

Eucatastrophe!

Esther 8:1-17

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Now if you would turn with me please to the book of Esther chapter 8. Esther chapter 8; you'll find that on page 414 in the church Bible. Before we read God's Word together let's bow our heads as we pray.

Our Father, there is not a child of Yours here, howsoever advanced in the Christian life they may be, that can claim that opening Your Word they understand with perfect clarity all that You would teach them, that they no longer need the illumination and help of the Spirit by whom these words have been inspired. And so as we gather to hear the Word of God read and proclaimed we cry out to You now for the help of Your Spirit. Would You illumine the text and illumine our understandings. Show us more of Jesus, show us our own bankruptcy, and glorify the triune God, for we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Esther chapter 8. We're reading from verse 1. This is the authoritative and inspired Word of Almighty God Himself:

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, 'If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?' Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, '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. But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.'

The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, 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, on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Amen, and we praise God for this reading from His own holy, inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth on all our hearts.

On the 7th of November, 1944, the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of The Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien, penned a letter to his son, Christopher, in which he defined a word of his own invention that stood at the heart of his vision of what makes a story, especially fairy stories, truly great. He called it eucatastrophe. A good catastrophe! He said, "I coined the word 'eucatastrophe.' It means, "the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears." He likened the sudden relief that eucatastrophe brings to the snapping back into place of a limb that had been long put out of joint. Joyous relief.

The book of Esther, from chapter 8 really on to the end of the story, is a

eucatastrophe. If you'll remember, everything had been going wrong for Esther and Mordecai and the people of God in exile in the Persian Empire. But in chapter 7, we saw the first rays of a new sunrise begin to crest the horizon. Haman was, remember, he was hoist on his own petard, caught in his own trap, quite literally hung on his own gallows. But Ahasuerus, the Persian Emperor, had permitted Haman to pronounce an edict, a royal decree, declaring the universal destruction of the Jewish people, and Haman's death notwithstanding, that decree still stood. And Esther chapter 8 shows us how the great reversal, the eucatastrophe in this story, actually comes about by which those who were doomed to die are delivered and made to conquer.

There are four things in particular that I want you to see in this chapter if you'll look at it with me please. First in verses 1 and 2 there is the reward. Then in 3 to 8 the request. Then thirdly in 9 to 14 the reversal. And finally in 15 to 17 the rejoicing. The reward, the request, the reversal, and the rejoicing. I'm a Presbyterian and I like alliteration. (laughter) The reward, the request, the reversal, and the rejoicing.

The Reward

Think about the reward first of all. Look at verses 1 and 2. Haman has met his untimely end on that state of the art, best that money can buy, macabre Persian status symbol - the shiny new 75 foot tall gallows that he had built and intended for his archenemy, Mordecai. Esther had sprung her trap with consummate skill. Ahasuerus could not resist her wiles and Haman could not escape her revenge. He has been dragged from the king's presence with a black bag over his head, taken away to face justice, and now chapter 8 opens, later that same day, in the palace. And as the dust settles on the earlier drama, notice what the king does. He bestows Haman's house, that is, Haman's estate and his possessions, upon Queen Esther. And then, look at the text - "Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the king" - listen to this - how is this for a great reversal? "And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman."

The Pattern of Scripture: from the ashes of mourning to a place of royal glory

Mordecai replaces Haman, do you see, as the King's right-hand man, the number two, the second most powerful man in the empire, and he rules from the very home that once belonged to his enemy. From rags to riches, from death to life, from the ashes of mourning to a place of royal glory - that is the trajectory of the story. And it is actually a trajectory we find repeated again and again in Scripture, one that will eventually sweep up into it the whole people of God.

Mordecai and Esther are but two more in a long line of righteous sufferers whom God rewards in the end. One thinks for example, perhaps especially, of Hannah. Hannah, reflecting by God's gracious intervention in her life amidst her own sorrows, said of her situation in language that is very redolent of Mordecai's own story, in 1 Samuel 2:6-8, she said, "The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor."

Isn't that exactly what has happened here? God has taken vulnerable Esther, and Mordecai - derelict, bereft of power, literally sitting in ashes, mourning outside the king's gate - and he has raised them up to the sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. It's Proverbs 11:8 - "The righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked walks into it instead." Righteousness, Esther chapter 8 is teaching us, righteousness is always worthwhile, but sin is ultimately self-defeating. Righteousness is always worthwhile, but sin is ultimately self-defeating. That is the point.

