

Rejoice in the Great Reversal

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- [0 : 0 0] If you want to know where we're going, in the service, the green service outline, that the notice sheet you're handed, which I've lost mine. Anyway, in there are some points as to where we're going as we just come to the end of the book of Esther together.
- Now, the Bible says this, Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again, rejoice. It's quite a nice sentiment, isn't it? I'd love to rejoice always. It'd be great, wouldn't it, to go through each day sort of on joyous cruise control, smiling away happily, whatever life chucked at you.
- But it's just very hard to feel joyful all the time. You know, especially if, like me, you've got a screaming four-year-old kicking off at your feet. Joy doesn't come easily. Or maybe you've gone to that appointment with a consultant, and you've had the diagnosis you were fearing.
- Or maybe you're someone, and you're struggling on life, and life means that you're spending a lot of time on your own, and you're in on your own again in an evening, and joy just seems to be a distant reality.
- How is it that we, as Christians, can have a life of joy, of security, of certainty, of hope? Because that's what the Christian life is supposed to be like.
- [1 : 1 4] Now, as we finish Esther, we finish with a massive party of rejoicing. It's a party that I think will help us understand how to have joy day to day in our lives. And as we've looked at this book of Esther, we've seen that it's taught us that though God might seem to be out of bounds and absent in the world around us, you can't talk about Him.
- Though actually God isn't mentioned once in the book of Esther, He is very near to us. In fact, He is ordering the events of history and the events of our lives to take us home to be in relationship with Him now and forever, to rejoice in Him.
- A little recap from where we've come in the book of Esther. Esther is a little Jewish girl. She's a young woman. She lives with her cousin Mordecai. She's been orphaned. She lives in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, in around 480 BC.
- King Xerxes, the ruler over the whole empire, has a problem. His wife, Queen Vashti, blanks him at a party when he tries to parade her as a sex object in front of his guests.
- She won't come in. So Xerxes had a beauty pageant with a different. He rounds up all the young virgins that look attractive in the empire, and as the sole judge and jury, he decides who is going to be his next queen, the lucky girl who gets to go into his harem.
- [2 : 3 7] While Esther, lucky girl, gets the vote and becomes queen. Shortly afterwards, cousin Mordecai, sitting at the gate of the king's palace, overhears a plot to assassinate the king.
- He tells Esther, his ward, who tells King Xerxes, and Xerxes is rescued. But rather than honoring Mordecai, for some reason, Xerxes appoints Haman, who hates the Jewish people, to the role of prime minister.
- And Mordecai has told Esther to keep quiet about being a Jew. But when this happens, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. The result is, Haman, in a very disproportionate response, decides to order the annihilation of the Jews throughout the whole of the Persian Empire.

Mordecai puts on sackcloth and ashes, and begs Esther to use her position of influence to get the king to reverse his irreversible edict. And what we saw last week was Esther going into the king, and in a dinner party that was a combination of black comedy and relief, the result being that Haman, who's erected a 75-foot stake outside his house in his front garden that he wants to have Mordecai stuck on, ends up stuck on his own stake, and Mordecai the Jew ends up being made prime minister.

That's what we are in the book of Esther. But at the same time, though Haman, who's issued this evil edict, is gone, the edict still exists.

[4 : 09] And in the laws of the Medes and the Persians, you can't take an edict back. The Jews are waiting for the day when everyone who hates them has the right to kill them. Just before we launch into the verses we looked at, it's also important to understand, especially maybe if you're not used to looking at the Old Testament in the Bible, that the Jews here don't equate to the Jewish nation of today, Israel.

No, what the Bible says is the Jews of the Old Testament all point us forward to the Lord Jesus, who was a Jew. He fulfilled all of God's promises that we find to them in the Old Testament.

And therefore, they are the spiritual ancestors of those who trust in Jesus today. They're the spiritual ancestors of Christians. They show us what it is to be in the people of God.

And so what we're going to see first of all is this edict change. And it shows us that we can rejoice because God is the God of reversal. The God of reversal. And let's let me read chapter 8 and verse 1 again.

Mordecai comes into Haman's place in the palace, just as Haman took Mordecai's place on the stake.

[5 : 34] But he's not just welcomed into the presence of the king, he's given the signet ring, the sign of the king's authority, just as Haman had been given the king's signet ring back in chapter 3.

And the house in which the evil Haman had plotted Mordecai's death is now, through Esther, given and becomes Mordecai's home. There is this issue of the decree, though.

How are they going to get rid of this decree to kill the Jews? Well, look at verse 3 with me. Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews.

Two chapters earlier, Esther was more worried about her own skin, but now she goes in weeping for her people to the king. And we're reminded that Haman, he's not just evil, he's an Agagite.

