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God's Work, Our Response
Esther 9-10

We're going to finish Esther today. And to briefly recap, Esther, a young Jewish girl has become queen of Persia. But Haman, second-in-command to the king, has issued a decree ordering the massacre of all Jewish people everywhere. But through a series of surprising events, Haman has been brought down, and Esther's cousin, Mordecai the Jew, has been promoted to Haman's place. And now Mordecai has issued a new decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves. And 9 months have passed since those events in chapter 8, as we pick it up in chapter 9.

Read Esther 9:1-17a

Divine Deliverance
Look at v1, 'on the very day…' the day Haman had cast lots for, Haman's 'lucky' day, on the 13th day of Adar, as the writer says, 'when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain mastery over them', something else happened. Verse 1, 'the reverse occurred.'

Now, have you ever experienced that? You were certain something was going to happen, but what ended up happening was the exact opposite, and you're left thinking, 'how did that happen? That was not what I was expecting.'

And this statement that *the reverse occurred* is like a summary of the whole book. Because so far we've seen multiple small, and larger, turnarounds. Esther's life, Mordecai's life, Haman's life, have all been turned around. But now there's this even greater 180 degree reversal. Verse 1, 'The Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.'

And that leaves these last chapters of the book as almost an anti-climax, doesn't it? Because before a shot has even been fired, the author tells us, 'it was a done deal'. The tables had been turned. So before it even happens you know that the Jewish people will be saved and their enemies destroyed.

And yet, that anti-climax is the point, isn't it – because the writer wants you to question *why* all this happened, *why* the outcome was what it was, when just a few chapters back everything seemed on a knife edge, and the odds seemed hopelessly stacked against God's people, and God seems totally absent, his people seem totally indifferent to him. So what's behind this remarkable, against-all-the-odds deliverance, through seemingly chance events, and through two people, Mordecai and Esther, who appear to be anything but devout Jews?

And the answer, of course, is God. That even when you can't see him, even when his people don't deserve it, God is in absolute sovereign control, and he's the one who's brought this reversal about. And in all the mess of life, through Esther winning this

morally dubious beauty contest, through her performing best in the king's bed, through Mordecai's compromise and hiding of Jewish identity, God's at work for the salvation of his people.

So this final reversal answers one of the key questions of the book: Will God's promise to protect and deliver his people hold, even when they are in exile? Even when they have chosen to live away from his presence? Even when they seem at the point of being absorbed by the surrounding culture? Are his promises still good then? And is he still present in a pagan and pluralistic world that is increasingly hostile to God and to truth? And the answer of Esther is, 'yes.' Which is why this remains so relevant to us.

You see, in our post-Christian, western world, there is this move to push faith to the margins and evict God from the public square. And in such a world God can seem absent. So does his promise to build his church hold – is it bankable - in such a world? Or, are we wasting our breath when we pray, 'thy will be done, thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven'? And the answer of Esther is yes – his promise holds. No, you are not wasting your breath. Even when you can't see him, God's at work to turn evil to good.

And that is just as true when he seems absent in the stuff of your life. Because there are times when the situation you face seems impossible, and the odds seem hopeless. But Esther tells you that even when things seem out of control, God is in control. That he's the one who can reverse the irreversible. And he may just do it through seemingly chance events and strange coincidences.

But, you might hear that and think, sure, but what about when the tables don't turn, when God doesn't seem to come through, and my hope dies? Where is God then? Well, the disciples were probably thinking the same on Good Friday, weren't they? As Jesus, and not his enemies, hung from the gallows of the cross. When the Son of God, and not the Hamans who surrounded him, died.

And yet the disciples weren't thinking that come Monday morning were they? And sometimes the tables only turn after a Good Friday, sometimes they only turn after you have been brought to your lowest point. But maybe even then they won't turn, and that's when Jesus' resurrection points you forward to the one great turning of the tables that will happen on the last day. And you may not see it in this life. But as Jesus walks alive from the tomb, he's telling you, one day you will see it.

But here in Esther, even as God brings about this extraordinary, table-turning deliverance, he uses people to do it.

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Using People

Now, in the rest of the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of where God rescues or gives victory to his people through miraculous means – through plagues, or seas dividing, or fire from heaven, or walls tumbling down. But not in Esther. In Esther, it's not miracles God uses, it's people: and very normal, far from perfect, people. And that's the miracle. And he still does it.

And in chapter 9 we see him using four different people or types of people.

First there's the everyday, man-and-woman-in-the-street, Jewish person. People who never asked for this, but who found themselves under attack, and who in their day needed to stand up, and act. Verse 2, 'The Jews gathered in their cities… to lay hands on those who sought their harm.' So even though God turned the tables, they still had to fight. And, sure, the future was in God's hands, but that didn't mean the sword didn't have to be in theirs. Verse 5, 'The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them.'

