

ESTHER 8

THE LORD OPENS THE WAY OF REDEMPTION THROUGH THE SERVICE OF MORDECHAI AND ESTHER

In the previous chapter we read about the downfall of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. We see how quickly things can change in life. This is especially so when your only purpose is to ridicule and destroy God's people. Haman initially thought that he had everything under control- the genocide of the hated Jews was all wrapped up, so to speak- but instead it started unraveling so quickly that he went straight from the palace to the gallows.

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

We see in chapter 8 what has been termed by some as a reversal of fortune. This is even seen as a Biblical theme. Perhaps we do better to speak about a *restoration* of God's people, in which the LORD affirms and demonstrates that he has made with them a covenant that always stands. The divine wisdom found especially in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes again comes to the fore: pride comes before the fall, but the humble in spirit will retain honour. God elevates those who love him and make his kingdom their dedication.

I have alluded earlier to the fact that some explainers have seen in the history of Esther certain parallels with the story of Joseph, as described in Genesis 37. Joseph was placed in a position of power and glory so that he might benefit his brothers, the very ones who had sold him into slavery! It requires much humility, patience, even training to see the big picture in our lives: God intended it for good! Before it gets better, it sometimes first has to become worse, as Joseph discovered in prison. And when it then does get better, it is hard not to retaliate against those who made life so difficult for you.

Things suddenly do go very well for both Mordechai and Esther. We read in verse 1 that on "that same day King Xerxes gave to Queen Esther the estate of Haman", who is now known and presented officially as "the enemy of the Jews". We also read in verse 1 about Mordechai's elevation to power: and Mordechai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. We learn also that the king took of his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman (notice that important detail, mentioned in verse 2) and presented it to Mordechai. And Esther appointed [Mordechai] over Haman's estate. Mordechai has in fact become prime minister of Persia. What a difference a day makes.

A MAJOR PROBLEM REMAINS

There is, however, one difficulty, a major problem. The edict of the king against the Jews, which Haman had dispatched throughout the empire, at this point still stands. Is the edict irrevocable? Can it still somehow be changed? Can the genocide of the Jews be called off? It seems that Haman will win in the end, even though he is in the grave. Everyone in Susa can honour the Jews living in the city, especially Mordechai and Esther, but the horrible edict stands. The king cannot repeal the edict, for his royal credibility is a stake if he would act against the laws of the Medes and Persians.

What we see then in chapter 8 is how the LORD opens the way of redemption for his people through the humble service of Esther and Mordechai. We note that although a difficult problem remains, a lawful solution is found, and a messianic perspective emerges.

The difficult problem that remains, then, is the edict of the king sent out on the orders of Haman. It was a special edict that demanded the complete annihilation of the Jews. We all know the expression that a certain rule is like the law of the Medes and the Persians, that is, unchangeable. We find the expression first in chapter 1: 19 that a royal decree be issued (concerning Vashti) "and let it be written in the law of Persia and Media which cannot be changed". Once a certain decree had been written into the official legal code, it could not be repealed. It was irrevocable.

A LAW OF MEDES AND PERSIANS

We use the expression sometimes when some want to defend an age-old custom or tradition. Then we say: it's not a law of Medes and Persians, it can be changed. This usually makes others even more determined to resist whatever change is suggested.

We are not sure how often such irrevocable edicts were made. Not every royal edict was as such unchangeable. Such edicts were definitely emergency measures which were put in place only when the situation was critical and special laws were required. It is like the emergency legislation sometimes made in times of war or other calamity.

An edict that received the character of unchangeable law had to meet certain standards. Here are some of the criteria which we glean from Scripture. The edict had to address a matter which concerned the whole empire. It was an imperial crisis, a matter of national security, which was being addressed. Secondly, it had to be written by royal secretaries and signed officially by the king or by an official using the signet ring of the king. Thirdly, the edict had to be written in all the languages of the kingdom and be officially dispatched by royal couriers. Finally, a copy of the text of the edict was issued as law in every province and made known to all the people (Esther 3: 10-15).

