

# Sorrow turned to joy

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Reading God's Word from Esther chapter 9 and then into chapter 10 as well. On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those determined to destroy them.

No one could stand against them because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them. And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews because fear of Mordecai had seized them. Mordecai was prominent in the palace.

His reputation spread throughout the provinces and he became more and more powerful. The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men. They also killed Parshandatha, Dalfon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adelia, Aradatha, Parmatha, Arisia, Aradaya, and Vaisatha. The ten sons of Haman, son of Hamandatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. The number of those killed in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day. The king said to Queen Esther, the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted. If it pleases the king, Esther answered, give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on poles. So the king commanded that this be done.

An edict was issued in Susa, and they impaled the ten sons of Haman. The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. Meanwhile, the remainder of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed 75,000 of them, but did not lay their hands on the plunder. This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy. The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy. That is why rural Jews, those living in villages, observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other.

Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, that they should celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth day of the month of Adar, as a time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy, and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote to them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy, and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

[ 4 : 05 ] So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman, son of Hamadathah, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast apart, that is the lot, for their ruin and destruction. But when the plot came to the king's attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be impaled on poles. Therefore, these days were called Purim from the word Purim, because of everything written in this letter, and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them. The Jews took it on themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants, and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family and in every province and in every city.

And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants. So Queen Esther, daughter of Abihel along with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm the second letter concerning Purim. And Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews in the 127 provinces of Exercius' kingdom words of goodwill and assurance to establish these days of Purim and their designated times, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had decreed for them, and as they had established for themselves and their descendants in regard to their times of fasting and lamentation. Esther's decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records. King Xercius imposed tribute throughout the empire to its distant shores, and all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king had promoted, are they not written in the book of the annals of the king of Media and Persia. Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xercius, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people, and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews. Amen.

I think if I were writing the book of Esther, I don't think I'd have been inclined to write chapters 9 and 10 as we have them here. I think I'd have written, and you know, when the day came, they gained victory over their enemies, and they all lived happily ever after. Job done. You know, it seems like a bit of an appendix, doesn't it? Kind of tacked on to the end, and we wonder why we want all of these details about, you know, feasting and rejoicing, and the letters to and fro, and all of this. But part of why we have this is because these last couple of chapters tell us how we're supposed to respond when good things happen. See, the book of Esther is not quite so over-optimistic as your average fairy tale, is it? Because Esther exists not in the land of make-believe, but in the real world. Sadly, this is not the last time that the Jews faced an extinction-level event. They have known oppression and injustice down through the centuries ever since this account.

And even for the individual characters involved, well, I'm not sure they lived happily ever after is really all that likely, is it? I mean, Xerxes is hardly a reformed character. There's still little, if any, evidence of love in Esther's marriage. The Jews are still living under foreign rule. They're still subject to laws that don't accord with God's own, and so on, and so on, and so on.

These last couple of chapters are not about rose-tinted spectacles, are they? And yet, despite not having that fairy tale ending, it does absolutely end on an amazing high. See, in these last couple of chapters, we see the culmination of the reversals that have marked the book throughout. First verse of chapter nine is very clear. On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day, the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned, and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them.

[ 9 : 12 ] Success. Success. Victory for the Jews. No one can stand against them. Here in this empire, a Jew is second in authority, second in authority of the most powerful empire of the day. What was planned for the defeat, the destruction of the Jews by this one wicked man, this long-standing enemy of God and his people? Well, instead of their destruction, it turns out to be an opportunity for them to gain the upper hand. I want to focus in these last couple of chapters on that sense of how we respond, the proper response to victory and blessing. Step one, rejoice. And step two, remember.

That's what we see them doing in these chapters, and there is much for us to take from that today. But before we come to that, let's just take a couple of moments to consider the significance of the victory that occurs here, just how dramatic a victory this is. And it really is an impressive reversal, isn't it? Those who sought to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews find that instead they themselves are put to death, put to death to the tune of some 75,000 people across the empire, plus 800 in the citadel, and Haman's 10 sons to boot. Now, we reflected last week a little bit on the ethics of Mordecai's edict, the permission for this kind of slaughter, and I don't want to go back over that same ground, but I want to add kind of another couple of elements to that consideration.

