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Mordecai's decree. The Christian life compared to an athletic discipline.

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Transcript

Esther chapter 8. On that day, King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai.

And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet, and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, and the plot that he had devised against the Jews.

When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, which he

wrote to destroy the Jews, who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred? Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews.

But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring. For an edict written in the name of the king, and sealed with the king's ring, cannot be revoked. The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Siphon, on the twenty-third day.

And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors, and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to each province in its own script, and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers, riding on swift horses, that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.

A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown, and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.

The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour, and in every province, and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday, and many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them. Esther chapter 8 begins at the point where many readers of the book presume that matters must all be over, all that we are left with now is the mopping up operation. Haman, the enemy of the Jews, has been hung upon his own tree.

Esther's plan has been stunningly successful, hasn't it? However, in chapter 8 we see that there is a huge problem. Haman may be dead, but his decree is still very much alive. What's worse, a law of the Medes and the Persians cannot be revoked.

Esther's position was a difficult one. To get the king to respond to Haman's genocidal decree, she had to present the decree as being won against his own queen, making it personal for him, a direct threat to him by his disloyal vizier. This way of framing things depended upon some measure of misapprehension on the king's part.

Haman's intent, of course, had never been to attack Queen Esther. He didn't even know that she was a Jew. Now, with Haman dead and the king's anger abated, the queen is safe, no one would be powerful enough to enact the law against Esther now Haman is removed.

Yet the law remains, and Esther's leverage is much diminished. There was always a danger for Esther in identifying herself too strongly with the Jewish people as the new queen of Persia, the one who was supposed to be the beautiful woman of the people, rather than the representative of a particular faction or ethnic group within it. When she had presented her argument to Ahasuerus earlier, the threat to the people had been framed first as a threat to her, as Ahasuerus's beloved queen, and second as a swindling of the king and of Persia, by killing a large number of inconvenient people for a very small bribe relative to the handsome amount that such a great population would receive on the slave market.

This is clearly not much of a moral argument, nor does it seem to have weighed very heavily with Ahasuerus. As evidenced by his lavish parties and generous gifts, Ahasuerus never seemed to be that bothered with the state of his treasuries. Esther still needs to convert the personal favour that she has with the king into meaningful power to act against Haman's decree.

A new plan is needed, and urgently. Out of his love for his queen, whom King Ahasuerus had protected from a man seemingly threatening her life, Ahasuerus gave Esther the house of Haman, his former vizier, whose property had been confiscated. The king had made Haman his second-in-command, granting him extreme authorisation by giving him his own signet ring.

Esther establishes Mordecai in Haman's former office, setting him over Haman's former property and giving him the authorisation of the signet that Haman formerly enjoyed. In chapter 6, Haman had to perform the peculiar honours for Mordecai that he had once presumed to be his own. In chapter 7, he was hung upon the tree that he had prepared for Mordecai, and now his property and his office are given into Mordecai's hands.

This is indeed a remarkable and poetic reversal of fortunes. In scripture, as Yoram Hazoni has argued, one of the ways in which the text's moral judgments on its characters and events are revealed is in the consequences or the aftermath of actions. Earlier on in the story of Esther, we might have wondered whether Mordecai was sinful in his refusal to bow to Haman.

Indeed, James Jordan and Louis Bale's Peyton are among those who see Mordecai's action as rebellious and inexcusable. However, the reversal here seems to be a divine vindication of Mordecai, apart from any repentance on his part. This greatly weakens that theory.

As Rabbi David Foreman argues, Queen Esther loses her composure at this point because, while many readers might think that she has completely triumphed, in fact it appears as though the most important part of the plan has failed. The king's anger has subsided, and while she is safe, her people very clearly are not. The king even seems to be prepared to shrug his shoulders and just count the great economic loss that he would sustain with the destruction of the Jews as a write-off.

Much as Haman had fallen down begging for his life in the preceding chapter, now Esther is in anguish, begging for the life of her people. There's no more ace in the hole remaining for Esther to play. She has already made her decisive move, and now with growing horror she realises that it might not have been enough.

