

Reversal - *Esther 8:3-10:3*

Introduction:

- For the past few weeks we've been spending time looking at the book of Esther, this interesting book in the heart of the Old Testament that doesn't even mention God once. It seems odd that a book like this is in the Bible, but as we've studied it we've been able to see how God has been at work behind the scenes in some pretty tough situations. As the little tagline for this series says, "Hidden God, Messy World".
- As we read through the book of Esther, it really is a very dramatic book. It can become very easy for us to read stories in the Bible and entirely miss the drama of what's going on. In high school I had to read through a number of old Shakespeare plays, as I'm sure the rest of you did, and one in particular that I had to read was called "Much Ado about Nothing". It was a comedy, though I didn't find it very funny. It was hard to understand many of the words, and I struggled to really follow the plot, so I didn't really enjoy it all that much. A bit later though, a friend of mine was in a play at a different school, and "Much Ado about Nothing" just so happened to be the play that was being performed. I went and, to my surprise, I actually was able to understand what was going on and even found myself laughing as the actors helped me to better understand the story I had read.
- I feel like at times we can view the Bible like an old Shakespeare play. There's lots of names and places and words we aren't familiar with, we feel like we can't quite follow the story of what's going on and so we miss the drama or the intensity of what we're reading.
- Make no mistake though, the book of Esther is an incredibly dramatic story, full of high stakes and political intrigue. It's the story of one girl, thrust into an incredibly dangerous situation, who has to fight for her life and the life of her people, and all the while God is working in the background.
- So last week we came to the very climax of this story. Esther has just revealed to the king that she's a Jew, and exposed Haman's evil plot to wipe out her, the queen, Mordecai, the man who saved the king's life, and all of their people, and this is what the entire book has been building up to. For the first seven chapters of Esther, the Jews are facing death, and what seems like inevitable destruction, and we're sitting here on the edge of our seats wondering what's going to happen next, and how the Jews are going to make it out of this one alive.
- So we've made it to the very climax of the story, Haman has been exposed, and in an ironic twist, has been killed on the gallows that he build specifically to use to kill Mordecai.

- What we're going to look at today is the story of what comes next, in the final three chapters of Esther we see how the story wraps up, now that the villain has been defeated, and his evil plans exposed. What I'm hoping we're going to see in this passage today, Esther 8:3-10:3 is that this passage is essentially the book of Esther in reverse.

God works behind the scenes to reverse the evil meant against the Jews:

- It's important to remember, as we've already said, that the book of Esther is a very dramatic story, but also that it's a very impressive work of literature that makes use of a number of different literary devices, and the one that it uses most often is dramatic and ironic reversals. We've seen at least two cases of this already, the first being Haman advising the king on how to honour someone who's pleased the king, thinking it's him, only to find out that he has to give all those special honours to Mordecai on the day he was going to ask the king's permission to kill Mordecai. The second case of this ironic reversal happens when Haman is taken and killed on the Gallows that he specifically built to kill Mordecai.
- This is the same type of reversal that we see going on in these final chapters of Esther. Let's quickly walk through this passage to see how the entire book seems to be reversed in these chapters.
- So it seems like everything in the book was leading up to this big confrontation with Haman, and Esther's dinner with him and the queen. So we have the scene of Esther finally opening up to the king about the plot, and that results in Haman's death. Following this, right at the beginning of chapter 8 in verse 2 we read that *"the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai"*. So Mordecai, who was the specific person Haman was trying to kill, was given Haman's job, showing one of the first instances of these reversals in the passage.
- Here at the beginning of this passage what we see is that Esther is pleading with the king again. Verse 3 of Chapter 8 says that Esther fell at the feet of the king, weeping and begging for the life of her people, that the plot Haman had devised would be reversed. From verse 3-6 Esther is begging with the King to reverse the decree that the Jews were to be wiped out.
- In verse 7 we see the response of the king as he says *"Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews"*. What we see here is that the king is incredibly apathetic towards the situation, it's almost as if he's saying to Esther "I've already gotten rid of Haman, isn't that enough?"
- He tells Esther that Haman's edict cannot be undone, but he does, however, give permission to Esther and Mordecai that they may write a new edict that is meant to be the reverse of the one written by Haman. This new edict, or law, gives permission that the Jews can defend

themselves against anyone who attacks them, providing a way for them to survive what's coming.