It is clear that the edict written by Haman to destroy the Jews met all the above-mentioned criteria. King Xerxes admits as much when he says to Esther

and Mordechai, 8: 8, "...no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked." So there is no ordinary possibility that the edict against the Jews can be revoked by the king of the Medes and Persians.

SOLVING A SERIOUS PROBLEM

This poses a serious problem. Mordechai is now a high official, but he cannot come walking nonchalantly into the royal court and say: oh, yes, your majesty, there is of course this little matter of the edict concerning the Jews which needs to be repealed. Will you see to it, sire? When King Xerxes had given his signet ring to Haman, he sealed the fate of the Jews. To ask the king directly to repeal the edict of Haman would be asking the king to go in against the constitution of the empire. One could be punished for making such a suggestion.

And so we realize that a difficult problem remains: how to undo the effect of the imperial decree? Here again Esther comes into the picture. Let us consider verse 3, "Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews". Esther is quite aware that with the death of Haman the danger itself has not disappeared. There are still many enemies of the Jews who will gladly do what has been decreed. The Jews will not be able to stand against them, since they are everywhere a minority group.

Notice that Esther does not elevate herself in any way or act as if she has rights. She pleads with the king, and falls at his feet. It is no act, for her tears are genuine for her people. She also is very careful not to accuse the king in any way. She may be distressed, but she's not hysterical. It is the evil plan of that horrible Haman which needs to be undone.

THE KING ALSO SEEKS A SOLUTION

We do not know whether the king felt somewhat foolish about the whole thing. He must have felt that Haman had lied to him, tricked him, and put him in an embarrassing situation. Now even his own queen is in danger. When he sees the tears of Esther and hears her anguished plea, he does react kindly (verse 4), "Then the king extended the gold scepter to her and she arose and stood before him".

The extending of the scepter this time is not just an allowance for her to be in his presence -as in chapter 5- for then he did not know what she wanted. When he now extends the golden scepter he indicates that he, too, seeks a resolution of the difficult problem of the edict which she has mentioned. Xerxes, too, wants out of the mess, but he wants to preserve his credibility as well. So he is open to Esther's pleas. It is the doing of the LORD who also controls the heart and thoughts of Xerxes. Again we see the underlying reality of God's government and providence emerging.

Now we read in verse 7 that Mordechai the Jew also was present. This should not confuse us. Either Mordechai as the king's chief advisor was present in the

throne room at that time, or he was called in by the king's servants to give advice, but we note that he, too, is involved in the further discussion and decision-making. What an assurance it will have been for Esther, who does not have to stand alone anymore in a precarious situation. Her step-father and mentor is beside her.

It is a difficult problem, I said. Sometimes you agree to something of which you later say: how could I ever have agreed to do this? You must look before you leap. Once you have agreed to a certain strategy or action, it is very hard to back out.

This whole notion of irrevocable laws, that is, of *human* laws that cannot be changed is typically something that is entirely worldly. No man should be given such power. No one may take that approach. Xerxes may have a believing wife, but he remains a despotic ruler in the style of this world. The only law that is absolute and irrevocable is the law of God! And that law is always applied with mercy and discretion.

Our Lord Jesus always upheld the law of God. But he did so in a way that showed insight and understanding of the law. He said: God requires mercy, not sacrifices (cf. Mat 9: 13). We may stick to the letter of the law, and even formally fulfill all its requirements, and yet have a heart that is cold and unfeeling, without a sense of grace. Our Lord only applied the law to others after he had first applied it to *himself*.

AN OVER-RIDING EDICT

The question remains: how to solve the problem of the irrevocable edict? In verse 7 we read that "King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordechai the Jew: because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows." Some explainers suggest that the king means: look, I've done enough, I gave you all that belonged to Haman and I had him executed, what more can I do?

But that would be a wrong interpretation, also seeing what follows. With these words the king indicates that he has already shown much favour to the Jews. He is really willing and trying to help the Jewish people. And we may again see here the providence and guidance of God, for Xerxes normally would never have gone this far for any people under his dominion.