Throughout the book of Esther, the story of Eden and the Fall is playing behind the text in all sorts of ways. We have already seen ways in which Haman was like Adam, desiring the one thing that he had not been granted, the forbidden fruit that spoiled his enjoyment of everything else. Ahasuerus was in some respects like Adam earlier, choosing Esther as a suitable partner and calling her by name after the parade of different potential queens.

Later, after walking in the garden, he delivered his wife from the serpent Haman. Zeresh, the wife of Haman, and Esther are also contrasted as two Eve-like figures. Eve wielded a powerful influence with her husband Adam, so that her husband rejected the word of the Lord at her invitation to eat of the fruit.

In the book of Esther, we see both Zeresh and Esther using the power of their influence with their husbands. Zeresh flatters Haman by pandering to his desires, offering him the body of the insubordinate Mordecai, the forbidden fruit, upon the tree of the gallows. Esther, however, takes a very different approach.

She uses her beauty and attractiveness and seeks to wield it as a force of properly moral persuasion. She seeks to achieve her purpose by giving food to her husband in the two banquets. She is the Eve to Ahasuerus' Adam, giving him the fruit of the vine.

As Rabbi Foreman observes, the language of her appeals gradually moves from what is desirable to the king, the language of what is good to one's appetites and desires, to a focus upon what is morally fitting and right, what is good in a more moral sense. She is training an ethically insensitive man in the true knowledge of good and evil. We should consider the way that her appeal in this chapter is a progression beyond her earlier ones.

Her first appeal was in chapter 5 verse 4, and Esther said, If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king. In verses 7 and 8 of that chapter, then Esther answered, My wish and my request is, if I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfil my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said. Even in the preceding chapter, as she was disclosing herself to the king, she made the appeal primarily on the grounds of his desires and what was expedient for him.

Chapter 7 verses 3 and 4, then Queen Esther answered, If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish and my people for my request, for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king. Now, however, the grounds of the appeal shift.

In Esther chapter 8 verses 5 to 6, the original grounds of the appeals are still there, but crucial elements have been added. And she said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, to this point everything is familiar from the preceding requests, but she proceeds, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. But how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred? Hasoni notes that Esther's petition here contains three lines of persuasion, the king's interest in those things that he desires, his presumed interest in the cause of justice, and his fear of losing her.

It's the second category here, the king's presumed interest in the cause of justice, bound up with the questions of what seems right, and the worthiness of Esther herself that are the new elements here. Esther is now, for the first time, appealing to the king on the objective grounds of what is right or wrong, not merely on the basis of his desires or on grounds of expediency. Esther also raises her own personal interest against the king's.

If he goes ahead with Haman's decree, she won't be able to bear it. Ahasuerus has already been resisted and his command rejected by one queen. Esther is taking a potentially risky tack here.

She is calling upon Ahasuerus the king to recognise the legitimacy and the importance of another person's desires besides his, even though that person's desires may go against his at points, and fulfilling those desires might not be expedient for him. Esther then is seeking to wield love as a sort of moral force. By Esther's use of love as a moral force, playing off the archetypal story of the Garden of Eden and Eve and Adam, Esther is demonstrating something about the relationship between a wife and her husband, and

the way that that relationship can be used as a power of good.

The king's response to Esther's new petition has a degree of ambivalence. It's as if he begins by saying, what more can I do? I've given you the house of Haman. Haman has been hanged.

What more do you want? Verse 8 seems simultaneously both to give and to take away. Esther and Mordecai are on the one hand being given the right to make whatever decree they want. On the other hand, however, the statement of the king that an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked, refers not just to any decree that they might write, but also to the original decree of Haman.

How are they going to deal with the decree of Haman when it cannot be revoked? They need to devise a plan that overcomes the decree without revoking it. They come up with an ingenious solution. They summon the king's scribes on the 23rd day of the third month of Sivan, and Mordecai instructs them what to write.

This is 70 days after the original decree. 70 days, the 10th Sabbath, but also reminiscent of the time of exile, 70 years. The Jews have been under a death sentence for 70 days, and now they are going to enjoy relief.