And the first is to recognize that the destruction of enemies is, at least to some extent, a necessary thing. Because you can only rest easy when the threat is gone. While the threat is still there, you can't relax. Some of you will have read the book or seen the film, *The Life of Pi*.

You've got the tiger, Richard Parker. Now, he sleeps easy. He is not under threat. And meanwhile, Pi, trapped on this boat with this tiger, well, he sleeps in fits and starts for brief periods here and there. You can't relax. You can't have rest when there's a tiger at the other end of the boat.

You can't rest when the threat is immediate. You can't rest when the threat is still there. And so, true rest for God's people requires the destruction of that threat, the destruction of those enemies.

[ 11 : 44 ] The Jews can't rest easy in Xerxes' empire, wondering when the day is going to come when Haman's sons will decide that they need to do what honor demanded. They must seek to avenge their father.

As long as his sons live, that's what they're going to be looking for, their opportunity to find vengeance, their opportunity to seek destruction, to complete what he failed to do, to avenge his death.

The enemies must be utterly destroyed. See, when Purim is established, verse 20, listen to the reason that's given. Mordecai recorded these events and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes near and far that they should celebrate annually the 14th and 15th days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote to them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. Do you see what they're called to celebrate? What they celebrate is not that they have been given an opportunity to kill. They do not celebrate that they have plundered their enemies. In fact, they don't plunder their enemies at all. They're given permission to do it, but they refrain from doing so. Now, what do they celebrate? They celebrate the time when they got relief from their enemies. The day when they could finally breathe easy, when they could rest, the day of their Sabbath. In some ways, this is kind of a glass half full or half empty thing, isn't it? You know, what is the difference between celebrating that your enemy's defeated versus celebrating that you have peace and security? It's, you know, it's two sides of the same coin, isn't it? But the perspective with which you look at that reality matters greatly. Because what could be in danger viewed from one perspective, what could be a danger of being jingoistic triumphalism, it becomes instead a celebration of God's gracious provision. God's provision of rest and relief. That is what the

Jews are called to celebrate year after year, what they are rejoicing in. And God seems to delight in these kinds of dramatic reversals, doesn't he? The reversals that we've traced through the theme, you know, through the chapters of this book. God seems to love to work in this way. And that seems to be the case whether he's visibly at work or doing it from behind the scenes as he is here. You know, this is the God who takes a nobody people, a people of no consequence, no significance whatsoever, and claims them for his own, declaring that through their weakness, his power will be displayed.

This is a God who takes what Joseph's brothers intended for evil and turns it around to his glorious redemptive purposes. This is the God who takes the might of the Egyptian army, rushing out into the desert in pursuit of God's people, who takes that power and might and crushes it beneath the waves.

[ 15 : 00 ] And all of these reversals, all of these are but a foreshadowing, aren't they? An advanced taste of the greatest reversal of all history, as the cross stands at the center of history.

And that day when Satan thought he had won that decisive success, when he thought he had won the day, when he thought the victory was his, when he thought he had defeated the Son of God himself, as evil people and the evil one himself engineered events according to their purposes.

And those selfsame events engineered by God himself for his purposes. Violence turned to victory through his humility. God uses his enemies' plans as the instruments of their destruction.

It's the same again as, you know, Haman impaled on his own pole. He does this according to his plans. His plans that are not a reaction to what's happening there in the moment, but rather his plans that are set in place before the dawn of time, before Esther was a twinkle in her father's eye, God knew that she would be in this place for such a time as this. And he continues the same way today. And because of that rest, because of the rest that God has given his people, therefore the dominant note in these final chapters of the book, the dominant note is rejoicing and feasting. So we come to a close with rejoicing, because that is the proper response. When God delivers his people, the right thing to do is to rejoice. I mean, it sounds trite to say it, doesn't it? And yet we forget to do it.