- This is what verse 11 says about this edict, *“saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods”*.
- There's some interesting things going on here, and we'll get into it more a bit later, but what we see here at first glance is that Esther and Mordecai have created an edict that undoes the one put in place by Haman, putting his evil plan into reverse. Instead of being powerless, and sitting, waiting to die, the Jews are given the power to defend themselves and overpower their enemies.
- In verse 15-16 then, we read of the response of the Jews to this news, and the new edict written by Mordecai and Esther.
- We see that the Jews are filled with such an incredible joy at this news! With one decree they have gone from being marked for death, and given the power to defend themselves. In short, they have been saved!
- This also is an incredibly dramatic scene taking place. Can you imagine the relief and joy that would have been felt by the people in this moment? The Jews have been sitting around, essentially just waiting for the day that they're going to be slaughtered and destroyed. They've been living in fear and terror, afraid to even admit they're Jews because it could get them killed, and now their situation has been completely reversed. They're able to celebrate, to shout for joy in the streets, and now those who aren't Jews are the ones who are afraid, and go so far as to claim they're Jews in order to keep themselves safe.
- This is such a dramatic scene, charged with so much emotion, and honestly, I think any of us in the place of the Jews would have been feeling the exact same way! God worked behind the scenes throughout the entire book of Esther, ordering events in this messy world in order to rescue his people from death.
- We read later in chapter 9 that this is such a significant moment for the Jews that they establish a yearly celebration to remember what's happened, that they call the Feast of Purim. Every year when the Jews would take part in this feast they would be reminded of what had been done for them, and the way they had been rescued.
- And do you want to know the best part? This entire story of Esther, and God's plan to save his people is a reflection of the same thing that he's done for us through his Son Jesus Christ.
- You see, just like the Jews, we're the ones who are marked for death because of our disobedience to God and our rebellion against him. Each and every one of us has sinned, and because of that, we deserve death and eternal separation from God. This is like the first edict

from Haman that marked the Jews for death. The big difference, however, is that that's the just punishment for what we've done. The Jews didn't deserve to be wiped out, but we do deserve to be separated from God because of our sin.

- But God did not leave us in that place without hope. Just like in Esther we see that God had a plan to rescue us through his Son Jesus Christ.
- John 3:16, one of the most famous of all Bible verses says *“For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life”*.
- You see, God didn't so much work behind the scenes here, like Darryl pointed out to us last week. He sent his Son Jesus to earth, to live a perfect life free of sin, yet to die on a cross, the death that we deserved to die for our sin. And in so doing, Christ gave himself as a substitute in our place, taking on himself the wrath of God against sin that should have come on us.
- Christopher Ash, in his book on preaching through Esther explained the parallels to the Gospel in this way, *“In the two simultaneously existing decrees, both of them irrevocable, we may perhaps see a hint of God's irrevocable decree of the justice of law against us and His irrevocable decree of the Gospel for us, by which the punishment of our sins is paid, but paid by Jesus our substitute”*.
- So Christ came as our substitute and rescue, God's plan to save us, similar to the second edict written by Esther and Mordecai. Christ's work, however, did not just reverse God's wrath against sin, but rather willingly took it all on himself, despite the fact that he had done absolutely nothing to earn it. In doing this, he created a way to have a relationship with God which was once broken by our sin. All that is required for this relationship is to turn away from the sin we used to live in and accept the free gift of life that Christ offers through the cross, committing to live our lives in obedience to him.
- This is such a great rescue that should fill us with such a great joy, so much more than the joy felt by the Jews in this passage! We have been saved from an absolutely hopeless situation that we could never have gotten out of on our own. Christ has given us the gift of life, and even better, the gift of eternal life, saving us from the certain death and separation from God that we deserved because of our sin.
- This is the reason we celebrate communion together each week, as a reminder of what Christ has done for us, and the work that he accomplished at the cross, which we could never do on our own!
- So let me ask you this, have you accepted this free gift of life that Christ offers? Turning away from your sin and turning your life over to him? Have you understood what truly was done for you?
- If you've never before accepted this gift, I invite you to do that today.

