

ESTHER 9:18-10:3

THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD CELEBRATED IN THE FEAST OF PURIM

We come now to the closing section of the book of Esther. Throughout the discussion of this book, I have emphasized the theme of God's *grace* manifest in the work of Esther and Mordechai. The LORD is not named, but his footsteps and handiwork are everywhere to be seen. It is through these people that the LORD then delivered his people from grave danger and kept them from harm. In doing so, he kept open the way to the fulfillment of his promise regarding the great Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The enemies, united under Haman, the Agagite, had planned a complete annihilation of the Jews throughout the Persian empire. But the LORD turned the tables around, and instead the Jews were able to defeat their enemies and find rest and relief. What we now read is how this victory leads to the instituting of the feast of *Purim*. It takes place in the twelfth month Adar, which corresponds with our February or March. It is still commonly kept by many Jews today, a two-day feast introduced by a day of fasting.

The feast of Purim today has a very patriotic theme rather than a spiritual one. During Purim the book of Esther is read and the hearers hiss and boo whenever Haman's name is mentioned while they cheer and clap when Mordechai's name is read.

The feast of Purim appears to have become a secular feast where there is much dancing and drinking and very little devotion. Perhaps somewhere you found a reference to an ancient Jewish rabbi who recommended that on this feast Jews may drink themselves into a joyous stupor. There is certainly not much religion on this kind of a feast. One American commentator compares it to the fourth of July in the United States. Independence Day.

PURIM TODAY?

These observations lead us to an important question. Does this Purim feast mean anything for the church today? It is noteworthy that Mordechai and Esther ordered that the feast "should never cease to be celebrated among the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants" (9: 28). Jews still celebrate Purim today, as a national feast day in Israel, but the church of Christ has done very little with it. It is not on our annual liturgical calendar. Is that correct? Is it purely a secular feast, or is it also an ecclesiastical one?

Now even if certain days are not adhered to, this does not mean that the mat-

ter remembered on those days may be forgotten by us. But we note at the same time that “Purim” is a feast that was instituted in a time of *transition*, the transition from the Persian (Eastern) empire to the Greek and Roman (Western) empires. In the monumental changes that would take place, deeply affecting also the Jewish people, the Jews must believe that the LORD will deliver his people, also from the mighty Persians. Fifteen years later Ezra would lead the first group of exiles back to the promised land! Purim therefore has somewhat of a transitory character. Although Purim is nowhere mentioned as such in the New Testament, and there is good reason for this, the matter of Purim, God’s grace to his people, is on every page.

Today we find the echo of Purim in the advent preaching of the church. Advent is the time when we gratefully remember the preparation made by God for the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Purim also reminds us that we must look forward to the glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church of today also lives in a time of transition, between the ascension and return of our Lord and Saviour. Many will seek to destroy the church of Christ, but all God’s children will be gathered into the holy, catholic church. The Old Testament Purim has become our time of advent: the Lord is coming! This is God’s grace to us today as we live under the sovereign rule of our heavenly King.

I summarize this section as follows: God’s sovereign grace is to be celebrated by God’s people in the feast of Purim. We will see that the wonder of this grace is amazing, that the power of this grace is sovereign, and that the promise of this grace is messianic.

FEASTING AND JOY

The feast of Purim is characterized in this passage as one of *feasting and joy*. They were to remember that their “sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration (9: 19 and 22). Feasting and joy. Sorrow turned to joy and mourning to celebration. I think that these words show us something of the great tension under which the Jews had lived. They heard the edict from Haman against them, and they were devastated. They lost their life’s joy, and entered into deep sorrow. They could not be happy anymore, wondering even about the purpose of life. Nothing made sense anymore, nothing really mattered at this point, for when the thirteenth day of the twelfth month came -as it would-they would all be slaughtered.

What is noteworthy precisely at this point that the Jews did not call upon the Name of the LORD. With the greatest hour of need approaching, their annihilation imminent, there is not a widespread return to God, a breaking with idolatry and immorality. There is no way that the Jews can on their own survive the massacre planned by Haman and his men, supported by the Persian crown and all the imperial officials.

