

The Great Reversal Esther 9-10

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, in the war-ravaged world of the mid-twentieth Century. Tolkien himself had fought in the trenches in the battle of the Somme during WWI, so he had firsthand experience of the havoc and tumult of war. It is not surprising, therefore, that Middle Earth, the world of his imagination, was a world covered in the darkness of war and impending doom. His fantasy echoed the realities of our fallen world, which is why it has resonated so deeply with so many in the 7 decades since its first publication. One of the most famous lines of the whole trilogy comes during a conversation between Gandalf, the powerful wizard, and Frodo, the humble hobbit who becomes the great hero of the story, the ring-bearer.

Frodo is bemoaning his fate that the Ring of Power had come into his possession, that he finds himself in the midst of a conflict he did not choose. "I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

These words are strangely similar to the theme of the book of Esther. It is a story about a time when worldliness, ungodliness, and unrighteousness were ascendant in the earth. It was a world in shadow. Yet despite all the forces of evil that were arrayed in the earth against God and against His people, God providentially guided the course of these historical events to bring His purposes to pass in the end. At just the right time, when Haman, the enemy of the Jews was about to seal the fate of Mordecai, the great reversal was sparked by one sleepless night when God turned the king's heart towards Mordecai. In chapter 6, we saw Haman ironically parading Mordecai around town with all the honors that he had devised for himself. Then the reversal continued in chapter 7 when Esther boldly uncovered Haman's evil plot to the king, which led to Haman being hanged upon the gallows of his own making. Two weeks ago, we saw the reversal continue further as the king granted permission to Esther and Mordecai to write a new edict granting Jews the right to defend themselves against their enemies when the day prescribed for their annihilation came. Tonight, we come to the grand climax, and we witness the end which had been written by the hand of God before this story even began.

The most beautiful fact about the book of Esther is perhaps contained in the Hebrew meaning of the name Esther. The letters that make up her Persian name, Esther, mean "something hidden" in Hebrew. Esther, by the wise counsel of her God, was hidden among the mightiest nobles of her day as queen of Persia. This humble orphan concealed her Jewish heritage until the opportune moment presented itself. But Esther's Jewish identity is not the only thing hidden in the book of Esther. God Himself is hidden. Even Mordecai and Esther do not speak the name of God in the text. Yet, in our nine-week study of this great book, we've seen God at work behind the scenes in so many ways.

Hasn't it been so encouraging to see that He works in the seemingly inconsequential, the mundane, the ordinary, everyday events of our lives? Despite the audacious arrogance and

unrestrained violence of the enemies of the Jews, despite the stunning negligence and decadence of the king, despite the peoples' sweeping ignorance of God and the muddle of immorality into which the world had sunk, God nevertheless steered the course of the events to His just and orderly end. Each individual's circumstances are like little rivulets that come together into the grand river of God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Those who study history understand that it often repeats itself. History tends to move in cycles. The Old Testament reveals the essence of these cycles. God promises blessing, man enjoys the fruit of the blessings but then rebels, God allows man to reap the consequences of his rebellion, God sends restoration and redemption for His people. Then the cycle repeats. The book of Esther takes place during the third part of this cycle. The nation of Israel was reaping the consequences of their rebellion as exiles in a foreign land.

Which of these cycles do you think we are in today? I would argue we are in the throes of this third cycle once again. That is why I have argued that the book of Esther is written for such a time as this. Its message is presciently pertinent to the days in which we are living. The predominant mindset during such stages of history is one of ignorance about God. Interestingly, as history moves forward, it seems that the cycles of rebellion often intensify. That is what we are seeing presently. The outright denial of God's existence and blatant removal of God from the public sphere is an intensification of previous generations' denial of the authority of God's Word. We are living at a time when at least 58% of all adults believe that identifying moral truth is up to the individual. There are no moral absolutes that apply to every person all the time. Tolerance is the absolute virtue of our day. Thus, those who claim that there is absolute truth are viewed as the greatest threat to society. Oddly, those who believe so strongly in the supremacy of tolerance, cannot tolerate anyone who believes in the authority of God's Word. Just over a week ago, Linda Greenhouse published an opinion piece in the NYT in response to the new Texas abortion law with the title, "God Has No Place in Supreme Court Opinions."

