

The Original Pony Express

The Shadow Sovereign-Part 8

Esther 8:1-9:16

In 1860, three businessmen organized what they called the Pony Express, which they intended to be a fast mail service between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California.

They made the unbelievable promise to customers that they could deliver mail out West in only 10 days. They used the 1860 presidential election as a platform to nationally reveal just how industrious they could be.

On November 7, 1860, relay riders and fresh horses were readied and the first Pony Express rider left the Nebraska Territory. Only 7 days and 17 hours later, the rider delivered to California newspapers the news that Abraham Lincoln had been elected President.

This got The Pony Express on its feet.

Soon the Pony Express involved 120 riders, 400 horses and several hundred personnel. It needed a lot of man and horse power to insure that the mail could be delivered so speedily, so each rider typically rode 175 miles a day and changed his horse every 10 miles at Pony Express relay stations.

The riders were required to weigh no more than 140 pounds. They never stopped to eat or drink. One Pony Express advertisement spelled out the danger as it read, "Wanted: young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18 years of age; must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily."

It's no wonder then why Pony Express Riders earned \$25 a week – which is \$24 dollars more than most unskilled laborers were making at that time. The boys who were hired were also given all the horses they needed along with a pistol and a Bible.

To be a rider in the Pony Express was to be engaged in one of the most dangerous jobs in the world: not only because of the endurance needed to

ride so strenuously, but also because it often involved outrunning bandits and Indians. One rider became famous for finishing his course after being shot in the jaw with an arrow which knocked three teeth out. He survived to become a folk legend.

The most famous rider, however, was a 15-year-old named Bill Cody, who you know as Buffalo Bill. As the story goes, when Cody discovered that his relief rider had been killed on the journey, he took his companion's mail pouch in hand and travelled over one of the most dangerous sections of the entire trail. He traveled 322 miles nonstop on 21 different horses and made it all the way! He held the record for the longest ride through Wyoming.

The Pony Express didn't last forever though. With the invention of the telegraph, lines were hung from Nevada all the way to California which ended the need for such rigorous travel. But the endeavor of these riders was not forgotten. In 2006 the United States Postal service adopted the Pony Express' original logo and still uses it to this day.ⁱ

The rear pony express, however, wasn't started by cowboys and businessmen in the 1900's; it was started by the Ancient Persians. The Greek Historian Herodotus records that the Persian Empire was connected by Postal stations every 14 miles.ⁱⁱ In speaking of this ancient postal service Herodotus marveled:

Nothing travels as fast as these Persian messengers. The entire plan is a Persian invention. Along the whole trail there are men stationed with horses and they will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they have to travel.ⁱⁱⁱ

I discovered the interesting fact that it was Herodotus' description of the Persian pony express that gave us our famous motto, "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, stays these valiant couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."^{iv}

The American Pony Express was only for the upper and business classes of people, because each package cost \$5 per half-ounce to send. The Persian pony express wasn't like that, however. It was the postal service used by the wealthy and commoners alike. In fact, the Persian government relied heavily on this nationwide service to communicate to a kingdom that stretched from modern day Pakistan all the way to North Africa.

This is the mailing system that Haman used to deliver his edict of death. Every Jew would have seen the post: whether wealthy or poor. The news travelled swiftly on the backs of horses, bringing with it unspeakable grief, fear and despair for the Jews.

The Jews are outnumbered and defenseless.

But then the tables are suddenly turned. Esther risks her life to get the King's attention. Within 24 hours, the threat of Haman's edict is uncovered and Haman is hanging from his own gallows.

Now most people stop at this part of the story and think that Esther's work is over . . . that she can now kick back and enjoy the winter palace of Susa like never before. That's far from the truth. Haman may be dead, but his edict of death is still very much alive.^v

The edict was sealed with the King's royal insignia and it is now a law of the Medes and the Persians. Esther's job is far from over. In fact, she is needed now more than ever. Let's pick up the story in *Esther chapter 8:1-2* to find out what she does next:

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

Promotion

Josephus informs us that in the late Kingdom of Persia treason and felony resulted in the forfeiture of property and wealth to the crown.^{vi} This forfeiture included houses, property, possessions and even bank accounts.

So King Ahasuerus ends up giving Esther half his kingdom after all but under very different circumstances than he previously anticipated. Esther, however, turns right around and hands the newly bestowed estate to Mordecai.

