

When the Tables are Turned

Esther 9

Bellevue Baptist Church

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Today, as we open our Bibles to Esther 9, I want to share one final message from this remarkable story before we launch into the New Testament book of James next week.

What is the purpose of the book of Esther? Why does it belong in the Bible? The most clear answer is that it describes the way God works behind the scenes on behalf of his people. God's name is never mentioned in the book, but His presence is felt throughout the story. In case you missed the last two weeks, Esther is the story of a young Jewish woman who is chosen to be the Queen in the Persian Empire. Not long after she comes to this special place of power, she discovers a plan by an evil man, to destroy all of God's people. He tricks the king into signing a decree, and setting a date for the mass murder.

The future was signed and settled. But as I mentioned last week, Esther's uncle Mordecai urges Queen Esther to go and tell the King what is really going on. This was a life-threatening decision for in those days, because no one was allowed to approach the king in his chamber without being summoned. Unless, he extended his golden scepter—this was the sign that the king was showing favor, allowing you into his private world.

In Esther 5, she approaches. The text reads:

As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard, she gained favor with him. The king extended the gold scepter in his hand toward Esther, and she approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

Through a series of events that unfold, the king gets the full picture of what's happening and he sentences Haman to death. This was good news for the Jews, but there remained one very large problem: Under Persian law, the first royal decree could not be revoked. The only thing the King could do is to sign a second decree giving the Jews the legal right to defend themselves—to assemble an army, to gather weapons, and to defend their families on the day of their destruction.

Now, we have reached Esther 9, the long-awaited day has finally arrived, when the Jews will be attacked. Will God's people survive, or will they be destroyed?

Esther 9:1:

"The king's command and law went into effect on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month Adar. On the day when the Jews' enemies had hoped to overpower them, just the opposite happened. The Jews overpowered those who hated them." Esther 9:1

I want you to notice that phrase: ***"Just the opposite happened."***

For many months, God's people knew this day was coming, like prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps—they knew it was coming, and every day they felt it.

But just the opposite happens. God rescues his people from disaster. Here we see a clear pattern in Scripture: God clearly loves a comeback. He specializes in reversals. He parts the waters. He topples giants. He raises the dead. And here in Esther, He turns a day of destruction into a day of deliverance. The book of Esther is written that we might look at our own lives in seasons of defeat and keep the faith.

Perhaps you walked into this room today feeling defeated in some area of your life? If you have a hope-meter that measures your confidence in God, it has hit bottom. Some situation has you down, and your eyes are low, your spirit is crushed. You find yourself catastrophizing—imagining the worst case scenario and assuming that God will be a no-show. I

f this is you, I want you to perk up and pay attention, because the final section of Esther may be the reminder you need to walk out with your eyes lifted up.

In this final section of the story, we can glean three timeless principles for remaining hopeful when life feels bleak. Let me show them to you.

When You Feel Down and Out...

1. Don't assume today's circumstances are your final outcome.

Look with me at 9:2.

²In each of King Ahasuerus's provinces the Jews assembled in their cities to attack those who intended to harm them. Not a single person could withstand them; fear of them fell on every nationality. Es 9:2

Notice the Jews experienced a resurgence that was spiritual, not strategic. It wasn't because a brilliant military commander suddenly emerged. There is no *Braveheart* figure riding over the hill. The text simply says: "Fear of them fell on every nationality."

This was God showing up. God changing the atmosphere. God working in ways that could not be seen. The Jews, who had previously been viewed as easy targets, were suddenly perceived as mighty foes. All of this happened because of the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

This reminds me of the disciples, before and after the resurrection. After Jesus emerged from the tomb, He told His followers to stay put—don't rush out and begin their mission just yet. "Wait," He said. Wait for power. Wait for the Spirit. Wait for heaven's help. And they obeyed. They remained in hiding, they stayed in a posture prayer, until the day of Pentecost arrived.

Then, on that majestic day, the Holy Spirit filled changed the atmosphere. It wasn't that those people completed a seminary degree that they suddenly became powerful preachers of the Gospel. No, it was God who transformed these flawed, ordinary people, by filling them with His power. The timid became bold.

