

Esther 8

Exegetical Big Idea: God's sovereign covenantal faithfulness ensures honour and glory for his people through his promise to bless those who bless his people and curse those who curse them.

Homiletical Big Idea: **God's turns the tears of suffering of his people into tears of joy.**

Fallen Condition Focus: We too often can't see past our current suffering to see the glory that it is producing.

Intro: Sometime in the 800's B.C. there was a king named Ben-Hadad. He was king of Aram at the time of the kings of Judah and Israel. Ben-Hadad mustered his forces and laid siege to the city of Samaria, which was the capital of the northern ten tribes of Israel at that time.

The siege was so bad, that something like a half a pint of seed pods sold for what today would be around \$70 bucks. As you can imagine, the people in the city were starving. They were doing horrendous things in order to simply stay alive.

We read in 2 kings 6-7 about what happened. So the siege is so bad that the king himself is weak and needs someone to lean on. He blames the prophet Elijah for this disaster, naturally, and goes with some men to kill him. They get to his house and the king is mad at God and Elisha. Elisha then says this "About this time tomorrow, 15 liters of barley will sell for a shekel" which in today's terms would be about \$15.

That night, few men with leprosy decided that they are dead men if they remain in the city, and possibly if they surrendered to the Arameans, they would be spared. So they go out to surrender around evening time. As they approach the camp they don't hear anything. They soon realize that nobody is there. Naturally, they do what you and I would do, they ate to their hearts content, dressed in the finest clothes, carried off all the silver and gold they could carry and when and hid it to go get it later. Realizing after a while that this was not the right thing to do, they go back to the city and share the good news. The people were elated, and in a frenzy went out into the Aramean camp and plundered it.

And sure enough, whereas the night before half a pint of seed pods sold for \$70, that morning 15 liters of barley sold for \$15 bucks.

God had opened the floodgates of heaven, and turned the tears of suffering of his people into tears of joy.

It's the same story, with different details in Esther chapter 8. God's people were marked for destruction. They were weeping and wailing, hopeless and helpless under the decree of Haman. But a new decree was on its way, which would turn the tears of suffering of God's people into tears of Joy.

Everything gets turned around in this chapter, and it shows us a God who is willing and able to save his people. This chapter shows us a God who turns the tears of suffering of his people into tears of Joy.

God's turns the tears of suffering of his people into tears of joy.

I see 4 direct reversals in this chapter. 4 ways in which God turns suffering into joy.

Verses 1-2: God's people receive blessing upon blessing.

They are away from their land that God has promised them. They own no property that is not ultimately the property of the king. They are an exiled people. And yet God reverses their fortunes and takes the vast wealth that belonged to their great enemy and gives it to Esther.

Remember how rich Haman was? He offered the king an amount of silver that today would be worth over 200 million dollars. That's an insane amount of silver. And this estate, is handed over to Esther, and Esther appointed Mordecai to run the estate.

Material blessing was a sign of the covenant for the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. Reading this as a post-exilic Jew, you would immediately see that God is doing what he has promised to his people. God had promised to bless his people with land, wealth, life, and protection from their enemies, and that's exactly what he is doing here. Esther and Mordecai, as representative of God's people in general, are living out the covenant promises of God. A complete role reversal from the last few chapters, when God's covenantal promises seem to have been on the brink of collapse.

Now, are we to understand this passage as teaching that God's people will have riches and land and health and protection from their enemies? Yes, absolutely...and also no. With the coming of Christ, these covenantal promises remain, but are actually revealed to be better than what were originally thought.

The covenantal promises to God's people were never meant to just be tangible riches in this life. But the promise of blessing in this life of the Old Testament nation of Israel was meant to reflect the great blessing that is to come.

[I was once told this story to show us the difference between the Old and New Testament promises. Suppose there once was a man, and he had a son. They lived at the time when the horse and buggy was the normal mode of transportation. Now this man loved his son and he had some wealth and so he promised his son that when he was old enough, he would buy his son a horse and buggy. Now his son had a few years to go before he was old enough, but he was so excited. During those years of getting older however, a wonderful new device was invented called the motorcar. Now when the son was finally old enough, and he was very excited to receive his horse and buggy, on his birthday the dad led him out of the house with a blindfold on and when they got to the yard the father told the son to take the blindfold off. The son looked up and saw, instead of a horse and buggy, a brand new motorcar. What do we make of this? Did the father give his son a horse and buggy like he promised? No. Did the father break his promise? No, of course not. The father kept his promise, but far exceeded the expectations of the son.]

Now our Heavenly Father does not change, but the promises of the Old Testament are really only a taste of the true fulfillment of the promises of God.

The promises of material blessing for the Christian are not fulfilled in this life, but in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Our ultimate reward is not a wallet full of bills, but Christ himself.

There have been great saints who have suffered under the hardship of material need. Our hope is that God is able to meet our needs, but ultimately, our cries of need, even if not met in this life, will most

definitely be met in the New Heavens and the New Earth. And we will see just how abundantly generous our God is.

God's people may have tears of suffering now, but he will turn them into tears of joy.

