

"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." – 2 Corinthians 5:20

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## Peace on Earth! In 2021?

Forgive us for not sending out physical Christmas letters and pictures this year. I look forward to praying through, writing, and then praying over our letter each year, and as a mother, I always enjoy sending out pictures of my babies. But this year, we just weren't able to get the project finished, so this year we'll share it with you electronically.

Our two big pieces of news for 2021 are that 1) we bought a house in Georgia in March, prepared to settle down for the continued long haul of staying stateside due to COVID, and 2) we are already renting that house to others as the Lord opened the borders for us to return to Romania on August 31! After feeling homeless for so long with so many moves, we have been incredibly blessed to find a home we love in Georgia *and* an apartment we love in Brasov. And like nearly all ministries around the world, we are prayerfully trying to figure out what mission work looks like for us now in this new pandemic landscape - full of restrictions, living in a new neighborhood with very different demographics, and juggling new added responsibilities, such as homeschooling Elin and Atticus. But some things remain the same, such as practicing hospitality, taking seminary classes, leading Sunday worship as needed, and

participating in groups and Bible study. Managing transitional grief and anxiety, though never any easier, has become a well-known and seemingly normal process. But overall, all of the kids are doing well, and we haven't been plagued by sickness. And although we left incredible community behind, we have come back to another wonderful community where we feel loved, known, and cared for. We are grateful beyond words to be back in Romania, and we love the deeper faith that these last few years have built in us. We have so much for which we give thanks!

I was recently a last-minute volunteer to lead our women's Bible Study on Esther chapter 3. Believing I could just prepare a simple lesson with a few typical application questions, I was happy to fill in. But the Lord had other plans to take me way past my bedtime as He revealed to me a beautiful thread woven throughout His Scripture. I'm sure nobody expected to read about the history of the Amalekites versus Israelites as our cheery seasonal Christmas letter - and it is a fairly lengthy lesson - but kindly just bear with me. 😊



In Esther 3, we are introduced to the story's antagonist, Haman - an Agagite. I **began to wonder who the Agagites are and why the Israelite character, Mordecai, despised him so much.** And why, when Mordecai rebelled against Haman, it incited Haman to not only seek revenge on Mordecai, but to try to

wipe out the entire Jewish race throughout Assyria! My research led me to 1Samuel 15, where Scripture reports King Saul is supposed to kill all of the Amalekites because they are the enemies of the Israelites. Yet Saul reports that he kills everyone except King Agag and the economically beneficial livestock. The fact that we see Haman - Agag's living descendent - in the book of Esther shows us that Saul was even more disobedient and dishonest than he said in 1Samuel 15. **"But why," I asked, "was King Saul supposed to kill the Amalekites in the first place?"**

Answering this question led me to Exodus 17, which is the famous story of Moses standing on the precipice overlooking the Israelite battle with the Amalekites. Every time Moses lifted his arms above his head, the Israelites prevailed, but every time he became tired and lowered them, the enemy prevailed. When he was no longer able to hold his arms up, his companions stood at his sides and supported his arms for him. **Later in Deuteronomy 25, we read that the Amalekites had started this battle by trailing the Israelites through the wilderness, picking off the slowest and weakest among them – a group that was already weary after escaping their Egyptian captivity and searching for the home promised to them. Further, I found that the Amalekites were known for being a vicious people – mutilating bodies and brutally killing their enemies.** Throughout many Old Testament stories we continue to see the Amalekite presence as Israel's nemesis, providing a constant reminder of hardship, oppression, enemies, persecution, and disobedience. So when Haman appears in Esther 3, he is not simply a story character. Reading with Jewish eyes, Haman is an arch rival. A man who signifies centuries of hurt and oppression, preying on the most vulnerable. And here he is again, trying to destroy the Jewish people in a terribly unjust decree by manipulating King Xerxes. There is a lot of history pent up in this character. And therefore, it becomes even more apparent why the downfall of Haman in the later chapters of Esther, and the corresponding elevation of Mordecai, leads to such joyous celebration! **Even to this day, the Jewish people commemorate the Day of Purim as a reminder of God's providence, love, and sovereignty. This holiday tells the story of how God's people will ultimately prevail, how He will bring justice to an oppressed and vulnerable people, and how He continues to love His people even when it seems they have been forgotten. It is a true underdog story!**