Now, if talk of God's people using violence against their enemies troubles you, the situation they find themselves in was like that of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto of the Second World War. And under Mordecai's edict they could only kill those who attacked them, as the writer says here: their *enemies*, and those *who hated them*. And whilst Mordecai's edict gave them permission to kill any who might attack them, including women and children, here, in v6, only men are mentioned. Plus, whilst Mordecai's edict, used the same words as Haman's, giving the Jewish community permission 'to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate' (8:11), in v6 only two of those verbs are used, 'killed and destroyed' – no annihilate, and that suggests that even in defending themselves they exercised restraint.

But the writer also sets this battle in a much wider context. Did you notice the phrase that kept on getting repeated? Verses 10, 15, 16: 'But they laid no hands on the plunder.' Why that repetition? Why does the writer tell us three times they didn't take the plunder, when Mordecai's decree had explicitly allowed them to do so?

Well, 1 Samuel 15 records the war between the people of Israel, led by King Saul, Mordecai's ancestor, and the Amalekites, led by King Agag, Haman's ancestor. And Saul was commanded to completely destroy the Amalekites and to devote to destruction everything that they had. But Saul declined to kill Agag and he and the people kept the best of their animals and possessions. So when Samuel the prophet

finds out he says to Saul, "why did you pounce on the plunder and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?" (1 Sam 15:9). And it cost Saul the kingship.

And so the writer of Esther is saying: The Jews of Persia succeeded where Saul failed. They didn't compromise with evil. They didn't seek to share in evil's proceeds. Rather, they did kill the Agagite of their day, and did not take the plunder.

I used to work in a hospital that doubled as one of the Royal Naval hospitals, so I had colleagues who were naval doctors, and they would talk of having 'taken the Queen's sovereign', the Queen's gold coin. It's the expression they use for being in the Queen's pay. But when you're in someone's pay like that you are bound to them in certain ways – you have to do as they tell you to do, and live as they tell you to live.

But the truth is that the world also has a sovereign, a gold coin to offer you. It offers you a share of its plunder, or it's popularity, if, like Saul, you're willing to compromise to get it. The problem is, if you do, it inevitably affects your heart and life. In the Narnia stories, Edmund is the first of the four children to meet the White Witch, and falls under her spell. And that's not lost on Mr Beaver. And when Edmund runs off to betray them, Beaver says to the others, "the moment I set eyes on that brother of yours I said to myself 'Treacherous.' He had the look of one who has been with the Witch and eaten her food. You can always tell them if you've lived long in Narnia, something about their eyes." You see you cannot eat the witch's food, you cannot take the world's plunder, and it not adversely affect you.

But if you know the story, Edmund is rescued, he's ransomed out of the witch's power, not with an exchange of money, an exchange of plunder, but an exchange of life. Aslan the Lion gives his life in exchange for Edmund's, just as Christ gives his life for us, who are no better than Saul, or Edmund, who time and again reach out our hand to take what the world offers.

And yet, if eating the witch's food leaves its mark, and if living for the world's plunder inevitably changes you – so too does eating the king's food, and living for his reward. Because as we feed ourselves on God's grace to us in Jesus, and as we live for his reward to come, it will inevitably change us, but for good and not for ill. And as we do, we'll find the courage and the strength, and the love for God and for others to stand up when our time comes.

But if God used everyday Jewish people, he also used Mordecai. And Mordecai wasn't a prophet, or a priest, and he didn't have a job that would appear on some sort of hierarchy of worthy people. He wasn't a doctor, or a nurse, or a teacher, he was a civil servant. And yet God used him, in his job, in the position where he was.

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And the way God used him was in the very unsexy and unspiritual way of writing edicts, that got sent out in the Persian postal system. How unhip is that? But that should tell you, that wherever you find yourself, however seemingly secular and pagan and unspiritual your place of work might seem, God can use you right there.

And if he can use Mordecai, he can use any of us. Because look how the writer describes him: v3-4, 'The fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful.' Now, that doesn't sound much like 'nice Mr Mordecai, meek and mild' does it? And we've seen enough already to suggest that, in some ways, Mordecai was a flawed man.

And yet the Lord used him, because that's what he does. He uses messed up and imperfect people, people like us, to achieve his ends.

Thirdly, God used non-Jewish, pagan, government officials: v3, 'All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews.' Now in our increasingly politically polarised societies, you can be tempted to think that unless people agree with everything that I believe, I'm not going to recognise, and certainly not applaud the good that they do. But here is God using non-Jewish pagans to bring about his purposes. So whenever we see others working for what's right, whatever their background, God's people, of all people, should applaud it.

But fourthly, God used Esther. And this book began with Esther's identity under tension. What would define her? Her Jewish or her Persian identity? But it ends very differently. Look at v29, where Esther is described as 'Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail.' So Esther is queen, but she is also Abihail's daughter. She has integrated her Jewish and Persian identities. And in that she becomes an example of what it means to be in the world, but not of it. To be citizens of this world, and citizens of another. To serve our communities, whilst serving the one true king.

And yet, there is something about Esther that has troubled Jewish and Christian commentators down the centuries, and that is her conduct around the second day of fighting.

