

The Great Reversal

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Welcome to St Paul's. If I've not met you, my name is Steve. I'm the lead pastor here at St Paul's. Great to have you here. If you have just joined us, we are partway through the book of Esther. We've been following this story.

She's a young, orphaned Jewish woman who becomes the Queen of Persia. We're doing this in this season as a church because we are looking forward into our life and ministry together as a church over the next three, five to ten years, developing a strategic plan for our next phase of our 124-year history here at St Paul's in this place at Chatswood.

And particularly looking forward in a society that, in the time that we've existed here, has moved further and further away from the Christian faith.

So what does it mean to be God's people in this time, in this place for such a time as this? And so what we've seen leading up to this, Esther has risked absolutely everything, used a position in the palace as Xerxes' new queen to save God's people from annihilation.

An edict has gone out to the entire Persian Empire against the Jews. And that edict's got several months to run before they are all annihilated.

[1 : 28] But there's another crisis that we've just seen. It's just risen right here. It's much more immediate. And the crisis is that Haman, who is the villain in this entire book of Esther, is determined to execute Mordecai.

And this plan has got literally hours to run. It's a much more immediate crisis. So open up your Bibles, Esther 5, running into 6.

And also, if you've got the Sir Paul's app, there's an outline for today's message, which that's the trajectory we're heading on through the course of this morning.

Haman would have to be one of the most vivid and, I think, sustained case studies in the Bible about what the Bible talks about in terms of pride.

And what happens when pride rages unchecked in the human heart? Haman was the highest position in the king's administration.

[2 : 38] But the odd thing with this is that Xerxes, the ruler of this empire, must, in fact, command people to kneel and to honour Haman.

What is unusual about that is that this is a hierarchical traditional society where bowing and honouring is instinctive.

But Xerxes has to command people to bow and honour Haman. And so we get an indication that Haman must have been a particularly obnoxious individual.

And Mordecai would not honour him. And so in chapter 5, verse 9, Haman is leaving a dinner party that he's just had, a personal dinner party with Xerxes and Esther.

And he is in very high spirits. Not because of the alcohol. Nevertheless, he was filled with rage against Mordecai.

[3 : 54] Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. In other words, he went out of there in high spirits of his own importance. That was the point.

And Mordecai was the pin that popped the balloon for him. He was intoxicated by his self-importance.

Verse 10, here comes the true Haman, calling together his friends and Jerez, his wife Haman, both of them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honoured him and how he had elevated him above all the other nobles and officials.

And then he says, that's not all. I'm the only person the Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow.

But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate. What we have here is a man whose fragile ego is being poked.

[5 : 11] And his whole sense of who he is has got to do with his ego. When his ego was fed, as it was moments earlier in the presence of Xerxes and Esther, he was feeling great on top of the world.

But when it was dented, when he saw Mordecai, he is filled with anger and malice. The Oxford professor, C.S. Lewis, has a great definition of pride in his book, *Christian Behaviour*.

He wrote, In other words, what he's saying is that your whole world is so desperately working to concentrate everything on me.

You don't get into relationships. You don't take up a role. You don't do anything unless it affirms your perception that you have of yourself.

Nothing is about the thing that you're doing or the people you do it with. Everything is ultimately about you. And in that sense, pride is essentially competitive.

[6 : 38] Lewis wrote that pride gets no pleasure out of getting something, but only in having more of it than the next person.

Pride turns everything into a means to an end.

You never do anything for its own sake. It is a means to an end of getting respect, approval, affirming who I perceive myself to be.

And so Haman here gets no satisfaction from his many accomplishments. He only has satisfaction in those things if it gives him what he really desires.

And what he really, really desires is really not a wife, not his sons, it's not even his vast wealth.

What he really desires is the respect and the approval of others, and Mordecai is not giving him what he thinks he deserves.

[7 : 45] When you understand pride, I mean, we can see people that we would regard as proudful. There's two, really, two forms of pride.

One is obvious, one's not so obvious. There's a superiority form of pride, and that's fairly obvious amongst, you know, in the media, certain leaders of countries and things like that, we would say, very proud individual.

Like the very first president of Tunisia in his public assembly has said that gifts of leadership that he has is virtually non-existent in the world.

That's a proud moment. That's a superiority form of pride, and it's pretty obvious, right? But there's also an inferiority form of pride that is not so obvious. This is where a person is constantly negative about themselves.

