

## ESTHER 9:1-17

### THE LORD GRANTS ISRAEL THE ABILITY TO DEFEAT HER ENEMIES

We come now to the conclusion of the book of Esther. In the first part of chapter 9 we read how the Jews are able to attack and destroy their enemies, and this is followed in chapter 9 and 10 with the institution of the feast of *Purim*, on which we will focus in the next chapter.

The point is now how the Jews make use of the opportunity granted by the second decree of king Xerxes to attack and destroy their enemies. And it is at this very point that many explainers ask some serious questions. In the verses 6 and 14 we read how the Jews in the city of Susa killed up to a total of 800 men! And the death toll in the villages and towns amounted to seventy-five thousand persons. Is that not a rather high number of casualties?

#### AN EXERCISING OF REVENGE?

If the fear of Mordechai, who now had a high royal position, was already upon the other nationalities, why, then, such massive slaughter? Does this not come very close to an exercising of revenge? Must we conclude that this is particularly an Old Testament situation, which does not really have much to say to us today? The rules are different now: we stand under the obligation to love all people and to do good even to our enemies! Now it is: turn the other cheek, while then it was: grab your sword, kill them before they kill you.

It is true that times and situations change. Yet if this book reflects the struggle between Christ and Satan, between church and world, the situation of enmity ( cf. Gen 3: 15) itself does not change, but even intensifies as the ages progress. This chapter does not give us just another bloody battle scene, but it shows us how the Lord God preserves his people for the coming of the great Priest-King, our Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. This preservation was especially needed in the transition from the Persian to the Greek and Roman empires. The Jews, as an exiled, divided, and impoverished nation, humanly speaking, did not have a chance of survival. But they have the LORD and his wondrous promises upon which to build!

We see here how in his sovereign grace the LORD grants to Israel through Esther and Mordechai the ability to defeat their enemies. We consider the intensity of the hatred against Israel, the immensity of the victory for Israel, and the integrity of the defense of Israel

#### A PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE

When we read a history like the one described in our text, we must be very

careful not to see the slaughter described as just another bloody page of which there are so many in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. This is nothing less than another battle in an ongoing war, not caused by God but certainly waged by him, which will not end until the final day of judgment.

We must also understand that the Jews are not taking “revenge” on their enemies, but they are acting in self-defense by a pre-emptive strike. They know that the enemy attack is coming, but they are prepared for it, and will “turn the tables” on their enemies, as verse 1 indicates. The outcome will be quite different than people at first expected.

It is important that we understand exactly what is at stake here. The people throughout the empire saw the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, per edict of the king, as a lawful opportunity to go out and kill Jews. The authorities would do nothing to prevent this, and would even encourage it. The Jews would be defenseless. No weapons, no support, outnumbered and out-manuevered, they would be, as so often, like sheep for the slaughter. The people of Israel had already been decimated in the land of Canaan, and now the remnant throughout the empire would be eradicated by systematic ethnic cleansing. God’s people would virtually disappear.

It says in verse 1 that the “enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them”, which means that they envisioned by sheer force of numbers and weapons to wipe out the Jews. In verse 2 we read that the enemies’ goal was the destruction of the Jews. That verse also suggests that “all the nationalities” in the empire were opposed to the Jews. The first edict of the king was seen as a long-awaited, splendid opportunity. Many people thought that they would finally destroy the Jews everywhere.

The Jews faced complete destruction. There were to be no Jews left alive. Their possessions would be confiscated, their houses burned, their rights taken away. No one would stand up for these Jews, and they would themselves not be able to withstand the flood of violence that would sweep over them. It seems that Israel has definitely come to the end of the line.

## **WHY HATRED FOR THE JEWS?**

One gets the impression indeed that every other nationality was opposed to the Jews and would gladly participate in their destruction. There is a spirit of opposition against the Jews that seems to prevail everywhere. What would be the reason for or the cause of such opposition? In the verses 1 and 5 the expression is used “those who hated them”. Also the word “enemies” is used a number of times.

Why this hatred? The word indicates a very deep-rooted dislike. This was not something that suddenly, without reason, unexpectedly flared up, but which always simmered under the surface, like a volcano, ready to erupt! What was it that made all these people bear such intense hatred for the Jews?

Now some might say: it’s purely an ethnic thing, anti-Semitism. The Jews

dressed differently, ate other foods, never entered your house, were always aloof and kept to their own peculiar traditions. They considered themselves to be special and different, and had all kinds of special traditions with historic significance. Besides, some might have said, these Jews are never honest in their business dealings, are opportunistic, have their fingers in every pie, and cannot be trusted. They are swindlers, enriching themselves at the cost of others.

