

Esther 6-10

The Complete Victory

A. The Beginning of the Finale: Mordecai Promoted and Saved (6)

In full view in the streets of Susa, God was about to show how he would bring to nothing the designs against him and his people. He arranged that this public demonstration would be at night. From a human perspective, everything seemed hopeless - Haman appeared to be on the way to certain victory.

According to Haman's thinking, Mordecai had spent the last day of his proud watch in the gate (5:9). Tomorrow he would be brought to 'the tree for the cursed', thrown up into the air as prey for the vultures. Meanwhile, Mordecai and Esther had no idea of this threatening danger. They entered the night hopeful for a new day for Israel (cf. 5:1-8). Who knew the minds of the two opposing parties on earth: Haman on one side, and Mordecai and Esther on the other? Only God knew, since "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." (Psalm 121:4) Without him, the hope of Mordecai and Esther would be in vain. By his intervention, the road to victory was again opened up.

From an external perspective, it seemed so ordinary: A man, who could not sleep because of the pressures of government, looked for something to distract him and so reached for a book. Yet it was God who directed the attention of the king to a forgotten page of the imperial chronicles. The Lord needed those records about the act of Mordecai (2:23), and so the dust was wiped off the archives. For the sake of Israel, the Lord wanted to promote Mordecai, whereas earlier (3:1) he had toppled the ladder of Mordecai's personal ambition.

Before Haman could set out to execute his sinister plan for the morning (5:14; 6:4), Xerxes had already proposed to his first minister that a parade of honour be organized for Mordecai. However, the king did not mention Mordecai's name. Haman was again blind to the truth. Haman's greater pride would have a still deeper fall (see Outline 4, C, re. 5:9-14). Haman assumed that the king wished to honour him. Therefore, he planned a triumphal parade which would bring regal honours to the one whom the king wished to honour. A servant and herald, a colleague from among the dignitaries of the empire, would accompany the king's favourite on foot (6:9).

At this time, the Lord trapped his enemy in his own delusions of grandeur. The plan which Haman had designed to satisfy his own vanity, was for Mordecai (6:10). The hater of the Jews was humiliated by the very man whom he so bitterly hated. This humiliation took place by means of the very things Haman had always craved: public honour and glory. "No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another." (Psalm 75:6-7) God gave Mordecai beauty rather than ashes (cf. 4:1).

Haman, defeated and in mourning, retreated to his house (6:12) expecting to find comfort from his wife and friends, who had served him as 'blood council' (5:14). But he did not receive comfort. On the contrary, ominous words were spoken to him, "Since Mordecai,

before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him - you will surely come to ruin!" (6:13)

Before this time, it was already known that Mordecai was a Jew (5:13). But the new element was that Haman had been humiliated by Mordecai. Haman's family and friends did not know what was behind this, since Mordecai could hardly have had a hand in this sudden change. Besides that, the king had not mentioned to Haman what had been discovered in the chronicles during the night (6:6). The king had only emphasized the fact that Mordecai was a Jew (6:10). Mordecai's nationality was now used as the clue to explain the mystery. At the same time, Haman's circle of supporters voiced the conviction that downfall was certain for anyone who began to lose in a conflict with a Jew. With respect to this prediction (6:13), the following can be noted:

- a. The first speakers were called Haman's "wise men" (6:13 RSV). This means that their explanation of Mordecai's promotion was not merely a sober cause-effect analysis, but rather a heathen 'religious pronouncement'. These "wise men" are similar to the ones mentioned elsewhere in the Bible (Daniel 2:2; Matthew 2:1,2).
- b. From where did this superstition regarding Moredecai's invincibility come? God had made no concrete promises in this regard. Even Esther was not sure of her victory, saying, "If I perish, I perish." (4:16) Rather, the "wise men" must have heard - as did the "Magi from the east" (Matthew 2) - an echo of God's promises and great deeds for his people, Israel. This echo had been distorted and changed by the fantasy of the heathen mind.
- c. Most importantly, this great prediction would be realized.