Verses 3-6: God adopts us into his family.

At this point, Esther has secured her fate, and the fate of Mordecai her cousin. In all likelihood, she will have royal protection on the dreadful day of Haman's decree. She has her life, the life of Mordecai, her new estate. She could easily take her ball and go home. But she's not the Esther that we saw back in chapter 4, where she was afraid to put her life at risk for others. She is a new Esther. She once again puts her life on the line.

Read verses 3-6. She ends her plea by saying "how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of *my family*?" Notice anything interesting with the way she puts that? If you remember, Esther has no immediate family. She is an orphan. And yet here she has fully embraced and identifies as one of God's people, as in so doing, has inherited a *family*.

She recognizes that she cannot turn her back on her family in their time of need. The bond between people of God is stronger than blood.

[Have you heard the wedding tradition that on the wedding day the bride wears "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue"? So we did that on our wedding day. Now my memory is a little fuzzy on what was old and new and borrowed, but I do vividly remember the thing that was blue. I took a blue sharpie and wrote on the bottom of her wedding shoes "Side by side, holding hands, walking together towards the throne of God." It meant that in our covenant of marriage before God and the church, that we covenant to move together in the same direction (side by side), bear each other's burdens and heal each other (holding hands), journey together (walking together), towards the common goal of the presence of our God (towards the throne of God). That's the bond we share as husband and wife, but it's also the bond we share as believers.]

Christians, those who rightly believe in the work of Christ on the cross and his resurrection, are family, and that bond is stronger than blood. As was true for Esther, the family of the Church of God is both a blessing and responsibility. It's a blessing because like Esther, God takes the orphan and adopts him or her into his family. Some of us have family that loves us, some of us have difficult family situations, some of us have family who have disowned us, and some of us have no family at all. But if you are in Christ, you are my brother, and you are my sister. And God is our Father.

What a blessing to belong. And with that blessing is the responsibility of love and care for each other. Esther puts her life on the line for her family. Are we willing to do the same? For Christians that disagree with us? For Christians that may not like us? For true Christians who believe other things outside of the essential doctrines of the faith? For Christians we don't know?

That is easier said than done. But by God's grace, the guidance of the Scriptures, and the leading of the Spirit, we can show the love of Christ to each other more and more until his coming. We all have family problems, with our blood family and with each other. Today they illicit tears of sorrow, but one day those will be tears of joy. Because:

God's people may have tears of suffering now, but he will turn them into tears of joy.

7-14: God raises his people up from oppression.

I hope these events sound familiar. What we are seeing is a reversal of the decree that Haman made back in chapter 3. Back in chapter 3 Haman has the ring, he is given permission from the king to do what he sees fit. Haman writes in the name of Xerxes. The decree goes out to all the lands of the kingdom.

The king, in an attempt of self-preservation, tells Esther and Mordecai that he cannot revoke his previous decree, but that he can make a new one. He instructs Esther and Mordecai to use the signet ring and make a new decree in the name of the king that will allow the Jews to defend themselves on that very day that Haman had set aside for their destruction.

Here, Haman is dead. And now those who were marked for destruction are in the position of prominence. *Mordecai* gets the signet ring. *He* speaks on behalf of the king. *He* has the king's blessing to make a new decree. And it is *Mordecai's* decree that is spread throughout the land.

We should take a second and address the hard verses in this section, namely verse 11. Reading this, you would think at first glance that Mordecai granted the Jews permission to kill not only the men who attack them, but that he gives them permission to go after the women and children. Surely children won't be attacking the Jews will they? Why have this in there? Is this angry revenge?

This is not vengeance, but justice. They are only called to self-defence. We do see the language of killing women and children, but this is clearly meant to reflect the language of the initial decree by Haman. We are supposed to see the reversal here. The Jews were defenceless, and now they are the ones with the upper hand. We don't hear of any indication that they Jews attacked women and children out of anger or hatred. Doing so would have actually violated the decree since they are only allowed to attack those who attack them. God is reversing the situation. The Jews were the victims, and now they are the strong.

[I grew up with 2 brothers and we are all about a year or so apart in age. From time to time we would start a game of Monopoly...but rarely would we finish. The game would go something like this. Two of the three brothers would end up getting most of the properties and are able to build houses. That means that one brother would quit pretty quickly because at that point there's no point in sticking around. The game when then be down to two of us. At some point, there would be a roughly even divide between properties and houses. Now it's a waiting game. At some point, my brother would land on my property that has houses or hotels and I would shout with excitement and rub it in a little. My brother would reluctantly pay up and we'd continue. And then the worst possible scenario would happen. I'd land on his Park place or Boardwalk. Now the tables have turned. How the mighty have fallen and the proud brought to his knees. Its' not his turn to celebrate and rub it in because he knows full well that there is no recovery from that. There's really only one thing to do at that point. Flip the game over and leave him to clean it up.]

