

Sermon Transcript from July 24th, 2016
A Story of Poetic Justice
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Today, we're closing this series on the book of Esther, looking at God's work on behalf of Israel; His people. We've said throughout this series that the book of Esther is a story. It's a story of people, of flawed and faulty people who make big mistakes. It's a story of providence in the midst of people; God's hand moving and working on behalf of His people. It's a story of pride. One man, in particular, who brings this death threat against God's people, solely out of this place of pride. And today, as we close, we ultimately see that Esther is a story of poetic justice. God's poetic justice. Rescuing His people from destruction under remarkable circumstances. And we'll look today at how we have hope that today God's poetic justice is still at work in our crazy world and circumstances.

So, quick recap: this story is centered around a rags to riches character named Esther, who we learn in the introduction is an orphan, she's a refugee, she's a woman, obviously, and she's been adopted by her cousin, Mordecai. And they are both Jews living in exile out of Israel in the Persian empire. And, due to a power struggle that is happening between this prideful man, Haman, that was talked about last week, and Esther's guardian, Mordecai, this power struggle between them, Haman declares war on the Jewish people. Not just on Mordecai, but on all of the Jewish people. And he has written this decree that all of the Jews in the whole Persian empire will be wiped out in a single day and the king has approved this order.

As the story unfolds, Esther goes from this lowly position as an orphan refugee into the most powerful position a woman can hold, becoming the queen of the Persian empire. And as she sits in that place of power, she's called to intervene on behalf of her people; to reveal herself as Jewish for the first time. She's been hiding that. And to pray that God does a miracle to spare her people from annihilation.

As we left off last week, things are beginning to unravel for our antagonist, Haman. Haman is forced to honor and parade his nemesis, Mordecai, through the city in this incredible reversal. After that embarrassing spectacle, he goes home to his wife and his friends, is telling them all about what has happened and looking for some sympathy. And they reply back, "Oh. You're in big trouble. Your whole world is coming unraveled. There's no way you can stand against him. This is the Jewish people. You're done for."

And as those words are coming out of their mouth, the servants come to get Haman and take him to a banquet. And that's where we pick up in chapter 7. Let's read this together.

Esther 7:1: "So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, 'Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given to you. What is your request? Up to half the kingdom, it will be granted to you.'

"Then Queen Esther answered, 'If I have found favor with you, O King, if it pleases Your Majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.'

"King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, 'Who is he? Who is the man who has dared to do such a thing?'

"Esther said, 'The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman!'

"Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The king got up in a rage, left his wine..." – which is a big deal – "...and went out into the palace garden. But Haman realized that the king had already decided his fate, he stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

"Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclined.

"The king exclaimed, 'Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?'

"As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona," – a super helpful guy – "one of the eunuchs attending the king, says this..."

"You know, king, a gallows 75 feet high stands by Haman's house."

"He had made it for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king."

"The king said, 'Hang him on it!' So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided."

Will you jump to Esther 9:20?

It says, "Mordecai recorded these events and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies and as the month when their sorrow was turned to joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote these to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor."

"So the Jews agree to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written for them."

This is God's Word. Let's pray.

God, I thank You for Your faithfulness as we have gone through this incredible story, and ask today God that You would open up our hearts and our minds for what this book is saying to us today; what we carry away from this story as it comes to a close. I pray, Lord, You give us eyes to see and ears to hear; hearts to receive. I pray, God, that You would use my mouth and my mind and my heart, God, that they would be glorifying to You, Jesus, and that You would teach and inform all of us together of the plans You have for this church, this family and this cultural moment we live in together. In Jesus' name, amen.

The value in all that Esther did throughout this story is found in Esther 9:22. It says, "**The Israelites received rest from their enemies.**"

In all of Israel's history, this is what they hope for. But, they experience very little rest, the people of Israel. Now, you may not think you have enemies in this world, not like the ones that Esther and Mordecai were up against, but I want to petition today to reconsider that. Maybe you do. God's promise to His people, then and now, is to experience peace; to have rest from our enemies. And we'll see how as we conclude the story today. But, remember, today we see that perhaps, most of all, the book of Esther is a story of poetic justice.