They are very self-conscious. They are always beating themselves up. Inferiority pride is when someone affirms you for something and you deflect it. You immediately talk about, yeah, I could have done it better here and I could have done it better there.

[8 : 58] Inferiority pride is doing exact same comparisons as the superiority pride, but you're just not scoring yourself as well on the assessments.

And that's where I think Lewis was absolutely right when he said humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less.

Humility is not self-loathing. You see, Lewis went on to write that if we met a humble person, we would not come away thinking that they were a humble person.

We would just come away thinking that they were just incredibly humble, so incredibly happy that they were stable, that they were not anxious by my presence.

They were interested in me. A humble person is not thinking about themselves and how you are treating them or how you are scoring them.

[10 : 16] For a humble person, there's no ego calculation there. But it's more than that. Pride ultimately is deadly.

Haman's monologue of his greatness is kind of embarrassing and awkward. But it's more than just embarrassing. Pride is more than just embarrassing and awkward.

It is so much worse than that. Haman wasn't just satisfied with killing Mordecai and therefore forcing Mordecai to do the very thing that he desired of him and that was to bow.

He was not going to... He's going to force Mordecai down. He wanted to make every Jew in the empire bow down to him as well by ultimately annihilating them.

That is, pride is deadly. It leads to devastation. It leads to ultimate destruction. Christian theology, ever since the days of St. Augustine, has acknowledged that pride is not just one of the sins of humanity, but it's the very foundation of all sins of humanity.

[11 : 37] C.S. Lewis writes, Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind. It is the essential vice, the utmost evil, unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, are mere flea bites in comparison.

For instance, and Lewis unpacks this more, but for instance, some of us struggle with bitterness towards other people because they've hurt us in some kind of way in the past.

They've put us down. They've made us bow in one level. They've made us feel low. They've treated us as if we are below them.

Ironically though, the only way that you can stay bitter towards another person is because I feel superior to them.

Even my bitterness is linked to pride. You can't stay bitter with someone unless you feel superior to them. And you want them to be brought low. There is no bitterness without pride.

[12 : 49] Pride says, ultimately, well, I would never treat someone like that. And with that statement, you've elevated yourself above them. Pride is the driving force of a life distorted by anger.

Pride also leads to being indecisive. It makes us either too abrasive or it makes us too shy.

Pride is the fuel behind racism and social injustice and classism and imperialism. Pride makes us foolish by keeping us from learning from our mistakes.

It diverts us to self-justification and blame shifting consistently. When relationships are going bad or the job's not working out, it is always someone else's fault.

It's a problem of circumstances. It's something else's fault. Humble people aren't always, in any sense, standing on their own dignity.

[14 : 01] Humble people are learning. When something goes wrong, they look for what they've done in terms of the contribution, even if it's not mainly their fault.

And if they find the part that they own, they learn from it and grow. You see, proud people don't just not learn from mistakes in general, but they don't learn from criticism in particular.

One of the ways to grow is to take criticism. The superiority type of person, of pride, dismisses criticism. The inferiority form of pride person means that you are so melted down by criticism that people are in fact too scared to give you any.

Because of the mess, they've got to clean up. But what is particularly difficult about pride is that it hides itself. Pride is the carbon monoxide of sin.

It's killing you, you don't know it. The prouder a person is, the less proud they think they are.

Because the more they will see it in other people.

[15 : 22] That's the irony. Lewis writes, I pointed out a moment ago that the more pride one had, the more one disliked pride in others.

In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are, the easiest way is to ask yourself, how much do I dislike it when other people snub me or refuse to take any notice of me or patronise me or show off?

He's making a very significant point there. Traditionally, in Australian culture, we have a disdain. It's called tall poppy syndrome, but we have a disdain for what we call snobs.

A snob is a slang term for someone who believes that they are superior to others due to their social class or their education or their taste in fashion or food and it often leads them to be condescending of others, disdainful of others.

So we don't like snobs in Australian culture. Ironically, it is only possible to disdain a snob if you feel superior to them. That is, disdaining snobbery is snobbery.

[16 : 49] That's the irony of pride. See the problem? We can't see it. Takes a certain amount of pride, in fact, to come even to this point in this message and to be mostly think about someone else.

I wish they were here with me right now listening to this. But this leads me to one more deadliness associated with pride.

that there is no pride like religious pride. This brings it a bit home for us. Being religious can stifle a certain amount of, or externally constrain a certain amount of sins to a degree.