But he cannot have the edict against the Jews repealed. King Darius faced the same problem when he, much to his regret, was forced to put Daniel in the lions' den. However, there is one thing Xerxes can do -and here we see something of the political astuteness of the man- and that is: write *another* edict that overrides or at least neutralizes the previous one. And then we read again of the royal secretaries, the king's couriers, the regions and peoples from India to Ethiopia to whom the edict must be sent.

What is the new edict? The old one still stands, but now all the people in the empire are told (see verse 11) that the Jews are given the right by the king on that

day to assemble and protect themselves. Not only this, they may kill and annihilate all their enemies, and plunder their property. It is also possible that Persian troops would support the Jews or see to it that the battles were fair and not one-sided. In any case, the Jews will not be defenseless victims, but a people prepared for battle with a solid strategy and suitable weapons.

A LAWFUL SOLUTION

I want to stress that this is a *lawful* solution. The Jews are not told: take the law into your own hands, and do what you can to defend yourselves. They are given the official right to do so! All the people know that if they do attack the Jews, they may expect good resistance and perhaps defeat, for the king is officially on the side of the Jews, The new decree makes the Jewish defense measures lawful.

The Jews have the right to organize a defense league. They have the right to set up headquarters in every region. They have the right to purchase or make weapons. These are the kinds of things they normally would not be permitted to do. They may now carefully prepare their defense. The previous edict of Haman stands. Whoever wants to attack the Jews may do so. But everyone is warned: the Jews are given the right to defend themselves and even plunder their enemies' goods.

The LORD God often uses the laws of the land -some laws foolish or even ungodly in themselves- to defend his people. Here again we see the sovereign grace of God. He does not say to his people: rebel, and break the yoke of Persia. That would be revolution. But he leads the king of Persia to decree that self-defense is allowed and facilitated.

Some explainers suggest that this second edict can never have been sent out on behalf of the king. He would never let the Jews kill and destroy Medes and Persians. The Jews were a tolerated minority, but they had few rights. To think that Xerxes would say to the Jews: go to it, defeat your enemies and plunder their goods, is considered completely false. But Xerxes does not advocate a general or unprovoked slaughter among the Medes and Persians, and the Jews are not told to go on an unlimited offensive. It says simply: you may assemble and protect yourselves! Here there is no idea of a secret rebellion or a Jewish conspiracy, but everyone is told with respect to the previous edict: let it be known that the Jews have the right to defend themselves and prepare for this defense, and if you attack the Jews on the determined day, you may lose and your goods may be plundered. So: watch out, think before you attack! The one edict to attack the Jews still stands, as is the law, but the other edict has a great bearing on it, and gives the Jews the right to prepare their defense. This completely changes the picture.

These are the wondrous ways of the LORD! He does not encourage his people to break any laws. He uses the worldly powers for the benefit of his church. He does this because he is *sovereign*, the Almighty God who rules all things, and because he is *gracious*, loving toward his people, keeping his covenant with

them! I find it remarkable that here too -as is consistent with all Scripture- God's people are not encouraged to break the laws, even those laws that can be used against them, but in every society again he himself protects them, often through the laws that exist. To see this is surely a matter of deep wisdom. It is a grand theme in the wisdom literature of the Bible.

That is why, for example, a true Christian who opposes abortion will not take a gun and shoot the doctor who performs abortions. That's not the way to go. We make use of the existing lawful, civil structures to exercise our God-given duty of defending the unborn! We use the sword of the Spirit which is more powerful than any humanly-devised weapon. When we do this, we will discover that our actions then not only benefit our interests, but that there emerges a *messianic* perspective.

SEEKING THE SALVATION OF ISRAEL

The effect of this edict is rather remarkable. We first read in verse 15 how Mordechai leaves the king's presence and appears in public in official robes -the NIV has "royal robes"- and also wearing a "large crown of gold". It is clear to all that Mordechai the Jew has a very high office, and is the right hand of the king. His appearing in this way underscores the message of the second edict that the Jews may gather to defend themselves. They have help in high places!

