



Central Peninsula Church

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Esther 8:3-9:32

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From Sorrow into Gladness

SERIES: *For Such a Time as This: Study of the Book of Esther*

Lynn and I are celebrating our anniversary this week. As I thought about 24 years together I couldn't help but think back to our first anniversary. Like most young couples in school, we were broke, but we still wanted to celebrate. My parents owned a cabin up in the Sierras and so we drove up there and planned to go to a restaurant we both liked. We got to the restaurant and opened the menu and pretended that we had choices to make, but in fact we didn't. We both knew that we could only afford the cheapest thing on the menu (chicken, of course). No drinks, no salad, and certainly no steak. We gritted our teeth, ordered our food, and enjoyed each other and the meal the best we could.

After we finished, the waiter came to offer us dessert, which by now he must have known we would never order. But before he did he just happened to mention that prior to our being seated someone had called and paid for our entire meal, whatever the cost. We looked at him in stunned disbelief! You mean we could have ordered whatever we wanted, and you tell us now, after we've eaten? Could we start over? We did have quite a dessert though!

Our situation that night was much like that of many Christians. Because we've trusted in Christ, we're part of God's family; you might say we've been seated at the table. We're glad to be there, but the Christian life that we live is not really one we enjoy to the fullest in the sense that we take advantage of all that has been provided for us in Christ. We grit our teeth and try to convince ourselves that we're just glad to be in, but there is no real joy, no genuine celebration, no real feasting at the table of Christ. Without joy, we may be seated at God's table, but we're not experiencing all he wants us to experience.

In the book of Nehemiah when the law was rediscovered and the people wept in repentance as it was read, Nehemiah said, **"This day is holy to the Lord your God, do not mourn or weep...Go eat of the fat, drink of the sweet...do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength"** (Neh. 8:9-10).

The writer of Ecclesiastes understood this. He said, **"There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God"** (Ecc. 2:24).

Even Jesus got in on the act. This was the guy that kept the party going at Cana by turning plain water into good wine. This was the guy who prayed that his **"joy would be made full in us"** (John 17:3).

It's no mistake that the image of heaven we're given in the book of Revelation is that of a party called "the wedding supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). Maybe that's why C.S. Lewis called joy, "the serious business of heaven." I mean, what do you think that party will be like? Boring? Quiet? Tame? Come on! We'll be intoxicated with gladness!

If you're hurting, if you're broken, if you're bitter and

angry, it's hard to hear others talk about joy. But pain and sorrow don't have to be a life sentence. Scripture talks about the power of God to turn sorrow into joy, and fasting into feasting.

This is the message of the book of Esther. Esther is a book with its share of pain and grief. The Jews are in exile in Persia because of their sin. But it wasn't just that. They were also in danger of extinction. Because Mordecai the Jew wouldn't bow down to Haman, the king's right hand man, a decree went out saying that all the Jews in the Persian empire would be killed on a set day in the not too distant future. Meanwhile, Mordecai was to be hanged on the gallows. As a result of all this, there was much weeping and mourning among the Jews. But God was working behind the scenes. Mordecai's young cousin, Esther, had become queen. And one night the king couldn't sleep and discovered that Mordecai had saved his life. Finally, Esther musters up the courage to talk with the king about what has happened. The king hears of Haman's treachery and decides to have him hanged on the very gallows built for Mordecai. He then exalts Mordecai to the very position of prominence that Haman had.

But there was still one problem. When the king makes a decree, it's irrevocable. It's not like America where politicians can change minds and judges can amend laws. There was this decree that said on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month all the Jews, women and children included, became animals to be hunted down and killed. So although Esther and Mordecai appear to be safe, their people are about to be exterminated. How do you find joy in a situation like that?

I. From Sorrow into Gladness for the Jews.

A. Esther's request: Starting in 8:3 we see that Esther once again decides to approach the king.

"Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept, and implored him to avert the evil scheme of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews. And the king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king. Then she said, 'If it pleases the king and if I have found favor before him and the matter seems proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces. For how can I endure to see the calamity which shall befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?' (8:3-6).