It is especially important to see God's providence in this pronouncement. Just as Jeremiah (50:2) said that Babylon's gods would be put to shame when Babylon fell, so the Lord put Haman and his attack to shame. Which "wise man" (sorcerer, pagan priest/prophet) could still boast in the casting of the lot? Haman would fall and his schemes would perish along with him. In this way, the Lord broke down the 'certainty' - Haman's lottery attack on God and his church (3:7). Haman had once relied on this 'certainty'. In fact, at one time, Haman had not even wanted to go to the king before the lot had been cast (3:7,8). Now, just before Haman went with the king to Esther's banquet (which led to Haman's downfall) God destroyed any religious 'certainty' which Haman may have had. God's judgments were announced to Haman by his own wife and spiritual advisers. "Amalek was first among the nations, but he will come to ruin at last." (Numbers 24:20)

B. The Fall of Haman the Agagite, the Hater of the Jews (7)

The banquet confirmed the dark premonitions of Haman's circle of advisors. God had begun by taking away from Haman the 'truths' on which he, as a heathen 'religious' man, had based his plans. Haman himself would now be killed. "Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned." (Psalm 34:21) Here "the righteous" is the Christ who would come forth out of Israel.

Esther's plea for her people was instrumental in Haman's death. The dramatic reversal took place because Esther no longer concealed her unity with the doomed people (7:3;

cf. 2:10; 4:14). In the king's eyes, Haman's attempted massacre of an entire people now took the form of a personal attack on the queen. Haman had dared to attack the woman of the king's choice, along with her people. So the strange accusation of 7:8 is made understandable if the king saw Haman as a man who would not even spare the queen.

Haman had "sold" Israel (7:4), with the intention of annihilating it completely. In the Old Testament, 'to sell' is a striking word for 'to abandon, to deliver into the power of someone else'. When someone sells something, he no longer wants it, but gets rid of it. Therefore, this phrase is not a reference to Haman's intended bribery, which fell through (3:9,11). Rather, it is an allusion to what happens when slaves are sold (7:4). It is even worse than this, since it means 'abandoned unto destruction'.

So the Lord fells his enemy. God's providence and guidance can be seen throughout the surrounding events: the fact that the king listened to Esther, the wrath of the king and his unjust accusation (7:8), and the fact that an obliging courtier remembered the gallows erected for Mordecai (7:9). As a judgment of God, Haman was hanged on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai.¹ God completely frustrated the murderous scheme which Haman had planned for Mordecai (5:13,14). At the same time, the hater of the Jews, who had attempted to apply the curse of complete destruction to Israel, was himself sentenced to the stake of the accursed: "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." (Deuteronomy 21:23) To be "under God's curse" and to hang on "a tree" means to be devoted to destruction by God's burning wrath. In the struggle between Amalek and Israel, this is the last time that such a complete annihilation is mentioned.

The destruction of Israel and Mordecai had been planned completely, to avenge the curse once administered in God's name to Amalek and Agag. But God reversed the evil scheme so that both Agag and Haman were destroyed as God's enemy. God's throne prevailed in anger over Amalek (see Exodus 17:16). He himself blotted out the remembrance of Amalek (Deuteronomy 25:19). This is a great comfort for God's people, who are threatened by increasingly powerful adversaries of God.

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19).

C. God Placed Law Over Against Law (8)

God resolved Israel's plight in a single day; Haman was humiliated (6:1-11) and his religious 'assurance' was taken away from him (6:12-14). So also Haman was speedily killed and cursed (7). There remained one last hurdle (cf. 3:8ff.): the irrevocable law of the Medes and Persians ordering the mass murder of all Jews on the forthcoming 13th day of Adar.

This law was a serious obstacle. It remained in force even though the prime minister who had proposed this law had been eliminated. Although many absolute monarchs in the ancient world were above their own laws, the kings who proclaimed Persian laws were not able to revoke them (1:19; Daniel 6:9,13). This peculiarity of the Persian political system kept the whims of the absolute monarch under control. The lawgiver was bound by his own laws, which providing stability and faithfulness.

¹ A footnote from the NIV suggests that Haman may have been hung or impaled on poles.

However, there were two problems with this system:

1. The Gentiles searched for stability and faithfulness in the laws. In order for this to occur the contents of the law had to be good as well. In this respect, however, there was no standard other than the unbridled will of the absolute monarch, whose heart was not subject to the Word of God, the law for all people (as was the situation in Israel, Deuteronomy 17:18,19).

Therefore, despite respect for proclaimed laws, the Persian state failed repeatedly. Part of the duties of any government includes “the protection of the Church and its ministry” (BELGIC CONFESSIO, Article 36); when this condition is not met, the church is in danger. In this book, the Persian state failed to protect the wellbeing of God’s people (3:12,13). In Daniel it failed when his haters wanted all subjects to give divine honour to the king (Daniel 6:8,9). A constitutional state or democracy is meaningless when obedience to the King of kings becomes increasingly absent. We must not depend on the Orient or the western world with their rulers. Rather, depend on the Lord, who governs and protects his people.