Acts 4:31 says:

When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly. Acts 4:31

Did you catch that? Not cleverly. Not persuasively. Not strategically. *Boldly.*

The Spirit of God transformed them. Peter, a previously proven coward, after Pentecost, becomes the Rock Jesus predicted he would be. That wasn't Peter's doing. It was God's doing. And the same goes for the rest of that motley crew. Because of God's work in their lives, they became better people. And you have to believe the same thing is possible for you.

In the days to come, if you keep walking with Jesus Christ, you can expect Him to take your average, ordinary self, and turn you into something far better. He takes the weak, and He makes them strong.

One of the most impactful books in my life, early on, is *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. It's a book that describes the way Jesus intended to change the world. How? Through ordinary people. He describes the disciples:

By any standard of sophisticated culture then and now they would surely be considered a rather ragged collection of souls. One might wonder how Jesus could ever use them. They were impulsive, temperamental, easily offended, and had all the prejudices of their environment. In short, these men selected by the Lord to be his assistants represented an average cross section of society in their day. Not the kind of group one would expect to win the world for Christ. —Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.

I read that this week and thought—well, that’s a description of me some days. I can be impulsive, temperamental, easily offended. I can judge people by appearances. I can be, in a word, ordinary. And yet, this is the miracle of the birth and survival of the Church. In every generation, God picks up average tools to prove what He can build without much help. Our success is all because of Him.

And that’s what we see way back in Esther 9—the people of God had been hiding in fear for many years—they had no military training, no expertise in war—and suddenly, their enemies saw them as warriors to be feared.

This text is here to encourage someone today. You may feel outnumbered today. You may feel discouraged today. You may feel like the odds are stacked against you today. But God can change circumstances faster than you can imagine. He can open doors, soften hearts, and create opportunities. And he can change the way you feel—imparting hope where there has been nothing but despair.

The story is not over simply because the scoreboard looks bad in the third quarter. Just ask the New York Knicks.

Surely many of you witnessed game 3 of the NBA finals, one of the greatest comebacks in NBA history. The Knicks were down by 29 points to the San Antonio Spurs. At halftime, the New York fans were stunned. All the celebrities in those courtside seats were speechless. The non-celebrity people were angry, because many had paid \$10,000 for their ticket. But in the 3rd quarter, the Spurs took their foot off the gas, allowing the Knicks to chip away at the lead. Then in the 4th Quarter, the Spurs slumped more, and you could sense the fans in the stands coming alive, like the electricity had been turned back on! And in the closing seconds of the game, the Knicks pulled it off. New York City went nuts.

I can promise you that the Knick fans will still be talking about that game years from now. Why? Because we humans love a good comeback. We love it when the tables are turned.

Esther 9 reminds us of this truth: *Don't assume today's circumstances are your final outcome.* Now, let’s move onto the second:

2. Don’t mistake God’s patience for God’s absence.

What happens next in the story, I'll summarize for the sake of time—the Jews rise up to defend themselves and they are victorious, but there's still one main issue—all of Haman's sons are still living and they are bloodthirsty for revenge. These men will be like terrorists to the Jews, for they want to pay back what happened to their father. Look what Esther boldly requests in v. 13:

¹³ Esther answered, "If it pleases the king, may the Jews who are in Susa also have tomorrow to carry out today's law, and may the bodies of Haman's ten sons be hung on the gallows." ¹⁴

The king gave the orders for this to be done, so a law was announced in Susa, and they hung the bodies of Haman's ten sons. ¹⁵ The Jews in Susa assembled again on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and killed three hundred men in Susa, but they did not seize any plunder.

Esther 9:13–15

There's no denying that the Bible paints a realistic picture of war. The bloodshed described here is sobering, more reminiscent of a battlefield than a Sunday school lesson. God did not create a world for violence, but in a fallen world where evil persists, self-defense is sometimes necessary. Hanging on the gallows were the bodies of Haman's ten sons, men who had aligned themselves against God's people and participated in a plot to bring them harm.

You can imagine the relief that swept through the Jewish community when justice was finally served. For months they had lived under the shadow of Haman's decree. Every family knew the date circled on the calendar. Every parent wondered what would happen to their children. There were surely moments when they questioned whether God was listening at all. There were nights when their prayers seemed to rise no higher than the ceiling.