You know, it can stifle greed to a degree. It can stifle lust to a degree. And a whole lot of other sins to a degree. If we work hard to live by a certain set of moral standards with the hope of life going

well now or approval in the future, then we will constrain ourselves to certain constraints, be strangled as we pursue those things.

That's the definition of religion. But religion fuels, it throws petrol on the fire of pride.

[18 : 32] Jonathan Edwards, an American theologian in the 1700s, he's got a, he wrote a book, a series of lectures really on humility. It's called *Charity in Its Fruits*.

And he says this, to know that there is an infinitely great God of justice does not create humility in itself.

Because either you will try to live up to this God's standard and become self-righteous as you achieve it or you'll feel like you can't live up to that standard and you'll just feel like a failure.

And either way, you're focusing on yourself. Religion will either make you feel more self-consciously a failure or it will make you feel much more superior to everyone else.

And either way, you're still at the centre. So what happens? Where's the cure for pride? Chapter 6, right at the beginning, Haman is arriving to see Xerxes.

[19 : 58] He's there to ask Xerxes to kill Mordecai in a pole that he's been building with his mates all night, 75 foot high. Haman, he's not just satisfied, he wants to make a public spectacle of Mordecai.

He doesn't send his assassins in the middle of the night, he wants to, this is the man who has made me, the public figure Haman, feel low and I'm going to show to everyone what I do to the person who makes me feel low.

So he's spent the night working on his pole, he's now coming to King, asking for special permission to kill Mordecai and hang him on it. While he's there, while this is all going on, while the pole's being built, Xerxes can't sleep.

Maybe it's the construction noise, we don't know, but Xerxes can't sleep. Now, here we see another one of those so-called coincidences that is God working silently and sovereignly through all of this narrative.

And so here it is, Xerxes can't sleep. Xerxes has a harem of the most beautiful women of the empire, the choicest food and wine, dances, endless options for entertainment, and in his inability to sleep and his restlessness, he says to his attendants, go and get what is equivalent to the parish council minutes and read them to me.

[21 : 40] I mean, he really did want to sleep, didn't he? And what is read out here is the record of Mordecai saving his life from assassination and now he really can't sleep because there is no record of Mordecai being rewarded for that and in that moment Xerxes knows we have a cultural crisis, a cultural crisis.

You see, this is not just a mere simple oversight that poor Mordecai wasn't thanked, so, you know, guys, send him an Uber Eats voucher. This is a cultural crisis.

If word got out that Xerxes does not reward those who stick their neck out and report assassination attempts and other risks to his rule, who else is going to come forward with information?

And so he needs some suggestions of what do we do? You know, Uber Eats wasn't around those days, so what do we do? And who's in the court? And it just so happens that Haman's there in the middle of the night, early hours of the morning.

What should be done for the man the king delights to honour? And so this is Haman desperately needing respect, desperately needing approval, desperately wanting honour and glory driven by his heart of pride is thinking as you do as a proud person.

[23 : 22] Who else could he be possibly talking about than me? Verse 7, this is his response. For the man the king delights to honour, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head.

Now this is a bold move by Haman. What he is proposing for himself is nothing short of the honour that would be given to a conquering ruling king of an empire.

A conquering conqueror's parade. Then let the robe and the horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. The greatest noble was to be put into the position of slave and to lead the horse, elevating the rider to the position of momentary king.

Make the great one less and the lesser one great. Let them robe the man that the king delights to honour. In ancient times for the king to put the robe on someone is more than just giving them a high position or trying out his outfits.

When Pharaoh puts his robe on Joseph in Genesis 41 it means Joseph is participating at that moment in the king's position.

[24 : 53] When Jonathan gives his kingly robe to David in 1 Samuel 18 it is Jonathan's way of saying even though he is the son of the king he's saying in that moment to David you are to be king.