And this sort of celebration is easy for me to understand! Wars have surrounded me my entire life. Military wars. Culture wars. Political wars. Church wars. Denomination wars. Our modern day political correctness and my own desire for righteousness may hinder me from comfortably using the word *enemy*, but I can often treat others as such, even if only in my heart and mind. I pray for the Lord to bring justice. To end oppression. To save the righteous. To destroy the wicked. To open the eyes of the stubborn person on the *other side*. The year of 2021 has made it especially easy for many of us to set ourselves opposite *the other side* and pray for their downfall. It's hard to pass through a normal conversation nowadays without somehow discussing another person's "wrongheaded" or even "evil" views on vaccines, mandates, what should or shouldn't be taught in schools, politics, presidents, how ministries and churches should be run, CRT, what evangelicalism does or doesn't mean nowadays... We've watched as families, friends, and churches have been ripped apart this year over heated, differing views. We have strong opinions ourselves on each of these issues, many of which are very nuanced and never seem to fit into some categorical box. And for these many issues near and dear to our hearts, I look forward to the day that the Lord elevates goodness and ceases the prevalence of evil. And isn't this future reckoning the hope of the Christian faith? **As Christ's followers now, we know that one day God will wipe away every tear, that He will bring about justice where people are hurting, and that terrible enemies will be crushed. This is our hope. Our banner.** The prevailing of goodness and the destruction of evil! Purim makes sense to me.

**But there's just one problem...**

When I finally asked the question, "Who are the Amalekites anyway?," I discovered that Amalek was *Esau's* grandson. Esau! The hairy twin brother of Jacob, the father of the Israelites. That means that the Amalekites and Israelites were relatives. Cousins. Kin. **These arch enemies can be traced back to a time when they shared the same womb.** We start to see a tension here. On the one hand, it is right and good when we praise God for the destruction of evil. And the Amalekites were truly unjust people. But at the same time, when the Jewish people celebrate the destruction of their enemies, they forget that their enemies are essentially from *their own family tree*. **So although I understand the celebration of Purim, I wonder what this sobering thought may mean for me and my own enemies today.**

Soon after teaching this lesson, I turned on Christmas carols, and "O Holy Night" struck me more poignantly than normal:

"Truly He taught us to love one another  
His law is love and His gospel is peace  
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother  
And in His name all oppression shall cease  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we  
Let all within us praise His holy name."

At Christmastime, we don't celebrate the destruction of others. Unlike Purim, we say that we remember the special womb that cradled the glorious Life that binds us all together as children of God. **This baby - this Emmanuel - taught us to love one another. To treat all others as our brothers. To love our enemy. Not celebrate their utter destruction. In Christ, we are all kin.**



The Christmas season gifts me with an annual opportunity to remember my spiritual lineage that points me, and all others, back to the same womb. But if I celebrate this Prince of Peace at Christmastime, am I prepared to also honor and celebrate His whole life and teaching? Am I ready to live my life in a way that loves and speaks kindly of those with whom I disagree? Am I willing to remember that my brotherhood with my enemy can be traced back to the Messiah, who was cradled in a womb and born the same way as each of us? Can I follow Him in showing mercy when what I really want is justice, or perhaps more accurately, vengeance? Can I pray for the salvation of those on *the other side*, even as I humbly work out my own salvation with fear and trembling? I don't want to celebrate the brotherhood embodied in Christmas just once a year - and then live the rest of my life as if I celebrate Purim. **Father, forgive me.**

This Christmas, we invite you to join with us in repentance as we consider those whom we've made our enemies in our hearts. We are asking our Messiah to help us live in the tension of rightly praying for "all oppression to cease," while simultaneously remembering to pray for true peace for *all oppressors*. **This is only a gift that a true Emmanuel can bring, as He Himself stepped down from His throne and joined a sinful enemy like me – to guide me to His path of peace.** Then, a sinner like me can

"Fall on your knees  
O hear the angels' voices  
O Night Divine, the Night when Christ was Born."

Merry Christmas!

*With Love and Gratitude,  
Derek, Catalina, Hin (7), Atticus (6), Denton (4) and Jemma (2)*

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