Obviously, God does have a place in Supreme Court opinions, just as He has a place in all of life whether we want Him to or not. Whose justice does the court uphold if not God's? But those who stand on the authority of God's Word today are standing in the minority, and there are angry, militant forces arrayed against us. Into our setting the conclusion of the book of Esther speaks with powerful, Holy Spirit-inspired words of encouragement. Tonight, we will learn that even though it appears we are fighting a losing battle, we really have no need to fear. In the age-old battle between truth and falsehood, those who stand for the truth constantly seem to be fighting a losing battle. G.K. Chesterton, the Catholic theologian, once remarked, "The one perfectly divine thing, the one glimpse of God's paradise given on earth, is to fight a losing battle - and not lose it." While I think that's hyperbolic language, I understand his point. Think of the great biblical examples of faith. Their faith and courage are seen in their willingness to stand on the promises of God in the face of mockery, persecution, impossible odds, and even death.

Think of Noah who endured the mockery and scorn of his generation as he built an ark to save his family from the impending floodwaters of God's judgment. We don't know how long it took

him to build the ark, but it had to take him many years to construct something of that size. It was a monumental task and the whole world thought he was a fool. He fought a losing battle, and did not lose. “He condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” (Hebrews 11:7) Think of Moses returning to Egypt from his exile in Midian to confront Pharaoh with nothing but a shepherd’s staff in his hand. Once a mighty noble in the house of Pharaoh, now reduced to a humble shepherd from the wilderness. But boldly he strode into the throne room of that mighty king and spoke up for God’s people. Ten times over he contended with the unbending pride of Pharaoh through the mighty works of God. He fought a losing battle, and did not lose. Then after leading the Israelites out of slavery, he and the nation found themselves cornered by the hosts of Egypt, with a vast sea in front of them and two towering mountains hemming them in on either side. Again, Moses fought a losing battle, and did not lose. The sea parted before them and they walked through on dry ground. Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. All of these great heroes of the faith were underdogs!

You know, it’s easy to feel discouraged when we look at the world around us. We can easily feel like Asaph in Psalm 73, *“Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. ³ For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”* (Psalm 73:1-3) Then he went on to describe the easy, prosperous life the wicked so often seem to enjoy. He bemoans the fact that those who are proud and violent, who scoff and speak with malice, who set their mouths against the heavens are always at ease and increase in riches. Haven’t we all been tempted to dwell on such thoughts today?

But something changed the heart of Asaph halfway through the Psalm. As he was caught up in a depressing cycle of envious thoughts about the wicked, something steadied him. He says, *“But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.”* (Psalm 73:16-17) What changed? He went into the sanctuary of God. God steadied him with His presence and with the reassurance that the wicked will not win in the end.

¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! ²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. ²¹ When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, ²² I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. (Psalm 73:18-22)

He realized his own folly as the light of God’s final victory shone into his heart. He realizes what a fool he had been to ever question the Lord—to ever doubt that God had a plan in all that was unfolding around him! How relatable the Scriptures are! We all know this internal struggle, don’t we? We are fighting this same battle today. So let’s allow the stunning, script-flipping conclusion of Esther encourage our weary souls together.

Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies

of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.² The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples.

What a powerful hope this ought to give us today! The fear of the Jews fell upon their enemies. This is always the case. When it comes to the end, the enemies of God have no ground to stand upon. Their foundation is shown to be sinking sand, and they cower in fear. We read about this in Revelation 6. When the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ, opened the sixth seal, there was a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then we read this, ¹⁵ *Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"*

This is the terror that grips those whose foundations are shaken and destroyed because they have built their lives upon nothing but lies. This will be the fate of all who hear the words of the Lord Jesus Christ and do not do them. Those who trust in anything or anyone other than Christ will cower in fear before Him when the end comes, just as Haman and all the enemies of the Jews cowered in fear before the inheritors of the promises of God.