Poetic justice is defined as an outcome in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded, usually in a manner peculiarly and ironically appropriate. I would say in the last couple weeks we've seen that especially. Where we left off, Esther has, for three days, been dragging out her request of the king. We don't know why she does this, but, in God's providence and His working hand behind the scenes, over these three days, her enemy, Haman, is falling apart. His world is unraveling. And it leads up to this climactic event that we just read. Esther pleads for her life before the king. And typical King Xerxes is clueless to what is going on.

He asks, "Wait, why is this happening? Who did this? How did we get to this point with my queen?"

And then Esther drops the bomb on Xerxes. "It's Haman. It's your guy. Your second-in-command. He's the one who did this. Your closest advisor. Your trusted counselor. He has plotted to kill me and all of my people."

And the king has this really strange response. He gets up and he walks out. He gets up and he walks out. He doesn't ask questions. He doesn't make a decision on the spot. He gets up and he walks out. And we should take note of that because, remember, every time in this story, from chapter 1 where we began, every time the king gets in a jam, every time he gets backed into a corner, he starts asking the people around him, "Okay. What do we do with this situation? How do we handle this? Give me some direction and advice."

But this time, it's his advisor. It's the one he would go to that's got him in the jam. So, he takes a walk. He's like, "I've got to get out of here. I've never been in this situation before."

He's got to get out to think. And here's what he's thinking, "Should I..." – he's in a precarious spot – "...side with me advisor Haman? This is my guy. He's the second most powerful man in my kingdom. I give him my ring. I give him authority. I make all of the

people bow down to him as he walks through the streets. Do I side with this guy or do I side with my queen? The one who I threw this beauty contest through my entire empire? Everyone knows about it. They sent women from every stretch of my empire, and she's the one I picked. I picked her, and everyone knows it. And then I paraded her through my empire. Which one?"

Either way he's got egg on his face. They're both in their position because of him. As it turns out, the king won't have to make that choice, because Haman makes it for him. As the king goes out to ponder his next move, what he's going to do, Haman does something scandalous. And this isn't scandalous to us, but in this cultural moment? Scandalous. No matter which historian you read, no matter what commentary you read – and I know you guys have just been pouring through the commentaries on Esther – they all agree on this: for a man to make an advance on one of the king's women in his harem, for a man to stay in the same room with one of the king's women, for a man to even be within seven steps of one of the king's women was not just an offense, it was an act of treason.

See, the king's women were his show of authority. So, the more you had in the harem, the more beautiful they were, the more they were from different areas of your empire, the greater king you were. For any man to approach those women was an attack on your throne. So, this was illegal, it was scandalous. Haman's in big trouble.

So, what goes on as king goes out into his garden to ponder his next move? Haman stays back, which kind of seals his fate. What's going on in this scene with Haman and Esther? A lot's going on. First, Haman is begging for his life. He knows that his only hope is if Esther comes to his rescue. If Esther pleads on his behalf. And here's the irony: Haman is begging for his life from a Jew who he has sentenced to death just out of his own selfish pride. He has got himself into that position and he's begging for his life from the very person he has sentenced to death.

Haman is pleading for his life and he throws himself at Esther's feet. This is super ironic. Because, if you'll remember, Haman is this super obnoxious guy who has a law decreed making everyone bow down to him wherever he goes. It's a law. And, ironically, now he is bowing down to this Jewish queen. A queen whose guardian, Mordecai, refused to bow down to Haman. Humility finally lands on Haman, but it's too late. And finally, in this moment, as Haman is pleading for his life and throwing himself at Queen Esther, he actually, in his own actions, seals his own fate. He seals his own fate by staying behind with Queen Esther. By just staying in the room, Haman is done for.

So, the king re-enters the room. He sees Haman on the couch with Esther, and it's an easy decision. It's been made for him. Haman has just let King Xerxes off the hook. And when this happens, just notice how helpful the servants are. Just notice how helpful they become in this moment. Right? So, Haman is there. He's doing the wrong thing. King comes in. "Oh my. What are you doing with my wife on the couch?"

And, all of a sudden, this guy shows up. "Hey, king. Just so you know, there's this stake that's been raised and Haman put it there. And you know what? He was actually going to kill Mordecai, the guy who saved your life. That guy. Just so you know. I'm out."