It's been said that a woman's tears can melt the hardest of hearts, and that seems to be the case here. The king extends his scepter to her as a way of saying, "Speak, I'm listening." Esther boldly asks for what she knows was practically

impossible: she wants the king to revoke what has been written. Notice her reasoning: "how can I endure to see the calamity of MY people...the destruction of MY kinsmen." There is no question now who Esther is; she is a Jew, she's fully identified herself with her people.

Sometimes if we just think creatively situations that we think are impossible are not. Sometimes we only think of Option A or Option B, when in fact there is an Option C that's best. The king comes up with an Option C.

"So King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, 'Behold, I have given the house of Haman to Esther, and him they have hanged on the gallows because he had stretched out his hands against the Jews. Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked'" (8:7-8).

Option A was to just let the old decree of death stand. Option B was to revoke it, which was impossible. But Option C was to write another decree which would counteract the first with equal force.

B. Mordecai's new decree: So the royal secretaries are summoned, just as they had been two months earlier by Haman. But now they write a new decree with orders from Mordecai sealed with the king's signet ring.

"And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horses, riding on steeds sired by the royal stud. In them the king granted the Jews who were in each and every city the right to assemble and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate the entire army of any people or province which might attack them, including children and women, and to plunder their spoil, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar)" (8:10-12).

This doesn't sound very nice to our modern ears. I mean, this sounds like vengeance to me. Doesn't God say "Vengeance is mine?" But notice this new decree limited the Jews to what amounts to self-defense. They're allowed to kill the "entire army of any people who might attack them." This is much like what happened in the aftermath of September 11 when we as a nation felt it was right for us to defend ourselves and seek out those who would do us harm in the future. Notice the Jews were limited to only do this on that one day. It's interesting, in the next chapter, when the Jews carry out this decree, they limit themselves further - they take no plunder, even though they were allowed to, and it doesn't appear they killed women and children.

Don't forget, there is some history behind this. In Exodus 17 the Amalekites attacked Israel when they were defenseless as they were leaving Egypt. Don't forget, these were ruthless people. As a result, God said to Moses, **"I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven"** (Ex. 17:14). And then in Deut. 25 God actually commanded the Israelites that once they came into the Promised Land they themselves were to blot them out

in an act of holy war. Years later, the prophet Samuel commanded King Saul to attack the Amalekites and destroy everything that belonged to them, even women and children (1 Sam. 15:2-3). But Saul disobeyed the Lord and spared their king, Agag, who was the forefather of these very people who are trying to destroy the Jews in Esther. In essence, Mordecai's decree is calling on the Jews to finish the job Saul left unfinished.

Today, there's no place for us to avenge our enemies. Holy war was necessary as a temporary measure to preserve God's people, the Jews, so that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, could be born. Now that Christ has come there is no need for holy war. And now that Christ has been crucified, there is no place for vengeance. All of the vengeance God's people would like to wreak on those who practice evil has now been satisfied in the suffering and death of Jesus. He's taken the wages of sin; he's suffered the vengeance of evil. The vengeance due to us for our sins against others and due to them for their sins against us has been satisfied in Jesus' body on the cross. Because the penalty has been paid by Jesus, we forgive others as we have been forgiven; we love our enemies; we pray for those who persecute us.

C. The Jews rejoice: You can imagine how the Jews felt when they read this new decree. Basically, this guaranteed their survival.

"Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a large crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. For the Jews there was light and gladness and joy and honor. And in each and every province, and in each and every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy for the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them" (8:15-17).

This is really a great scene! This is like Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year's all rolled together! Mordecai, the Jew condemned to death, now rides out in royal robes and brings "light and gladness and joy and honor." The decree goes out, and where there was mourning and weeping and fasting, there is now "gladness and joy, a feast and a holiday."

You see, it doesn't matter how bad things get, there's hope. God can turn things around. You think your marriage is dead. God can turn it around. He brings joy where there was gloom. You think your career or your reputation is ruined. All you see is darkness, but God can turn it around and bring light. You think your children have just wandered off too far to ever come back to the Lord. You wonder if you can ever know joy without being sure of their salvation. God can turn them around and he can bring gladness where there was sorrow and regret.

Notice also that many among the peoples of the land became Jews. Why? Because they "dreaded the Jews." They were scared to death! They could see that God was with them and to fight against them was to fight against God.

