

Tears Turned to Testimony

Just picture it. Mary Magdalene stands outside the tomb weeping. The world as she knew it had collapsed. The Teacher who had called her by name, healed her, and given her life meaning had been crucified. All that remained – she thought – was loss. John tells us that she looked into the tomb and saw angels (Jn. 20:12), but even that did not immediately change her grief. Her pain was so deep that even heavenly messengers couldn't break through it.

Then Jesus stood behind her – alive, victorious, present – but she didn't recognize Him. She assumed He was the gardener (verse 15). Only when He spoke her name, "Mary," did everything change. In that single word, despair turned into hope, mourning into mission, and fear into faith. The God who had allowed Friday's darkness brought about Sunday's dawn. What looked like the end became the greatest beginning the world has ever known.

That moment at the empty tomb reminds us of a truth we see over and over again in Scripture – our God is the God of great turnarounds. When situations appear sealed, final, and hopeless, God steps in and reverses the story. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the greatest example of this in all of history. Today, as we turn to Daniel 5, and tie in the story of Esther, we encounter a God who brings down the proud, lifts up the humble, and turns impending disaster into deliverance. **Read Daniel 5:1-9, 18-30.**

Partying on the Edge (of Judgment)

Daniel 5 opens with a scene that's extravagant, but also reckless. King Belshazzar of Babylon throws a massive banquet for a thousand of his nobles. Wine flows freely, laughter echoes through the palace, and there's an air of careless confidence. Outside the city walls, the mighty Persian army is advancing – but inside – Belshazzar chooses denial over discernment.

In a shocking display of arrogance, Belshazzar orders the gold and silver vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem to be brought out. These sacred items – dedicated to the worship of the One True God – are used for a drunken toast to idols of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. We might think what Belshazzar does is in bad taste. The reality is that it's open defiance of God. He's mocking God.

Belshazzar's actions remind us how easily power and privilege can blind us. When life feels secure, when resources are abundant, it's tempting to think we're untouchable. King Belshazzar mistook temporary comfort for permanent safety. He forgot – or ignored – the lesson learned by his father, Nebuchadnezzar. The Most High rules over all the kingdoms of the earth, and He gives them to whom He will. Almighty

God is still on the throne today, friends. The world's shaking – change is coming – don't be surprised when new leaders rise and fall. God is still in control.

The Writing on the Wall

In the middle of the party, the mood shifted instantly. A mysterious hand appears, floating in the air, and writes on the plaster of the wall near the lampstand. The Addams Family doesn't have a "Thing" on King Belshazzar! The king's arrogance evaporated immediately. His face turned pale, his knees knocked together, and his legs gave out beneath him. The same guy – moments before mocking Almighty God – now trembles in terror.

Belshazzar summons all the wise men of Babylon to the palace, and promises to give riches and honor beyond their wildest dreams to anyone who can read and interpret the writing. But the wisdom of the empire fails. No one could understand the message. When we're working in our own power – as humans – our power and intellect has its limits. And King Belshazzar was working under his own steam, his own power. And so, King Belshazzar was left helpless.

I want to point this out this morning, because it's a deep truth. Belshazzar's folly shows us that when we mock God and trust in ourselves, we eventually face realities and consequences that we can't manage. No matter how much "spin" we put on it, no matter how many "yes" people surround us, when the emperor puts on his "new clothes" and goes stark naked through the streets because he's been duped into believing something that isn't true, and none of us speak out about the ridiculousness of it – we become complicit in the absurdity of it. The writing on the wall represents those moments when our illusions finally shatter and we realize that we're not as in control as we thought.

Remembering What God Has Already Done

When Daniel is finally brought before the king, he doesn't flatter him. Instead, Daniel recounts the story of Nebuchadnezzar. He reminds Belshazzar that God gave Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom, his power, and his glory – and that God also humbled him when his heart became arrogant. You can read about that in Daniel 4. Nebuchadnezzar lost his mind for a while.

Daniel's words cut to the heart of the issue. "You, Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this," (Dan. 5:22). Belshazzar's no dummy. He's willfully defiant. He's disrespectful to God. Belshazzar had seen God's power at work in history – in the life of his own dad or grandpa Nebuchadnezzar, depending on what source you look at – and he still chooses to ignore the power of God. And to mock God.

Here's where the story begins to echo the book of Esther. King Xerxes, too, wields enormous power. His decisions could elevate or destroy entire groups of people.

Yet in Esther 7, when confronted with the truth of Haman's plot against the Jews, the king is forced to reckon with the consequences of his own careless decree. "Queen Esther said, 'If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life – this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request.'" (Est. 7:3). "King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, 'Who is he? Where is he – the man who has dared to do such a thing?' Esther said, 'An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!'" (verses 5-6).

We hear how King Xerxes reacts when he hears that his own wife has also been sentenced to death. But we often miss what he does next. "The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life," (verse 7). Remember – Xerxes, like Belshazzar, loves a good party. Both of these kings were wild about wine, women, and their own wealth. Power doesn't excuse responsibility – it magnifies it.