So these two Jewish cousins now occupy the two most powerful positions in the Persian Empire beside the King. The Queen and the Prime Minister are Jews.

This is God's doing.

This looks like coincidence to us but it happens to be sovereignty. This scene has been choreographed by the Creator Himself!

Nevertheless, there's still a serious issue at hand. Even though Esther and Mordecai have every reason to feel safe, they still aren't.

Passion

Notice what happens next in *verses 3-4*:

Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept and implored him to avert the evil scheme of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews. The king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king.

Some believe that this is a different conversation. But I agree with others who see this conversation as the same mentioned earlier where Mordecai is promoted.

Proof of this is found in *verse 7* where the king responds to both Esther and Mordecai together. They are still in the royal court, which tells us that instead of going out and celebrating for a week or two, they are now interceding for the lives of their people.

What's happening here is that Esther is once again risking the king's displeasure by asking him to grant another request. The heart of her request is found in the middle of *verse 5* where she asks, "**Let**

it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman.”

The king, however, isn't all that concerned. In fact, he basically responds in *verse 7* with something like this:

Look, Esther, I've given Haman's estate to you and I've given his job to your cousin; there's really nothing more I can do because, as you know, I signed the edict myself and according to Persian Law the edict must stand. But I tell you what . . . I'll let you and Mordecai write up a new edict that seems good to you and I'll sign that one too.

Ahasuerus has found a loophole in his earlier decree.

We know from history that the Persian kings prided themselves on their infallibility. Why would they ever need to repeal a law when whatever they signed was always right? To repeal a law would be to admit he had made a mistake. And Ahasuerus wasn't in the business of admitting that.

So true to his character he finds a way to get himself off the hook while at the same time pleasing his wife and right-hand man. In the process he also does something critically important for the Jews.

Permission

The king says in *verse 8*:
Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked.

In other words, the king won't admit that his first edict was ill-advised, but he still does what he can to exonerate himself from any embarrassment the first edict might cause him in the future. Esther and Mordecai aren't the only ones who need a way out in this situation. The king is playing it cool here by allowing Esther to save her people's skin, but behind the mask of cordiality he is also saving his own face.

So Mordecai draws up a letter of the edict and has it copied in all the different languages of the Persian Empire. The letter basically endows the Jewish people with several legal rights. Look at *verse 11*:

In them [these letters] the king granted the Jews who were in each and every city the right to

assemble (an army) and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill and to annihilate the entire army of any people or province which might attack them, including children and women, and to plunder their spoil on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

The Jews have just been given the legal right to mount an army and take up arms. In fact, they are actually given the right to plunder any Persian who dies in his or her attempt to kill the Jews.

Mordecai actually quotes Haman's original edict word for word. All the Jews in Persia, who by now probably have the first edict memorized, immediately catch the significance of this second edict. Mordecai is counterbalancing everything Haman established in his first edict. Everything the Persians can do, the Jews can now likewise do.

So the edict is signed, sealed and committed and *verse 14* tells us that *“The couriers, hastened and impelled by the king's command, went out, riding on the royal steeds.”*

The news is now making its way from Susa all the way to the Sudan.

Two months earlier the pony express had delivered an edict of death throughout the empire. Ever since that time the sound of hoof-beats probably sent a shudder down Jewish spines. Perhaps they feared what news would come next from the palace.

Another letter is nailed to a post and they can see the king's seal. Someone finally musters up the bravery to read it. Joy floods his or her eyes. “Mother! Father! Come quickly! Come and see what the king has written now!” There is bustling in the streets as Jewish men and women crowd around a set of words that give them their first ray of hope in nearly two months.

And what this edict effectively does is communicate to the Persians that if they all restrain themselves no one gets hurt. If they keep their greed and animosity in check no one dies.

This edict sent a warning to the Persians that they are no longer going after unarmed Jews anymore. It won't be a picnic of plundering. They will be risking their lives and the lives of their families because now the Jews can retaliate in self defense and plunder.

The meaning of this edict can be summarized as simply as this: the Persian citizens no longer have to

attack the Jews, but if they still choose to do so, it won't end well for them.

This is a brilliant counterbalance to an unchangeable edict. What a turn of events for the Jewish people!

Can you imagine what it must have been like to have been a Jew during this time? You read that first edict 2 months earlier and life screeched to a halt. You knew you only had 11 months to live. Your greatest fears were about to come to pass.