D. The Jews avenge themselves: In chapter 9 the fateful day arrives. The thirteenth day of the twelfth month. What we know of as March 7. The Jews carry out the new decree. It's described in vv. 1-2,

"Now in the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar), on the thirteenth day when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the day when the

enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm; and no one could stand before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples” (9:1-2).

So the tables are turned and the Jews gain mastery over those who on that day had hoped to gain mastery over them. Again, there was this sense of dread that the people felt. Later in the chapter Haman's 10 sons are killed as well. And still later Esther asks the king for one more day to finish the job in the capital of Susa. When it was all done, 800 people were killed in Susa and 75,000 throughout the Persian empire. Remember, this was a war. This seems like a lot of people, but we forget that America lost about 800,000 people in WW II.

E. The feast of Purim: The last two years I've had a chance to be in Russia on May 9, what they call Victory Day. It's the day they celebrate their victory in WW II where they lost 26 million people. The whole city of Moscow celebrates. Many of the main streets are closed down. We went to Victory Park and thousands of people were there. The finest symphony in all of Russia gave a free concert. The part we enjoyed the most was the veterans. On that day all the WW II veterans wear their uniforms and proudly hang all their medals on their chest. It's customary for people to present these elderly men and women with flowers as a token of thanks for their sacrifice. It's really very touching. And it's very appropriate because it keeps the memory alive.

That's exactly what the Jews wanted to do as well. Look at vv. 20-22,

“Then Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to celebrate the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same month, annually, because on those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and it was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:20-22).

This was called the feast of Purim. They call it that because Haman had cast Pur (lots, dice) to determine the precise day in which to kill the Jews. The Jews have celebrated the feast of Purim down through the centuries. Today March 7 starts as a day of fasting. But that night, everyone gathers at the synagogue and reads the whole book of Esther. When the name of Haman is read, everyone hisses and boos and together they say, “Let his name be blotted out.” When the name of Mordecai is read they all cheer. It's like a melodrama. The next day they all gather together again for a party. The ancient Talmud told those celebrating this feast that they should drink until they could no longer distinguish between “Cursed be Haman” and “Blessed be Mordecai.” They feast and rejoice and sing and celebrate. They send gifts to the poor. It's a great day. It's a great party.

But what does this have to do with us? What does this have to do with you and I experiencing joy?

II. From Sorrow into Gladness for Us.

A. A decree of death: Consider first that from the very beginning of time God has been involved in a holy war against sin and evil. We would like to think that God could destroy sin and evil but leave people alone. But sin and evil don't exist apart from people who DO sin and evil. Sin entered the world through Adam and Eve when they rebelled against God in the Garden. God told them, “When you eat of that tree you shall surely die.” This was a decree of death, not only against them, but against all their descendants who followed suit. Scripture says, “The wages of sin is death...” There is a decree of death against all of us, and that decree can't be changed.

I have to say that I really don't think most of us get that. I don't think we really understand what kind of trouble we're in. We think we have rights. We think as long as we're nice people and try to be good that God will pat us on the back and say, “Good job,” when it's all over. If he didn't, how dare him! But God doesn't play by our rules. We don't set the standards, he does. God is not some kind of cosmic grandfather who overlooks our faults and sees only the good in us. He is holy. What we consider a “no big deal” kind of sin, is abhorrent to God.

Remember as a kid when you got caught doing something really bad and you knew there was no way out, you would have to suffer the consequences. That's how it is with God. We serve a holy God who must by his very nature punish sin, and for each of us the sentence is death. And God cannot revoke that decree.

B. God's counter decree: But there is something else he can do; he can issue a counter decree. And that's what he's done. That's what the gospel is. It's God's counter decree. This counter decree was initiated in history long ago when God chose a people through which he would bless all the nations of the earth. He gave his people the law. He taught them what was clean and unclean, holy and sinful. He taught them that because of his holiness and justice sin needed to be atoned for through the shedding of blood. What kind of God would he be to just say that sin and evil didn't matter; no big deal? You wouldn't want that in our courtrooms, would you? No, it IS a big deal! God is holy. God is just. His holiness and justice demand the death penalty. His holiness and justice demand that he wage holy war against sin.

