

TURNING THE TABLES

Does your life sometimes seem like a cliffhanger? Wondering what could possibly happen next? The book of Esther is like this, as God works behind the scenes of ordinary life, to accomplish His extraordinary purposes. Prof M. Breneman notes the Bible "is all about God's providential sovereignty over nature, nations, and individuals, in His superintendence and preservation of His people." When expected outcomes are dramatically reversed, the literary term is "peripety." There's a lot of this in Esther!

1- GOD USES ORDINARY MEANS - in life's circumstances. It was ordinary life in far-away Persia for the exiled people from Jerusalem. But the unexpected was happening. The orphan Esther was adopted, then crowned Queen of Persia. But her godly uncle Mordecai refused to worship Haman, the king's second-in-command. In jealous anger, Haman bribed the king to issue an edict for complete destruction of all Jewish people. A catastrophe! But wait, Esther was Jewish, and surely she could change the king's mind. Mordecai told her "*who knows whether you came to the kingdom for such a time as this?*"

After fasting and praying Esther decided to act in faith, saying, "*I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.*" Wise as she was brave, Esther simply asked the king to come to a banquet that she had prepared for him and Haman. The king was pleased. But afterward, Haman raged against Mordecai, and built a gallows 75-feet high, for when he had the king's permission. But as Breneman says, "satisfaction that depends on worldly honor and glory can be easily extinguished."

2- GOD HAS EXTRAORDINARY PURPOSES - in His providence. In Esther chapter 6, another turn as "*on that night King Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus) could not sleep.*" The Greek Old Testament words it "*the Lord took sleep from the king that night.*" So begins what Prof KH Jobes calls arguably the most ironically comic scene in all the Bible. The king has the chronicles of the kingdom read to him, and is reminded how Mordecai had warned him about a plot against his life. The king was distressed to hear that no honor had been given Mordecai, which was important for the king to do.

Just then, Haman happened to be there (hoping to ask him about the gallows), so the king asked him, "*what should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?*" Haman said to himself "whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" So he answered, put royal robes on him, a crown on his head, and parade him on the king's horse and proclaim his honor to the people. Royal robes were thought to endue magical power to the wearer, so Haman expects to exalt himself for even greater gain.

So the king says, "*hurry, just as you have said, do so...to Mordecai the Jew who sits in the king's gate. Leave nothing out that you have mentioned.*" Peripety! Haman was devastated, but had no choice. He had to carry out the orders to the letter. He had to honor Mordecai, the very man that moments before he planned to exterminate. Mordecai is now exalted above Haman, who after parading him through the city, hurries home in shame and lamenting. Then he must go to Esther's second banquet.

3- GOD EXPOSES EVIL - through His obedient people. In Esther chapter 7, on the second day of the feast, the king is pleased and asks Esther, "*what is your wish? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be granted. What is your request?*" She is not after earthly material possessions but something of far greater value, eternal human souls. Esther says, "*if it please the king, let my life be granted for my wish and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. But our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.*"

The king demands, "*who is he and where is he, who has dared to do this?*" The rapid staccato in the Hebrew narrative underscores his rage, at who would so aggrieve his beloved. Queen Esther points him out: "*a foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!*" Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The tables were turned. Haman came to the banquet expecting to be honored. Instead, he is humiliated.

4- EVIL EXACTS GREAT COST - to all of humanity. Esther had taken the same approach as the prophet Nathan with King David in 2 Samuel 12. The king realized he had issued the edict against the Jews, so he was responsible for the sale of Esther's people. Kings conquered peoples and nations in order to further their own power and economic welfare, so the loss of people could be devastating. Esther obliquely reminds him that losing this revenue would be much greater than the bribe he received from Haman. In his wrath, the king went out to the garden. He had to think through what to do.

He weighs the developments. What can be done? Everyone is in such a risky position. Haman is terrified and begs for his life from Esther, because if he simply ran away he would be done for. King Xerxes paces in the garden, bringing his rage under control so that justice can be done. But he cannot undo his own edict. Somehow, there must be a solution. You'll find out next time! Meantime, remember God's words to His people: *be strong, courageous, obedient, for I am with you to deliver you!*

You can no doubt see many parallels with this story in the political, corporate and cultural intrigue of our own day, as well as in your own personal life. Human nature hasn't changed, but God is always at work. And as Jobes notes, "evil is personal, not some ethereal substance 'out there' as evil does not exist apart from beings who are evil. On the final judgment day when truth is revealed, the condemned will realize they have no one to blame but themselves." They will have worked their own destruction! □