

ESTHER

For Such A Time As This

by

Carl Armerding

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CHAPTER TEN

MEMORIAL DAYS

THE CUSTOM of marking out certain days to commemorate special events dates back to the beginning of history when the Lord set aside the seventh day to celebrate the conclusion of the work of creation. Again, when He delivered His people from Egypt and its bondage He said, **“Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place. . . . This day came ye out in the month Abib”** (Exodus 13:3, 4). In like manner, those of us who know the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Saviour also remember with praise and gratitude the day when we first knew the joy of sins forgiven and peace with God. For us too, the first day of the week, that day on which our blessed Lord rose again from the dead, will ever be a most important day. Triumphantly we sing, **“The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it”** (Psalm 118:22-24).

The days of which our present portion speaks had never been set aside before. They are not referred to in Leviticus 23 which gives us a list of all the holy days and seasons which the children of Israel were to celebrate each year. None of them occurred in the month Adar, which is the last month of the sacred year. There was no conflict, therefore, with that which had been prescribed by the law of Moses. And the fact that the Jews still celebrate these days each year indicates that they accept the institution as valid. Of course, there is no divine directive such as we find in Leviticus 23, but the man who took the lead in establishing this custom was none other than Mordecai who ranked, for the time being, with other great leaders of Israel.

It was Mordecai who **“wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far, to establish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, as the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor”** (Esther 9:20-22).

It is to be remarked that nothing is said here about the destruction of their enemies.

Instead of that we have the very meaningful expression, “**The Jews rested from their enemies.**” We have but to single it out in this way to see how suggestive it is of that rest which the Lord Jesus gives to all those who come to Him. Says He, “**Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest**” (Matthew 11:28). If the labor were merely self-ordered labor, one might stop at any time. If the burden were self-imposed, one might drop it at any time. The implication, however, is that the labor is slave toil ordered by a taskmaster as real as any that the children of Israel ever had in the land of Egypt. And the burden with which we were so heavily laden was a burden placed upon our necks by one who would have enslaved us forever. In offering to give us rest from these, the Lord Jesus offered to set us free from the domination of sin and Satan—two of the greatest enemies we have. But our divine Emancipator has removed our sins as far as the East is from the West,

And rest divine is ours instead,
Whilst glory crowns His brow.

When Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, celebrated the birth of the forerunner of our Lord, he made reference to the fact that the Israelites should be saved from their enemies and from the hand of all who hated them, and that being delivered out of the hand of their enemies they might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of their life (see Luke 1:71-75). It is certain that Zacharias was thinking of the Messiah of Israel who alone could bring such deliverance to His people. And we may be sure that he was also thinking of something more than mere human enemies. A man of his spiritual stature could never be satisfied with political freedom only. True freedom comes from Him of whom it is written, “**If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed**” (John 8:36).

The second great thing to be noticed here is that these memorial days occur in “**the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day.**”

Once again we are reminded of the words of our Lord Jesus who said, “**Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. . . . Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you**” (John 16:20, 22).

And we have good reason to believe that it was the same One who turned that month of sorrow into joy in the days of Esther even though the Jews did not recognize Him at the time. Even then it was true that “**he was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not**” (John 1:10, 11).

We believe that the verses just quoted refer to Old Testament times, and that the great deliverance wrought in the days of Esther and Mordecai was one of those gracious manifestations of the One who was yet to come. He alone can make transformations such as we read of here. “**This also cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working**” (Isaiah 28:29).

The third thing which was to characterize this festive occasion was the sending of portions one to another, and the sending of gifts to the poor. How easy it is to observe the first part of this as is so often done at Christmas and Easter, while the second part is quite forgotten! Many a Christmas celebration has become nothing more than “an exchange of gifts,” and is actually referred to in that way. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with such a custom. But we must not stop there. The Jews were to send gifts to those from whom they could expect nothing in return. Our Lord said, **“If ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same . . . love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil”** (Luke 6:33, 35).

How good it is to read that **“the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them; because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had devised against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them”!**

As I write these words I have before me a news report published in the Chicago Daily News for March 18, 1954, concerning the celebration of the Purim festival in the various synagogues of the city. Among the titles of the sermons to be delivered by the different rabbis, I find this one, “Are We Faced with a New Haman?” Just how the rabbi intended to answer that question was not indicated in the article. But the very mention of the name of Haman shows that he is still looked upon as typical of one who may be seeking the destruction of the Jewish people.

Just as the name of Quisling has become the modern epithet for one who undermines his own country from within, and just as the name of Judas Iscariot is always associated with the worst form of treason, so the name of Haman will always stand out as the typical anti-Semite. He is here described as **“the enemy of all the Jews.”** And we must never forget that this anti-Semitism was just a part of a greater scheme to destroy, if possible, **“the seed”** who was to bruise the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15).

“But when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he had devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.” The matter would never have come before the king if Esther had not risked her life to bring it to his attention. In the news article referred to above we find the statement that the festival of Purim “recalls the heroism of Esther, who risked her life to aid the Jewish people.”

“Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur,” that is, the lot. Haman and his sons meant it for evil, **“but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive”** (Genesis 50:20).