You've been wearing sackcloth and ashes for the last two months but your mourning hasn't seemed to pay off. You've imagined with horror what the 13th day of Adar is going to be like for you and your family and you know you can't do anything to prevent it.

Your friends, coworkers and neighbors have been given the command from the Prime Minister to wipe you off the face of the earth and take your homes, possessions and wealth for themselves.

Suspicion was mounting. Tension grew greater every day. No one dared make eye contact with you. No one sympathized with you for fear of a reprisal from the government.

People were murmuring amongst each other in the streets. You can hear the things they were saying. Things like, "They must have been a threat to our government all along. You can't trust them. They're not even really Persians; they're just foreign people from a foreign land and they've never really fit in here. We'll be better off without them. And I'd like that house and carriage anyway!"

This was Germany and Austria and Poland 80 years ago. This was the prelude to another holocaust.

And then out of nowhere, a royal stallion gallops into your village with another edict from the Palace.

You read it and can't believe what you discover. The new Prime Minister is Mordecai, the Jew. The rumors that he had been executed by Haman were false. He is alive and well.

Furthermore, you discover in the edict that the king is on your side. Even his government officials are siding with the second edict.

This is cause for celebration! And that is exactly what the Jews do. Look at *verse 15*:

Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a large crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple (these were the royal colors of the palace in Susa); and the city of Susa shouted

and rejoiced. For the Jews there was light and gladness and joy and honor.

We're even told in *verse 17* that "***many of the people of the land became Jews.***" The Persians literally aligned themselves in solidarity alongside the Jews.

Some commentators believe this to mean that many Persians began following God as well. This is like Rahab, the Gentile, who abandoned her people in Jericho and became a proselyte Jew, or like Ruth, who left her pagan idolatry and married a Jewish man, later becoming the grandmother of King David.

No wonder the city of Susa is celebrating that night. We're told in *verse 16* that for the Jewish people "***everything was light.***" That word "light" can be translated "hope," which represents the reversal of darkness.^{vii} Everything is now filled with "***hope and gladness and joy and honor.***"

That's quite a reversal!

And the celebration is nationwide. The Persian Pony express gallops at full speed across the Arabian Desert, along the banks of the Euphrates River, down into India and over into Africa, and brings the good news to everyone.^{viii}

Once seen as the messengers of darkness and death they are now seen as the messengers of light and life.

Protection

The clouds haven't completely passed, however. The day of the massacre is about to dawn, and the Jews are vastly outnumbered. Napoleon once remarked that God is always on the side of the largest army.^{ix} If he's right, then the Jews don't stand a chance against the Persians. Edict or no edict, death will still be imminent for some and perhaps all.

Chapter 9 opens with these words:

Now in the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar), on the thirteenth day, when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them.

That verb translated here as "hoped" is a rare verb that refers to someone waiting with great

anticipation.^x In other words, some of the Persians were licking their chops, considering that the Jews would be easy prey. “We’ll have new homes, fields, cattle and clothing before the sun sets,” they thought. But *verse 1* goes on to tell us that the Jews in fact took mastery over their enemies instead.

Napolean was wrong. Fighting has broken out in different places throughout the Persian kingdom, and a day of fighting there is no record of any Jew being killed. There is a record of Persians being killed, however, and most notably Haman’s 10 sons. *Verses 6-10* inform us of that.

But then Esther does something surprising. In *verse 13* Esther goes back to the king and begs him to give the Jews one more day to defend themselves.

She has evidently discovered a plot in Susa – more than likely fomented by Persians loyal to Haman and his 10 sons who had already been killed in the battle. Evidently there were many well-connected Persians in and around the palace who weren’t happy with all these reversals.

This was their chance for revenge.

Esther doesn’t stop there, however. She also asks the king in *verse 13* to publically display the bodies of Haman’s 10 sons to discourage any further killing.

Verse 16 summarizes what these two days of fighting were like:

Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king’s provinces assembled, to defend their lives and rid themselves of their enemies, and they killed 75,000 of those who hated them but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

Upon reading this you might think, as I initially did, that 75,000 Persians is a lot of people! This must imply that the fighting was taking place all over the kingdom. But documents from this time period reveal that the population of Persia was somewhere around 50 million people,^{xi} which means that the number of people who actually took up arms against the Jews was relatively small.

God had obviously turned the hearts of the Persian citizens toward the Jewish people. If he hadn’t, the Jews would have been annihilated without much of a fight.

