapter 3, right on cue, we have the entrance of our villain, the wicked Haman, the sinister prime minister. He had gotten a bee in his bonnet because Mordecai wouldn't kneel down in his presence to honor him, and he got it into his head that just killing Mordecai wouldn't be enough punishment, he would

get rid of his entire race. 3:7 tells us that he “looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.”

And so we have the first act in our story, destruction planned. And this was some kind of evil scheme of Haman’s! (3:13, 14), “Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the 13th day of the 12th month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.”

This appeared to be the end of the road for the Jews, for the king of the greatest kingdom on earth had just issued an irrevocable command that would result in the extermination of all the Jews from his kingdom. Game, set, and match; the ballgame was over—only it wasn’t a ballgame, or a movie—it was life itself for 100’s of 1000’s of Jews, for the entire Jewish race, even, in fact, for the hope of a Messiah to come from the Jewish people. And hence Act 2.

Act Two: Despair Suffered (4:1-3)

We need to feel the angst, the pathos, the anguish, the torment, the despair that this situation created for the Jewish people. We can’t imagine it, but suppose you were a minority and your neighbors hated you, some day months ahead had been designated as a day that the police would take the day off, people had carte blanche to do whatever they wanted with you? Can you imagine what it would be like to know that within a few short months the people of your neighborhood would have free rein to kill you, your wife and children, so they could get their hands on all your stuff? And there was nothing in the world you could do about it.

Here’s how Mordecai felt about it, (4:1), “When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.” Have you ever done this? Then you probably haven’t suffered the level of despair that Mordecai was feeling.

Here’s how the rest of the Jews felt about it, (4:3), “In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.” Think of it! You and I have problems in our lives, we get discouraged, maybe even depressed from time to time, but we’ve never seen anything even close to this. It was a great burden on them, pressing them down, boring into their soul every hour of every day, flooding their lives with darkness and doom.

Act Three: Deliverance Provided (8:3-8, 11)

You know the story well. Esther, the heroine, boldly approaches the king by faith, wins his favor, exposes Naman’s plot, and in a delicious twist of irony, Naman is hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. It was something only God could do, to move the heart of the king—and yet He used a human instrument, a willing servant who was ready to risk everything, even her life, for the salvation of her people.

But the matter wasn’t over yet. A decree had been issued in the king’s name and sealed with his signet ring—and “no document written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.”, (8:8)

So, “Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. Then the king

extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him. 'If it pleases the king,' she said, 'and if he regards me with favor and thinks it is the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agaite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people?', (8:5,6)

The king responded, "Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring." (8:8) He gave her the right to write whatever she wanted to save her people. So she had Mordecai help her and here is what was written, "The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies. . . A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies." (8:11,13)

God had provided a way out, a way of escape, He had provided deliverance! And that's exactly what happened. On the day the Jews were supposed to be killed, "on this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. So the Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. Not one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them." (9: 1,2) So the Jews struck down their enemies, killing 500 men in Susa and 75,000 of them in the remainder of the kingdom, as the text says, "to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies." (9:16) Notice they did it in self-defense, killing those who would have killed them, and that three times it is recorded that they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

They were free and secure again! So how did that make His people feel?

Act Four: Delight Celebrated (8:15-17; 9:17-22)

First, when the new decree was issued, look at the celebration. "And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating." (8:15-17)

But that was just the beginning, because once the day had come and they had actually been delivered from their enemies, the party really began! They celebrated, 9:22, "As the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor."

Notice the 3 ways they celebrated: Feasting, giving gifts, and giving to the poor. This, then, v. 27, became a custom for the Jews and it was written down that they should without fail observe these two days every year in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. Imagine, mandating a celebration! Requiring a party! But they wanted to make sure that no one forgot what a great thing God had done for them, in saving them from extermination and delivering them from their enemies who were bent on their destruction.

In fact, this custom has continued down to this day, so that the Feast of Purim is one of the great celebrations of the Jewish calendar. It is often preceded by a day of fasting, called the Fast of Esther, to remind them how close they were to destruction and of the despair that that had caused. That evening the book of Esther is read aloud in the synagogue. When the name of Haman is read, the congregation says in unison, "Let his name be blotted

out" and the kids join in with rattles and noisemakers, while everyone boisterously boos and hisses and stamps their feet, jeering the memory of their enemy Haman. The public reader recites the names of Haman's 10 sons in one breath to convey the idea that they were hanged together. The next morning the congregation assembles to conclude the formal religious exercises, then the rest of the day is devoted to mirth and rejoicing.