The Jews were doomed. Yet we do not read that they turned to the LORD

with a powerful, living faith. There may have been some that still did call upon God, for the LORD always preserved for himself in the exile a remnant, but the vast majority of the Jews did not turn to God.

WAS THERE TRUE REPENTANCE?

As a matter of fact, many of the Jews had started to feel quite at home in the empire. On the whole, the Persians were reasonable, enlightened people. The Jews were inventive, industrious, and even successful in many ways. Some had learned to live and act as Persians. There was a certain comfort zone that many did not want to see changed. But the edict of Haman, with the king's approval, shattered their lives and plunged them into dark despair. How could they ever survive this onslaught? The edict of the king as planned by Haman certainly brought an end to any illusion that the Jews had a future in the Persian empire. They had to focus on the promises of God!

Now we can say: the fact that prayer and repentance is not mentioned, does not mean that none of the Jews prayed to God. Indeed, that is true. There were those, and Mordechai was one of them, who believed that deliverance would come. Remember how he said to Esther: if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place (4: 14). God's covenant promises always stand. But is it not also true that many exiles had become accustomed to their new home, and did not live with a strong desire to return to Canaan and to Jerusalem. They did not all sing: Jerusalem, for love of you I cry; my right hand wither if I you deny" (Psalm 137, *Book of Praise*).

Similarly, we ourselves who live in quite a different time and place, can also become very relaxed in this world, in our tolerant society, where our religious freedom is guaranteed by charter. Why long for the New Jerusalem, when conditions here are excellent? The feast of Purim did remind the Jews everywhere that their place in this world is never safe. They are directed by this feast to the great messianic era, just as we today are urged to pray, "Maranatha, come Lord Jesus" (1 Cor 16: 22). Purim does mean that we have here no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come (cf. Heb 13: 13, 14). Truly, Purim is the feast of advent, and it is important to note that the Word of God in the Old and New Testament has a clear and strong focus on advent.

In the events that happened through the work of Esther and Mordechai, the Jews were to see the work of the LORD, indeed the fulfillment of his covenant promises. The expression that "sorrow is turned into joy and mourning into celebration" reminds us of Psalm 30: You (LORD) turned my wailing into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy". To go from sorrow to joy and from mourning to feasting is possible only when the LORD shows his grace and favour! The Jews still knew their psalms.

AMAZING GRACE

And this grace is *amazing*. The deliverance that God gave was beyond human

expectation. Who would have dreamed that the tables would be so completely turned, that those scorned would be favoured, those doomed to die would destroy their enemies, and those ready for the plunder would keep their possessions fully intact? Who would have believed it to be possible? Such a complete turn of events cannot be ascribed by any believing Jew to simple circumstance. Not one Jew would say after going through all this: I guess we got lucky this time. Would you dare to say that all this was only a matter of chance? Everyone stood in awe and wonder. They really had something to celebrate!

You see the intensity of the celebration in the way it is described. It says in verse 18: it is a day of resting, and feasting, and joy. These three words are significant. The first word, resting, indicates that the threat of the enemies is completely gone. The relief is great. Resting is not just a physical matter, like taking a break after two days of fighting, cleaning off your sword and putting on a new shirt, but it means: having peace from the enemies. Think of the promise of the LORD in Isaiah 32: 18: my people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. There is nobody who breaks into your house to kill you and take all you own. Rest is here the peace and security that flows forth from the protection of the LORD!

PURIM: A TRUE CELEBRATION

The word feasting characterizes Purim as a celebration. There are food and wine in abundance, and everyone may share in this, for notice how it added that they gave presents to each other. In verse 22 we can read that these presents were especially presents of food and gifts to the poor. All the Jews were to be able to celebrate and no one was to go hungry: the fellowship, the unity of the Jews all over the empire was again established. Instead of the destruction of Israel we see here the unification of Israel! The grace of God is indeed amazing: he always gives far more than we can imagine, in a way that is wondrous, and he gives reason to celebrate!