By the way, don’t miss the phrase that Ezra has already repeated 3 times. The Jews have been given the legal right to not only fight back but also to

plunder any Persian citizen they defeated. But three times (*verses 10, 15, and 16*) Ezra informs us that ***“the Jews did not lay hands on their plunder.”***^{xii}

This is their chance to get back! They have suffered a year of mental torture and anguish. They received no support from the Persians who are now lying dead at their feet. To take their possessions won’t be stealing; it won’t be unlawful! Yet the Jews leave their enemies’ homes and families alone.

Have you ever been ripped off by someone? Have you ever been mistreated by one of the superiors in your company? Have you ever signed a contract only to find out the guy lied to you?

What would you do if somehow you were able to get back at them without any legal resistance? What would you do to your enemy if you were offered the chance to take revenge?

I heard a funny story about a guy who was bitten by a dog and rushed to the hospital. After taking some blood tests, the doctor came in with the grim news that the man had rabies. The man didn’t say a word in response. He just took out a pad of paper and began to write feverishly. His doctor, thinking he was writing out his last will and testament, encouraged him by saying, “you’re not gonna die, sir; there’s a cure for rabies.” The man said, “I know; but I’m making a list of people I want to bite before I get it.”

That’s the way of the world, isn’t it? Don’t get mad . . . get even. Bite back! One of mankind’s natural instincts is revenge. You may not use a gun or a sword, but you’ll use a letter or an email.

The enemy of your soul knows that you will remain a victim much longer if you retaliate. Bitterness and anger will kill your soul and it won’t be satiated by the blood of your victim.

That’s why Satan never fails to show up and whisper in your ear, “You’ve held back long enough; you’ve gone the second and the third mile; why not get them back?”^{xiii}

But the Jews didn’t listen. I can’t help but think how remarkable this is in light of the fact that they didn’t have the New Testament. They couldn’t open their bibles and read the Apostle Paul say in *Romans 12:17-21* (abbreviated):

Never pay back evil for evil. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.

What has the mail-man delivered to your door recently?

- Bad news?
- A false accusation?
- An unkind word?
- Misfortune?
- Gossip?
- Slander?

Have you heard the whispering of the enemy in your ear, saying, “You didn’t do anything wrong; you’ve taken it on the chin long enough; it’s time for a little revenge?”

Learn from these Jews who had every reason to take revenge on their enemies, but instead refused to do anything more than defend their lives. And don’t think for a second their Persian neighbors didn’t notice. The God of Israel received great honor that day as His people lived out the words of **1 Peter 2:9:**

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

What’s so amazing about this story is not that the Jews gained mastery over their enemies, but that they gained mastery over themselves.^{xiv}

A national, empire-wide celebration ensues as the Jewish people marvel that they are alive to see another day. And this is real, genuine Biblical ecstasy because the Jews decided to leave vindication up to God. The celebration would have been a lot shorter and far less sweet had they chosen to plunder their neighbors.

The world doesn’t understand this principle. Books are written and movies are made all the time which glorify the concept of revenge. To truly turn the other cheek after suffering injustice is a concept that blows their minds. But it also makes them look twice. In the end, God will receive glory through you and your testimony for Christ will receive greater credibility than before.

So how will you respond to the news that is going to arrive at your doorstep today? It’s on its way right now. Will you, like the Jews in this story, remind the world that in every circumstance God is worthy of praise and honor? Or will you, like the Persians, give in to your greed and frustration?

We are a chosen people. We – the Church – are a royal priesthood and a holy nation, as Peter so beautifully reminded us. So let’s make it our ambition today to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness and into His wonderful light.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/13/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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i Above facts taken from wikipedia.org/wiki/Pony_Express

ii Anthony Tomasino, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 3, Esther* (Zondervan, 2009), p. 480

iii John Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God’s Sovereignty* (Moody Press, 1979), p. 42

iv Tomasino, p. 480

v Charles R. Swindoll, *Esther: A Woman of Strength & Dignity* (Word Publishing, 1997), p. 143

vi Cyril J. Barber, *Ezra and Esther* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007)

vii Gary V. Smith, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther (Tyndale House Publishers, 2010), p. 278

viii J. Vernon McGee, Esther: The Romance of Providence (Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 126

ix Barber, p. 167

x Luter & Davis, p. 323

xi Tomasino, p. 499

xii Karen H. Jobes, The NIV Application Commentary: Esther (Zondervan, 1999), p. 196

xiii Swindoll, p. 169

xiv Swindoll, p. 163