Yet all along, God was at work behind the scenes. What appeared to be silence was not absence. What appeared to be delay was not neglect. And when the appointed day finally arrived, the Lord turned the tables. The people who had expected destruction instead experienced deliverance, and the God who seemed hidden proved that He had been guiding the story all along.

Now, students, I need to give you a quick history lesson from the 1980s. Back in the day, before cell phones, every house had a phone attached to the wall. And if you wanted to take a nap without being interrupted, there was a simple solution: you took the phone off the hook.

When somebody called, they didn't get voicemail. They didn't get a text message. They got a busy signal.

Here's the reality: if you live long enough, there will probably come a season when it feels like God has taken His phone off the hook. Every morning, you wake up burdened by the same request.

"Lord, heal her." "Lord, change him." "Lord, provide the money." "Lord, open a door."

Your motives seem pure. The request seems reasonable. You are not asking for a yacht or a winning lottery ticket. You're asking God for something that genuinely seems good and right. But the days turn into weeks. The weeks turn into months.

When Lynley and I accepted the call to Bellevue, we put our house in Nashville on the market. We felt certain God had called us to Memphis, and we were eager to make the transition. So every day we prayed, "Lord, bring a buyer."

Others prayed with us. We trusted. We waited. One month passed. Then another. Then the holidays arrived, and showings practically disappeared. Just when things started picking back up, an ice storm rolled through Nashville. Trees snapped. Limbs littered the streets. Neighborhoods looked like disaster zones. The market stalled again.

And every day we kept praying. "Lord, bring a buyer." Eventually, praise God, the house sold, and we were grateful, but we wondered like everyone else does at times; "Lord, why so long?"

Now, I realize that's not a life-and-death story. We weren't praying for a loved one in the ICU. We weren't facing a cancer diagnosis. But it is a practical reminder of how quickly our faith can be shaken when heaven seems silent.

And that leads us to a truth we desperately need to hear: Don't mistake God's patience for God's absence. The book of Esther reminds us that God is often doing His deepest work when He appears to be doing nothing at all.

Think about it. By the time we reach Esther 9, God has been orchestrating events for years. A queen has been removed. Dozens of seemingly random events have been moving into place. Yet throughout most of the story, it looked as if God was nowhere to be found.

Clearly, He is not in a hurry like we are. He does not operate according to our timetable. He never said, "If you ask, I'll fix it by Friday." But He did promise His presence even as we learn patience:

Listen to Isaiah 43:2:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and the rivers will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, and the flame will not burn you.
Isaiah 43:2

Notice what God did not say. He did not say, "You will never face waters." He did not say, "You will never walk through fire." He said, "I will be with you." There are times when we must be humbled, and learn again, that God's silence should never be confused with God's absence. The Jews learned that in Esther.

Now, let's move to the final point, because one of the most fascinating parts of Esther 9 is that it explains the origin of a major Jewish holiday that is still celebrated today. It's called Purim. In this we learn a third principle...

3. Don't forget what God has already done for you.

After the Jews survived Haman's attempted genocide and witnessed God's remarkable deliverance, Mordecai wanted to make sure the people never forgot what God had done for them.

Look at 9:23...

²³ So the Jews agreed to continue the practice they had begun, as Mordecai had written them to do. ²⁴ For Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them. He cast the pur—that is, the lot—to crush and destroy them. ²⁵ But when the matter was brought before the king, he commanded by letter that the evil plan Haman had devised against the Jews return on his own head and that he should be hanged with his sons on the gallows. ²⁶ For this reason these days are called Purim, from the word pur. Because of all the instructions in this letter as well as what they had witnessed and what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews bound themselves, their descendants, and all who joined with them to a commitment that they would not fail to celebrate these two days each and every year according to the written instructions and according to the time appointed. ²⁸ These days are remembered and celebrated by every generation, family, province, and city, so that these days of Purim will not lose their significance in Jewish life and their memory will not fade from their descendants. Esther 9:23–28

Now, unless you grew up in a Jewish community, there's a good chance you've never attended a Purim celebration. But remarkably, more than 2,400 years later, Jewish people around the world

still celebrate this holiday every year. The name Purim comes from the word *pur*, which means "lot."

