

The Sweetest Medicine?  
Esther 9:1-17  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
November 18, 2007  
Pastor Dave Carver

*"It was a dark and stormy night;* the rain fell in torrents--except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness." You may recognize that line – although if you do, you regret it – as being the opening sentence of a novel titled *Paul Clifford*, written in 1830 by Edward George Bulwer-Lytton. Each year, the folks at San Jose State University sponsor the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest wherein they challenge people to create the opening sentences for the worst possible novels.

One of the winners for the Detective Category in 2007 reads as follows: "I'd been tailing this guy for over an hour while he tried every trick in the book to lose me: going down side streets, doubling back, suddenly veering into shop doorways, jumping out again, crossing the street, looking for somewhere to make the drop, and I was going to be there when he did it because his disguise as a postman didn't have me fooled for a minute."

Why do I bring this up? Because I want to point out that how we tell a story helps us to hear what is being said, doesn't it. I mean, I could say, "it's cold today", and that conveys something. But I could say, "the old mercury is dropping faster than the eyelids at a preaching convention", and that conveys something else.

Today, we start our reading from the book of Esther with tension in the air. You remember that earlier in the book, Haman, our bad guy, sent a letter throughout the empire ordering the destruction of all the Jews. A month or so later, though Haman is killed and his replacement, Mordecai, a Jew, sends out another edict – this one permitting the Jews to defend themselves from attack. And our reading gets at this tension, as the narrator begins by saying, "now in the 12<sup>th</sup> month, the month of Adar, the 13<sup>th</sup> day, when the king's command was about to be carried out, when the enemies of the Jews hoped to over power them..." Do you see? He's drawing it out. The big day has come. It's a war of words. Edict vs. Edict. Haman vs. Mordecai. All through the book of Esther, the narrator has been leading to this conflict. The readers have wondered...what will happen when the big day finally arrives...and today, we learn the result.

Mimi read the passage for you, but I'll suggest that you might want to re-open your Bibles as we look at how a few of our characters behave in this part of the story and then consider what it all might mean for us as believers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What about Mordecai? What is he up to in chapter 9? Well, he doesn't

actually do much. When we first met him, he was a “regular guy”, living in Susa, taking care of business and raising his niece/adopted daughter Esther. But at every turn, he has acted with humility and integrity, and one of the results of that is that his stock is rising faster than Ikie Kraus’ blood pressure during a Steeler game. Mordecai is increasing in power and there is nothing to suggest that his character is anything other than flawless.

What about the king? Well, like Mordecai, he doesn’t do too much here, although there is a rather telling exchange between Ahasuerus and his queen. After the news of the day begins to spread, and we see that the Jews have been able to defeat anyone who threatened them, we hear a conversation between Ahasuerus and Esther. But this is a conversation that is different. Why? Well, there is no mention of Esther being nervous about approaching the king. Evidently, the king has come to Esther – she has not gone to see him. And he points out to her that quite a few non-Jews have died already that day, and, oh, by the way, is there anything else I can get for you.” Is it just me, or does Ahasuerus seem a little nervous around Esther? Is he afraid of her? Is he, a non-Jew, a little jumpy today, and he wants to be on her good side?

Esther herself has come under some suspicion by some readers of scripture for her behavior in this chapter. When the king does ask her what she wants, she seems to be a little bloodthirsty, doesn’t she? I mean, asking for the extension of Mordecai’s edict and the display of the bodies of Haman’s sons? That’s a little gross, is what that is, at least at first glance.

But let’s look at that for a moment. When she asks the king to extend the Jews right to protect themselves an additional day, she’s not asking for more people to die. She’s simply asking that the Jews in Susa be given an additional day to defend themselves against any who might attack them. If no one attacks, then no one dies, right? It’s like the fellow we worked with on the Mission Trip in Tennessee said often, “If you don’t start none, then there won’t be none.”

And what about the idea of hanging the bodies of Haman’s ten sons? They’d already been killed – why display them in public like that? Well, it might be a way of saying to those who were still hoping to assault the Jews, “Look, friends, it’s over. There is no one left to lead this charge. Look – see for yourself – they are all dead.” And don’t forget that no one ordered their execution – they were killed because they attacked God’s people.

One other thing about these dead sons – they are all listed by name. Why does that matter? I mean, why would the narrator give us all ten names of Haman’s dead sons, other than to give you one more reason to never sign up to be a lay reader again? Well, here’s the thing about those names. It turns out that those ten names are remarkably similar to a group of names called the *daiva* names. *Daiva* names are those names that are associated with a cluster of ancient Iranian and Hindu gods and demonic forces. So when the story teller of Esther gets to this point in the story, and he’s wanting to tell us what happens to people who attack God’s people, the only ten deaths he names are people

whose names sound like the names of the idols of the times. It's almost as if he's saying, "Hey, how did the people of God wind up in captivity in Susa to begin with? Oh, yeah, they worshiped idols, and God punished them. And what happens to idols? Oh, yeah, God defeats them and humiliates them." It may seem subtle to you, but those names would have jumped out to the first hearers of this story – the author is using them to make the point that the power of God trumps the power of any idol.

