



TEARS AND RAIN

by Noah
Genesis 6:9

You know how it feels when you wish you could take something back? Get a second chance at doing it right?

That was me, not too long ago. I was really close to God back then. Still am, to this day. You could say we're friends. I loved God, and I cared about doing the right thing.

But apparently I was the only one. Everybody else on Earth — literally, everyone else — was despicable. They were violent, dishonest, mean, cruel, malicious. The world had become a miserable pit of filth and depravity. And God, their creator, was heartbroken. All he wanted was a relationship with them, but they turned their backs on him. God said he was sorry he ever made them.

So he decided to do something about it. Something drastic. God told me he was going to destroy it all — every person, every animal, every bird, every single thing that breathed the air — with a worldwide flood. God would wash the world clean and start over. No more second chances for anybody.

I felt sick when I heard God's plans. Just ... gutted. My first thought was of my family. I have a wife and three sons: Shem, Japheth, and Ham. They have wives, too. None of us were perfect, but I raised them right. Sure, the rest of the world was a bunch of soulless scoundrels. But not us. Why kill my wife and kids? Why me?

I can't tell you how relieved I was when God said he was going to spare my family and me. One minute I was suffocating in heartbreak, and the next moment I felt the greatest sense of relief any man has ever felt. We were the only people on the planet who were going to get a do-over. The only ones to watch glorious sunsets and kiss each other good night and stretch our legs when we wake up in the morning. The only ones to survive.

But first, God wanted me to make a boat. A huge boat — MASSIVE — bigger than I thought was possible. I mean, I've seen entire towns smaller than the likes of this monster of a ship. God gave me instructions down to every last inch and nail: all wood, 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high, with three decks. How in the world do you build something like that? I'll tell you: one

plank at a time. I waterproofed the whole thing with tar inside and out. It took years and years. You wouldn't believe the splinters and bruises.

And the crazy part? The whole time we didn't get a drop of rain. Not one sprinkle. I can't lie — there were plenty of times I thought maybe I was losing my mind. Our neighbors thought we were lunatics, and I really couldn't blame them. Even I had a few moments of doubt. Was I doing the right thing? Did God really mean what he said? Am I really spending all these years building the world's biggest boat so I could look like the world's biggest fool? I guess I just had to trust God and take him at his word.

When we finished the boat, I didn't have time to worry about my uncertainties.

After I pounded the last nail, the animals started showing up. Pair after pair after pair of creatures began to wander out of the woods, gathering around the base of my boat. While they nibbled on the grass and nipped leaves off the trees, I stared in awe at the sheer staggering number of them — beasts I'd never seen before. Giant gray leathery ones with long noses, small ones with prickly spikes, impossibly tall ones covered in spots. They were furry and scaly and slithery and lumbering and spectacular and frightening. They seemed calm, as though somehow they knew God was going to take care of them. I hate to admit it, but these animals probably had more faith than I did!





The boys and I wrangled aboard a male and female of every kind of animal there was, plus an extra six pair of all the birds and the animals God considered “clean” — the ones we could eat and offer as sacrifices in our worship rituals. Plus enough food for everyone. Tons of food.

Starting the world over again is exhausting. Literally. The work just didn’t end. My wife has to be the most patient woman in all of history. We were all spent. I’d be happy if I never saw another hammer in my life. And caring for thousands of animals in tight quarters isn’t for the faint of heart, let me tell you. And don’t even get me started on the noises and the smells.

I was ready for some water. But I wasn’t prepared for what came next. I locked the doors and held my breath.

I squeezed my wife’s hand tight as we watched the first drops hit the dirt. It wasn’t long before the pitter-patter on the roof turned into thunderous pounding. The rain poured down in buckets and waves, and it didn’t stop for forty days. It rained and poured and stormed and beat down without mercy. Water even gushed up in bursts out of the ground. It wasn’t long before the land disappeared — all of it, even the highest mountaintops — along with everything else. Now my family and our floating farm were the only living, breathing things on the planet. (Except for the fish. The fish were fine.)

And then we waited.





After almost six weeks of unending storms, the rain finally stopped. We cherished the sun on our cheeks and the dry wind in our faces. I watched the clouds disappear, and took a long, deep breath of that fresh air. The bright blue sky was a welcome hug from the heavens. This may sound strange, but the sound of the gentle waves lapping up against the side of the boat was the closest thing to angels singing I'd ever heard.

This was what a second chance felt like.

I had a lot of time to think about the world we left behind. I missed walking over dry leaves in the fall, and picking ripe red berries from the vine, and running my fingers through the cool, dry dirt. My weary body ached to stand on solid ground again. Deep in my soul I knew those days would soon come for my family and all the animals in our care.

