

Esther 8 The great reversal

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Our God is a god of reversals.

You can see that right through the Scriptures.

The enslaved people of Israel were released from Egypt with a mighty act of God.

But the powerful Egyptian army was drowned in the Red Sea.

The childless Hannah became the mother of Samuel, the great prophet who guided Israel.

King David was chosen over his brothers who were older and stronger.

The prophet Elijah overcame 450 prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel.

Gideon's army was whittled down to a mere handful of men before they defeated the Midianites.

This is how Jesus' mother Mary put it

when she sang God's praises before the birth of her baby.

Lk 1:51-55

"The Lord has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones,

but had lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendents forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

That is our God's regular pattern of behaviour.

And in our passage today,

we see a fine example.

Haman was brought down.

The Jews, Abraham's descendents, were lifted up.

We didn't talk about Haman last week,

so let's recap his downfall.

In his pride, he couldn't bear with Mordecai

failing to stand up in respect when Haman walked past.

Now this was after Haman had successfully persuaded king Xerxes to order the annihilation of the Jews.

Mordecai was already a man under a death sentence.

But Haman couldn't say to himself,

"OK Mordecai, you can disrespect me all you like, in a few short months, you'll find out who's boss."

No he had to have revenge now.

He was consumed by vengeance.

He asked his wife and friends what to do,

They told him to erect a fifty foot pole in his back yard, and have Mordecai impaled on it.

That's a pole about as tall as the top of the church roof.

It's an extravagant and showy way to dispose of an enemy.

It says, not only am I powerful enough to get rid of you,

I want to display my brutality to the world.

Well then Haman hit reversal number one from the hand of the Lord.

Xerxes was reminded of how Mordecai had saved his life.

He brought Haman in

to ask him how the king's honoured servant should be rewarded.

Haman thought he was writing his own ego trip.

And he found himself leading Mordecai,

seated on horse through the city,

proclaiming Mordecai's praises to all of Susa.

You can imagine that for a proud and ambitious man like Haman,

leading anyone on a horse through Susa proclaiming his praises

would have been utterly humiliating.

But to do it for Mordecai who he hated with an uncontrollable ferocity, that would have been too much to bear.

That was reversal number one.

A bitter pill for Haman.

Reversal number 2 would have been stomach churning for him too.

He got home after his humiliation on the streets of Susa,

and he pours out his grief to Zeresh his wife and to his friends.

He was hoping for some sympathy from them.

You know who your friends are when the chips are down, right?
How did they reply?

6:13 "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started,
is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him -
you will surely come to ruin."

Well that's cold comfort.

And it's a sharp contrast from their advice at the start of the day.

They encouraged Haman to go to the king
and ask to have Mordecai impaled on a pole.

Couldn't they have worked out
that Mordecai was of Jewish origin at the start of the day?

John F Kennedy was right.

"Victory has a thousand fathers but defeat is an orphan."

At the start of the day, Haman has his wife and friends solid behind him.

At the end of the day, they are leaving him on his Scott Malone.

That would have been awful for Haman
if it wasn't followed by something far worse.

Reversal number 3.

Haman is rushed off to the banquet with Queen Esther and King Xerxes.

Esther accuses him as the one who would take her life
and destroy kill and annihilate her people.

But it's not for those crimes that Haman would go down.

In pleading for his life,

falling down before Queen Esther on a couch,

he gives the impression to Xerxes that he's trying to molest his wife.

Now Xerxes is a very proud man,

and that seals it.

A helpful attendant points out

that Haman had constructed a pole to impale Mordecai on
in his back yard,

and the rest is history.

What a reversal!

The pole intended for Haman's enemy is used on him.

Three reversals on Haman.
And each time it's clear that they were masterminded by Almighty God.
The timing of Xerxes being reminded of Mordecai saving his life.
Only God could organise that.
Haman's wife Zeresh has the conviction
that anyone who opposes the God of Israel will surely come to ruin.
It's an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the Lord
from someone who didn't worship him.
The timing of Xerxes walking in on Haman pleading for his life,
and the wrong conclusion that Xerxes jumped to,
only God could organise that.

Our God is the God who organises great reversals.
In last week's reading, we see the reversals that took Haman down.
This week we see the reversals that exalt Esther and Mordecai
and save the Jewish people.
Remember, just because Haman is dead,
his royal decree allowing the enemies of the Jews
to kill, destroy and annihilate them is still active.
The 13th day of Adar looms.
So God organises three more reversals.
Reversal number 1.