And then he's gone. He just steps into the story and then steps out of the story. You know? Just to share this information. I mean, Haman must have been just hated by everyone. And this is the moment of redemption. This is this poetic justice. This is this place where the whole story takes a turn. It turns around. But, Israel isn't out of the woods yet. This decree by Haman has gone out to the entire empire. Even though Haman is now dead, he is put to death on the stake that he had set up for Mordecai. He's gone. But, the decree is still out there. And, under Persian law, anything the king signed, anything he used his ring to sign, it can't be revoked. It can't be turned backwards.

So, they're stuck. What are they going to do? Well, Esther and Mordecai brilliantly draw up a new plan; a counter-decree. One that gives permission to all of the Jews to defend themselves against anyone who tries to attack them on that same day. It's important to know that this isn't a war decree. This isn't an offensive tactic. This isn't giving Jews permission to go rape and pillage everyone around them. That's not what's going on here. It's a defensive move. It is permission for them to protect themselves against anyone who comes after them. But, more importantly, think about this, it signaled to the entire empire that while the king must have been against the Jews with the first decree, something has changed. And now the king has put out an order with his signature and he is for the Jewish people. He's standing up for them.

So that, if nothing else, would give people pause before they would attack the Jews. And it works out. While some of the Jews are attacked, they are not overcome, and they lived through Haman's genocidal decree. Poetic justice for Israel, for Mordecai, for Esther. It's all captured in Esther 9:22. "The Jews got rest or relief from their enemies. Their sorrow was turned to joy, their mourning into a day of celebration. Rest from their enemies."

For all of their history, Israel has been longing for rest from their enemies. And God has always provided it. God has always provided it. When the young nation of Israel is fleeing from this tyrannical king Pharaoh in Egypt, God miraculously splits the Red Sea, they cross over into safety and Pharaoh's army is swallowed up. They're given rest from their enemies. When the young nation of Israel is attacked by neighboring nations, whether they're led by Moses or Joshua or Saul or David, over and over the God of Israel fights on their behalf, even against enormous odds, fights on their behalf and they are given rest from their enemies.

And now, when it looks like Israel is on the brink of annihilation in a foreign land living in exile with no king of their own to fight for them, no supernatural miracles to speak of, the Jewish people are saved and they're given rest from their enemies. This was a promise that God made to His people from their very foundation. In Deuteronomy 25, it gives this promise, the Lord's promise to Israel, that as they follow Him, as they listen to Him, as they obey Him, they will be given rest from their enemies. And He always does this. He always does this. For a time. For a time.

Whether in Exodus or Judges, Samuel, Chronicles, Kings and even this book of Esther, as we've been reading this whole year in the Year of Biblical Literacy, these books are filled with the testimony of God's people that He always intervenes on their behalf. He always fights for His people and He gives them rest from their enemies. For a time.

Now, listen. I sat with this a lot this week. It would be very easy to close out the book of Esther and just say, "Isn't God good? He just keeps His promises. He delivers His people. Yay."

We could say that, and it would be true. But, here's what's also true. Listen. Please. As the story of Esther concludes, the Jews survive, and thank God for that. They survive. And they institute this festival of Purim. This festival of remembrance. It's like Passover. Remembering what God did. But, here's the reality: Israel's reality is still very overwhelming at the end of the book of Esther. They are still in exile in a foreign land. They are still without a king of their own. They're still without a temple to worship. They are still a people scattered all over the known world. And this is the story of Israel we've been reading the whole year from the very beginning.

Israel gets in trouble. Usually because of their own foolishness and disobedience. Israel gets in trouble. Just when it looks like they're not going to make it, God steps in and He saves His people and they're given rest from their enemies for a time. Until they get in trouble again. Usually by their own foolishness and disobedience. And then God steps in and rescues them and does something on their behalf and they're given rest from their enemies for a time. And this happens over and over and over. And I know. Listen. I know where you guys are at in the reading with the Year of Biblical Literacy. I know you're just like, "Can we get done with the Old Testament already? Can we be done?"

Tarik, even. Pastor Tarik, in staff meeting this week, He's just like, "When do we get to Jesus? Can we please get to Jesus?"