Why? Because back in Esther chapter 3, Haman cast lots, which was something like rolling dice. He did this in order to determine the day on which the Jewish people would be destroyed. Haman thought he was controlling the future. He thought chance was working in his favor. But what Haman intended for destruction, God used for deliverance.

The holiday's name is actually a reminder of Haman's failure. Every year, when Jewish families celebrate Purim, they are essentially saying, "The day that was supposed to destroy us became the day God rescued us." Today, Purim is one of the most joyful holidays in the Jewish calendar.

Families gather together. The Book of Esther is read aloud. Children often dress in costumes portraying Esther, Mordecai, kings, and queens. Special gifts of food are exchanged among friends. Generous offerings are given to the poor. And here's the most fascinating part, whenever Haman's name is read from the Book of Esther, children and adults alike make noise with rattles and noisemakers to symbolically drown out the name of the villain. Like Mississippi State fans with cowbells—they drown out his name.

Generation after generation, century after century, parents have gathered their children and said, "Let me tell you the story of how God saved our people."

Here we see the importance of remembering meaningful moments. In Scripture, the people are told constantly to build memorials, celebrate feasts, observe special days, and tell the stories again and again.

The greatest danger wasn't that they would forget Haman. The greatest danger was that they would forget God. And we're not much different.

How many prayers has God answered that you no longer remember? How many crises has He carried you through that you rarely think about anymore? How many times has He provided, protected, healed, guided, and sustained you? One of the healthiest spiritual disciplines you can develop is the habit of remembering. Remembering God's faithfulness. Remembering God's provision. Remembering God's deliverance.

Because when you remember what God has done in the past, it becomes much easier to trust Him with the future.

So that's the third lesson we take from Esther 9.

When You Feel Down and Out...

1. Don't assume today's circumstances are your final outcome.
2. Don't mistake God's patience for God's absence.
3. Don't forget what God has already done for you.

Now, with my remaining time, let's dive into some questions...

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

Is there a point where it becomes wrong to keep asking God for the same thing over and over?

That's a thoughtful question, and I think the answer depends largely on whether God has already made His answer clear.

Take the Apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians 12, he talks about a "thorn in the flesh," some kind of burden that caused him great pain. Paul says, *"Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me."* He begged God to take it away.

But then God answered. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness."* (2 Corinthians 12:9) In other words, God was saying, "No, Paul. This thorn is staying. What I'm doing through your weakness is more important than your comfort."

Once God made His will clear, Paul's posture changed. He stopped arguing and started accepting. In fact, he eventually says, *"Therefore I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses."* I will tell other people all about it, because I'm living proof that God can work through ordinary, weak things.

One of the hardest parts of maturity is learning to accept life on God's terms. Accepting limitations. Acknowledging disappointments. Trusting that God sees things we cannot see. Learning gratitude for what we have rather than resentment over what we don't.

But there is another side to this question.

Jesus told a parable in Luke 18 about a persistent widow who kept coming to a judge with the same request over and over again. She wouldn't quit. She kept asking. She kept knocking. She kept pleading.

And Jesus ended the story by saying: *"Will not God grant justice to his children who cry out to him day and night?"* (Luke 18:7)

The point of the parable is that God's people should continue praying and not lose heart.

So there's the balance: If God has clearly said "no," learn to trust His wisdom. If God has not spoken, keep praying. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. Sometimes faith looks like surrender. Sometimes faith looks like persistence. The challenge is learning which season you're in.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

So what do you say to someone who prayed for a breakthrough and never got one?

I can certainly understand the predicament. Let's say you have two daughters—one is able to have children, lots of children—and the other is unable to bring a baby into the world. Why does God give to one but not the other?

There are no easy answers here. It's something all Christians have to come to terms with—that the Lord does not explain why one person gets a miracle and another the sound of the phone off the hook.

There's a well-known writer by the name of Jennifer Rothschild, who wrote a book called *God is Just Not Fair*. In it, she shares the wrestling match that she has had with God because of the blindness that became her reality in high school. Being blind has forced her to rely on God and to accept that this was part of his design for her life.