Weighed, Measured, and Found Wanting

In this morning's Old Testament lesson, Daniel reads the writing, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin," (Dan. 5:25). The interpretation is sobering. God has numbered the days of Belshazzar's kingdom and brought it to an end. The king has been weighed on the scales and found wanting. His kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

This is judgment, plain and simple. But even here, we see God's justice at work. It's not arbitrary; rather it's measured and righteous. Belshazzar's downfall isn't sudden cruelty. It's the result of persistent pride and blasphemous behavior that seeks to desecrate what's holy and make it worthless.

In Esther, we see a parallel, but opposite outcome. Haman, who plotted genocide against the Jewish people, is also weighed and found wanting. In Esther 7, the tables turn dramatically. The pole Haman built on which to impale Mordecai becomes the instrument of his own death. What he intended for evil is turned back upon him.

In the Bible, we often see that God's turnarounds often involve this kind of reversal. We see it in real life, too, but often overlook it, or attribute it to "karma". The proud fall into the pits they dig, while the faithful are lifted from the brink of destruction. Church never forget this truth: in the Gospel, we see it time and time again – Jesus Christ's heart is bent toward the marginalized, the meek, the lowly. The outcast, the stranger, the sick. The weak things – weak people – of this world. Jesus loves them. As should we.

Judgment Falls, and God Continues to Work

The very night that Daniel interpreted the inscription, Belshazzar was killed, and Babylon fell to Darius the Mede, who would have been either the father or grandfather of the Xerxes in Esther's book. Belshazzar's party ended in silence. An empire that seemed eternal collapsed in a single evening. From a human perspective, this is the end of the story.

From God's perspective, though, it was all part of a bigger plan. The fall of Babylon sets the stage for future deliverance. Under Persian rule, God's people will eventually be allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. What looks like disaster becomes a doorway to restoration.

Esther 8 shows us a similar pattern. Even after Haman's death, the decree against the Jews cannot simply be revoked. But God provides a way forward. A new decree is issued, allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Mourning turns into joy, fasting into feasting, and fear into celebration. God doesn't just cancel the threat. He transforms it into victory.

A Common Thread

Daniel, Esther, and Mary Magdalene all stand at different points in history, but their stories are bound by a common thread. Each of them faces a moment when the situation appears hopeless. And each of them encounters a God who specializes in reversals. Mary's tears give way to resurrection joy.

Daniel witnesses the fall of a blasphemous king and the rise of a new chapter in God's plan. Esther sees her people spared and her enemy defeated. In each case, the turnaround isn't just personal. It's also redemptive. God's actions reveal His character and advance His purposes for all His people.

We may not face a mysterious hand writing on the wall or a royal decree threatening our lives, but each of us encounter moments when the future feels uncertain. Diagnoses come back worse than expected. Relationships fracture. Churches face decline. Nations seem unstable. Like Mary at the tomb, we stand weeping, unable to see what God is doing right in front of us.

The message of these texts isn't that God's going to spare us from every hardship. He won't. The Bible never promises us that. What it does promise is that He's never absent from our darkest moments. He is the God who calls our name in the garden, who speaks truth in the banquet hall, who brings deliverance in the royal court.

God's great turnarounds often come when we least expect them – and rarely in the way we would choose. But they always serve to bring Him glory, and are always for

the good of His people. As Max Lucado says, “God is ever a turn of the page from a turn-on-a-dime turnaround.”¹ Who’s to say God doesn’t have a reversal in your future?

Living in Trust of the God of Great Turnarounds

So how do we live in light of this truth? First, we live with humility. Belshazzar’s downfall warns us against pride and complacency. We remember that everything we have comes from God. It is right to declare God’s goodness. But it is a mistake to dismiss God’s justice. Our God is a just God. Nothing escapes Him. No one escapes Him. The wicked will not win!

Second, we live with courage. Esther risked her life by approaching the king, trusting that God had placed her there “for such a time as this.” Faith sometimes requires holy boldness from us. When Esther stepped forward, she embodied a truth we still need to hear today: When we cry out, “God, do something!” He says, “I did, I created you.” God’s turnarounds often come through faithful people who are willing to act.

Third, we live with hope. Like Mary, we may not recognize Jesus at first, but He is nearer than we think. The resurrection assures us that no tomb is final when God is involved. It is a wonderful thing to restore art, antique cars, or run-down homes. But it is a holy thing to restore human dignity. That is the heart of every divine turnaround. That is the mission of the Church. We are called to be safeguards of human dignity. To love the lost, and the least of these.

The writing on the wall declared an ending. The empty tomb declared a beginning. Between those two moments stands the God of great turnarounds. When pride reigns, God humbles. When evil schemes prevail, God reverses them. When death seems victorious, God speaks life.

Friends, whatever wall you are facing today – whatever words of fear or failure seem written there – remember the garden. Remember the cross. Remember the empty tomb. The same God who turned Mary’s tears into testimony, who turned Esther’s danger into deliverance, and who turned Babylon’s arrogance into ashes is still at work today. He IS, now and forever, the God of great turnarounds!

Prayer: Compassionate God, You are the One who sees what is hidden, who judges with righteousness, and who saves with mercy. When we cannot see a way forward, remind us that You are already at work. Turn our mourning into joy, our fear into faith, and our weakness into courage. Make us instruments of Your justice and compassion, that through our lives others may see Your great power and love. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray. Amen.

¹ Max Lucado, *You Were Made For This Moment: Courage for Today and Hope for Tomorrow*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2021), page 134.