The new decree is almost exactly the same as the original one, and allows for a seemingly insane situation, a sort of civil war permitted by the law. The Jews are permitted to defend themselves and to apply lethal force against their adversaries without any fear of reprisal from the government. While their enemies can act with impunity, they can also do so.

Rabbi Forman asks some important questions here. Why does it say that the Jews were allowed to kill children and women and to plunder their goods? First of all, it does not seem that they carried these things out when they actually enacted the decree in chapter 9. And for that matter, hadn't King Saul been rejected from the throne for taking plunder from the Amalekites? Surely Mordecai, a descendant of the family of Saul, should have known this. However, this is to fail to realise the true purpose of the decree.

The true purpose of the decree is not merely to allow the Jews to fight back against their enemies. It's to go toe to toe with the original decree of Haman, to throw the weight of the Persian government visibly behind Mordecai and the Jews over Haman and the Jews' enemies. As officials in the various provinces receive these two decrees, they are going to have to decide how to enact and enforce them.

Is the second decree merely a minor mitigation of the first one? Or is the second decree intended completely to counteract the first? This is why it's important that Mordecai's decree be so severe. His decree must be at least as severe as the decree of Haman if it's to be effective against it. While Mordecai's decree cannot overturn the decree of Haman,

it can send out a strong signal that the weight of the government of Persia is completely against any of those who would seek to enact it.

To drive this point home, Mordecai and the Jews arrange a great spectacle. Mordecai plays the sort of royal dress-up that Haman had wanted to play. He is sent out from the presence of the king wearing royal robes, and the Jews have a great feast and holiday.

Haman's law is still on the books. Why are they partying? They have not yet been delivered. They are celebrating because the celebration itself is a signal that's being sent out to all of the provinces that the king's power and force and authorisation now decisively and completely lies with the Jews over against Haman and his faction.

Anyone seeking to enact the original decree should recognise that they are in a dangerous position. The decree has not been revoked, but it has been successfully counteracted. A question to consider.

The decrees of Haman and of Mordecai are central elements of the story of the Book of Esther. We have already seen the way that the Book of Esther explores themes of chance and providence. In what ways, and perhaps in relationship to those two themes of chance and providence, is it exploring and developing the theme of law? 1 Timothy chapter 4 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent silly myths, rather train yourself for godliness.

For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, for to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hopes set on the living God, who is the saviour of all people, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things.

Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of the scriptures, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep

a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

From instructions concerning the ordering of the church, in 1st Timothy chapter 4, Paul addresses Timothy more directly concerning his role in the situation in Ephesus. Firstly there are the false teachings that he needs to address, then there are the ways that he needs to behave and the actions that he needs to take as a servant of Jesus Christ. Paul begins by presenting some of the challenges that the Ephesian church is facing within the framework of redemptive history.

They are in the prophesied last days, there's about to be an upheaval in the ordering of the world and Timothy should not be surprised that these false teachings have arisen at this juncture. We can see a similar statement in 2nd Timothy chapter 3 verse 1, but understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. Jesus had also taught this in the Olivet discourse, in places like Matthew chapter 24 verse 11 for instance.

And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. The false teaching is attributed to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons. The deceitful spirits describe the instigating forces behind these teachings and the teachings of demons describe the teaching in terms of their demonic content.

The teachings are spread by deceitful spirits and their substance arises from demons. These teachings will deceive and lead some astray and the teachings will be spread by persons who have been compromised, insincere liars whose consciences have been seared. The content of Timothy's false teachings are described in verse 3, forbidding of marriage and requiring abstinence from foods.

We might speculate here about the exact nature of these teachings. Something more than just observance of Jewish kosher laws seems to be involved here, nor does this seem to be like the situation Paul tackled in Corinth, a matter of eating food sacrificed to idols. Paul had already made his views on that matter clear.