Lastly, let us consider the behavior of the Jews themselves, scattered throughout Ahasuerus' nation. What did they do? Well, they trusted in Mordecai. They gathered together. And they learned from the past to pay attention to what God was saying.

How do I know that they learned from the past? We are told that all day, in every place, the Jews are attacked and that they defend themselves. All day, Jews are living, while those who want to hurt the Jews are dying. Three times we read that the Jews smote their enemies, but we hear another phrase three times, too: "they did not touch the plunder." Did you hear that?

That means that they did not see this as a street fight or as a get rich quick scheme. They saw this as a holy war. Earlier on, we mentioned that Haman, the enemy of the Jews, was called an Agagite. That is, he is a descendent (either biologically or philosophically) from the Amelekite King Agag, who sought to destroy the Jews and their King, Saul. God commanded Saul to kill Agag, but to leave his stuff alone. Saul, instead, left Agag live, but took his stuff. At several points in the Old Testament, God's people are commanded to wage war on a certain place, but to dedicate the valuables within the town to the Lord. And in most of these occasions, the Israelites wind up trying to keep the shiny stuff for themselves.

Well, here in Esther, when they are permitted to defend themselves, the Jews refuse to touch a single shekel. They defend themselves and they refuse to impoverish or humiliate their enemies, and at the end of the day they celebrate the fact that God has allowed them to live. Do you see? They learned – they did what God had told them to do for thousands of years, and today they get it right. Today, they refuse to take revenge on the people who have brought, or at least kept them, as captives.

And that's worth noting, because in some of the commentaries that I read, and some of the study bibles that you might see, the topic for this section is something along the lines of "The Jews Take Revenge". And while that's understandable – I mean, we want to say that "Haman and his boys really get what's coming to them" – it's just not true. This is not revenge. This is a group of people who gathered together under a leader who had demonstrated humility and integrity. These people defended themselves when they were attacked. And the result of this, oddly enough, is that the people throughout the country (including, perhaps, even the king) were afraid of the Jews.

Isn't that interesting? I mean, it's Haman's team who has all of the armies,

hi-tech weapons, and racial hatreds. All the Jews have is integrity, humility, and unity. But somehow, a group of people, wisely led, following ideals of integrity, humility, and unity, are able to overcome and disarm a hostile nation.

In our New Testament reading, Paul tells his friends that they are not to repay evil for evil. In other words, he says, "Look, even if people deserve to be treated poorly...act nobly towards them. Live peaceably with everyone, so far as you can help it." It's like he's taking the point that Esther was making and driving it home even more deeply.

Is it just me, or is it hard to hear those words some times? Don't you like revenge every now and then? When someone heaps on you some injustice you do not deserve, don't you just want to make them pay for it? I know I do. But Paul looks at you and at me and seems to be saying, "Yep, I know it's tough. But in your home, find a place to put that anger. If you have been mistreated by someone you love – can you find a way to see that person the way that God does? When you are in the world – can you look for ways to be a blessing to your neighbor, even that neighbor that annoys the heck out of you?"

Now, I wonder. Where did Paul get this stuff from? I'd suggest that he got it in two ways. First, we know from the church's history that Paul was a scholar. He knew the book of Esther, and the rest of the Old Testament, better than I ever will. So he could read all this and draw his own conclusions, logically speaking.

But more than book learning, he saw it in Jesus. When we meet Paul, he's making a name for himself by persecuting anyone who believes in Jesus. He's trying to stamp out the church. And then he meets Jesus – and he becomes a preacher. He is overcome by grace and forgiveness, and he wants to share it.

Can you do that? Can you lay down your desire for revenge and wish your adversary God's best?

Now listen carefully to me. Some of you in this room know what it's like to be physically or mentally abused by someone close to you. Some of you have been treated in terrible ways by someone who has claimed to love you. I am not saying that Jesus wants you to stay in a place where you are continuing to get abused or molested or hurt. If you are in a relationship where someone is harming you, you need to get out. If that's you, then talk to me about it today. You need to get out before you become filled with that kind of hate and evil.

But the truth is that most of you are not in that position. Most of us are not being abused...but most of us know what it means to be holding a grudge or savoring a hatred. And there's a message here for us.

Do you find it hard to forgive? Are you consumed with thoughts for revenge? Are you just waiting to get back at someone else? Let me encourage you to put that down. That's a burden you do not need to carry right now.

Instead, ask God to give you an awareness of his deep acceptance and forgiveness for you. Ask God to give you an appreciation for his grace moving in your life.

And then, ask God to help you treat others the way that God has treated you.

That, my friends, would be sweet. Amen.