But not for anyone else. When I remembered all the people who lost their lives, my stomach sank like a rock. As terrible as they were, I felt nothing but sadness for them. They paid the ultimate price. Instead of growing closer to God, they drowned in their wickedness. They didn't get a do-over.

It made me all the more thankful that God gave me that second chance. And I knew I had to make the most of it.

A year after that first raindrop splashed in the ground, our giant sailing zoo finally came to rest in the mountains. No more rocking back and forth, no more swaying and bobbing through endless waves. It was time to make waves of a new kind — giving humanity a fresh start to show God that we could become what he created us for: friends with him. God never intended to be at

war with people. All along God has only wanted intimacy with us. For us to stay close to him, just like a friend would. I can tell you that nothing in the world feels better than being arm in arm with our creator.

Needless to say, I was ready to get off that boat. The thought of solid ground made my legs ache with yearning. I sent out a couple of birds — first a raven, then a dove — to see if they could find some dry ground. They didn't. So a week later I sent the dove out again, and this time it came back with an olive leaf in its beak. Yes! That meant the water was finally receding. A week after that I sent the dove out again. This time, it didn't come back.

When God told us it was time to leave the boat, he didn't have to tell us twice. We let the animals loose, and they took off pair by pair, more than ready to get busy replenishing the earth, if you know what I mean. I may or may not have kissed the ground when my feet hit the soil. But I can assure you I thanked God for every last grain of it.

Then something remarkable happened. God made us a promise. He said he'd never destroy the earth like that again. And he sealed that promise with a spectacular ring of colors in the sky — purple and blue and green and yellow and orange and red — the brightest, most vivid colors I'd ever seen! We called it a rainbow. And every time I see it I'm reminded that God wants me — and all of us — to be his friend.

Unfortunately, that's not the end of the story. I wish everything could've ended with sunshine and rainbows, but it didn't.



I planted a vineyard, grew some grapes, and made some wine. It was good stuff, too — better than any I'd had before the flood. It was so good that I drank too much of it. I guess all that time on the boat made me a bit ... thirsty. This whole experience had been so overwhelming, and I thought I just needed to forget things for a little while. I don't remember what happened exactly. It was all a blur. But the next thing I knew I woke up in my tent, naked as a dove and covered up in someone else's robe.

When I asked what happened, my sons told me their younger brother Ham had seen me naked while I was out cold. You'd think he would've just covered me up and kept his mouth shut, but no. He left me there and ran off and told his brothers about it. At least they had the decency to come back, put a robe over me, and do it all while looking away.

I was furious! I flew into a rage and cursed Ham's youngest son, Canaan. I said Canaan would have to spend the rest of his life as a servant to all his relatives. I even rubbed it in by wishing the best of blessings on Ham's brothers. Then I stomped away.

In all my embarrassment and anger it didn't occur to me that I'd been a hypocrite. God had given me a second chance, but I didn't do the same for Ham. And now it's too late. I cursed his son, and those words can never be unspoken.

What I wouldn't give for one more do-over.

Eye to Eye with

NOAH

I imagine there have been times in your life when you've been given a second chance. Maybe even a third, fourth, or eighty-seventh. You made a mistake, a bad one, and your life flooded with shame and regret. But then someone helped you back on your feet and gave you a nudge in the right direction.

You got a do-over.

God is all about second chances. God knows humans can't help messing things up. He kind of made us that way. God didn't want mindless puppets, after all. Where's the love in that? But he cares for us despite our many faults. He loves us. Fanatically, profoundly, endlessly loves us. And he loves YOU, too. Fanatically, profoundly, and endlessly.

For God, grace comes easy. And, unlike that flood, it's here to stay.

That's a promise. Instead of pouring down waves of destruction, God now showers us with love, grace, and friendship. Because he's not only the God of second chances, he's the God of promises, too. Remember that every time you see a rainbow in the sky.

And remember that every time you feel like giving someone what they deserve.

Think about a time when you were given a second chance. Who gave you the do-over? How did that make you feel? How is that similar to the second chances God gives us?

FOR SUCH A QUEEN AS I

by Esther
Esther 1-9

I am Esther, and I am a queen.
I've been called many things: her majesty, wife, virgin, cousin, woman, girl, servant. I was a daughter, too, a long time ago. But when I was called a Jew, that was when I feared for my life.

Stories spread faster than the wind around here, and the night I heard about the bravery of Vashti, the winds were strong. She was the queen of Persia and wife of Xerxes, a powerful king who loved nothing more than wine, war, and women. His empire, like his ego, was massive. It stretched as far as his armies could reach, from Asia to Africa and beyond. Even those 300 mighty Spartans couldn't keep Xerxes out of Greece.

What Xerxes wanted, Xerxes got.