We are being helped here, I think, to endure our own privations and trials for the Lord's sake. We are to endure hardship, and not to lose heart, nor be surprised at the fiery trials that come upon us. We are to be ready, in Hannah's language, "to sit in the ashes," and to suffer for being a child of God and not be ashamed, but as the Apostle Peter, rather, puts it in 1 Peter chapter 4 and verse 16, we are to glorify God as we suffer for being Christians, knowing, as Paul puts it in Galatians 6 and verse 9, that if we do "not grow weary of going good, we shall reap if we do not give up." And we are to do all of that, of course, because this is a pattern set for us, not simply by a long line of scriptural heroes and heroines like Hannah and Esther and Mordecai and Job and David and Jeremiah and Daniel. We are to do it because it is a pattern that finds its climactic expression in the patient, selfless suffering and glorious, exalted reward of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The Pattern of Jesus Christ

That was Paul's point in Philippians 2 in verses 5 through verse 11, wasn't it? We are to "have the same mind among ourselves, which is ours in Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Here is Christ Himself, the Lord of glory, sitting, as Hannah said, in the ashes of humiliation, in the dust of obedience and death, for us and our salvation. Here He is, who, though He was rich, yet He became poor, that we might become rich. But it didn't end there, did it, in the ashes of suffering? The joy that followed sorrow for Hannah and for Esther and for Mordecai and for Job, that was but a pale shadow of the glorious

reality of God's final response to the trials of this world. Having borne our sorrows and paid for our sins, Paul goes on to say, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name, Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Isn't that ultimately what is going on here? Mordecai's elevation from the dust of mourning to the seat of power is a reminder of God's promise to all his suffering children, that He is no man's debtor, that, "the righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked walks into it himself," that righteousness is always worthwhile, even when it comes at a cost, but sin is ultimately self-defeating, that we will, if we will "not grow weary of going good, we will reap if we do not give up." And it is a reminder, supremely, that this is the pattern into which Christ Himself has entered, not just as our example that we might imitate Him, but also as our Redeemer. The joy into which He was brought in glory is the guarantee, as we rest on Him, of a joy that is surely waiting for us. Therefore, let us bear our trials with patience, knowing the reward that God has promised for those who cling to Christ, the righteous suffer who entered into His reward and has gone ahead to prepare a place for us to bring us into participation with Him in His reward in the fullness of time. The reward.

The Request

Then secondly, look at verses 3 to 8. Here is the request. And there are two things that I want us to see here about that. First is, as Esther pleads with Ahasuerus for the overturning of Haman's decree and Haman's edict, we are reminded, aren't we, of the Lord Jesus who intercedes for His people and by His intercession our salvation is secure. But Esther here also at least reminded me, particularly, if you look at verse 3 and the way her pleading is described, reminded me of the parable our Lord Jesus used of the man who came to his neighbor at midnight. You remember, was it Luke 11, and said, "A guest has arrived unexpectedly and I need to give them bread." And the man said, "The doors are shut. Don't bother me now. I'm in bed with my children. Come back tomorrow." Jesus concludes, "Yet because of his importunity (is the old word), his bold, shameless, insistent, urgent pleading, self-forgetful, pressing prayerfulness, He will give it to him." Jesus' point there is to use a simple earthly example of urgency as this man pled for all that he needs.

And I think we learn something of that here too. Esther pleads - the word there in verse 3, "pleaded," really is captured well by that word, "importunity." She weeps and cries out and pleads with the king to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite. And even when the king holds out the golden scepter to her and she regains some of her courtly composure, she remembers the appropriate courtly phrases, "If it pleases the king," and, "I found favor in his sight," and, "If the thing seems right before the king," and "I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be

written to reverse the crave of Haman's plan." But look at verse 6. Her urgency can't be hidden. "How can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" She is importunate. She is insistent and urgent.