Here the fun begins! Many kinds of merry-making and mockery are indulged in on Purim, so that among the masses it is believed that on Purim "everything is allowed." Much joyous license is permitted within the walls of the synagogue itself. They have carnival-like celebrations, dramas, plays, hymns, even beauty contests, food and drink. In fact one of the mitzvahs of the Talmud says that you're supposed to drink more than just a shot or two, you're supposed to really get sloshed, enough so that you cannot tell the difference between "cursed by Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai." Giving of gifts is a big part of the day, with gaily wrapped baskets of sweets, snacks, wine, pastries, salads, and other foodstuffs given as *mishloach manot*. Roberts says that Purim is "*a joyous, even uproarious celebration of freedom and redemption*", p. 310

But the focus is not only on themselves, as we have seen from Esther. The giving of at least 2 charitable donations to 2 poor people was expected. It is better to spend more on charity than on the giving of gifts to each other.

Now I want to get you thinking about something. Why was it that they partied so hard? What was it that made them so exuberant? Was it not the depth of the despair, the hopelessness of their situation, the direness of their plight? ***The darker the night, the brighter the dawn seems.*** And this brings us to what I want us to think about this morning, at the beginning of this Christmas season, and that is the story of Christmas. For it is also a story in 4 acts and follows the template of the story of Purim. Let me show you what I mean.

The Story of Christmas

Act One: Destruction Planned

Who was it that planned our destruction? Adam and Eve were in the Garden, enjoying the perfect blissful life that God had designed for them. They were so full of love for their Creator and all He had provided for them that Satan didn't even enter their thinking. And so in the granddaddy of all evil schemes, he plotted their destruction. He thought, if I can bring a wedge in between them and God, maybe I can wiggle my way in and get a spot at the table. For you see, just like Haman, Satan desires those who would worship and follow him rather than God. So he disguised himself as a serpent, slipped into the Garden, and began to work his plan by saying to the woman, "Did God really say. . .?" He is our stated enemy, the father of Liars, the deceiver of the nations, the accuser of the brethren, a roaring lion who stalks the earth seeking whom he may devour. He has plotted our destruction from the very beginning. His goal is nothing less than to destroy, kill, and annihilate all those who refuse to bow down and worship him.

Act Two: Despair Suffered

Think of the despair in the Garden, when God called to the man and the woman, "Where are you?", and they tried to hide in their shame, but they couldn't; they tried to shift the blame for their sin, but God wouldn't let them off the hook; and then they heard his

pronouncement of judgment, His unfolding of the words, "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." This involved suffering in childbirth and in toil for food and they were expelled from the Garden never to come back again. Their idyllic existence, their beautiful relationship with God had been ruined, all for the sake of a piece of fruit. And now darkness and death itself entered their world. There appeared no way out, except to bear the penalty of their sin, for the wages of sin is death and death brings despair.

Act Three: Deliverance Provided

But in the midst of the darkness, God had spoken a word of hope. He had said that from their offspring would come a deliverer. He continued to promise to His people through His prophets that a deliverer, a savior would come, as recorded in Rom. 11:26,27, "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." 1 Jn. 3:8, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." The problem was their sin which led to their death, and so the Deliverer was going to solve their problem by taking away their sin.

And of course we know who that Deliverer was, it was Jesus, and the message of Christmas from Mt. 1: 21 is that Mary would give birth to a son and she was to give him the name Jesus because He will save His people from their sins. He is the one who loved us and who freed us from our sins by His blood. The work wasn't finished until He died on the cross and rose again from the dead. But the rescue began on Christmas day. Christmas was like D-Day, the day that this Savior landed on our earth, made a beachhead on enemy soil, and began His work of delivering us, of freeing us from our enemies and the destruction they sought to wreak among us.

God used Esther to deliver his people from the Persians; He used Jesus to deliver us from Satan. Now I'm not suggesting that Esther was a formal type of Christ, but it is intriguing to notice some of the parallels:

- Esther was a pure virgin; Jesus was a lamb without blemish or spot
- Esther had come to the throne "for such a time as this"; and "when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive full rights as sons." (Gal. 4:4)
- Esther submitted to God's will, 4:16, "I will go to the king. . .And if I perish, I perish."; Jesus said, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me; yet not as I will, but as you will." (Mt. 26:39)
- Esther entered the king's presence to plead on behalf of her people; Jesus entered the most holy place, where the Father dwells in glory, by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption, and there his blood pleads for us, and there He stands at the right hand of God interceding for His people. (Heb. 9:12; 7:25)

Jesus is our deliverer, our rescuer, our only hope, our Savior, He has set us free, brought us from darkness to light, from death to life, from despair to rejoicing.