But God is not just a God of justice, he's also a God of love, so he sent his only Son into the world to atone for our sin through the shedding of his own blood. He was sentenced to death on our behalf so that we could be set free. God waged holy war against sin and evil on the cross. The decree of death that was meant for all of us went out - against his own Son!

But it didn't stop there. He didn't just die, but he rose from the dead so that there could be a complete reversal. Talk about the tables being turned!! Think about it. Through the resurrection, that which had mastery over us (death), we now gain mastery over! The decree of death is satisfied; eternal life is available through a simple act of faith. Yes, **“the wages of sin is death,”** but as the rest of the verse goes on to say, **“the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord”** (Rom. 6:23). We're like the Jews at the end of chapter 8 who have heard this new decree and yet we still wait

for the fateful day when the battle is finally won. We hear the word, we believe it, and what is the practical result in our lives?

C. Our response of joy: It's very simply: joy! We are in the same position as the Jews. At the end of chapter 8, after the counter decree went out, Mordecai rode out from the presence of the king in royal robes and a crown of gold and for the Jews there was "light and gladness and joy and honor." It says wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy, a feast and a holiday." Why should it be any different for us? Why shouldn't we celebrate the feast of Purim every day?

As great a thinker as G.K. Chesterton wrote that the greatest evidence that the Christian faith is true is the Christian's experience of joy. He said unbelievers are forced to find their joy in the small things of this earth while the closer they get to the heavens, to the ultimate issues of our existence, the sadder they become. He writes, "When the pagan looks at the very core of the cosmos, he is struck cold. Behind the gods, who are merely despotic, sit the fates, who are deadly...The mass of men have been forced to be happy about the small things, but sad about the big ones." In contrast to that, when the Christian looks at the core of the cosmos, as he gets closer to the heavens, as he considers the ultimate issues, he finds joy in a sovereign and loving God working out his perfect purpose on earth.

As believers we experience sadness. When a loved one dies, we're sad. When we don't get the promotion we wanted, we're disappointed. When we go through struggles in our marriage, we don't necessarily like it. But, our sadness is in earthly things. The closer we get to the heavens, the brighter things become. That's why Paul says in 2 Corinthians, "**we are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing**" (2 Cor. 6:10).

Think of it this way. Joy springs from at least four sources. Joy flows first from the knowledge that we're loved. No one has joy unless they know someone loves them, values them, cares about them. To not matter to anyone is a joy killer. But followers of Christ know that we are loved. The measure of love is how much it gives, and by this standard God's love is immeasurable! He gave his only Son to die for us!

Second, joy flows from contentment in our circumstances. As morphine kills pain, so a lack of contentment with our circumstances kills joy. But we know that our circumstances, whether they be pleasant or unpleasant, are planned out by our loving heavenly Father as part of our preparation for glory. God's purpose is to make us more like Christ. No matter how bad things seem to be, God is still about his purpose in our lives. Knowing that brings joy. That's why Paul could say as he sat in prison, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."

Third, joy flows from possessing something worthwhile. We speak of our children or our families as "a real joy to me." If you have nothing worthwhile, you will not have joy. As believers, what is that we possess? Remember how Jesus told the story about the merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it (Matt. 13:45). That's us, discovering a relationship with Jesus Christ through the gospel, having the opportunity to possess that. It's having that pearl that brings us joy.

Finally, joy springs from having something to give that's worth giving. There is joy in giving. We have been given the best news in the world to give away to others. Though they might not always see it, it's exactly what they need! And what joy when someone receives it. This week I got an e-mail from Danice Lee, our children's pastor, and she told me that a woman who had come to the church seeking and asking questions had finally trusted Christ as her Savior. That gave Danice and all of us joy!

CONCLUSION

True joy comes from knowing all that you have is Christ. Through God's wonderful, life-giving counter decree, you are loved, every circumstance has been designed by him to conform you into the image of his Son, you possess the pearl of the Gospel, and you have something to share so valuable, everybody on earth needs it more than anything else. It's a good thing you've come to God's table, but you don't have to starve while you're there; you can order up; you can have a feast.

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