A Model for our Prayer Life

If the importunate pleadings of the neighbor seeking bread in Jesus' parable, and Esther's importunate pleadings for temporal deliverance for her people from a wicked, earthly, tyrant, if they obtained their desired results, Jesus' point to us and to His disciples in Luke chapter 11 is - How much more ready ought we to be, as the children of God, importunate pleaders with our Father in heaven, to ask and to seek and to knock, as he goes on to say, knowing that unlike the sleepy neighbor in Jesus' story, or the wicked King in Esther's life, our Father in heaven stands ready to give good gifts to those who ask Him? God has promised that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the things that are to be revealed to us - Romans 8 in verse 18. But he has also ordained that the pathway through the sufferings of this present time, to the glory to be revealed, be the pathway of faithful, persistent, importunate pleadings with the only King that really matters. We have no right to expect a place in the kingdom to come if we never pray with urgency and devotion, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The reward. Then the request.

The Reversal

Thirdly, look at verses 9 to 14. Here is the reversal. Esther has poured out her request, the King, for his part, has reassured Esther that she and Mordecai are now, in fact, in a position themselves to undo the edict that Haman had enacted. Mordecai now wore the royal signet ring taken from the hand of condemned Haman. Mordecai rules now as vizier, second in command in the empire. Oh now, it's true, Persian laws could not be revoked exactly, but they could be contradicted; they could be countermanded. A new law could supersede the old. Here we get to see something of the perversity of the Persian Empire - "We can't change our mind but we don't mind contradicting ourselves. So we can't repeal the old law but we can pass a new one that says the opposite." And that is Ahasueras' advice to Mordecai and to Esther.

And so, 9 to 14, the scribes are summoned. An edict is written, sent to all the satraps and governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, each in their appropriate language. It's sent, using the vast, efficient Persian courier network, on the fastest available horses. And now it is the Jews who are to defend themselves against the aggressors who will attempt to enforce Haman's original decree. Not just a contest of laws, it will be, in the end, a contest of two groups of people who will seek to enact and obey those

laws. Now it is the Jews, notice, who are to “destroy, to kill, and to annihilate” any armed force that might attack them. They are to destroy their enemies and their families and plunder their goods, “on a single day,” the edict says, “the thirteenth day of the month of Adar.”

Now if you were listening carefully, you will have heard there an echo of Haman’s original decree back in chapter 3. The mention of the scribes, the provincial governmental officials, the language of “kill, destroy, annihilate,” the appointment of the thirteenth day of Adar, the couriers used to deliver the message. The author of the book of Esther is being careful to show us that in Mordecai’s new edict we have a blow by blow undoing of Haman’s original decree. It is a eucatastrophe. A reversal that is complete and total. The sudden reversal of the enemy’s plan, snatching triumph from the jaws of defeat. It is death swallowed up in victory.

When Tolkien coined the term, eucatastrophe, this idea of sudden, happy reversal, of evil undone, he said it made for such a great story because “it is a sudden glimpse of Truth. It perceives,” he said, “that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World (he meant heaven) for which our nature is made. And I concluded” Tolkien said, “by saying that the Resurrection was the greatest ‘eucatastrophe’ possible and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy.”

The Greatest Reversal: the Death, Resurrection, and Return of Jesus Christ

That’s exactly right. Here, in the eucatastrophe that broke in upon Esther and her people during the reign of Ahasueras of Persia, is an adumbration, an anticipation and echo, a foretaste and a preview of the greatest eucatastrophe of them all, when death itself was undone, when the great enemy of our souls, in all his malice is at last defeated, and the grave’s power was broken, and Jesus Christ rose in triumph. Esther’s tale is a tale of a great reversal, but it ought to remind us of the greatest reversal of all, when our Redeemer made satisfaction for sins, and overcame death, and rose in glory. And it invites us to wait for the day when we ourselves shall be swept up into participation in Christ’s own victory, in a eucatastrophe of our own. One day, remember, the trumpet of the archangel will sound and Christ shall split the sky, coming in glory with His angels, and every eye will see Him, and we who believe will be changed, and the dead will rise, and heaven will be rolled up like a scroll, and the elements melt as in a fire. And books will be opened and all the enemies of Christ and His Church will be destroyed, and a new heaven and a new earth will open to us, the home of righteousness where we shall be forever with the Lord, face to face, as the Lamb wipes away every tear from our eyes. There is a eucatastrophe coming. Christ has entered into it ahead of us and one day He shall bring us up with Him into it too.