But, one time, she was told about a blind woman named Marolyn that was miraculously healed from her blindness. Someone had handed her a tape and she hadn't popped it in to listen to it. Finally, one day, she sat and heard Marolyn Ford's story. And she writes this about the punch in the gut that it was. She said:

Facing the hard reality that God had healed Marolyn Ford's eyes and not mine exposed such tender wounds and conflicting feelings toward Him. It was so hard to admit that I loved God but was disappointed in His ways...the truth was hard to take, that God could heal Marolyn *and* me but healed Marolyn and *not* me.

--Jennifer Rothschild, *God is Just Not Fair*

Nobody lives in this world for long without being forced to face the unfairness of it all. It is not a fair world, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says, "The race is not always to the swift." Bad people often win. Good people often lose. Some evil people reach their 90s and some of God's finest pass away in their youth, or mid-life.

So what do we do? We hold onto this truth—that the Lord has determined the number of years we should live. He has marked out a race He wants us to run. Each of us will face our share of victories and defeats, but the goal is the same: to get to the end and hear our Savior say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant!"

Jennifer Rothschild will not be blind in heaven. And your problems are temporary too. We take our licks, we keep trusting God, and we reject all invitations to become discouraged.

I like to think about depression and discouragement like that. I get invitations in the mail, asking me to come to an event, requesting an RSVP. Sometimes I say yes, and sometimes I say no.

When the Devil tries to invite me to my own pity party, I do my best to decline, to waste no time wondering why I didn't get something someone else got. The pain of that disappointment was part of the process—what God used to shape me into who I am today.

A Student Asks:

How can I develop the kind of courage Esther displayed in her life?

Most people think courage is something you're born with. They imagine Esther waking up one morning and suddenly becoming fearless. But courage doesn't usually work that way. Building spiritual strength is not much different than building physical strength.

I know that many of you have run the St. Jude half or full marathon. If so, you know the importance of building up mileage. To become a stronger runner, you've got to stay in the habit, allowing your body to adapt. One mile becomes two. Two becomes three. Three becomes four. The secret is not one heroic run. The secret is consistency.

You see, over time, his body capacity grew with the size of the challenge. The same principle is true spiritually. When David stood before Goliath, he wasn't trembling the way everyone else was. Why? Because Goliath wasn't the first scary thing David had faced.

David told Saul:

Your servant has been tending his father's sheep. Whenever a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, I went after it, struck it down, and rescued the lamb from its mouth.

1 Samuel 17:34-35

So get this, David's courage didn't begin on the battlefield. It began in the pasture.

Long before he faced a giant, he had been facing smaller opponents out in the wild. In other words, God had been training him. And that's how courage grows. You don't become courageous by waiting for courage to arrive. You become courageous by obeying God in small moments until you're ready for bigger ones.

Just a few weeks ago, I pulled into a gas station. As I was taking the gas cap off, the man at the pump beside me said, "Excuse me."

I looked over and he had a huge smile on his face. He said, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? I just had to ask." I have to tell you, I was shocked by his boldness.

I said, "Well, yes sir, I do."

And he smiled and said, "Then you understand. I had to ask. You know, he told us to tell people!"

I said, "Yes sir, He did."

And he walked away, perhaps thinking that he hadn't accomplished much. But even though I wasn't one of his converts, I must say that his courage stayed with me. As I filled my gas tank, I stood there and thought:

When was the last time I showed unflinching courage for the sake of Christ?

When was the last time I brought up Jesus in a conversation? When was the last time I said something that took some guts? I don't have that man's personality, but I do have the same Spirit living inside me. And so do you.

The Christian life is meant to be a series of tests, each one a little bigger than the last, requiring us to trust Jesus more and more.

So if you want courage like Esther, don't wait for a giant moment. Start with the next faithful step. Pray with someone. Invite a friend to church. Share your testimony. Volunteer where you're needed but not where you prefer. Speak up when everyone else is silent. Face a lion. Then face a bear.

And one day, when a giant steps onto the field, you'll discover that God has been preparing you all along.

Because when we stop growing, we start dying.

And if you're bored with Jesus, it may be because you're no longer attempting anything that requires His help.