The king tells her in v12 of the numbers killed on the first day, and asks her if there is anything more that she wants. And her reply? Verse 13, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this days edict." But Haman's original edict only allowed their enemies to attack on the 13th day – so why is Esther asking for another day of violence? Has her righteous desire

for self-defence morphed into vindictiveness? As one writer puts it, at the moment when Persians are becoming Jews, is Esther behaving like a Persian?

So, has Esther fallen under the seduction of power? Is she becoming like Haman, the very man she has tried to protect others from? Well, if she is, she would hardly be unique, would she? Power corrupts, and Esther now has power. And there is a long line of men and women in the Bible who find themselves in this fight against sin and evil, but who themselves get dragged into sin.

And yet Esther's request is that the Jewish people "be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this days edict" (v13). And this day's edict was 'in defence' only, so maybe she is only asking for another day to defend themselves. So was Esther justified? Well, the author doesn't tell us. But what he does show us is how different Esther now is. Before she was compliant, and pleasure seeking. But now she's steely, and unbending. Which is great when the cause is good. But so often that can morph into harshness and ruthlessness, can't it? And the Bible doesn't hold back from showing us the darker side of those whom God raises up, but who are none the less flawed. Because we all are.

It's why we need a rescuer better than Mordecai, better than Esther and better than ourselves. And chronologically, Esther is probably the last book of the Old Testament, and it leaves you longing for someone who isn't flawed to take the field. And it's into the battlefield of temptation to use power for our own ends that Jesus steps. And it's him and him alone who battled the forces of evil and remained uncorrupted. And it was in his seemingly becoming a victim to the power of evil, that he destroyed it's power.

And it's because of Jesus that you can know that when your turn comes, maybe this week in the office, or on campus, or at home, when you have to stand up for what's right, you can know you're not alone. In fact, the book of Esther tells you that God has gone before you, positioning you and preparing you for just this moment.

Read Esther 9:17b-10:3

Remember and Celebrate
There's a saying, 'elephants never forget'. But we're not elephants, are we, and we can quickly forget those times God comes through for us, and we move on to the next thing, and especially the next thing to get anxious about. Which is why the Bible repeatedly calls us to remember.

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And after this against-all-the-odds deliverance, Mordecai and Esther establish the feast of Purim to help the people remember. And verses 17-19 explain that because fighting finished in the rural areas on the 13th day of Adar, they celebrate Purim on the 14th, but because fighting lasted a further day in Susa, they celebrate on the 15th. And Mordecai writes to all the Jewish communities to observe both days.

And the reason they should celebrate is that Haman's 'lucky' day, the day he had cast lots, Pur, for, the day of death, had come and gone, and God's people were still standing, and this day, v22, 'had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday.'

After all, did you notice when the actual day of celebration is? You see, it's not the anniversary of the day of fighting, but the day after the fighting. So this wasn't a celebration of death, but of life. It wasn't a party to rejoice in war, but in peace and rest and deliverance. And so they feasted, and gave gifts of food to one another, so even the poor could celebrate.

So, this book begins with two feasts – as the king tried to persuade his people to go to war against Greece – a war that ended in disaster. And it ends with two feasts – but two very different feasts, that celebrated the victory and the peace of a much greater king than Ahasuerus.

And the Jewish people continue to celebrate Purim, and each time they read the book of Esther. And whenever Haman gets mentioned, kids boo, and when Mordecai gets mentioned, they cheer. And one ancient Jewish text says that at Purim you can legitimately get drunk, drunk enough so you cannot tell the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordecai'!

But don't go getting any ideas! Because whilst Purim looks back, it also looked forward – to the greatest reversal of all, and how the darkest of days, Good Friday, was reversed on Easter Sunday, as Jesus achieves the greatest of all deliverances from death.

And so if Purim is good news, how much more is the gospel a reason for joy and celebration. Good news to be feasted on. Good news to remind yourself of and preach to yourself, that God loves you, and Christ died for you, that you might know everlasting joy.

But the book ends by telling us it's joy and deliverance with a purpose.

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Work for the Common Good

So chapter 10 begins by telling us, v1, 'King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land.' Which tells you that things have returned to normal, routine government has returned: the tax bills are being sent out! And the book began with a description of the king's wealth and power, funded, no doubt, by the people's taxes, but it ends describing Mordecai's glory: v3, 'For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.'

So Mordecai has reached this position of power and prominence. But he doesn't use that power and prominence to feather his own nest. He uses the social and political capital that he has for the welfare of the people, and probably not just the Jewish people, but for all the people, and for peace – for the wellbeing of the community.

And so Mordecai becomes a paradigm for you and me. That as we work, and maybe even succeed in a pagan world, as you attain positions of influence within the sphere of your work, we use that for the common good and for the blessing and welfare of God's people and all people. And Mordecai and Esther were called to different tasks, and different roles, and so are we. But as we grow in our understanding of the deliverance Jesus has brought about for us, that one greater than Mordecai used his position and his life for our welfare, so we will serve like he served, even within a hostile and pagan culture, for the good and the welfare of all, wherever God puts us.