

Esther 3 - 5

The Defense Mobilized

A. God and the "Cast Lot" or: Satan's Helplessness (3:7)

One item from chapter 3 has yet to be discussed. Before Haman went to the king to promote his devilish scheme, he assured himself of 'divine' (though not Godly) assistance! He had the lot cast in order to find the most favourable day for the planned massacre.

This was man-centered religion, which is enmity against God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is right to confess that idols are 'nothing'. But this does not mean that idolatry is harmless. The worship of idols is a powerful heresy, which causes great damage. Therefore Haman's casting of the lot should not be viewed as a minor detail. That is what many a person would do who are affected by the western world's worship of logic, and who therefore find casting the lot unbearable nonsense.

For Haman however, it was not nonsense at all. As a genuine 'old-fashioned' heathen, he:

- a. felt himself enveloped in a world full of unpredictable 'divine' powers, mysterious influences which could cause disaster and lead to hell;
- b. feared the future, unknown to all men, believing that anything could happen; and,
- c. arranged his defenses. He tried to find ways to win the favour of 'good' powers for himself and to direct the evil forces toward his enemies. For this purpose he resorted to sorcery. What did this sorcery or magic involve? Sacrifices are given so that power is passed to a mortal in order that he may ward off the wrath of the gods in the spiritual world. Haman attempted to bind the gods to himself and to control them.

It is with this background in mind that Haman's desire to cast the lot must be understood. It was not a trick to predict the future, but a means to assure himself of the proper time, the favourable day. It was an effort to find, in the interplay of powers which dominated the entire future, that particular moment in time when forces would be coordinated against his enemies. Therefore, the technique of casting the lot (also known as the lottery) was an attempt to outwit the enemies. Whoever controlled 'the gods' by tricking them to reveal their mysteries brought a secret weapon into the struggle against his enemies.

This belief was a great error on Haman's part, because:

- a. God, the God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, is always greater than his creatures. Therefore no creature may ever be deified and God may never be equated with his creatures.

- b. God governs all and will show his omnipotence. With him there are no coincidences; everything goes according to his designed plan. The sure ground of faith is that the future is in his Fatherly hand.
- c. God will not let himself be controlled by religious acts, such as sacrifices. He remains God.
- d. God cannot be tricked into revealing his secrets, including the secrets of the future. Our attitude of faith must be to remember that we are blind to the future though the commandments give us sight.
- e. Israel's "sacred lot" was essentially different from that of the heathens, for in Israel "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33). "Decision" means here: "judicial verdict" e.g. for pointing out a guilty one (Joshua 7:14ff.) or for dividing the land (Joshua 18:6,8,10). In fact God did speak through the lot then (Old Testament) and there (among Israel). The lot was a means of revelation, in addition to dreams and visions.

But here, with Haman, God did not speak. This was apparent from the outcome: the date established as favourable became the date on which Haman's scheme failed.

In the New Testament, the casting of the lot as a means of revelation was abandoned. Acts 1:26 still shows the use of the lot in the sense of Proverbs 16:33. But after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the lot was no longer used on such occasions as the election of office bearers (Acts 6:5). Now the Spirit provides wisdom and those who are anointed by the Holy Spirit - the whole congregation - may no longer cast the lot. This would be an insult to the Holy Spirit and an evasion of our own responsibilities.

Thus Haman's trust in the lot was not only an error, but also an attack upon the God of Israel by means of a 'secret weapon'.

- a. With his sorcery, Haman entered the war against Israel's God. This had happened before with the king of Moab and his sorcerer Balaam (Numbers 22:2-24:25) and with Pharaoh and his magicians (Exodus 7:11).
- b. In the case of Balaam we see that his magic with words was defeated, proving that sorcery has no power over the God of Israel. Additionally, while prophesying in spite of himself, Balaam stated: "There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel." (Numbers 23:23) And so it will be again – the lot will fail against God.
- c. Balaam had also prophesied: "Their [Israel's] king will be greater than Agag." (Numbers 24:7) This was a prediction of the might of Saul (1 Samuel 15:8) and of David (1 Samuel 27:8; 30). Now the contest was between the Agagite, Haman, and the empty throne of the coming Messiah, the Son of David. God would keep the way open for the coming King, in accordance with Balaam's prophesy.
- d. How? Precisely by Haman's casting of the lot. While the lot did not reveal God's command (since it was not a sacred lot) it was under God's providence. Using the

lot, Haman searched for a favourable day. He checked out month after month and day after day. The lot was cast in the month Nisan, the first month of the year. The lot fell on the 13th day of Adar, the last month of the year. Haman perceives this simply as a “delay of execution” and was carefree (3:15). But God ruled over the dark arrangements of Haman's experts, inserting a space of eleven months between the proclamation and the execution of this annihilation decree – a decree which was aimed against God, against his Son, and against his people. My Father governs, also over the casting of the lot – there is no magic, and no chance.

Haman was slowed down in his preparations. Amid the sins of the people, for which they alone remained responsible, God laid out his work in the most excellent and just manner (Belgic Confession, Article 13). While Haman established the date for his massacre of Israel, God set the time period of his work for the protection of Israel.