And listen, I don't mean to be cheesy. But, listen. Don't you think Israel is asking the same question? When do we get to Jesus? When do we get to the Messiah person who's promised? When do we get final resolution? Not rest from our enemies for a time, but final resolution? When does that part happen? That's where we find Israel at the end of the book of Esther; as we're going into the Gospels. There's a few hundred years between the end of the book of Esther and the beginning of the Gospel message. A few hundred years. And, over that time, they're occupied by another empire. This time Rome.

And still waiting to have rest from their enemies. And this is why, when Jesus shows up on the scene in Israel, everyone is expecting a revolutionary; a war hero; a warrior king. One who will take down Rome. One who will establish Israel, again, as a nation and make them great. That's what everyone is thinking. This is how all the Israelites would have thought. This was their historical narrative. When do we get to Jesus? Even the disciples. Even Jesus' own closest family, they're confused by this. They grew up reading Esther. They knew the stories. They know the Torah. They know that God always fought on behalf of His people, and

they expected Jesus to do the same.

But, Jesus does something radically different. Radically different. On the night when Jesus is betrayed, He's handed over. There's this dramatic scene with His disciples and the guards of the high priest who are coming to arrest Him. As the guards approach Jesus, this is what happens.

John 18:10. It says, **"Then Simon Peter drew his sword and he struck the servant of the most high."**

I don't know if he missed or he was aiming, but he cuts off his right ear.

"(The servant's name was Malchus.) [...] 'Put your sword back in its sheath,' Jesus says to Peter. 'Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?'"

Put your sword down, Jesus says to Peter. See, Peter thinks it's go time. Peter's been waiting for this. He's read these stories. He knows how God works. He's been waiting for the time Jesus was going to release this can on their enemies, on Rome and even on the high priests. Earlier in the Gospel message there's this moment where they're having some trouble with some people and Peter says, "Jesus, do you want us to bring fire down on these guys like Elijah did? I know that's how you roll, God. Do you want us to bring fire down on our enemies?"

That's what Peter – I love Peter. So, in this moment, Peter takes out his sword and he's ready to start war. Let the war begin. And Jesus says, "Put down your sword. Put down your sword."

Jesus is saying, in this really powerful way, "If you want real rest from your enemies once and for all, put your sword down. I will drink the cup the Father has given me. This will fall on me."

He will still fight for His people, but this isn't, any longer, a fight of flesh and blood. This time, Jesus will defeat the real enemy once and for all. In the greatest act of poetic justice of all time, God defeats the enemies of sin and evil in humanity by becoming humanity and dying in its place. This is the great reversal. This is the great poetic justice. Just as Haman had a death decree against God's people, God has a death decree against sin and evil. He will not allow for it to go unchecked, because He's good and He's holy and He's righteous. But, instead of unloading His wrath on humanity, He instead writes a counter decree like Esther and Mordecai did.

He writes a counter decree and He says, "I will step into their story. I will take the wrath on myself and give them rest from their enemies."

Poetic justice. God's love and justice meet at the cross of Jesus and He gives us rest from our enemies. So, it begs us to ask the question: "Who are our enemies?"

Know your enemy. Any Rage Against the Machine fans? I'm too old for that? No? Okay. You don't know who they are. It's okay. It's okay. Could this possibly mean that Jesus has given us real rest from our real enemies? Because, we could look around our world right now, family, and see that there are plenty of enemies. You could probably identify in your own life enemies that you are facing. You could probably identify enemies in your own office. So, what do we do with this? This idea that He gives us rest from our enemies?

Well, there seems to be a really clear direction from Jesus here. The first step is to put down your sword. Put your sword down. The sword that Peter held was this symbol of power; this symbol of authority in human form. To literally take power in his own hands and destroy his enemies. But, on this side of the cross, you guys, this is no longer a battle of flesh and blood. Jesus changed the game completely. This is a battle fought on our knees crying out to God. This is a battle of humility, not of pride. This is a battle of surrender. Jesus changed the game and turned it upside down.

Secondly, I think really clearly, when Jesus says, "I will take the cup my Father has given me," He gives us this important reminder: "Remember who your king is."

I know that's grammatically incorrect. "Remember whom is your king."