Somehow these Jews always managed to obtain influential positions of power. Think of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah. And now Mordechai and Esther. In the previous chapter we read how many people of other denominations “became Jews”. Did they do this out of fear or was it true commitment to the Lord? People saw the shifting of a trend in favour of the Jews, and therefore decided to change their own course as well. Get with the program, but not wholeheartedly; for overall the Jews themselves remained despised.

### NOT ETHNIC BUT COVENANTAL

There may have been certain ethnic customs which the other nationalities abhorred in the Jews, but the bottom line is not a matter of ethnicity. The cause for the intense hatred lies in the basic claim of Israel: we are the covenant people of the living God, who serve no other gods, nor bow to any idols, nor burn incense to any man, but serve only the God of heaven and earth! All who do not serve this God will perish! The intense hatred is one of false versus true religion. The peoples could not tolerate the claim that only Israel serves the one true God. They saw it as a matter of intolerant exclusivism.

You may prefer your own “god” above those of others, But those others are also to be recognized as being true gods. The general religion of the day was one of *syncretism*, mixing all religions into one because in fact all religions are principally the same. There are many ways to the one truth. The focal point of the religion of the day was that the gods favoured the king or the emperor, or that the king himself was godly! The divine emperor-king kept the great empire together, and thus he was and had to be more than just a man.

In the book of Daniel we read that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the blazing furnace because they would not worship Nebuchadnezzar’s image of gold. Later Daniel’s enemies succeed in having a decree issued that everyone may during the next thirty days pray only to the king, or be thrown in the lions’ den. They knew that Daniel could not comply with this rule, and they would be able to accuse him. They said: we will never find any basis for charges against this man, unless it has something to do with the law of his God! (6: 5).

The heathen worshiped multiple gods. One more god was no problem for them. But the Jews worshiped only the LORD, the one true God. Their religion set them apart among the nations, even in exile. The intensity of the hatred against them, therefore, lies in their serving of the LORD alone, with the claim that they

are God's special covenant people. That is what lies at the bottom of the plan of Haman which many people all over the empire would most gladly carry out.

## SYNCRETISM

Syncretism is the belief that all religions are equal, that the one religion is but a variation of the other, and that in every religion there are valid points of truth and wisdom. By recognizing each other's religion as being of equal truth and value, people can live and grow together in a harmonious world. And at the center of this harmony lies the idea of the godly emperor under whose reign all peoples find themselves as one. This notion of one empire under one imperial god would come to full effect in the Grecian and Roman empires.

I think that we need to understand that syncretism -mixing of religions as being equal- is the predominant danger for the people of God. The LORD may have a place in your life; you may serve the LORD God, but also you must recognize the other "gods". Jahweh and Baal can go together. This is what Satan and the world time and again would have us believe. There are no absolutes. Nothing is carved in stone, not even the Ten Commandments. The word of God is not the only way to knowledge. There is not one true religion. There is especially not a true church. Watch out for exclusivism, the idea that your religion alone is true, for that is the greatest of all evils. Many ways lead to God and to salvation. Syncretism -like its moral partner, secularism (living a worldly lifestyle, for there is no binding law)- was the style of the past and it will be the wave of the future. And anyone who does not go along with this, must ultimately be eradicated. Tolerance lasts only briefly, now and then.

In Esther's days Haman's plan and Xerxes' edict would have meant that the true Priest-King, the great Son of God would never have come into the flesh. If the Christ can be kept out of the world, Satan can stay in control. For Satan knows that God alone is sovereign and that Christ will rule over all! Christ is King and he alone! Only in him will there be unity and peace.

## CONTROL OVER OUR SOULS

Similarly today the devil's striving is to minimize the place of Christ in our lives. The battle is much more for control of our souls! People do not mind if we are somewhat involved with religion. That is okay. But it should not be the very key to our existence. Serving God must always be secondary, especially serving God alone and truly. The world will never accept the reality that following the Lord Jesus Christ a matter of our whole life.

Much has changed since Esther's time. One thing has not changed: the world's line of syncretism. There is Satan's hatred, even deepened into wild rage and fury in his war against the offspring of the woman, the children of God who serve him truly and him alone (cf. Rev 12). The hatred has become even more intense, because Christ has risen from the grave and has entered into heavenly glory! All the world must now be forced into false religion, because the end is

drawing near The delusion is growing (2 Thess 2).