There was feasting back at the end of chapter 8, wasn't there? Feasting for deliverance anticipated. Joy because Mordecai had risen to power and there was hope again. And so they feast. Rejoicing, because that second edict was issued. Anticipation in chapter 8, and now the fullness of joy with that deliverance actually achieved. On the 14th day in the provinces, the 15th day in the citadel, rejoicing and rest. Feasting and joy, because the Jews got relief from their enemies. Their sorrow turned into joy. Their mourning into a day of celebration. Folks, I think we should be better than we are at celebrating. Sometimes we're too reserved, aren't we? There's too little joy on display, even when amazing things have happened. I mean, maybe, you know, when we come to God in prayer, maybe we do remember to thank Him for salvation bestowed upon us. It is good that we remember that deliberately at those times. It's good and right, but does it actually bring you joy?

[ 18 : 03 ] Are you actually rejoicing, or are you just thanking God because that's what you know you should do? Folks, does it make you rejoice that you are sons and daughters of the King?

And for that matter, there's smaller things as well. The smaller successes, the smaller celebrations, the lesser salvations, if you like. When you've prayed asking for God's help to make it through a tricky season in your life, or when you've prayed for success in an exam, when God answers your prayers for healing and restoration for your friends and family. For that matter, when God answers your prayers for daily bread, do you rejoice? Do you celebrate? We should be joining in with the words of Psalm 126, the Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. He really has.

And notice the form of this rejoicing. This isn't kind of abstract, this isn't airy-fairy, this isn't a kind of prim and proper celebration. It's a day of feasting. The good things of this earth brought into God's presence as a means of celebrating what he has done. Folks, the good things of this earth are intended for us to enjoy. When there's good news, we eat cake. We buy the better cuts of meat. We gather our friends together. There can sometimes in some circles be a kind of reluctance to spend money on things that are seen as trivial, a reluctance to enjoy luxury. Now, this isn't an instruction to go overboard by any stretch of the imagination. It's a call to gluttony.

It is not. But a feast is, well, it's a feast. It should look different. It should look joyous. It should be a celebration because God has given us these things for us to rejoice in, to use as means of our rejoicing at what he has done. We should also notice, verse 19, that this day is a day of giving presents to each other. It's not a selfish feast, is it? It's not, you know, I will retreat into my little huddle and, you know, we'll enjoy the things that we've got and you can go and do your thing.

It's not selfish like that. Verse 22 explicitly adds, giving gifts to the poor as well as the kind of more general gifts to one another, when they're commanded to observe these days of feasting and joy. Well, everyone needs to be able to join in with that. Maybe that would be a good element to include in our feasting as well, that our feasting would be marked by abundant generosity. These feasts certainly don't come across as insular affairs, do they? There's abundant celebration. There's extravagant rejoicing. Well, we sometimes, we buy presents more for those who are going to buy us presents too than we do for those who won't return the gesture. Maybe sometimes we invite family and maybe close friends, invite them to celebrate with us. But sure, here, there's a precedent isn't there for inviting into our celebration the poor, those who might not otherwise have much of a feast.

[ 21 : 23 ] Finally, in terms of this rejoicing, note the non-sectarian, if you like, way that this feast is established. Verse 27, this feast is for them, for their descendants, and for all who join them.

Now, that sense of those who join them would have had an immediate impact in Esther's day. Remember the end of chapter 8, many people of other nationalities became Jews out of fear for what would happen. Well, here, those people are invited to join the feast. And as the feast is kind of established in an ongoing fashion, it is made very clear those same people are both welcome and expected to join the feast. You know, you're welcome into the feast to celebrate what God has done. And if you want to count yourself as part of God's people, well, then you will celebrate what God has done.

You won't say, well, that was for them, but not for me. No, you're part of the people then. You're part of the people. And you join in in every respect. It is a family affair.

Now, you might be forgiven for wondering why, given that the people are feasting anyway. The people have spontaneously erupted in joyous celebration. So why do Esther and Mordecai feel it necessary to send letters instructing them to feast? They're already doing it. But there needs to be more.