"Remember who your king is." Jesus didn't come as a revolutionary warrior king. Not in the sense that we think of. He didn't come to conquer temporary dictators who are here

today and gone tomorrow. He came to conquer enemies of sin and evil at the heart of humanity. And we, as His people, have been entrusted to work out that redemption in our world today. But, we have to remember who our king is, because there are so many things that want to be king.

This has tremendous possibilities for healing in so many areas of our life. And we could talk about so many different things. But, I want to talk about just what we've covered the last three weeks. Let's just dive into the things we talked about in the last three weeks as we've been working through the book of Esther. The first week, there was this idea of compromise that we have become a concubine like Esther did to our culture; forgetting our identity of who we are. And specifically dialing in, you guys, to our dating culture within our church and how we are hurting each other; how we are thinking of ourselves and others.

Jesus can give us rest from this wrestling by understanding our identity in Him first; who you are. And then understanding His grace for one another and the beauty in every image-bearer of God. But, you have to lay down your sword. You have to lay down your pride. You have to be humble and you have to remember who your king is and how His kingdom works. Practically, church, we're preparing some follow-up conversations on how we work through this as a church together. How we should be rightly formed in Christ to think about dating in our city, in our cultural moment, in our church family.

So, more to come on that. In week two, we talked about power and privilege and we called out that there is a very real racial divide and power divide in our nation that is ripping us apart at the seams. There are black members of our church family who are terrified for the future of their families living in this cultural moment. There are police officers in our church family who are terrified to go about their jobs every day in this cultural moment in our city, in our family. And then there's the rest of us who are lost and confused and angry and we don't know what to do about it.

Listen: Jesus can and will give us rest from this destruction, from this hatred. Our faith is not in public policy; our faith is not in physicality to take it out on one another. But, by the Holy Spirit, the working, healing of the Holy Spirit, we can be formed as people of Christ; ambassadors of peace in our city. In our cultural moment, we have to put down our sword. You have to put down your agenda. You have to put down your hatred. You have to put down all of these things that we hold onto hoping that we have enough power to change our circumstance. You have to lay it down. Then you have to remember who your king is and how His kingdom works. That here, there is no Jew or Gentile. That we are the people of God; we are the family of God. We have to remember who our king is.

Practically, we are preparing several events and discussions in the fall to get us thinking. But, more importantly, to get us practicing how to be these kinds of people when we talk about racial reconciliation in our church, in our city, in our cultural moment. And last week, week three, we talked about the inherent poison of pride in the human heart. That is a reality that lives in all of us and leads to foolishness and evil in our world. And we are a part of it. But, Jesus can take a prideful heart, He can take a hard heart if it is surrendered to Him and He will turn that pride into humility and make us the kind of people that bring healing into our city and our cultural moment right now. A kind of people who give generously, not just out of their pockets, but of themselves, of their very being, to one another.

But, you have to put down your sword. You have to stop thinking of yourself and your plan and your strategy and your superiority or your inferiority to everyone else around you. You have to lay it down and you have to remember who your king is. This kingdom works in a different way. You guys, this is just the last three weeks. Think of all the ways God gives us rest from our striving, from our pride, from our foolishness, our bigotry, our unforgiveness. He gives us rest from those kind of enemies as we release our self to His care and allow Him to form us as His children, shaped in the image of their Father.

This is the poetic justice of God. This is our story as the people of God and this is our only hope of glory.

Let's pray.

Jesus, I thank You that You ushered in a new kind of kingdom. Thank You, Lord, that You changed, You turned upside down our ideas of love, our ideas of power, our ideas of privilege, our ideas of pride. You took all of them and You turned it upside down, Lord. Thank You, Jesus. Thank You, Lord, that Your love was so great that You did not count equality with God something to be grasped, something to be far off. But, You came and You made Yourself nothing, Jesus, for Your people, for Your sons and daughters, that there might be a new way to live as a human.

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We believe in that work, Jesus, and now we want to celebrate it. We want to cry out to You. Lord, would You come and do the work in our individual hearts? By the power of Your Holy Spirit, Lord, there is nothing that can't be made new in the name of Jesus. So, we invite You, Lord. Come and meet us in this place. In Jesus' name, amen.