Sometimes events occur of which we say: we must never forget this. Future generations must also know what happened here, how the LORD saved us in a wondrous manner. Mordechai writes letters to all the Jews throughout the empire, near and far, verse 21, “to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth day of the month of Adar” as the time when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. We even read that the Jews agreed to continue the celebration: the first Purim became an instant tradition, an institution among all Israel.

This is repeated in the verses 27 and 28. The element of repetition shows how important the matter is. And then to top it off, we are told in the verses 29-32 that Queen Esther -now named “daughter of Abihail”, probably to confirm her Jewish descent -also writes a decree, supporting Mordechai’s letters that the feast of Purim will find a place among all Israel’s “times of fasting and lamentation” (see the end of verse 31).

FIRST A DAY OF FASTING

Remember that Purim started with a day of fasting. This fasting recognizes that Israel was in a very serious danger. But the relief and deliverance were amazing. Feasting follows and the celebration is joyous: the LORD has delivered us! Every generation anew has to hear the story of Haman and his evil scheme, of Esther, the queen, and of Mordechai who stood up to Haman and caused his downfall!

How could it happen? Why did it happen? The LORD is the same from age to age. His faithfulness endures forever. His steadfast love is sure, it shall evermore endure (Psalm 136, *Book of Praise*). The theme of the Scriptures, *sola gratia*, by grace alone, is also the theme of Purim. Would there be any other theme? All that we do in the Lord's service is always within the contours of his amazing grace.

The courageous deeds of God's servants, of Mordechai and Esther, are remembered. God does not use people and then let them pass into anonymity. Their obedience and courage stand as a stirring example for us. But everyone knows that Mordechai and Esther could not themselves on their own bring the whole Persian empire to a grinding halt, just to save the people of Israel. This is the grace of God, amazing, wondrous, and undeserved.

SOVEREIGN GRACE

God's grace is always amazing, that means, it never ceases to fill us with awe and wonder! What he does for his people, no one else could even dream of. Whoever says that God's grace is amazing, must then also come one step farther and confess that this grace is *sovereign*. The confession that God's grace is sovereign is specifically implied in the name "Purim". We are reminded in verse 24 that Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the *pur*, that is the lot, for their ruin and destruction. Purim comes from "pur", that is, lot.

We read in Esther 3: 7 that in the twelfth month of the reign of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the *pur*, that is the lot, in the presence of Haman to select a day and a month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar. Purim is then the plural form of the word "pur", lot. I mentioned already when we were dealing with Esther 3 that Haman in casting the "pur" in fact consults the "gods". When it says: they cast the pur in the presence of Haman, this was an official act of consultation of the gods by astrologers. What the lot determined, was seen as a direct answer from the gods!

Haman could not go on the attack against Israel without the approval and direction of the gods of Amalek and Persia. His "gods" chose the day, and on that day, these gods would be victorious over the God of Israel. We noted that Haman seeks divine inspiration and guidance. He wanted divine providence to be on his side.

At bottom the conflict is spiritual. The conflict is between the idols, the false gods of mankind, behind which lie the power of demons and of the devil, and

between the LORD God and his Anointed Son. It is and always has been since the fall the underlying struggle. There is no deeper struggle than that of Christ versus Satan. Haman understood that he could leave nothing to chance; his gods would have to determine the best day for success. Therefore Haman thought he could not fail. The “pur”, the lot could not be wrong.

The gods of this world would be sovereign over the God of all the earth.

PURIM: A MASTERFUL STROKE

But now we discover that the grace of the God of Israel is *sovereign*. The power of his grace is all-surpassing. He rules over all people, and also over all spiritual powers, even over the hosts of wickedness in the air (cf. Ephesians 6: 10-12). There is no so-called god, no demon who can stand against the counsel of the LORD. They may cast lots, but the LORD alone determines the true lot of his people, and he deals with them in accordance with his covenant promises.

Calling the feast of victory over Haman and all Israel’s enemies “Purim” is a masterful stroke. Purim means: the LORD is sovereign and rules over all. His grace is invincible and omnipotent. He gives his grace to whom he wills, and no one can take this away. He blesses whom he wants, and it remains true also in the transition from Old to New Testament: the LORD alone, he is God! God’s Name may not be mentioned in this little book, but the evidence of his powerful name, the reality of his sovereign grace is on every page. Give him the glory that his Name deserves.