When you look at all these factors, and the prevailing hatred behind them, you wonder how Israel, how God's church can ever survive in such a world. The Jews in Esther's time certainly faced utter annihilation. When the thirteenth day of the twelfth month comes, the Jews have reason to be afraid, for they are terribly outnumbered. There will be no mercy. Perhaps the most logical thing would be to hide, to look for cover or to keep on running. But where can they hide? Where can they run to? They are a free target, who have no rights and fall outside of the protection of the law. Anyone who wants, can assemble a gang to hunt and legally kill Jews. Kristalnacht has come.

This is a terrible situation. In the free west we live under the protection of civil law. Imagine if it was said that for one day we no longer are protected, and everyone may kill us, and plunder our possessions. When the gangs come banging on your door, you can call the police, but the authorities say: sorry, can't help you, our hands are tied; what they are doing is legal today! Who would dare go in against an edict of the king of the Persians.

### **WILL THE SECOND EDICT REALLY HELP?**

Now there is a second edict, of course. The Jews have the right to "assemble and protect" themselves, and if they can, plunder their enemies. That second edict is meant to even out the odds, but does it really achieve this? You can assemble to protect yourselves, but if you are still outnumbered and out-muscled, it will not help much, will it? More is required, in order to survive the effect of the first edict.

We read in verse 1 that the tables were turned and the Jews got the "upper hand" over those who hated them. In verse 2 we find that no one could stand against the Jews. In verse 5 we read that the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword. We read about five hundred men being killed in Susa, as well as Haman's ten sons, while in the provinces the Jews killed seventy-five thousand of their enemies.

There is even a remarkable passage in the verses 11-15 containing the conversation between the king and Queen Esther about the casualties in Susa, the capital city. Notice how Esther asks for one more day in Susa, as well as having Haman's sons' bodies hanged publicly. This is not a measure of revenge, but it serves as a clear deterrent, and the extra day enables the Jews indeed to purge the capital city of all enemies, even those who may have gone in hiding!

When we look at this picture, eight hundred men in the capital and seventy-five thousand in the provinces, we must conclude that the outcome of the Jews' defense was a great success. In terms of numbers seventy-five thousand may not have been high. When we consider the total amount of inhabitants in the Persian empire, it was perhaps only a small fraction of the total amount of citizens, but the point is that those who still outrightly assembled to destroy the Jews are themselves defeated and slain.

## THE FEAR OF GOD WINS THE DAY

This victory is immense, not in terms of the numbers slain, but considering its effect. Many of the enemies will have been discouraged by the king's second edict. They were seized by the fear of the Jews (8: 17). Those who did come out to fight that day, the most fanatical and committed of enemies, were slain. This is not to be ascribed to the fighting capability of the Jews. The text makes clear that the peoples of the nationalities were afraid of the Jews. The local rulers and nobles also helped the Jews, out of fear for Mordechai.

The victory of the Jews is immense because of the fear that had come over the peoples and their rulers. There was fear of the Jews and fear of Mordechai. But behind this lies the fear of the LORD. For he alone can lay such fear upon people. It again becomes clear that there is only one God, the LORD, and that he alone is to be worshiped and adored. He preserves his people in a time of great danger, and gives them an immense victory. They are the smallest of peoples, dispersed throughout the empire, with thousands of enemies just waiting for an opportunity to strike, but the LORD grants them a victory which will never be forgotten! The knowledgeable Bible reader understands that this victory is *from the LORD*. He has again, as so often in the past, shown his sovereign grace to his people because of his covenant for the sake of the great Son of David.

## PERSONAL ACTION REQUIRED

Notice that the Jews must defend themselves. They need to take personal action. God does not let us win any battles without our own involvement. We may never be passive. Remember this in your own personal struggles. Be involved, for God's grace motivates and enables. And we can only fight a battle when we believe in the sovereign and empowering grace of God! But when we then go into the battle in the faith that overcomes the world (1 John 5: 4), the victory is only from the LORD!

Now this victory under Esther and Mordechai does not mean that the people of God will always be so victorious. Sometimes the result is different and many Christians are martyred. But that is not the point now. The victory of the Jews here ensures the coming of the Lord Jesus into the flesh. And now that he has come and has entered in our flesh into heaven, our victory also is ensured. Not by a decree of the king of Persia, but by the decree of the Almighty God: sit thou upon the throne at my right hand till I the power of thy foes have broken (Psalm 110, *Book of Praise*). A victory not from earthly powers alone, but from sin and death, the entering into a life of fellowship with God that begins here and never ends.