Both Mordechai and Esther were unpretentious persons, who saw duty above honour, who simply did what they knew God asked of them, and who did not thereby seek any glory for themselves but salvation for their people. They are in the same line of many witnesses who simply did what had to be done, and meanwhile put their life in the Lord's hands. They did not cause strife among Israel, but sought the peace of Jerusalem.

We are again reminded here of Proverbs 29: 23, "A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honour". When we proudly go on a route of self-justification, we make things even worse for ourselves. When we humble ourselves and expect all things from God, we will be richly blessed. Psalm 138: 6: though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar. All this is evident in the ministry of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing. He humbled himself and became obedient unto death. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name (cf. Phil 2: 6, 7).

THE CONTOURS OF THE GOSPEL

But the contours of the Gospel are found here in beauty and riches: whoever wishes to be exalted, must first humble himself. The way to glory is one of patience and suffering, not taking the law into your own hands, but awaiting vengeance from the Lord. I read somewhere this sentence: we who teach and preach in the church must walk a fine line between challenging people to greatness and calling people to humility. That is true, indeed. Today Christians are eas-

ily called to do great things for the Lord, to show their faith in the many fruits. This is good. As long as there is no spirit of pride and ambition, whereby we seek to be great in God's service rather than serve a great God! We always must watch for the pitfall of starting to think: wow, aren't we good Christians! Look at what we do for the Lord! The sin of activism takes place when Christian activity is directed towards one's own grandeur. Not Mordechai or Esther or anyone else should be praised here, but God who alone is good and great.

Then it happens that God's children everywhere can rejoice in the salvation of God. This was true in Susa and in the whole empire. It says in verse 16: for the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy! We read that there was "joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating" (verse 17). These people are not saying: look what Mordechai and Esther did, but look what *the LORD* did! They see it as a sign of the wonderful era which will come with the great Messiah!

God's work did not lead these Jews to passivism, either. Passivism means that people think: I need do nothing, for God will do all. On the contrary, God's grace always motivates and activates his children! The Holy Spirit enables us to act. We must speak about the source of God's blessings, from whom and through whom our help comes. We must call others to repent from their sins and believe in God's promises of redemption. The Jews certainly spoke about these things in Esther's days. How else would they explain the new edict of the king except in the light of the covenant of God?

MANY PEOPLE BECAME JEWS

The last words of this chapter are truly amazing. "And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them". We might have expected: the fear of God had seized them. That indeed underlies the fear of the Jews. Why should people fear the Jews, a small minority of people, exiles, strangers and sojourners? They are the focus of constant hostility and always in danger of annihilation. But now they are "feared". Many people of other nationalities even became Jews. They became proselytes, who were circumcised, ceremonially washed, and pledged to keep the laws of God. They worshiped in the synagogues. They learned about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the promises made to David, and the coming of the great Messiah who would be a light also to the gentiles.

This book certainly has a messianic perspective. We see shades of what will happen at Pentecost and thereafter when all the world will hear the preaching of the Gospel. Here is a people that barely survived complete genocide and is now honoured and esteemed. This truly is the doing of the LORD. Nowhere else can this happen than with God's children. It is the miracle of redemption of which the Bible never ceases to speak! Here the sovereign grace of God becomes evident once more in the life of a people that does not deserve it. He does it for the sake of his great Son, our Lord and Saviour.

The Persian empire is facing its decline and fall. Satan wanted to use this fad-

ing empire to destroy the Jews, the seed of the woman! But God says: I'll not let this dying empire kill my children. All empires -also those that come, of Greece, of Rome, and of whatever place or people- shall serve the coming of the kingdom of heaven! As the great Persian empire begins to fall apart, the contours become visible of the kingdom of heaven: Jews and Gentiles together seeking the LORD of Israel.

We stand at the threshold of something marvelous.