And so this is Haman's moment. If everyone saw that he is the one who is loved and approved of by someone as great the most powerful man in the world at that time Xerxes the first then everyone will know and he will know deep down inside of him how much he is valued How much he is loved! Lead him on lead him on the horse through the city streets proclaiming before him this is the one what he's done for the man the king delights to honour his heart is so satisfied and this is when it all comes tumbling down the great reversal begins Xerxes says great plan do that for Mordecai and you lead the horse Mordecai was literally hours from death he was about to be lifted up as a public spectacle on a pole 75 feet high to be scorned and to be mocked by all who passed by a great humiliation and instead he is lifted up onto

Xerxes horse covered with his robe and paraded in front of all and honoured in front of all and Haman thinking he was about to be lifted up even higher than what he currently is and honoured is now down at the feet of the one who refused to bow in the role of the servant leading the horse as a slave and in verse 12 Haman rushed home with his head covered in grief and Haman's reversal here signals the great reversal of God's people here in the book of Esther God stands against the proud it's an ethic that runs right throughout the Bible the first will be last and the last will be first if we humble ourselves we will be exalted but if we exalt ourselves we will be humbled as C.S.

Lewis put it lose yourself that you might find yourself the principle runs right throughout life from top to bottom lose your life and you will save it for instance I haven't got time to unpack this in every area sphere of life but in social life you never actually make a good impression on people until you stop trying to make a good impression on people this is the principle of the universe because it is the nature of the God who made the universe Haman wanted the one thing that we all humanities created to want and that is the approval the love of the lovable what we need what we need is the ultimate assurance of who we are assurance ultimate assurance of our worth what we all need is the praise and the affirmation and the approval and the love of the praise worthy you see [28 : 59] Haman here asks Xerxes he's seeking from Xerxes for the very thing that we all want and that we all need in life so what Haman is wanting here he didn't ask Xerxes for the wrong thing he just asked the wrong king that's his problem he asked the wrong king there is a better king there is a king with ultimate glory who came to earth was stripped!

allowed himself to be stripped He chose to strip himself of all of his glory why? because he was trading places with us Mordecai was saved because Haman swapped places with him but Haman did it involuntarily and if this is new to you let me just say that the uniqueness and the truth and the goodness and beauty of the Christian faith is that it's very central message that all things flow out the very central message what we call the gospel the good news of the Christian faith is that Jesus Christ the son of God the one of infinite glory and majesty and splendor has traded places with us just in a number of weeks we will be celebrating him taking on human form to trade places with us but he did it voluntarily you see

Jesus is the ultimate king he's the king with ultimate splendor and glory and an infinite cost to himself he did the great reversal he reversed places with us you see in Jesus voluntary act of trading places with us we see the consequences of our pride and the cure for our pride 2

Corinthians 5 21 puts it like this God made him talking about Jesus he made him sin who knew no sin perfectly that we might become the righteousness of God in him that he might give his royal robes to us he was stripped naked nailed to a stake for our sin and that all would walk past him and mock him and scorn him as a public spectacle humiliated so that we could be raised up and clothed in his perfect righteousness and honoured he takes what we deserve so that we can get what he deserves

John 17 in the New Testament reads what this means for those who bow to Jesus now father I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory the glory that you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world he's talking about his glory there the father has given Jesus glory and then he says something remarkable a couple of verses earlier I have given them the glory that you gave me I have made them what I am that is unbelievable you see glory is not fairy dust glory is delight it is honour for those who bow in submission to Jesus who hand their life over and follow Jesus what awaits is not a life of religious subjugation what becomes

ours is the praise of the ultimate one who's worthy of praise the glory and honour and the robes of the ultimate eternal king and when we know

Jesus loves us like that when we know that the horror of the cross was the cost of our pride and the solution to our pride that in fact is what our ego needs to divert it from us and constant self-assessment to look to him and to finally be self-forgetful and at rest you see it's not enough just to say well I believe that God exists that doesn't make us humble what we must see and know and push down into the driving centre of our life is God coming down and reversing places with us at infinite cost to himself to know that he had to die for us humbles us to know that he was glad to do it chose to do it actually affirms you in a really infinite way and that ultimately is what causes the [34 : 32] Christian to be strong enough to be weak strong enough to learn from mistakes strong enough and humble enough to not try to exert power or influence people in a negative way strong enough to take jobs and get involved in relationships and to serve others that don't just make us feel good about ourselves it means we won't be constantly down on ourselves or constantly elevating ourselves or in fact anything about ourselves it is a place of stability of freedom so freeing so refreshing so restful and so beautiful and that's what we offer our society as we look forward as a church a church of diverse people growing downward in humility as we grow upward embracing the Lord

Jesus and all that he has done for us a church that is so beautifully countercultural that it makes in fact Jesus and Christianity compelling to our society Amen