But not Vashti. Xerxes wanted to show her off to all the wealthy men at one of his drunken parties. She was gorgeous. The most ravishing woman in the world. The king's most beloved trophy. Well, Vashti may have been his queen, but she was tired of being his property. So that night when Xerxes called, she said no.

She said no! I couldn't imagine having that much courage.

Xerxes was furious. He took the crown off her head, and she was lucky she got to keep her head.

The king wanted a new queen. So he sent his men to find the most beautiful virgins in the empire and bring them to his harem. Hundreds of sexy, untouched women, all stolen from their families and set aside for one man's lustful pleasure. It sounds sick, unfair, cruel.

And I was one of them.

Some said I was one of the lucky ones. But when you're a friend of God, luck has nothing to do with it.

Being part of the king's harem wasn't what I wanted. I'd been content living a simple life with my cousin Mordecai. He adopted me when my parents died. He's a good man, and he kept his eye out for me. Fortunately, he worked in Xerxes' fortress, so he could stay close by. In the midst of all this unwanted attention, Mordecai told me, "God has a plan. Remember that."

The king's attendants took a year to get us ladies ready for the king and his bed. We got all the royal treatments: oils, perfumes, baths, jewelry, clothes — all the plushiest comforts we could want. The food was the best I'd ever tasted. They even assigned seven maids to take care of me — just

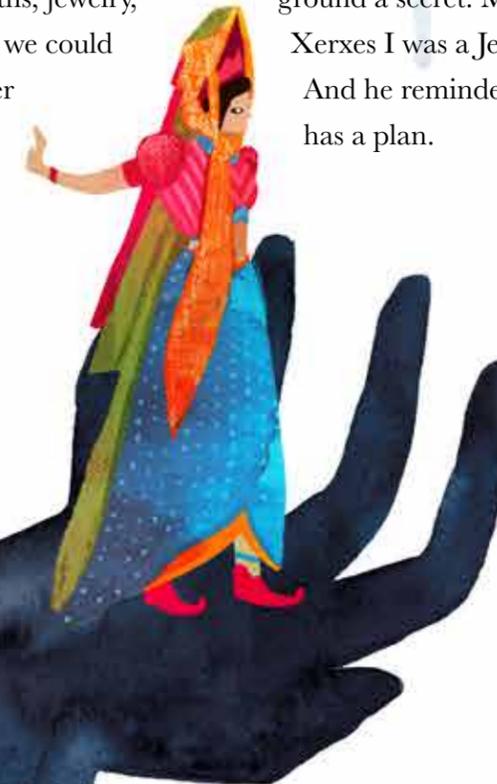
me. Aside from being a sexual slave and not having any say in my life, living in a harem could've been a lot worse.

Finally, after a year of preparation, Xerxes had his way with us, one at a time.

I won't go into the details, but I was his favorite.

He liked me. Very much. So much, in fact, that he put a crown on my head and made me his new queen. He lavished me with anything I wanted. He threw parties in my honor. We had a lot of sex.

But through it all, I kept my family background a secret. Mordecai warned me not to tell Xerxes I was a Jew. He said it was dangerous. And he reminded me again that God always has a plan.



Mordecai found himself moving up in the palace, too. He'd overheard a couple of guards plotting to assassinate Xerxes, so he told me to warn the king. So I did. And then Xerxes impaled them on a sharp pole for all to see the fate of those who dared to challenge the king. Xerxes was happy with Mordecai.

But not everyone else was. Xerxes had an assistant named Haman, who was as prideful as he was powerful. I had a bad feeling about Haman. That snake was in love with himself, and he thought everyone else should be, too. So he made a law that everyone had to bow down to him whenever he passed by.

Mordecai wouldn't bow to anyone but God. He refused. Which sent Haman fuming into a frenzy. His fragile ego couldn't take it. He wanted Mordecai dead, and he wanted all of Mordecai's people — the Jews — dead, too.

So Haman started scheming. He went straight to the king and lied to him about a "rebellious group of people" spreading throughout his empire — falsely accusing the Jews of treason.

Haman urged Xerxes to make a law allowing anyone to kill these people on March 7 of the next year. He even bribed the king with a lot of money if he let him do it.

And Xerxes did.

I wish I'd had the courage of Vashti to tell him, "No!" But I was scared. If Xerxes could allow a heartless thing like that to happen to a million people, I could only imagine what he would do to me if I stood up to him.

Would he impale me on one of those poles? I shuddered just thinking about it.

But my cousin told me something I'll never forget. "Maybe you became queen for such a time as this." Maybe, just maybe, he was right. God had been with our people for more than a thousand years. Even though the Jews had been scattered around the empire and away from our homeland, God never abandoned us.

I knew what I had to do.