Agag was from a people called the Amalekites. And all the way through the first half of the Bible, the Amalekites hate God's people. You see, this isn't just good versus bad, nice versus nasty.

[6 : 41] This is a people who hate God versus God's people. And the result has to be that God needs to reverse this edict. So what happens is with Haman dead, Xerxes gives Mordecai instructions to send out another decree, a decree that allows the Jews to defend themselves.

We read it down in chapter 8 and verse 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 and their women and children, and to plunder their property of their enemies.

It's the exact reversal of the evil Haman's decree back in chapter 3. Then it was to kill, destroy, and annihilate the men, women, and children, young and old of all the Jews.

But now the Jews have the right to defend themselves, to protect themselves against those who are seeking to attack them. And the two decrees bring very different results.

You see, after Haman's evil decree went out, the threat of death and misery, when Mordecai heard it, he put on sackcloth and ashes. But as this new decree goes out, well, look how Mordecai is dressed down in verse 15.

[8 : 06] When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, and a large crown of gold, and a purple robe of fine linen, and the city of Susa held a joyous celebration.

He goes out dressed like a king. You see, the result of Haman's decree in Susa was confusion and fear. The result of this new decree is joy and celebration.

And if you look at verse 17, it's not just for the Jews. In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, and feasting and celebration.

And many people of other nationalities became Jews for fear of the Jews had seized them. You see, back in the beginning of Esther, we saw the people of God fearful themselves and wanting to fit in with the world around them.

But because where was God in their pagan environment? They just couldn't see Him. But now, now the world wants to join the people of God.

[9 : 11] Because God has turned history upside down in Persia. God is the God of reversals. He takes death and He turns it to life. He takes sadness and misery and He turns it to royal rejoicing.

He takes fear and compromise and He turns it to courage and wholehearted devotion. Now, God's ultimate reversal is not seen in Susa in 480 BC.

It's seen outside Jerusalem in the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, without the cross and resurrection, the devil has the world in the grip of a death sentence.

If you're not a Christian, I don't know what you make of the idea of a person who is evil, a personal evil devil. But the Bible is very clear that he exists and that his desire is to lie to people and so that they do not know the love of God in their lives.

And without the death and resurrection of Jesus, the devil has a grip on the world because he's tempted humanity into disobeying God, into sin.

[10 : 19] And the result of sin is death. And without the cross of Jesus, the devil has a grip of guilt upon humanity because every man, woman and child stands before God guilty of rejecting Him with no way of escaping.

Without the cross of Jesus Christ, we live in a world where we cannot know God and there is no hope. But with the cross, the devil has been defeated because just as the evil Haman was stuck on his own stake, so our sin, our rebellion against God has been nailed to the cross in the Lord Jesus.

He has died to free us from our death sentence. He has taken it for us. And so we can now stand that if we trust in Christ, we now stand not in sackcloth and ashes and fear before God, but the Bible says that if we trust in Jesus, we stand clothed in royal robes, we stand innocent and right with God because of what He has done for us.

Paul puts it like this in a letter to early Christians in Rome, for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God is the God of reversals. And just as two decrees were sent out across the Persian Empire, a decree of death and a decree of rescue and safety.

[11 : 49] So there are two decrees that people can hear and believe in the world. First is the decree of the devil. And the devil's decree is this, listen to me.

No, no, really, you need to worship yourself. God, you don't need to believe in Him, if He even exists. Be God in your own life. Choose what's right and wrong for you.

I don't worry about the consequences. God doesn't care. He certainly doesn't love you. That's the decree that writes our news. It's the lie that's believed by billions of people.

It's the decree of self-rule and self-love that means so many people's lives are filled with pain and sorrow and sadness. But a second decree has been issued.

It's this, that God so loves the world that He's given His only Son, that the evil one has been defeated, that your sin, your rebellion against God has been paid for, that death has been conquered, and there is life amongst the people of God.

[12 : 57] Because the humble Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, has now been exalted and rules over the world. Come to Jesus. Come and know the love and security of following Him.

Two decrees. Two options. That's the decree of the Gospel. And as Christian people, we're waiting for the day when everyone will know that.

Because the day will come for us, just as it did come for the people of the Persian Empire, the day when we see the reality of those two decrees. You see, God is the God of reversals, but He's also the God of relief.

Because as we start chapter 9, nine months have passed. Nine months of fear for the Jews. Can you imagine waiting for the day when your neighbor, who's always hated you, has the right to put you to death in law?

You know, you can hear him sharpening his knife on his stone every night for nine months. That's the day they're waiting for. But the tables have been turned. Look at chapter 9 and verse 1.

[14 : 04] 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.

God is the God of reversals. And this is the day of relief. See, now the hated people are the feared people. Do you see why in verse 3?

