

The Book of Esther: The Table Turned
Esther 9 & 10
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Back in Chapter 3 after Mordecai had refused to bow down to Haman, the other officials at the king's gate tried to persuade Mordecai that his act of civil disobedience was unwise and he should change his mind. "When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman [of his disobedience], in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew." (3:4)

Act VII, Scene 1: As the curtain lifts on the final act of this drama, we discover just how pivotal and prophetic that scene back in chapter 3 was. Edict is now pitted against edict, and all that remains is to see whose words will prove to be more powerful.

There is a nine-month hiatus between the end of the chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter 9, and during that time the only hint we have about the possible outcome of this "war of words" is in 8:17 where we are told, "the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them." These words reverberate across the stage, reminding us of the words of Haman's wife and friends who predicted in chapter 6, "If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him." (6:13)

As the battle finally begins, this rather amorphous dread of chapter 6 surges to the surface and becomes a veritable epidemic of fear. When Esther's people gather throughout the land to defend themselves against their attackers, "no one could withstand them because the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples." (9:2) The epidemic is no respecter of rank, either. Verse three describes its effect on various government officials who suddenly swing their support to the Jews in deference to Mordecai.

The fact that it is this fear that tips the balance and allows the great reversal described in verse 1 is one more instance of God's behind-the-scenes role in this drama. While God's name is never actually mentioned, there are moments throughout the story when the outcome is heavily dependent on something beyond the control of the characters. There is a sense in which "relief and deliverance" has indeed arisen here for the Jews "from another quarter," as Mordecai had said in

chapter 4. We can easily imagine Psalm 124 on the Jews' lips at the end of the day:

“If it had not been for the Lord who was on our side...
 ...when our enemies attacked us
 then they would have swallowed us up alive...
 Blessed be the Lord
 who has not given us as prey to their teeth.
 We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
 the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
 Our help is in the name of the Lord,
 who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 124: 1-2, 6-8)

From the moment the plot for Haman's evil edict was hatched, the tension has been building. As we approach the fateful day, the day “the king's command and edict were about to be executed,” we are holding our breath. At this climactic moment, the tables unexpectedly turn, and the anticipated day of defeat turns into a day of victory for the Jews. It brings to mind the many reversals of fortune throughout the story—Vashti's fall from grace, an obscure Jewish girl who rose to prominence, the demise of the assassination-plotting eunuchs, Haman's spectacular free-fall from power, Mordecai's ascendancy. But the author has saved the best for last. The Jewish people, living under a cloud of condemnation almost from the beginning now experience the sweet taste of victory over their enemies.

As we saw last week, their victory was intentionally restrained. They were allowed to defend themselves but not to be the aggressors. Women and children were not attacked, nor did they plunder their enemies' goods. Among those killed are Haman's ten sons. They are not executed but are killed in the general melee, which implies they were among the attackers. The fact that they are listed by name underscores the fact that, in contrast to Agag whom Saul allowed to live, this time around no one will be left to carry on Haman's hateful legacy.

A moment of tension resurfaces when Ahasuerus is given an update of the fighting. What will be his reaction to the news that 500 people in the capital city have been killed? Will his infamous anger flare again? We have no idea how he will receive the news until he speaks. His response is muted, at the very least, and one can't help but wonder at his seemingly detached, callous reaction. He rather matter-of-factly reports the death toll and then wonders aloud how much worse it is throughout the provinces. Then, in an utterly unexpected development he offers to fulfill another request that Esther may have.

Esther asks that the edict be extended for a second day, but note that the request is only for Susa and the same rules and restrictions apply as already stated: the Jews will be allowed to defend themselves, but will not be initiating any attacks. We don't know why Esther makes this request unless she has had some report that enemies still remain, awaiting opportunity to kill the Jews. Their safety has been and remains her paramount concern, and she seems to think that one more day is adequate to establish their safety. Since 300 additional attackers are killed the following day, it seems Esther's intel was accurate.

The second half of Esther's request no doubt strikes our modern ears as odd if not downright unconscionably vicious. But, in her cultural context, even this is consistent with her concern for her peoples' safety. The public display and thus, disgrace of an enemy's body was not at all unusual in the ancient world. Saul and his sons suffered this fate in 1 Samuel 31, for example. One commentator observes that Esther's actions here represent a "shot over the bow," designed to discourage others who might try to imitate Haman's treachery. It also sends an unambiguous message that Haman's cause has no future. In other words, the enemies of the Jews have been put on notice.

Finally, reports from the provinces start trickling in. Notice again the emphasis on self-defense and refraining from plunder. The number of those killed, 75,000, is staggering but is likely part of the exaggeration that appears throughout the drama. What this number really reveals is the vast number of those who hated the Jews, and therefore, the vast extent of the threat. No wonder the Jews of the provinces rested on the 14th day and made it a day of "feasting and gladness."

In Susa the fighting continues on the 14th, so it is a day later when their celebration begins. In addition to the food and wine that is surely flowing, there is one additional detail about their festival—that they sent "gifts of food to one another." Although it may seem insignificant, this act points to a spirit of generosity that is critical for understanding the nature of the celebration. The experience of receiving God's grace always begets more grace.

The remainder of chapter 9 is devoted to the establishment of the festival of Purim, which is plural for the "pur" cast by Haman to determine the day of the Jews' demise. Even the name of this festival calls attention to the "great reversal" at the end of the drama in which a day of defeat became, by the grace of God, a day of salvation. By establishing this festival, the Jews are charged to remember God's great act of deliverance to be sure, but also to remember their status as

exiles, as those condemned to die who out of gratitude for their salvation, respond with gestures of generosity towards others.

The main event of Purim, in Mordecai's day and now, is the reading of the book of Esther. Not infrequently I hear someone wonder aloud why as Christians we should read the Old Testament and whether it applies to us. I grant you that it's hard work reading texts that deal with times and cultures so very different from our own. We have to dig a little deeper, sometimes, to understand what is being said and why. But, I hope our walk through Esther has put to rest whether or not the entire biblical canon is "for us." It absolutely is. In fact, perhaps this book has come to us, "for just such a time as this."

It is, after all, about the struggle to be faithful in the midst of an increasingly unfaithful culture, and is that not a word we need today? It is a story of courage and faith that prods us to also be courageous and faithful even in the face of obstacles and difficulties. It is a story full of great reversals, and when we are mired in challenging, painful, even impossible situations, we need to be reminded that nothing is impossible with God and there is more going on than what we see or know. Don't we also need to hear that our mourning and fasting and weeping and wailing can be turned into joy and gladness and honor?

It is the story of men and women working together with a God who is not always obvious, but who is always good and gracious. Since God's providence is such a major theme in Esther, the absence of God's obvious activity invites us to imagine the divine actions going on behind the scenes, and that is as true of our own lives as it is for Esther. If we could only hear and see what is happening around us in the unseen realm, our eyes would bulge and the noise would be deafening. Ezekiel got a glimpse of it and said:

"When the living creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army . . . and above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above it was something like a human form. I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around, and there was splendor all around. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord, and when I saw it, I fell on my face." (1:24-28) But, of course. What else could any of us do when we recognize that God is near?

Esther concludes with a celebration and like all good celebrations, food is at the heart and soul of it. The Jews set their tables to celebrate the gifts of life and joy brought about by God's deliverance. We, too, have set a table and we also celebrate the gifts of life and joy brought about by God's deliverance of us through Jesus Christ. With the story of Esther ringing in our ears and the glory of the Lord surrounding us, let us approach the table today with a renewed sense of gratitude for all God has done and continues to do for us. Amen.