8:1 "That same day, King Xerxes gave Queen Esther
the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews."

It's said almost as an afterthought.

But it's a tremendous gift.

Haman was a fabulously wealthy individual.

Up until this point in the story,

Esther had a royal title,

but she was reliant on Xerxes for everything.

Now she was independently wealthy.

She could decide for herself how to spend the income from her estates.

She could use it to benefit her people, to defend her people.

She didn't have to come into the king's presence to ask permission.

And straight away she demonstrates

that her new found wealth is not going to go to her head.
He hands over the management of her estate to Mordecai.
Mordecai is the one who called upon her
to sacrifice her safety for the good of her people.
He's not about to advise her to use her wealth to live the high life.
By choosing Mordecai as a manager,
Esther is signalling a disciplined service of the Lord
with what she's been given.
Now what I find interesting about this reversal is that it's not necessary.
God didn't have to make Esther fabulously wealthy to save his people.
The other actions God took in the story would have been enough.
But he chose to bless Esther anyway.
It reminds me a bit of Solomon.
He was given the opportunity to ask God for anything he wanted.
He asked for wisdom so he could rule God's people well.
And God said to him,
"Because you haven't asked me for wealth or long life for yourself,
I will give them to you anyway."
Or the words of Jesus,
Mt 6:33 "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well."
Now those of you who know me at all
will know that I abhor the prosperity gospel.
It's a perversion of the truth.
But these verses are as close as you will get in the Bible.
What are they telling us?
They aren't telling us to serve God so we can be materially blessed.
Esther risked her life with no thought of reward.
The financial rewards are completely out of the blue.
The thought never entered her head.
It's the same with Solomon.
He was focused on being the best king he could be.
So there is no promise of financial reward in these verses.
But if God does bless his children in that way,
it will be for people who are not looking for it.

People who are focused on his kingdom.
And even then, you might end up like Esther,
but you also might end up like Jeremiah or John the Baptist.

Reversal number 2.

8:2 "The king took off his signet ring,
which he had reclaimed from Haman,
and presented it to Mordecai."

You remember the signet ring?

This was the ring that the king pushed into hot wax
to seal a document as being genuinely from the king.

This was the ring that had been given to Haman.

The ring that had sealed the document
that allowed the annihilation of the Jews.

It's quite a reversal.

That ring that had been on Haman's finger was now on Mordecai's.

It made Mordecai the most powerful official in the land.

King Xerxes was never one to micromanage the affairs of his kingdom.

So long as he had control of the harem and the banqueting hall,

he was quite happy to delegate responsibility

for the more mundane aspects of ruling the land.

Xerxes was basically appointing Mordecai ruler
over the entire Persian Empire.

Certainly ruler under Xerxes own authority.

But a position of great significance nonetheless.

God is raising up his faithful servant.

Again there's no promise here.

God sometimes raises his faithful servants up to positions of influence.

We have a Prime Minister in Scott Morrison
who is a faithful Christian right now.

In the ordinary course of events,

he should never have been Prime Minister.

There were two more powerful better connected politicians,

Malcolm Turnbull and Peter Dutton fighting over the role.

Politically, they managed to kill each other off,

to leave the Christian Scott Morrison as the last man standing.
Now I'm cautious about claiming anything in the world around me
as divine intervention.

Not because I doubt God intervenes.

But because I doubt my capacity

to recognise where God is doing a special work.

Who knows whether Prime Minister Morrison will blot his copy book
and I might at some point in the future

wonder why God allowed him in?

But at the moment, it feels like God put a Christian man

in the highest office in the land

in a country that has in large measure turned away from him.

A Prime Minister

who when he was speaking at a Christian gathering in Brisbane

at a large church there, told the assembled crowd,

the best thing you can do for me is to pray for me.

It feels almost like Mordecai.

And now for the greatest reversal of this chapter:

the salvation of God's people.

Haman's decree could not be reversed.

That was the law of the Persian Empire.

Any decree with the king's signet ring impressed into the wax
could not be overturned.

How careful a ruler should be in such a situation

before attaching his authority to a law.

How foolish Xerxes was in allowing Haman to manipulate him.

But not even Xerxes himself could reverse the decree.

So what should be done?

Mordecai has been given the ring.

And so he has the job of crafting a new decree.

A decree that would limit the damage caused by the original decree.

A decree that would avoid the annihilation of God's people.

What should he do?

Well the decree he came up with was as good as was possible.