For a salvation this dramatic, a single banquet is not enough. For a salvation so immense, it needs to be remembered. Wise people down through the ages have recognized that without deliberate intention, without intervention, we very quickly forget. Folks, we forget all sorts of things. And sometimes it doesn't matter a great deal. Sometimes it causes us some frustration when we have to drive back home to go and pick up the little pots of wafers and wine that we forgot to bring with us and end up starting the service a little bit stressed. Because, you know, sometimes it has a little trivial frustration that we've forgotten something. And sometimes it is so much more serious. Because for the Jews, for them to forget events like the deliverance from Haman's edicts, or for them to forget the plagues and the exodus, to forget the conquest of the land, to forget things like that is a massive scale of problem, isn't it? Why? Well, because what you remember, what you recall affects how you behave. It affects what you do. If you remember that the last time you brushed against a plant like that, you were itchy for days afterwards, well, next time you'll remember to avoid the stinging nettles. And if you forget that that happened, well, you'll regret it when you walk into them this time. And again, it scales up to the more dramatic. We're meant to remember what God has done, because in remembering what he has done, we know what he is like.

[ 24 : 19 ] We see his character. We see how he chooses to act. This God who says he does not change, who says that he is the same yesterday and today and forever, well, then it's well worth looking at what he was like yesterday, isn't it? Because it will affect how we expect him to behave today and tomorrow. God's chosen to reveal his character in these events on the grand stage of history. He's chosen to show us his ability to enact this dramatic reversal. He's chosen to show us his inclination to choose people not because of anything inherent in them, but to choose on the basis of his great love and immense mercy. All of God's people are called to remember what he did in Susa thousands of years ago, because thereby we know him better. And therefore he caused these things to be written in his holy and inspired words. And Esther and Mordecai instituted this annual festival.

For God's people, even the name reminds them of the significance of the event, Purim. The im suffix, that just makes a plural in Hebrew. It's like an S in English.

And the poor, this is the lot. Remember, this is what Haman cast back in chapter 3 to determine the day for his edict to go into effect. So this feast is called the Festival of Lots, the Festival of Chance. You could mark it by, you know, hanging big fluffy dice up all around your house, if you like. Blind chance seems like a pretty strange thing to celebrate, doesn't it?

But in the context of the book of Esther, what we see is that there is no such thing as chance. It's become abundantly clear here that God's hand directs every single throw of the dice.

And so you can call the festival the throw of the dice to remind yourself that God is in control even over that. He is in control of everything. And that is something worth celebrating, isn't it?

[ 26 : 18 ] That's something worth being reminded of year after year. In a few weeks' time, we'll mark Remembrance Day, the end of hostilities. We'll remember in honor of those who gave their tomorrows for the sake of our today. And we'll remember because we hope and pray that by remembering that we will not walk that road again. Remembrance matters. It affects what we do.

So, my friends, when good things happen, take proportionate, appropriate steps to ensure that you remember. The scale of how good it is, I suppose, will determine, you know, what's proportionate for remembering it. The gracious gift of God, of this precious child, well, let's remember it each year and celebrate a birthday. Maybe we'd do better to, you know, have that birthday be more of a celebration of the gift of this child, that God might be more involved in those birthday celebrations.

But anyway, proportionate, according to the nature of the thing. Write the journal of God's answers to prayer. Take the photographs on the day that you came out of hospital, the photographs of the day of your baptism. Or when you get back from that week at camp or the week at the conference, or you get home from the sermon that hit you like not many others have. Well, when you get home, download the recordings of it. You know, we live in this digital age where things aren't just kind of there and gone. We have such easy ways to bring them back to mind. Or read through the notes that you've taken. Or put a reminder in your calendar for next year to say, do you know, this was significant to me today. Let's come back to it in six months or a year's time and be reminded of what God said to me then. When you're hearing those key truths about God, think to yourself, how will I remember this? Write it down, stick it on the fridge, program your phone to ping you every single day and remind you about it. It's pinging for 6,000 other things. Might it not be good if one or two of them were means of remembering what God has done for you?

Rejoice. Remember. Rejoicing and remembering, it applies to God's deeds down through history, doesn't it? It applies to how we respond to events in our own lives. And that rejoicing and remembering applies to the future as well. Because folks, there is a better day of rejoicing yet to come.

There is a greater banquet, a more impressive feast that we are looking forward to. Greater rejoicing lies in our future. Folks, the day is coming when we will see not just Haman and his sons defeated, but we will see every single last enemy defeated to no longer threaten us in any possible way.