I have quoted these words of Joseph to his brethren to show that this was not the first time that the Lord brought good out of that which was designed for evil. And that should give every child of God comfort. Our God is able to turn the darkest day into a shining light. There is nothing too hard for Him.

“Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them, the Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.”

It is very interesting to see how they connect the written word with their experience—namely, that which they had seen and that which had come upon them. When experience agrees with the written Word of God, the combination is happy indeed. The Jews who had passed through those dark days confirmed the reasons for the observation of these days of Purim. They not only bound themselves to perpetual observation of these days, but in the undertaking they included also the generations yet to come, as well as any proselytes who might join themselves to them, regardless of where they might be living. In their thinking they included every generation, every family, every province, and every city. Thus we can see that the ecumenicity of which we hear so much nowadays is not such a new idea.

Christians also have a “memorial” which is ecumenical in its meaning and intent. We may not be able to sit down at the same table with every Christian in the world, but when we break bread in remembrance of our blessed Lord, there is a sense in which we are having fellowship with every Christian; for **“we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread”** (I Corinthians 10:17).

The part that Queen Esther played in all of this is also very interesting. In this she stands out in contrast to Ruth, the only other woman who had the honor of having a book of the Bible named after her. In the case of Ruth, we note as we come to the close of the book which bears her name that she becomes less and less prominent. She is passive rather than active.

But in the case of Esther we find just the opposite. **“Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim.”** This is the second time that Esther is referred to as the daughter of Abihail. When she was first discovered as a possible candidate to take the place of the deposed Vashti, she was referred to as the daughter of Abihail (Esther 2:15). After that, no reference is made to her father until we come to this. Now, instead of trying to conceal her ancestry, the sacred historian seems to emphasize it.

And even though Mordecai is referred to again and again as **“the Jew,”** we never find that to be the case with Esther. Of course, we know that when Mordecai was referred to as **“the Jew,”** it was not always in a complimentary way. Here it is mentioned as if that were the greatest distinction he might claim. He probably had more than one title by this time. But it is not by his titles that he is known here, but by his racial and ancestral connections. That which was once a reproach now becomes the greatest honor.

This is the more remarkable when we take into account that the letter which was being sent out was written **“with all authority.”**

It is just here that one might have expected to see some title affixed. But evidently **“Mordecai the Jew”** was the most dignified thing that could be said of him. And such is the case of a true Christian. The most wonderful thing anyone can say about him is that “he is a Christian.” Even the non-Christian recognizes that. All the titles and the degrees which men may confer on such can never surpass, or excel, in dignity and glory the name which completely identifies us with Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

“And he sent the letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth.”

Over and above the letters which made the observance of the feast mandatory, we find these **“words of peace and truth.”** That indicates that in the writing of this letter, Mordecai was acting as something more than a prime minister giving orders to those under his authority; he was a minister ministering to the spiritual needs of his people as well. This is so Christlike that we cannot resist making the comparison. **“The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ”** (John 1:17). Thus were these days of Purim confirmed **“in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry.”**

The fact that the people themselves had decreed these things for themselves and their descendants shows that there was perfect agreement between them and those who enjoined, or commanded, these things. In that we get a good illustration of a principle which we believe may be traced all through the Bible. If one loves the Lord his God with all his heart and mind and soul, he will not find it irksome to keep His commandments. And if that were true of those who were under the law, how much more should it be true of those of us whose hearts have been captivated by His love and grace? Obedience then becomes a matter of loving obligation.

And the fact that **“their seed,”** that is, their children, were included shows that what was right and proper for the parents was right and proper also for those who were to come after them. That is quite different, of course, from that philosophy which teaches that we should not impose upon our children that which we believe until they are able to decide for themselves whether or not they desire to be governed accordingly.

No one knows better what is best for his children than one who has been saved by grace from a life of sin and its terrible consequences. He may well decree that his “seed” shall follow after him in these things. It was said of Abraham, **“I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him”** (Genesis 18:19). And that is as it should be with all of us. And that it results in blessing for all concerned can be proved by scores of cases of Christian parents who have brought up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

“The matters of the fastings and their cry” take us back, of course, to the dark days when the threat of death hung over their heads. In the joy of their deliverance they could not forget what they had been delivered from. In like manner, the memory of our low estate before the Lord saved us by His grace should serve to make us truly grateful, as well as joyful.

Would to God that we all knew more about **“the matters of the fastings and their cry”!**

Perhaps one reason why we do not say more about this is because there was not much fasting and crying to begin with. But wherever there has been deep conviction of sin and true repentance there will be found a corresponding sense of gratitude to the Lord. It will be like the **“bitter herbs”** that were to be eaten with the Passover lamb. In themselves they were not pleasant to taste, but they served to bring out the flavor of the lamb.

“And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.”

Thus a permanent record was made of these matters so that they might be preserved for generations yet to come. And to this day we find that “the book” is still referred to even by those who seem to have no appreciation of its spiritual depth and value. But for those of us who accept the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, the fact that it was written in **“the book”** is significant. And that is one of the best of reasons we have for studying this Book of Esther. The things which are written here were **“written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope”** (Romans 15:4).

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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