He allowed the Jews to assemble to defend themselves.
Their enemies had one day to wreak havoc.
If they could survive for a day,
then their oppressors no longer had the mandate of the king.
He also allowed the Jews to avenge themselves on their enemies.
8:11 "The king's edict granted the Jews in every city
the right to assemble and protect themselves;
to destroy, kill and annihilate
the armed men of any nationality or province,
who might attack them or their women and children,
and to plunder the property of their enemies."
Now many of us would feel a level of discomfort at that decree.
Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek.
This sounds a very long way from that.
Well it doesn't just sound it.
It is a very long way from turning the other cheek.
Partly that's because we are in the Old Testament here.
In the Old Testament, the promise of God for his people
was the land of Israel and his presence with them to protect them.
When the promises of God are physical and this worldly,
then the salvation from danger needs to be this worldly also.
And so Mordecai's decree is really no different to David or Solomon
fighting against the surrounding nations who attacked Israel in the land.
It's also worth noting that Mordecai's edict
is couched in the same terms as Haman's.
Haman's decree gave anyone the right
to destroy, kill and annihilate the Jews.
Mordecai's decree gave the Jews the right
to destroy, kill and annihilate anyone who attacked them.
Given that Haman's decree could not be revoked,
there is a level of fairness in giving equivalent permission to both sides.
It's not that Mordecai wanted to wage war on Israel's enemies.
It's that Israel's enemies were already coming for them,
and they had to respond to that situation.

It's also worth noting the psychological impact of Mordecai's decree. There could well have been people who hated the Jews who were preparing to attack them, who decided to leave them alone because of this decree. It's one thing to think that there are some defenceless people who the government has given you the right to plunder for your own profit. It's another thing altogether to think that you are allowed to fight against a well prepared and defended group of people who are backed by the Prime Minister of the Empire who himself is one of them with the considerable resources of the personal estates of the queen of the empire at his disposal. That's not nearly such an enticing proposition.

This third reversal of the chapter is sign that the reversal that befell Haman is about to befall all who would oppose God's people. We'll read about that next week.

But for this week, let's conclude by looking at the results of all these reversals. First of all there is joy and celebration amongst God's people. 8:15-17 "And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honour. In every province and every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating." Well it's no surprise. You are looking at annihilation in the face, and God acts powerfully to rescue you, you'd be jumping for joy. But friends, we have a greater salvation. God's people in Esther's day were saved from physical annihilation.

We have been saved for an eternity of spiritual torment.
Our salvation is greater.
So it's fair to ask the question,
"Where is the happiness and joy?
Where is the feasting and celebration?"
Now obviously it's hard to throw a party at the moment.
But generally speaking, in times where we aren't locked down,
I don't detect enough joy and celebration amongst us.
Why aren't we as over the moon as those guys were?
I know that the sudden change in circumstances
was a trigger for their celebration.
It was new news.
For us it's not quite such new news.
Most of us have had many years to get used to the idea of our salvation.
But I want to say to you,
it's still worth celebrating.
Celebration reminds you how wonderful the good news is.
We do that in a ceremonial way when we celebrate communion.
Of course, that's important.
Though I would point out that in the early church,
these things were called love feasts
and they were far more like a party.
Somehow, we have to build more celebration into the life of the church.
It keeps our joy in our salvation fresh.

The second result of the reversals is quite unexpected.
8:17 "Many people of other nations became Jews
because the fear of the Jews had seized them."
It's not the best reason to turn your life over to the one true God.
But let's not be fussy.
Worshipping the one true God is better than not worshipping him.
As I reflect on that,
I'm reminded about one of the noted features
of revivals in Christian history.
There have been a few periods of time

when there have been surprisingly large numbers of conversions to Christianity.

We call those times revivals.

The revival in New England under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. That was in the 18th century.

The East Africa revival in the 1920s and 30s.

Started in Rwanda and spread to Tanzania and Kenya.

There was a revival in Wales in 1859.

When God does something like that,

it's a noted feature that people are struck

by the awfulness of the prospect of God's judgement.

People turn to the Lord

because they have a genuine fear of going to hell.

To me that sounds like a NT application of what we read here.

Fear of the Jews had seized them.

Fear of God's wrath coming upon them through his holy people.

It's not that much different to fear of judgement day.

It's one reason

why I never want to play let's pretend about God's judgement.

It's true.

It's a reason for people to throw themselves on God's mercy.

It's been powerfully effective before.

How do we apply the reversal's of this passage?

We have a balanced picture.

On one hand there is the celebration of God's people at their salvation.

On the other hand there is the honest portrayal

of the consequences of saying 'No' to God's salvation.