Act Four: Delight Celebrated

Can you imagine the incredible delight that comes from an amazing deliverance from what would have been awful destruction? Unless we have felt the depths of despair, we will not know the heights of joy. Last year, I came to a very new and fresh appreciation of deliverance, when a team of 6 of us from CPC were traveling in the state of Bihar in India and became surrounded by an angry mob. . .

"The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy", the Psalmist declares in Ps. 126: 3, when the captives were brought back from Zion, while "Their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with songs of joy." **Joy this great bubbles over!**

It's the joy of a father who kills the fatted calf and put on a feast when he was delivered from the devastation of a lost son who returned home, who said, "But we had to celebrate and be glad. . ." (Lk. 15:31). It's the joy that when the ransomed of the Lord return, "They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." (Isa. 35: 10)

It's perhaps best seen in Isa.9: 1-7. . . This is the story of Christmas!

So how do we celebrate, exactly? The Bible doesn't prescribe a way, you can do it any way that is meaningful (and lawful, according to the law of Christ and the law of the land!) But when I saw 9:22 as I was reading through Esther in my Bible reading earlier in the year, I thought, there is a perfect Christmas verse. Because it has in it everything we do at Christmas!

1. Feasting. Do you want a rationale for a huge Christmas dinner? Here it is, right here in the Bible! You see, we celebrate with our minds and our souls, but we can celebrate with our bodies as well. So it's fine to have a feast, to splurge, to enjoy the good gifts God has given us as we celebrate His deliverance of us through His Son our deliverer.
2. Giving of gifts. You see, it's OK, in the spirit of Christmas, to celebrate our joy by giving gifts to each other. God is not some cosmic Grinch that scrunches up his nose and grits his teeth every time we spend some money on a Christmas gift. It seems to me that as long as we are doing it in the spirit of celebrating our delight in our deliverance from despair, it is a wonderful thing to do. In the words of Laniak, "*Gift giving, so to speak, is a symptom of good times.*" So let's go ahead and Christmas party! Let the good times roll, as we honor our Savior by celebrating our delight in Him.
3. But notice, it doesn't end here, with ourselves. The Jews, even in their greatest moment of ecstatic joy and celebration of deliverance, paused to remember those less fortunate than they. They sent gifts to the poor.

How important this is! Not only had they been commanded at all times to "be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deut. 15:11), as we are in Gal 2: 10, "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."—it was precisely in their time of greatest personal joy that they also wanted to remember others.

Because there's a danger if we don't. Look at this fascinating verse in Eze. 16: 49, "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." Who is that talking about? Sodom! When they became proud and plump, they abandoned their God and began their slide down towards the bottom of the slippery slope of immorality and idolatry. They became like Jeshurun, Deut 32: 15, who "grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior." We give to the poor, yes because it's commanded and it's right, but also to help preserve our own spiritual vitality.

And that's one reason we take a Christmas offering every year, because in the middle of our own rejoicing and celebrating, we want to remember those who are less fortunate than we are, who have less of this world's goods, who have less of the glorious Gospel of Christ, and we want to give generously to help provide them with these things. That's what the Brookside Initiative is all about.

So feast abundantly on Christmas Day! Give joyfully to one another! But also give generously to the poor as you remember Him, our Deliverer, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, on Christmas Day, so that we through His poverty, might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

The Story of You

Well, that's the story of Purim and the story of Christmas. What is the story of you? Have you entered, personally, into the story of Christmas, or is it just a story about another time and another place, a story for someone else, or just a story from your childhood with some warm fuzzies but nothing really lasting? How can you make it your own this year?

By realizing that there is an enemy who has plotted and is plotting your **destruction**. He is out to demolish you, to make a shambles of your life, to bring you down to the pit where he lives. And maybe he's done a pretty good job of that so far.

You need to feel in your soul a deep sense of **despair**, that you are in a pit so deep and so slippery that you could never climb out, that your final destruction is imminent.

And then you need to understand that there is One who loves you and has provided for your **deliverance**, the God who so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This is the message of Christmas, and once you receive it by faith and find yourself freed from the sentence of death, you can then, with the rest of us who have already believed, celebrate your **delight** in His salvation with all your might.

If you've already entered into this story and you know what great despair and destruction you have been delivered from, then, like the Jews at Purim, here is the application of today's message: go and Christmas party! Delight in God's deliverance from the despair of destruction! And as you do so, remember the poor, and remember why you're doing it: to worship your Deliverer, your Savior, the Messiah of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ!

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