Considering the other teachings that seem to have been spread in Ephesus, it may be that what Paul was dealing with here was a sort of Hellenized Jewish asceticism, a form of asceticism based upon Jewish myths that had developed within a Greek cultural context. Perhaps they looked back to the pre-fall state, prior to man's eating of meat and prior to a situation where men and women had sexual relations, or perhaps the teaching was developed in the context of the new creation, where there would no longer be marriage or giving in marriage, and where meat eating would presumably cease. Paul addresses these issues by alluding back to the book of Genesis and the teaching there.

In Genesis chapter 1 verse 29 for instance, man was given the privilege of eating of every tree and of every plant, and in Genesis chapter 9 verse 3, man was explicitly given

the right to eat of the animals too. The foods were created by God and they were created to be received with thanksgiving. An appropriate response to God's good gifts is to enjoy them and give thanks.

In Romans chapter 14 verse 14, Paul makes clear that he does not believe that anything created by God is unclean in itself. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. This is why reception of these gifts needs to be with belief, with knowledge of the truth, and with thanksgiving.

If things can't be received in that manner, they aren't being received as gifts and can't be properly enjoyed. The statement that all of these things are good again alludes back to Genesis chapter 1 verse 31, and God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good. Creation can be misused.

It can be used in a way that's not of faith or a knowledge of the truth. It can also be used in an ungrateful manner. God's good gifts can be perverted and wrongly received, and where they are being perverted or misused in such a manner, we must abstain.

However, the gifts as given by God are good things, and any suggestion that abstinence from good gifts makes you a holier person should be viewed with great suspicion. God's good gifts are made holy by the word of God. Perhaps this is the word of the gospel, or perhaps the word of Christ by which all things were declared clean, or perhaps the word of the scripture more generally, or maybe something else.

Prayer is also mentioned here, prayer presumably thanksgiving. Perhaps prayers at meal times are particularly in view here. Timothy needs to instruct the Ephesians in these matters.

It is in such a manner that he will acquit himself well as a servant of Christ Jesus, demonstrating his knowledge of the content of the Christian faith and of the good and sound doctrine that stands opposed to the false teaching of the opponents in Ephesus. Once again he is warned against the irreverent silly myths. The myths in question are not godly, and Paul also regards them as fundamentally theologically unserious, unworthy of regard.

He more literally characterises them as old women's fables, the sort of superstitious legends that would be spread by people without training in the law. As an alternative to this, Timothy must train himself for godliness. Athletic imagery is introduced at this point, and Paul fills it out by contrasting godliness with bodily training.

The sort of rigorous physical training that an athlete might undergo in preparation for an event has purpose and value, yet its value is exceedingly limited compared to the value of godliness. Physical training can increase the potential of the body in this life, but

godliness prepares us for this life and the life to come. It has value in every way.

It deals with the comprehensive character of human existence, not just the physical body. Paul underlines this point in verse 9. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. This is a formula that we have already encountered a couple of times in the book.

By comparing and contrasting rigorous physical training and training in godliness, Paul encourages Timothy and us to regard godliness as a discipline that we should take every bit as seriously as an athlete takes bodily exercise. It is something that must become the overriding focus of our lives. We must give ourselves to deliberate practice, not just passively coasting along, but in a determined fashion, devoting ourselves to disciplines that will increase our spiritual capacity.

The Christian's existence must be a lifelong growth in the practice of discipleship, learning the disciplines of prayer, of the reading of the scriptures, of the works of mercy, of integrity in speech and practice, of service within the body of Christ. Filling out Paul's analogy, we might think of the church as a spiritual gymnasium, where many people are training together, pushing each other to greater heights, training each other in the disciplines by which they will increase their strength. The good pastor should be like a coach, training Christians in spiritual disciplines, encouraging and exhorting them to keep on going, providing them with an example to aspire to, and holding them accountable for failure.

Paul teaches that all of this is done because we have set our hope on the living God. The living God is the source of life, and committing ourselves to godliness is something that we do because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the source of our present life, and our life in the age to come. Paul speaks of God as the saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

Here our minds should be drawn back to 1 Timothy 2, verses 3 and 4. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our saviour, who desires all people to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth. By speaking of God as the saviour of all people, Paul is likely referring to the comprehensive character of God's salvation. It addresses the situation of the whole world, it is offered to every single person.