Returning to Esther,

³ All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. ⁴ For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful.⁵ The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. ⁶ In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, ⁷ and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha ⁸ and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha ⁹ and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, ¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

¹¹ That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. ¹² And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled."¹³ And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows."¹⁴ So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. ¹⁵ The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the

fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

So Haman's ten sons are hanged on the gallows by the king's command. In two days, the Jews killed 800 enemies in Susa, on the very day when their enemies were supposed to annihilate them. The Jews were acting out of self-defense, but they had to stand boldly and confidently. They had to be as bold as lions, while being innocent as lambs. Faith always involves action. As James said, faith without works is dead. That doesn't mean we're saved by our works, but our works are the living evidence of our faith. Saving faith is never alone. It is not mere intellectual assent. It is a radical change in the very constitution of a person. We are new creatures when we are in Christ, and we begin to live like it.

¹⁶ Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. ¹⁷ This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁸ But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

²⁰ And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, ²² as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor. ²³ So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. ²⁴ For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. ²⁵ But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, ²⁷ the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, ²⁸ that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

²⁹ Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. ³⁰ Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, ³¹ that these days of Purim

should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. ³² The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

In this lengthy passage, we see the inauguration of a new Jewish holiday: Purim. The name of the holiday is a richly ironic play on words. The very device used by Haman to determine the date of the Jews' extermination, Pur (the casting of lots), becomes the boast of the Jewish nation. God overruled the superstitious practice of Haman in trusting to luck and chance for the determination of a date. Interestingly, in our secularized age we have seen a resurgence of the superstitious belief in luck and fortune. Phrases like "good luck," "knock on wood," and "fingers crossed" are commonplace today. People are once again looking to astrological signs for guidance. David Wells argues that this is the inevitable result of a society emptied out of the notion of God's sovereignty. Prayers are replaced by wishes, and blessings are replaced by fortunes. The problem is that fortune makes no moral judgments. A world dominated by superstition is a world devoid of a true sense of Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, ultimately, a true sense of God. Without God, we become the masters of our own destinies, and yet, so much remains outside of our control, so we adopt superstitious language about luck and fortune, and we live in fear of our unknown fate.

But the reality is that this world is not controlled by chance. It is controlled by a sovereign God. God chose the date that best suited His purposes, the thirteenth of the month of Adar, the twelfth and last month of the Jewish calendar. Not only did the date selected give the Jews plenty of time to overturn the schemes of the enemy, it also provided us with a spiritual lesson about the end. I don't think it is mere coincidence that God chose the end of the calendar year for this great reversal through which He saved His people from extermination. It is a beautiful type and foreshadowing of what God will do at the end of all history in saving His people from extermination.

The picture the Scriptures paint of the end are in many ways quite terrifying, and yet what is revealed is given for our consolation and hope. The Scriptures never sugar-coat life. They never give us life through rose-colored glasses. They tell the truth. The truth about the end is that it will be a terrible time to live on the earth.

¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.

²⁵ "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

In Revelation 16, we read about what's known as the great battle of Armageddon, when demonic spirits will stir up the kings of the whole world to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. Do you know the end result of that great battle? It's actually almost somewhat anti-climactic because there is never even really a battle. Listen to what happens:

¹⁷ The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" ¹⁸ And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. ¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰ And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. ²¹ And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

What can we learn from all of this? Quite simply, we have nothing to fear today! The Lord will fight for us, we need only to be still! The end is written! We might be tempted like Frodo to say, "I wish all of this need not have happened in my time." But that is simply to be discouraged by the circumstances that ultimately will be for your good and God's glory. At the very end of The Lord of The Rings, Sam wakes up after the ring has been destroyed and he is surprised to find that Gandalf, whom he thought was dead, is alive and at his bedside. He says, "Is everything sad going to come untrue?" Tolkien once wrote, "*Fairy tale does not deny the existence of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance. It denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat...giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy; Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.*"

The truth is the world will be made new, everything sad will come untrue, and somehow it will be all the greater for having once been broken and lost. "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*" (Romans 8:18)

Take heart, strengthen your weak knees. Renew your strength today as we wait upon the Lord. The work is finished. The end is written. Jesus Christ our Living Hope!