And all the nobles in the provinces and satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews because of fear of Mordecai had seized them. You see, Mordecai, the Jew, now rules as prime minister.

I wonder how you felt as the beginning of chapter 9 was read. There's a lot of death, isn't there? Do you feel awkward? Slightly disgusted? I think we're right, aren't we, to find slaughter hard to stomach.

It's never a pleasant thing. But this isn't revenge. This is justice. You see, the people who die are the people who otherwise would have killed the Jews.

[15 : 14] People who so hated the people of God, who even when the evil Haman had died and Mordecai was on the throne, they'd rather risk the wrath of the new prime minister and kill their enemies and neighbours than submit to the new fair law.

And justice in the Bible, it's always retributive. Retributive means there's a punishment that fits the crime. I guess in our culture, we believe the lie that people are basically good, and as long as we can educate them right, we can rehabilitate them.

So what we do is we send the drug dealer to prison, we teach him how to be a plumber, and then he comes out and he's still a drug dealer. But we believe in rehabilitative justice in our culture.

The problem is, the Bible's much more honest about our hearts, and it therefore has retributive justice, that there's a punishment that fits the crime.

And in the Bible, the wages of sin is always death. It's that idea of retributive justice that's behind Esther's request in verse 13.

[16 : 25] I wonder if you found this just sickening. 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.

She seems such a lovely girl, Esther, didn't she? But you see, in the Old Testament, God had said this in the book of Deuteronomy, anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse.

It's not that Esther wants the bodies of the already executed sons mutilated. It's that she wants people to understand that this is God's punishment upon those who reject him.

And God's punishment is always complete. That's why the Jews have an extra day to defend themselves. There is no one who avoids the justice of God.

In fact, one of the ways we see that this is the justice of God is the way that the Jews don't actually collect the plunder for themselves. Did you see that at the end of verse 10? But they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

[17 : 32] It's repeated in verse 15 at the end and verse 16 at the end. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder. You see, this judgment is horrific. But the Jews aren't doing it for their own gain.

They don't ransack their neighbor's house. No, they're doing it to defend themselves and to bring God's justice upon those who reject him.

It's actually the same throughout the Bible. That whenever God saves his people, he brings judgment on those who continue in rebellion and rejection of him.

Noah and his family, saved through an ark. The rest of the world drowned. The people of Israel walk through the Red Sea. The walls of water piled on either side.

The Egyptian army drowned. The people walk around the city of Jericho seven times. You remember that account? The walls fall in. They rejoice. And then put to the sword the inhabitants of the city.

[18 : 36] See, for God's people to be free of evil, evil has to be destroyed. And the source and incubator of evil is the human heart.

Now, the reason we find that hard is we live such comfortable and protected lives that we fail to see how evil evil is.

So we want a sort of a nice, tame God who doesn't rock the boat. A grandfatherly God who sort of ignores all our little naughtinesses. Who doesn't make us feel too awkward about our friends or our family.

Maybe you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. But God isn't tame. But God is good. He is passionately good. He is determinedly good.

And He will not tolerate evil. And that is very good news for you and me. Because it means there is a day when all evil will end. And that's the only hope for our world.

[19 : 37] If you look to the news this morning, there is a day when there will be no more stabbings in Paris. When you'll be able to go and see the sights without any sense of fear whatsoever.

There is a day when there will be no more discussions about whether Glasgow is the stabbing capital of Europe or whether London is the stabbing capital of Europe this year as the murders go through the roof. You'll be able to walk the streets anywhere at any time in safety.

There is a day when Christians will be able to go to church in Indonesia and not be killed by suicide bombers as they were last night. Ten people who died. There is a day of hope.

A day of relief. Because in the end, this judgment in Persian Empire, just like the reversal was to point us to the cross, this judgment is not to point us to what we should do today, but to the day God has promised when He will judge all evil in the world through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Esther 9 is a picture of that day. The day when everyone will see not Mordecai on the throne, but Jesus on the throne of the universe. And those who set themselves against Him will suffer His righteous judgment.

[20 : 58] I sometimes wish that I could emotionally engage with the reality of that day more. Maybe if I could emotionally engage with the reality of the horror of facing the just judgment of God, I would understand more the wonder of the reversal where He took my rebellion and sin on Himself and His Son on the cross.

Maybe I'd love Him. It's why I'd say to you, if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, then come to the Lord Jesus. Because on that day, those who trust in Him, they stand before Him innocent, not because of the lives we've lived, but because we know that He has died for the way that we have failed to be the people He calls us to be.

Not because we're clothed in our own good deeds, but as Mordecai left the palace, we are also clothed in His royal robes, right with God before Him.

Come to Him before it's too late. You see, look at verse 17 of chapter 9 with me. This happened on the 13th day of the month of Adar and on the 14th day they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

You see, though judgment sounds terrible, it will be a day of relief, of rest, the Bible describes it. Relief from all the battles we have in this world against sin, against pain, against suffering.