[ 29 : 17 ] The devil will no longer be prowling around like a lion looking for someone to devour. No longer will our own deceitful hearts incline us to sin. A day of greater rejoicing is coming. What a day that will be. How amazing will be the wedding feast of the Lamb. That day when we will see him in all of his glory. That day when we will rejoice because of his total perfection. That day when we will celebrate what he has wrought in us and what he has done for us. We look forward to that day and our feasting here and now is a foretaste again, isn't it? It's right and proper that we do so because that eternal banquet, that day to which we look forward, it breaks in to the here and now. It casts such a shadow that we can already start to enjoy it. There is true reason for celebration and rejoicing. Even on days when the difficult things are more prominent in our minds, we still have that great hope to look forward to.

We still can rejoice and celebrate even now. Folks, the God who preserved Esther and her people from the wicked plots of evil men, this God will also preserve you and me from the most nefarious schemes of the devil himself. God has the power and he will do it. So let's rejoice in that confidence.

Let's pray. Lord God, thank you that you have given us the good things of this earth to enjoy, that you have given us things to celebrate in our lives, that these moments that come, the days when we see your goodness to us, that you invite us to rejoice, to give you thanks and praise, to honor you for what you have done for us.

Thank you that we can do that together as a family, that we are called to rejoice as your people together, to celebrate your abundant mercy, to celebrate your great goodness. Thank you that we can taste that already.

Thank you that we can come into your presence, rejoicing that we know that day is coming, that day when everything will be perfected, when all of the wrongs will be righted, when we will have true, perfect, eternal rest, when our Sabbath will be complete, when we will be forever in your presence.

[ 32 : 12 ] Thank you that we can taste that already. Though we see through a glass darkly, though we do not know these things in full, but yet, yet in your gracious goodness to us, you have chosen to give us this opportunity to taste, to see what you have done, to rejoice in your salvation.

And Lord, we pray that our lives would be increasingly marked by, by feasting, by rejoicing, as we consider more and more what you have done for us.

We pray that that will be our experience as individuals, in our families, in our fellowship together here as a church. And we pray that for our brothers and sisters as well.

Lord, as we bring before you this evening, Kirkcaldy Free Church and John as he serves your people there, Lord, we pray that their experience as a congregation will be one of rejoicing, that they will have times of festival in their future.

Lord, you know that in a town where such a small proportion of people profess any faith in you, show any interest in coming along to church, Lord, you know how easy it is to be discouraged, to focus on the things that aren't the way we want them to be, on the difficulties and the struggles.

[ 33 : 36 ] Lord, I pray that you would encourage John and the elders there with him, and the deacons and all of the people of that congregation, that you would encourage them in your service, that you would show them that there is reason for feasting even in days of small things, that you have done amazing things for them, and you promise great things for the future.

Lord, thank you that you are the God who orders kingdoms and nations according to your purposes, that you are sovereign over foolish kings like Xerxes, just as you are sovereign over wise kings.

But Lord, we long for a day when we will have wiser kings and prime ministers and first ministers in authority over us, where they will know the true wisdom that comes from a fear of you.

Lord, we long for that day. We long for the opportunity to feast, to rejoice in good and godly laws being passed.

It grieves us that we so often feel at odds with the world around us, even as we recognize that this is a normal and predictable experience. Lord, we long for that day when we are in good and bad things, that you expect us to suffer, to find things difficult, to grieve, to mourn, to struggle.

[ 35 : 04 ] And Lord, we thank you that you are sufficient for those things. We thank you that so great is your goodness to us. So confident can we be in what you have in store for us.

So well can we trust that you have good purposes in mind, even in the midst of, even in the fact of such suffering. So confident can we be of these things that we can even view our trials and our struggles as light and momentary.

Lord, how far off that sometimes seems. How much we recognize that for many of our fellowship this evening, their troubles feel anything but light and momentary.

But Lord, our desire is that you would so grow in them that confidence in your goodness, that trust in the future that you have in store, that indeed the things of this earth might pass away as of lesser importance, as light, as momentary, passing afflictions.

Lord, thank you that we can have that kind of confidence in you. Bless us in these ways tonight we pray.

[ 36 : 28 ] Amen. . . . .

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