Presently we see the Haman's of the world with great honour and power, and I admit this is daunting! But we cannot forget, that our God has decreed the reversal of events. There will come a day when the

Haman's, all the enemies of the people of God, will lose all they have, and give way to the honour of God's people. Except we will not receive only the worldly estate of the wicked, we will receive an eternal inheritance that will never rust or spoil, where thieves will not break in and steal. God's people, who are dedicated to honouring him, are mocked and ridiculed by the world. But he will take these same faithful saint who are foolish in the eyes of the world and give them royal robes and crowns and seat them at the table with the King of kings.

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So the decree is sent out just like before. The whole kingdom hears of this decree, and just like before, we get the mention here that it is also issued in the citadel of Susa.

16-17: God turns a death sentence into life. Defeat into Victory. Fasting into feasting. Hopelessness to Hope.

The couriers depart and bring the message of hope to the entire kingdom. When the message is received it is received with joy and thanksgiving because their death sentence has been revoked.

Mordecai leaves the king's presence with royal robes and a royal crown, and the whole citadel of Susa held a joyous celebration. Contrast this with the last time he was honored. It was temporary, it was reluctant on the part of Haman. But now, Mordecai has a permanent position of honour and royalty.

When Haman's edict went out to all the land in chapter 3, we read that there is mourning, fasting, weeping, wailing, sackcloth, and ashes. All this because of a death sentence.

But for God's people, though that sentence still stands, there is now a defence against it. This defence will prove to be more powerful than the death sentence.

God has turned fasting into feasting. Weeping into shouts of joy. Defeat into victory. And sadness into celebration.

[I think I've mentioned before I like Star Wars. Remember when in the first movie, Luke and Han and Obi-Wan and the droids are in the death star and they're trying to save Princess Leah? So they break into her prison cell and they're surrounded by the bad guys and they need to jump down this tube. They don't know where this tube is going, but it so happens it's a garbage shut that leads into a giant garbage pit. It's called the trash compactor. All of a sudden the walls of this giant room start closing in to compact the garbage, and Han and Luke and Leah are in there. So they get on their little communication device and tell R2D2, the droid, to hack into the computer and turn it off. Well it's supposed to be a tense scene as the walls are getting closer and closer the three people are inside and screaming through this communications device for R2 to shut it down. Well the camera cuts to the droids and all you can hear over the communications device is wailing. And the two robots are convinced that they didn't shut it down in time and their friends are now pancakes. But then they hear a voice over the radio saying "you did it, you did it!" It's then that we realize that the shouts and cries for help, turned into shouts and cries of joy. The moment they realized that their lives were spared and that they weren't going to be crushed, the cries changed into laughter.]

Life is not easy. It is filled with hardships and tears of sorrow. And yet we are called to endure. When the walls are closing in, and despair has taken hold, never once has God abandoned his people. In fact, our sufferings in this life are designed by God to grow our affection for Jesus. And anything that grows our affections for Jesus, and lessons our affections for this world, is a gift and blessing from God. And how sweet it will be when we are finally in the presence of Jesus and all suffering is in the rear-view mirror.

This happens because of God's covenant faithfulness to his people. Not because they are worthy.

The death sentence of sin will not go away for humanity. It stands and cannot be revoked. However, God's people have a defence. Christ is our great defender. Not because we are worthy of being defended, but because of his great love for us. Christ takes our death sentence upon himself as he dies on the cross, stripping it of its power over us. The couriers of the gospel, the church, go out into the world and proclaim the good news that death no longer has hold on those who trust in Christ.

GOSPEL – Do you hear the news from the couriers? Your death sentence can be removed if you join with Jesus. Believe in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and you will be saved.

Victory is already won for the people of God. The last sentence in this chapter is that many who were not Jews, became Jews out of fear of the Jews. Why? Because they knew that the victory belonged to those whom God calls his own. It is unclear whether or not these people simply adopted a Jewish lifestyle and culture in order to avoid destruction. Since this edict appears to indicate the Jews were on the defensive and not the offensive, that doesn't make perfect sense. But the notion is clear. They recognized the power of God working for the good of his people and were terrified because they knew they were not counted among them.

There are so many examples of those who are not born Jewish being enfolded into the people of God through faith. Think of Rahab the woman who hid the Israelite spies, recognizing the victory of YHWH. Think of Ruth the Moabitess, who chose a life of faithfulness to her mother-in-law and said "Your people will be my people, your God will be my God." We can think of Uriah the Hittite whom David had murdered and stole his wife. Uriah refused to feel the comforts of home while under the responsibility of serving in the army of Israel. He was more righteous in that moment than David. The reality is that the majority of the people in this room are not Jewish. Because God enfolds people from every tribe and tongue and nation into his family through faith in Christ Jesus.

The edict is proclaimed, and yet victory doesn't fully happen until the next chapter. But the outcome has already been made sure.

Christian, if you are in Christ, you will have tears of suffering now. We live in the reality of chapter 8. The decree of the gospel has been proclaimed and the victory is sure, and so we wait for the next chapter, when victory will be realized. When Christ returns for his own, when he judges the living and the dead, when he creates the New Heavens and the New Earth, it is then that our tears of suffering will be turned into tears of Joy. Though we may not see him now, may we continue to trust in the God who is there.

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