2. Political stability was sought by making the laws irrevocable. This led to a degree of deification of the laws, because irrevocable laws must be perfect (like God’s law; Psalm 19:8,9), proclaimed by an infallible king. Thus the urge for stability and faithfulness led to a foolishly rigid policy of making royal decrees irrevocable.

The dialogue between Esther and the king should be regarded in this context. Wisely, Esther did not mention the irrevocable royal decree. Rather, she spoke of Haman’s scheme which had to be revoked (8:5). With equal cunning, the king mentioned only the new law for the protection of the Jews, calling this one irrevocable (8:8). He carefully avoided any mention of the old law. He knew quite well that the old law was technically irrevocable; therefore, he did not respond directly to Esther’s request. Instead, he indicated the direction in which the solution could be found, and authorized it.

The new law to safeguard the Jews would also be irrevocable (8:8). The only way to prevent the old law from being enforced was to place the new law over against the old law.

In this manner, the Lord bent the heart of the king so that flexibility was introduced into the rigid Persian political system for the sake of God’s people and our salvation. The Persian state had to cooperate for the benefit of those who loved God (cf. Romans 8:28-29). To that end, Mordecai was given the powers and the dignity of the late Haman (8:2; 8:8,9ff.; 8:15).

The royal secretaries went to work (8:9,10; cf.3:12). The first decree had been written on the 13th day of Nisan, the first month. The new decree was made on the 23rd day of Sivan, the third month, long before the 13th day of Adar, the last month. As well, the famous Persian postal system was engaged (8:10, cf.3:13,15).

The contents of the new law were effected by the need to leave the old law in force. The new law permitted the Jews to defend themselves against any attack that came as a result of the old law. Endorsement was given for the destruction of the enemies of the

Jews (8:11; cf. 3:13) on the very day that the Jews themselves would have been annihilated, the 13th day of Adar (cf. 3:7,13).

Chapter 8 shows the continuation of God's judgment over his enemies. Mordecai received Haman's position and wealth (8:2; cf. 5:11) and a new law was made to reverse the initial law. As well, this chapter describes the deliverance of Israel. Mordecai, the new prime minister, appeared in his official apparel (8:15). Of special importance is that God gave the Persian law to the Jews as a strong support. They were permitted to attack their enemies on the 13th of Adar. This attack in self-defense was not a form of rebellion against the lawful authorities. God himself mobilized his sheep against the followers of the Agagite. (Otherwise they would have been as sheep before the slaughter.) Even in this generation, the Lord was against Amalek (cf. Exodus 17:16; Esther 8:5). The Jews were now able to fight lawfully, just as they had under Moses, Saul, and David.

D. The Thirteenth Day of Adar: Day of Blood, Day of Advent (9:1-17)

The numbers of the losses which the Jews inflicted upon their enemies - 800 in Susa (9:6,15) and 75,000 in the whole empire (9:16) indicate that Haman had organized an 'alliance' of followers who were to launch the attack on the 13th of Adar. Just as Hitler organized his S.A. (the 'brown-shirt battalions' who terrorized the Jews in the WWII), so Haman had evidently organized his party members to be ready on the 13th of Adar for the massacre of the Jews, under the protection of the Persian law.

But God had placed his sheep into battle formation. Under the new law, they had support from the authorities (9:3), (among whom Mordecai now occupied a top position (9:3,4)) and were allowed to fight.

This was, however, no fight of revenge:

- a. It was a fight in the name of the law, not a revolutionary action.
- b. It was a fight in self defense, against "those seeking their destruction" (9:2), "enemies" (9:5), and "those who hated them" (9:5,16). They "assembled to protect themselves" (9:16). Those who had gleefully welcomed the 13th of Adar were destroyed.
- c. It was a fight with those who had desired the death of the Jews.
- d. It was a fight without ulterior motives; they did not lay their hands on the plunder (9:10,16) even though the law specifically allowed this (8:11).

Most importantly, God executed his judgments over Haman's house (9:7-10) and over all the followers of this Agagite, who were primarily 'Neo-Amalekites'. God gave the Jews rest from their enemies (9:16).

In the Bible, the concept of 'giving rest' or 'relief' is the great purpose of all God's work for his people (cf. 1 Kings 8:56 - in Canaan; Jeremiah 30:10 - prophesy regarding the return after the exile; Jeremiah 23:6 - the coming son of David; Ezekiel 34:27; Hebrews 4:1-13).

Keeping in mind this great purpose of God, the importance of this relief (9:16) can be established. God provided rest from enemies, who were after Israel's very existence.