The statement that follows, however, qualifies it, particularly of those who believe. It is by belief that this general salvation is received. While God's salvation is addressed to all mankind, it is only those who receive Christ by faith that actually enjoy it.

Nevertheless, there are numerous blessings of Christ's rule that are enjoyed even by those who never respond to the gospel. Paul charges Timothy to command and to teach these things. In commanding, he would lay them down as authoritative teaching that must order the life of the church.

In teaching them, he would explain the rationale, and he would instruct people in how to understand them. Timothy's confidence might have been shaken by the fact that he was relatively young, being sent as Paul's representative to a church where there would be many people who were older than him. This is one of the junctures in the book of 1 Timothy where the question of when the book was written is of some consequence.

If the book of 1 Timothy was written in the window of time of Acts chapter 20 verses 1 to 3, then Timothy may have been in his early twenties. If it was written after Paul's Roman imprisonment, at the end of the book of Acts, then Timothy would likely have been at least in his mid-thirties. We see a similar statement in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 10 to 11.

When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.

Timothy is instructed to provide an example to the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. In his speech he would need to show wisdom and mastery. In his conduct he would need to show the integrity between the message that he declared and the actions that he performed.

In love he would show his devotion to Christ and to his people. In faith he would demonstrate his confidence in the word and person of Christ. And in purity his chaste behaviour, particularly towards women.

Perhaps in the purity we also have another reference to the integrity that he needs to show. In 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 17, Paul describes Timothy as his son who represents his own character. Paul imitates Christ, he calls the Corinthians to imitate him, and he gives them Timothy who has imitated him.

That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere in every church. As a good leader, Timothy needs to lead by example. He needs to be an exemplar of the sort of behaviour that the Christian needs to exhibit.

To this end, until Paul returns, Timothy is instructed to devote himself to the public reading of scripture. This is the fundamental practice of the church, the corporate reading of the scripture and study of it. That leads then to the practice of exhortation that takes the word of the scripture and gives it an force in the life of the congregation.

And then the second practice of teaching by which people are instructed so that they might better understand what they hear in the public reading of the scripture. Timothy had received a gift by which he would be better able to perform the ministry that had been given to him. The gift here is associated with an act of prophecy and also with the

laying on of hands.

Elsewhere in 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 6 we read of another event of laying on of hands when Paul laid hands on Timothy. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. Whether these were two different events of the laying on of hands or the same one is not immediately clear.

I believe it is most likely that the laying on of the hands of the elders might have been the Ephesian house church leaders appointing Timothy to act in a temporary overseer role over them, while Paul's laying of hands on Timothy was appointing Timothy to act as his apostolic plenipotentiary emissary. Timothy has been authorised to perform a mission. He has also presumably been empowered by the spirit and exhorted and encouraged by a prophecy given concerning him.

He must devote himself to performing what he has been given. It is only in performing such a vocation that the gift will actually be enjoyed and be rendered effective. To do this, like the effective athlete, he must continually practice these things.

He must immerse himself in them. It must become his entire world. It must be what he lives and breathes every single day.

As he does this, he will be a more effective example. People will see the progress that he is making and he will thereby inspire them to make progress in their own Christian lives. Timothy's primary focus must be keeping watch upon himself.

By keeping watch upon himself and by practicing his own Christian life, he will be the most effective leader that he can be. In many ways, the most effective shepherd of a community is the person who watches more closely over himself than over anyone else. He masters himself and sets an example for others thereby.

He sets the tone for the entire community. Leadership will always be a lot easier when you are giving people something worth following and the man who is keeping close watch over himself will be in the best position to do this. Likewise, he also needs to be diligent and watchful over what he is teaching.

It is the truth that he lives and teaches that will be effective in saving himself and the various people to whom he ministers. A question to consider, how might Paul's analogy between the Christian life and athletic training inform our models and our practices of Christian discipleship?