Haman thought that his “gods” would prevail. Just cast the lot, said his advisors, and we’ll find the exact day when nothing can go wrong. Well, everything went wrong, because they picked the wrong people to fight against, the people of the only true God, the sovereign God of heaven and earth. They cast the lot, alright, and sealed Haman’s doom.

I can understand that in this feast the Jews were so elated that they took a somewhat frivolous approach: Purim, the lots cannot stand against the counsel of the living God. Only a fool like Haman, the Agagite, would think that he can stand up against the people whom God has chosen in his grace! It is sad that the feast led to excesses, but what remains is the deep conviction that no one can curse whom God has blessed! In the name Purim a sense of humor becomes apparent: did you really think that you could stand up against the eternal counsel of the LORD and destroy his people, the apple of his eye?

God’s grace is amazing, and it is also sovereign. He does greater wonders than we could ever imagine, and he does them against all opposition there may be. Even demons and devils must flee before him. We are right back to Genesis, even Genesis 12, where it was said to Abram: I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and in you shall all nations of the earth be blessed. The blessing of God will come to the nations.

MESSIANIC GRACE

For there is in the book of Esther what I like to call the promise of God's grace, a promise which is messianic in character, which means that it directs us to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Purim is an advent feast because God's amazing and sovereign grace is also *messianic*: it leads us to Christ, our Lord.

You may say: but I do not read here anywhere about the Lord Jesus. This is true in a direct sense. But let us look at chapter 10, which consists of only three verses. What do these verses tell us? It seems at first glance that these verses are in praise of Xerxes, the Persian king. First we read that he imposed a tribute throughout the empire to its distant shores. A tribute is a special imperial tax which everyone had to pay. It is a grim reminder of the fact that the kings of this world lord it over their subjects. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

There are scholars who suggest that this verse about the tax is a side-note which has nothing to do with the story of Esther, except perhaps to function as superfluous biographical note. But there is not one word in the Bible that doesn't meaningfully belong. Xerxes goes his own way, building up his kingdom, and replenishing his empty coffers. Remember how I mentioned at the beginning of this book that the king had spent a lot of money in a losing campaign against the Greeks? The money expected from Haman is now in the estate of Mordechai. Xerxes wants to fill the empty treasury and prepare to strengthen his empire. But the whole empire is falling apart.

Actually the only reason why the Persian empire is still intact is because of the prominence of Mordechai and Esther. We read that Mordechai *the Jew* was second in rank only to King Xerxes. Not only did he have this position in the empire, but he was preeminent among the Jews and held in esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.

THE TIMES ARE CHANGING

The times are changing. New horizons will appear from east to west. But God has everything in place. The Persian empire must function yet as a cradle for the Jews, so that they may bring forth the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter 10 we see a beautiful picture of a people that is blessed and guided, though in exile. Soon they will be able to return to their homeland. They may rebuild the ancient ruins as a new era dawns.

This happens because God is building the kingdom of heaven which will come through the Lord Jesus Christ. In Esther chapter 1 we saw the glory of Xerxes, and now in chapter 10 we read of the same glory of Xerxes, but the difference is that God has his servant in place, in honour and esteem, like once Joseph in Egypt, to prepare the day for the coming of his Son.

There are many parallels between the history of Esther and that of Joseph in Egypt. A situation of despair and defeat is turned into a window of opportunity for deliverance. How can this be? Because we have here the word of the same God

who has one goal: to glorify himself in the salvation of his people through the coming of the great Messiah. Your kingdom come, and yes, it is coming. That is why the book of Esther has a clear message and belongs in the Bible, in the Word of God.

Amazing grace: God's work is wondrous.

Sovereign grace: God blesses whom he wills.

Messianic grace: everything leads to Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

Purim is Advent. "*Come, Lord Jesus! Maranatha!*" (Hymn 67, *Book of Praise*)