[22 : 31] A relief of knowing God's love perfectly and loving one another perfectly. It will be the final reversal, the God of relief. And the Jews, they only tasted a little sense of that relief on the day of Purim and they made it a day of feasting and joy.

So here's the last thing we see. It's the God of rejoicing. Because the God is the God of the reversal, there will be a day of relief and that is why we should rejoice. It's the repeated idea that comes in verse 17 and verse 18 and verse 19.

End of verse 19, a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other. And in fact, the rest of the chapter is all about the instructions on how to rejoice.

Have a look at, say, verse 20 to 23. 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 day and 15th days of the month of Adar as a time when the Jews got relief from their enemies and as the month when their sorrow turned to joy and their mourning into a day of celebration.

He wrote to them to observe these days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. They'd call the feast Purim.

[23 : 52] Purim means lot or luck but they're not celebrating this because they got lucky. Luck had nothing to do with it. They weren't rescued because they touched wood. No, they were rescued because God was for them so no one could be against them and being a member of God's people is open to all so in verse 27 we see all who join them could celebrate with them.

Being open to God's people is being open to anyone who will come to the Lord Jesus Christ and they're rejoicing because of his great acts of salvation. That's what they were remembering what he's done for them.

In fact, it's so important that Queen Esther writes a letter with exactly the same instructions telling them don't forget this day the day that God reversed your judgment and brought you relief from your enemies.

Don't forget it whatever you do. Now sadly those who are still Jews today have missed the greatest day to remember the greatest day of reversal that that day when the Lord Jesus died outside Jerusalem.

Today he calls us to remember as Christians isn't it? He gave us a meal to do so. He gave out the bread the night before he died and said to his disciples eat this in remembrance of me.

[25 : 13] And he passed the cup round and called them to remember that his blood had been poured out so that their sin could be forgiven and forgotten forever by God.

You see we're to be a people who rejoice because we remember how God has reversed the judgment we deserve and given us relief.

That's how we rejoice. And it's only really when we know how much that reversal has happened how much Jesus has done for us that we will truly rejoice.

I was reading on the BBC News website last night about Amelia Tomlinson. She was a girl who was caught in the bomb at the Ariande Grand Concert in Manchester and she talks about how it just changed her life.

A moment like that does change your life, doesn't it? She said it suddenly put everything else into perspective. And I guess that is what the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ should do for us as Christians.

[26 : 13] We see suddenly the rest of our lives and perspective. There is a God who loves us with a passionate love that means His Son has died for us and has promised that He is going to take us home to a place where none of the problems and the enemies we face in this world will be our experience and therefore we rejoice whatever is happening.

Do you see why the Jews could be confident of their ongoing status in the empire of Xerxes? It comes in chapter 10 and verse 2. And all his acts of power and might together with a full accord of the greatness of Mordecai whom the king had promoted.

Are they not written in the book of the Annals the kings of Medea and Persia? Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes preeminent among the Jews and held high esteem by many of his fellow Jews because he worked for the good of his people and spoke for the welfare of all the Jews.

Well the Lord Jesus Christ the one who died and rose for us is now seated on the throne. Romans 8 tells us that he's at the right hand of God interceding for us.

And so as Christians we know that we will make it to that day of relief. We began Esther yesterday morning with a party. It was a party of the world.

[27 : 34] It looked like a great place to be. There was exceeding wealth. Men and women were having a fantastic time and in many ways we thought isn't that more fun? than this following Jesus business?

I mean where is God in my day to day life? But we're ending Esther with a better party. It's the party that God promises to all his people.

The party of final relief. And when we remember the cross of the Lord Jesus, when we remember that Christ is now seated at his father's right hand and he rules the world and he has promised to take us home, there is only one celebration we should rejoice in and that's the love of God we know now, we taste now as his people through the power of the Holy Spirit, seeing the reversal he's done in our lives and the love of God we will enjoy finally in the day of relief he brings when he judges the world.

You see joy, joy comes by remembering all that the God who rules all things has done for us his people and when we remember that it doesn't take away the pain and the struggle of day to day life but it gives us the perspective that enables us to keep going.

Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven we thank and praise you that you are the God of reversal that you take guilty people like us and you make us into those who are right with you through the death and resurrection of your Lord Jesus.

[29 : 21] We praise you for that. We thank you that you're the God who brings relief that one day the things that we struggle with, the things that bring us difficulty they will be no longer our experience as you bring your righteous judgment in the world through your Son.

So we pray you'd help us to be a people of rejoicing that we might rejoice day in day out in your great love for us and your rule over our lives. For Jesus' name's sake.

Amen. Amen.