## NO PLUNDERING

I want to point to one more aspect in this text that is quite important. It says in this chapter that the Jews did what they pleased with those who hated them

(verse 5). Some understand this in a negative manner, as if the Jews mocked their enemies before executing them. I think that the meaning is more positive: they did whatever they felt was needed. One thing, however, they did not do. It is mentioned three times in this passage, and so it is quite important, verses 10, 15, and 16: but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

It is important to compare this with Haman's original plan. In Haman's decree, it was specified that all Jews had to be killed, "young and old, women and little children" (3: 13). Haman wanted complete genocide, the killing of all Jews regardless of age or gender. But the Jews only defended themselves against the men who came out to fight against them. The battle was not against women and children. It was not an act of vengeance or revenge, but an action of self-defense alone.

And therefore they did not take of any of the plunder. They would not enrich themselves at the cost of their hostile neighbours. Self-defense does not include self-enrichment. Here also the difference with Haman's style is remarkable. The king had also given the Jews the right to plunder (8: 11) but the Jews did not exercise that right. Just think, what an opportunity. The Jews had been exiled and perhaps some of them lived in poverty with little or no prospects. Here was a glorious opportunity to get something back by plundering the neighbours' houses, for to the victor belong the spoils! It's pay-back time!

## THE VICTORY IS FROM THE LORD

To the victor belong the spoils, yes. But in not taking of the plunder, the Jews show very clearly that the victory is *from the LORD*. They will not plunder what they themselves did not win. I think that we see here what I call the integrity of the defense of Israel. Integrity means that you act justly, with mercy and compassion. No cruel actions, no inhuman behaviour. The enemies of the Jews would not have hesitated to kill the men and children, rape the women, plunder the goods, and burn down the houses, in short, follow the scorched earth policy of a holocaust, but God's people do not act in this manner. They did not lay their hands on the plunder. They await their great King and Saviour, and expect their blessing from him!

This reminds me of what once happened to Abraham. You may remember that Abraham returned from rescuing his nephew Lot from the allied forces of Kederlaomer, who had overrun Sodom and Gomorrah and also taken Lot captive (cf. Genesis 14). As Abraham returns victoriously, the king of Sodom approaches him, and says to him: give me the people and keep the goods for yourself! In other words, this defeated king of Sodom, who had no rights, wanted to act graciously to Abraham by saying: give me back the people, and you can keep the goods, the plunder! Then Abraham answers with the mighty words, "I will accept nothing belonging to you...so that you will never be able to say: I made Abraham rich!" We do not depend on the goodness of this world, we depend on the sovereign grace of God!

Something similar occurs here. According to the custom of that time, the Jews have the right to the plunder. But they do not take it. No one will be able to say, not even Xerxes, Mordechai or Esther: I have made Israel rich! Only God gives to his people their riches and blessings!

There may be a deeper cause here as well. Especially in this case the Israelites do not plunder because the possessions of the Agagites are cursed. Remember Saul's sin! He took of the spoils, while this was in his case forbidden. Saul compromised the glory of God. But the integrity of Israel's defense is shown here in not plundering, not taking anything that belongs to others. Therein the LORD is glorified! He gave the victory; to him belongs the spoil. Israel will not take of the world, but will receive from *God* whatever is needed to survive in this world of hostility and enmity. The leaving of the plunder is a clear sign to all that the Jews expect their blessing from God alone! It is also a lesson to us: we shall not fight our battles in worldly ways and for worldly gain. Not our honour is at stake, but the glory of God. Not our enrichment comes first, but God's blessing.

#### NEW TESTAMENT ECHO

All this finds a clear echo in the New Testament. How are we to live in the midst of a Gentile world that does not recognize the one true God and also hates his people? Let us make use of the opportunities the Lord gives us, as long as we can. Let us not compromise the truth of the Bible for the sake of earthly relations. Let us stand together as one people in the unity of the true faith. Let us be of good reputation among all our neighbours, so that they can accuse us of nothing, except being and living as Christians.

And whenever we are called to battle, to defend ourselves, let us do so with integrity and humility. In the world, and also in the church. We put on the armour of God. When Peter writes about "suffering for doing good" he first urges the believers to live in harmony with each other, to be compassionate and humble (1 Peter 3: 9-10). We need each other badly to stand united against the world and the devil. To others we shall show gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience. The result is a united church, and a world that is left wondering about the power of Christ!