This was an awesome thing. Better yet would be the relief found in the return of the exiles to the Promised Land. After this, rest could be found in Jesus Christ, and eternal rest in the world to come.

The rest spoken of in Esther 9:16 opened the way for the return to Jerusalem and for the coming of Jesus Christ.

The 13th of Adar was a great day of 'advent' (meaning coming or arrival): a day on which God prepared the highway for the coming Saviour. The Anointed, the Messiah, approached over streets which were red with blood. Israel, who was allowed to live, had the privilege of going out to meet him, saved for his sake.

E. Purim: Day of Joy, Day of Remembrance (9:17-32)

The great joy over the deliverance had to be preserved and renewed by annual celebrations of the feast of Purim. In memory of the relief obtained after the victory, the 14th and 15th days of Adar were to be set aside as feast days. The 'pur', or the lot, cast by Haman to determine the day for the Jews' annihilation, would be remembered in the feast of Purim as a time of joy and deliverance. Two letters of instruction (9:20,29) introduced the feast of Purim to the people, causing it to become a generally accepted feast. Particularly among the Jews, this feast became extremely popular.

After the coming of Christ, the celebration of Haman's fall became a demonstration of Jewish nationalism. The festivities which accompanied the feast of Purim became more like that of a carnival. This distorted the true significance and intention of the feast. In light of the history of salvation, the central fact is that God saved Israel for Christ, not because of any of their own merits.

The feast should have led to the praise of God's grace and a faithful anticipation of the Christ. After the Lord Jesus appeared, who came forth from Israel according to the flesh, the celebration of Purim no longer made sense.

Still, the history of Purim is preserved for us in the Holy Scriptures, to encourage us amid the raging of the antichrist. Our deliverance, which - according to the flesh - was once threatened in Israel's womb, is now revealed and assured. Through his exaltation, Christ has forever escaped the reach of the dragon (Revelation 12:5). Therefore, in him we are already more than conquerors.

The struggle continues here on earth. Now that the Saviour has escaped, the dragon directs his raging fury against those who "hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17). In this struggle, Christ will give us complete victory (cf. Revelation 14:1-5; 15:1-4). Purim, the Old Testament feast of Christ's advent, causes us to await the day of his second coming with even greater longing.

F. Safety For Israel (10:1-3)

The purpose of this concluding chapter to the book of *Esther* is to show that Israel's life was safeguarded after their deliverance on the 13th day of Adar. The following should be noted:

- a. Xerxes' taxation system is described (10:1). The government of Xerxes settled into normal routines (cf. Romans 13:6). It is Caesar's right to require everyone to pay taxes. (How the tax money is used is a different subject.) This topic (Romans 13:1-7) is unrelated to the persecution of the church (Revelation 13). The reference to Xerxes' taxation system is only a sample of his manner of government, and the reader is referred to the chronicles of his empire for more information (10:2).
- b. Safety within the Persian Empire was strongly improved by Mordecai. He had received "greatness" (10:2), being "second in rank to King Xerxes" (10:3). He used his influence to the benefit of the Jewish people (10:3). The author of *Esther* emphasized this fact, intentionally selecting it from the facts known to him (10:2).
- c. Both the beginning and the conclusion of the book make it clear that Xerxes' place as king is central. This fact no longer creates a mortal danger, although the entire book of *Esther* is concerned with his power as king. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate if the book had been called *Xerxes*.

There is a definite contrast between *Esther* and the books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*. These latter books deal with the return to Jerusalem, its restoration, and its reformation. In *Esther*, the life of Israel itself was at stake, and so also was the flesh and blood of our Saviour.

The little book of *Esther* was indeed necessary: to show that God saved his people. For this reason, it includes no deep analysis of the human piety of Mordecai and Esther. The books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* are different, since they depict a return to the service of God: a reformation.

The church was safeguarded by Xerxes (Esther) so that there would be an opportunity for:

1. a second repatriation under the leadership of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1,2)
2. the completion of the restoration of Jerusalem by rebuilding its walls (Nehemiah 2:1ff; 3; 4; 6; 7:1; 12:27ff.)
3. a combined reformation of the congregation of the Lord (Nehemiah 5:1-13; 8; 9; 10; 12:44-47; 13).

Nehemiah's activities commenced under Artaxerxes, the successor of Xerxes (Nehemiah 2:1).

Where God saves the breath of life, flesh, and blood, as seen in the book of *Esther*, there is again hope for the work of the Spirit of the Lord, as seen in *Nehemiah*.

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