Even though God is at work, the world is still messy:

- I want you to pay attention to what's going on here though, because these chapters do not just give us an easy "happy ending" to our story. These are actually some fairly difficult chapters for us to work through.
- We've talked for the past three weeks about the book of Esther and how it shows us God working behind the scenes, how he's ordered events to be faithful to his people in the midst of a messy world, rescuing them from the destruction that was plotted against them.
- We began this story in a messy world full of excess, immorality, rape, and kidnapping, and here at the end we finish up once again in a messy world. I want to take a few moments to look in a bit more detail at what goes on in chapter 9, when this edict written by Mordecai and Esther is actually carried out.
- Look at the beginning of chapter 9, verse 1-6
- So we have this edict carried out in which the Jews are able to defend themselves and strike out against their enemies, and in one day in that capitol city alone, 500 men are killed. This is an extreme number, but you'd be tempted to look past it because the Jews were simply defending themselves when they were being attacked right? Well look what happens next.
- After the day is over, the king comes to Esther and essentially asks her, "anything else", and this is what Esther asks for in verse 13.
- So not only were there 500 men killed when this edict was carried out, but Esther asks for the edict to be extended an extra day, beyond when the Jews were in danger so that they could continue to destroy their enemies. That second day, another 300 men were killed in the capitol.
- Even more than this, if you look at verse 16 you'll see that across the entire Persian empire the Jews killed 75,000 of their enemies, which is a staggering number. This was more than just self defence, it was an absolute blood bath.
- So what do we do with passages like chapter 9 that show us the Jews seeking out revenge, rising up to slaughter those who planned to slaughter them, and not only that, but Esther asking the king to extend this slaughter for an extra day in order to more thoroughly destroy their enemies? How do we process a story like this in the Bible?
- I want you to look at the screen, and see the slide that we've been using for this series. What it says is this, hidden God, messy world. We've seen God working in the background, showing his sovereignty in ordering events through people who are not acknowledging him or seeking his help, in order to rescue his people.

- What we see in this passage, however, is that that statement on the slide is true still, hidden God, messy world. God has sovereignly rescued his people, but the world is still messy, and people are still messy.
- So what started as a story in a world of excess, rape, and all around messiness, has ended in a world of slaughter and bloodshed. God was at work to rescue his people, but the world and the people in it, were still messy.
- I'm sure if you take a moment to look at our world today you'll see that the same is also true. We still live in a messy world. You really don't have to go to far to see the truth in that statement, you barely need to do more than walk out your door. Just looking at 2020 alone makes painfully clear that we are living in a messy world.
- This can be difficult for us to process, if God is at work, why is this world so messy? If Christ has died for us, and we follow him why is life still hard? Why do we still struggle? Why do we mess up?
- Make no mistake, a life for Christ will not always be an easy life as some may tell you. It will at times be a difficult and a messy life, because we live in a world that is still messy and sinful, but let me encourage you with this, it will not always be that way.
- There will come a day when God will take this messy world and make it right.
- When Jesus rose again, and returned to Heaven, he did so with a promise, and that promise was that he would come back again, and when he does, everything that is messy and broken in this world will be put right. He will destroy sin once and for all, and we will live free of the messiness that fills our world today.
- So as I end, let me leave you with this closing comment on the book of Esther. As you read through this book, pay attention to the ways that God has sovereignly worked behind the scenes in a messy world to save his people from destruction. Let that be a reminder that God is still at work in our messy world today, and that one day Christ will return. Let these reminders encourage us to put our faith in Christ, to live in obedience to him, and remember that he is worthy of our trust in any trial and struggle that comes our way.