The Rejoicing

And that brings us to the last of the four things to see here. First the reward, then the request, then the reversal, and now, finally, the rejoicing. Tolkien said, remember, the Resurrection was the greatest eucatastrophe possible and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy. Part of the reversal of Esther's story is that, just as Haman's original edict to destroy the Jews threw Susa, the capital, into confusion and uproar when it was announced, and brought the Jews everywhere into mourning and fasting and grief, notice that in verses 16 and 17 here, the fasting is replaced with feasting, the mourning is replaced with rejoicing, the grief is replaced with gladness. Those who once distanced themselves from a people marked for destruction now join them. They declare themselves Jews, "for fear of the Jews had fallen on them." And yet as wonderful as the celebration no doubt was, it was a celebration, did you notice, not of victory actually won, but only of a victory promised, of victory anticipated. The edict that secured salvation for the Jews, it was announced but it was not yet executed. And yet there was joy. The promise, they knew, made the victory certain.

The Source of our Joy: Certainty of Future Glory

Brothers and sisters, the deliverance that has been promised to us, the victory that is ours in the Lord Jesus Christ, is more sure still, our destiny certain, our future secure. Those whom God has predestined He has called, and whom He has called these He has justified, and whom He justified, these He also glorified. Note that past tense. Whom He predestined and called and justified He glorified. It is sure, as though it were a thing already done. It is certain for every child of God. The glory to come for a believer in the Lord Jesus is so sure that Paul speaks about it as though it were already within our grasp. One day all creation will be swept up into the glorious liberty of the children of God and sin and death and sorrow and suffering will be undone forever.

The Measure of our Joy: Our Embrace of the Promise of Future Glory

And if the Jews of Persia could rejoice at an earthly promise of political and military victory, let me ask you, as I ask myself, where is our joy, where is our joy, at the sure, certain hope of the resurrection to everlasting life that is ours, sealed not by some earthly tyrant's signet ring but by the blood of the Lord Jesus and guaranteed by his empty tomb? Does your Christian life reflect a deep awareness of the glory that is to come, that is sure and certain, kept in heaven for you who are kept by the power of God, so that we cannot help but thrill at the every remembrance of God's promise? Let me put it this way. You can measure your embrace, your confidence and your faith in the promise of future glory, by the practice of your present joy. Your present joy is a barometer and an index by

which to measure how deeply you really believe that the Christ who has risen to glory will come to bring you there that you may be with Him where He is, forever with the Lord.

At the end of Tolkien's book, *The Lord of the Rings* - you can tell that I'm a Tolkien geek (laughter). I make no apology. At the end of Tolkien's book, *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam, who is one of the central characters, wakes up to find friends that he thought dead, alive and all around him. "Gandalf!" he said, "I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?" "A great Shadow has departed," said Gandalf, and then he laughed and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land."

Brothers and sisters, everything sad is going to come untrue. Everything sad is going to come untrue. Christ is risen! A great eucatastrophe has occurred. Death is undone. A great Shadow has departed. Sin and death and hell have been decisively defeated by the cross and the empty tomb. The Lamb wins! So let me ask you, where is your joy? You can measure your embrace of the promise of future glory by the practice of present joy. A reward - let us not grow weary in doing good for we shall reap if we do not give up! A request - if Esther's importunity was answered by a tyrant king, how much more will ours be by our Father in heaven who loves to give good gifts to those who ask him? A reversal - the greatest eucatastrophe of them all is the empty tomb and the victory of the Resurrection, and one day, if we are Christians we shall share in it all. And a rejoicing - everything sad is going to come untrue, therefore, brothers and sisters, let us praise the Lord!

Will you pray with me?

Our Father, we bless You that the Lamb has won and now reigns, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Grant to us to lift our eyes from the brokenness of our lives and the reality of our remaining corruption, of the easily overwhelming sense that we sometimes have that the journey ahead of us is still so very difficult and steep and sore, to see again the victory already won by our gracious Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, to remember His promise that He will come for us to take us to be with Him that we may be where He is and enter into the joy of our Lord. And as we fix our eyes on those things, would You reignite in our hearts joy here and now in the knowledge of a victory already given? For we ask it in our Savior's name, amen.

Could you stand and receive God's blessing?

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.

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