But I was terrified. I couldn't just wait for Xerxes to call for me; that could take too long. But if anyone — *anyone* — entered the unpredictable king's chambers uninvited, they could be killed on the spot. If Xerxes didn't point his golden scepter at me, I was doomed. Yet if I didn't try, all my people would be slaughtered. Erased forever.

I whispered to myself, "For such a time as this. For such a time as this...."

My legs felt like water as I walked to Xerxes' throne room. My hands trembled as I opened the door. I could barely breathe. As I stepped inside, the king looked straight at me.



He smiled and pointed his scepter at me. I nearly passed out from relief.

“Tell me what you want,” Xerxes told me. He had a sparkle of passion in his eyes. “I’ll give you anything, even half my kingdom!”

I had to be careful. This was going to be tricky.

“I would like to invite you to dinner. Just you, me, and Haman,” I told him.

He didn’t hesitate. That night, the king and his right-hand man came to my banquet. Seeing Haman’s pompous face sickened me. That conniving villain wanted to murder countless people because one man wouldn’t kiss up to him. I could hardly bear being in the same room with him. He embodied evil itself.

As we were drinking wine, Xerxes asked me again, “What do you really want, my queen? I’ll give you anything!”

“Come again tomorrow, both of you. Then I’ll tell you exactly what I want,” I told them.

Haman was quite pleased with himself. He ran off and bragged to his wife and friends about how special he was to have dinner with the king and queen. But, being the snake he was, Haman was still seething about Mordecai. He couldn’t let it go. And he didn’t want to wait until next year; he wanted my cousin dead now. So Haman had a 75-foot pole sharpened and ready to impale Mordecai on first thing in the morning.

Then something peculiar happened. Xerxes couldn’t sleep that night. So he asked an assistant to read him a

history book about his reign, including the story of Mordecai thwarting an assassination plot. Xerxes decided it was time to honor Mordecai for his service.

First thing in the morning, Haman arrived to ask the king for permission to execute Mordecai. But before Haman could spit out a single word, Xerxes ordered him to honor Mordecai by clothing him in the king’s robes, setting him on the king’s horse, and leading him around the city announcing Mordecai’s great honor.

I wish I could have seen the look of humiliation on Haman’s face. But that was only the beginning of the end for that snake.

At dinner that night, Xerxes asked me again what he could do for me. “I’ll give you half my kingdom if you want it!” he said.

I cared about only one thing. “Please spare my life and the lives of my people. All the Jews have been ordered to be killed — even the women and children. And ... I am a Jew,” I said, holding back my tears.

The king clenched his jaw and shook his head. “Who would do something like that? Who would dare threaten to kill my queen?”





I pointed at Haman. “He’s the one. Haman is our enemy.”

Xerxes wasted no time killing Haman, that deplorable weasel, on the very 75-foot sharp pole Haman had meant for Mordecai!

The enemy of the Jews was dead. God, our friend, had saved us again.

The king gave me all of Haman’s property, and he promoted Mordecai to a powerful position in his palace. But my people were still in danger. The king’s decree to kill the Jews was still the law. Again, I gathered my courage and approached Xerxes on his throne. I pleaded with him to find a way to spare the Jews. And again, Xerxes didn’t hesitate. He immediately sent out another decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves and kill their enemies.

Not a single Jew died when March 7 arrived. Instead, the Jews throughout the empire killed anyone who tried to attack them. They destroyed 75,000 of their enemies in a single day. We even created a holiday to celebrate it — the festival of Purim, when we take time every year to remember our peoples’ salvation from annihilation.

I’m still called many things: queen, wife, cousin, woman. I’m no longer afraid to be called a Jew.

But now I’m also called brave. That might be my new favorite.

Eye to Eye with **ESTHER**

What do people call you? Mother? Son? Boss? Neighbor? Friend? You’re likely called many things.

But do people call you brave?

I lived in difficult times. My world was brutal and heartless. Hardly a place for a woman to take a stand against a tyrant or confront an egotistical troublemaker. It was an age when courage wasn’t a badge; it was a weapon.

Your world probably isn’t so different. Danger lurks in unexpected places. Hate and malice are as constant as the sunset. Standing up for others in the face of hostility takes audacious compassion — something we can always use more of.

Here’s the biggest lesson I’ve learned about courage: Being brave isn’t sticking up for yourself; it’s standing up for those who aren’t able to stand up for themselves. To be honest, that’s what makes my story so much more important than Vashti’s. She was unflinching for herself, but I had to be dauntless for an entire nation standing at the tip of sword.

That’s love. And love like that comes from only one place: God.

God demands love for others, even — or especially — those who are hard to love. That kind of selfless love requires no small amount of courage. If you want to be brave, the best place to start is growing closer to God.

When love is courageous, it’s unstoppable.