Between Nisan and the 13th day of Adar, God made time for the wonder year of his intervention. He gained time immediately, and would win the battle soon. He “lengthened” the time for the sake of his elect. Modern apostasy would say that the results of the lot were pure chance, but faith confesses: God's hand was at work.

B. Esther Mobilized By God (4:1-5:8)

Haman's lottery was the beginning of his attack, through sorcery, against the highest power of the universe – against God. At the same time it was the turning point of the conflict. For at the moment that Haman attacked, God counter-attacked. Thus we see that at the start, and at every turn, God thwarted Haman's efforts.

Just as God ruled in a sovereign manner over the result of the lot, in order to protect the womb which was to bring forth the Christ, so he dealt with the people. From a human standpoint (Luke 10:31) the whole history of *Esther*, and particularly the failed attempt to massacre the Jews, appears to be a succession of coincidences. But all those coincidences fit together in a perfect manner. Some people are so offended by this that they promptly declare *Esther* to be a cunningly devised story, a fairy tale or novel. Thus, human fantasy receives credit for God's incomprehensible work of grace in Christ – that all things and men must work together for good.

In this manner Esther was recruited to act as an advocate of the church.

1. Esther received her calling (4:1-9)

Mordecai went wailing and mourning through the streets of the great city of Susa (4:1). He had discovered the vulnerability of the church under Satan's attack - their strength was non-existent. But he failed to realize the strength of God's promises (Isaiah 45:9-25; Daniel 2:44). Here there was no prophecy, as there was later, about the “two witnesses” (Revelation 11:1ff.). However, Mordecai did accept the antithesis between the world and God's people, as the Lord made it manifest in the Haman/Xerxes decree.

Mordecai stood with God's people in Death Row. Realizing that calamity was near, he stood in the gate of the palace in his mourning garments (4:2). This was actually forbidden, since no mourning clothes were to darken the splendour of the king's majesty. But Mordecai did exactly that: he put on his mourning to underline the separation between

the palace and himself. This indicates a change in Mordecai. He did not cross the threshold where the royal decree had been formed - the threshold which he had once attempted to cross to satisfy his hunger for power. Neither did he allow a worried Esther to help him across (4:4). Instead, he involved Esther in an agreement aimed at the saving of God's people - and his own skin! Esther had to speak for her people (4:9).

2. Esther accepted her calling (4:10-17)

Esther raised objections to Mordecai's plan. This was quite understandable, considering her upbringing. In the past, she had been advised to keep silent about her people - and so also about Israel's holiness under the covenant (2:10). Now she was told to stand up for her people. Her objection was that to appear before the king at her own initiative was extremely risky, and could endanger her life (4:11).

How should this law of the king be understood (4:11)? It was not just a safety measure to avoid assassination (cf. 2:21ff.). Rather, it was to maintain the honour and prestige of the king, so that he would be regarded as unapproachable, in splendid isolation. Anyone who was to approach the king did so in the fear of death before his majesty; the king called those whom he wanted. In addition to this, there was also the aspect of being granted life, as it were, as a present from the despot. For Esther, however, this chance was very small, since the king had not even bothered to look at her for thirty days.

Mordecai's response to Esther was that her safety in the royal palace was a mere illusion (4:13,14). This was not a reference to Haman's strong arm and the decree. It was unlikely that harem women, the most personal possessions of the king, would be in danger from the annihilation order. Mordecai gave a further explanation: The possibility that Esther would perish was linked with the idea of "deliverance... from another place" (4:14). In other words, Mordecai said that remaining in the palace was more dangerous for Esther than if she were to go to the king. If Esther remained neutral when the life of God's people was at stake, God's judgment would follow. Mordecai declared that this was much more certain and dangerous than the risk involved in appearing at the court without proper introduction.

Mordecai firmly believed that Israel would never perish, and that anyone who would disassociate himself from Israel through neutrality would perish. However, Mordecai was not entirely clear in his 'repentance'. He did not even mention the name of God, using instead the vague phrase: "relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place". This implies deliverance from a source other than Esther. Conspicuously absent is a clear confession of God's promises (e.g. Jeremiah 31:35-37) and acknowledgement of the curse which would fall upon those who did not help the Lord (cf. the case of Meroz, Judges 5:23) but withdrew from the struggle of the church.

Esther gave in (4:15-7). Impressed by Mordecai's urging, she relinquished both her isolation and her aim to improve her own position. She, who had previously looked for her own benefit apart from God's people, started to work for the church. She: (a) asked Mordecai to arrange for a fast, and (b) began to make preparations, by fasting, for the confrontation with the king. What a contrast from the time when she kept busy with improving her femininity, by means of special diets and extensive treatments with various cosmetics (2:12)!

Esther went to the king without a beauty treatment or choice foods. She had spent three days in which she had not been absorbed in her own loveliness. Not a glance had been given at the mirror. Instead, she had spent the time in fasting. This was a forceful break with the style and the vanity of harem life. (Compare this with the 'self-indulgence' of movie stars.)

However, true repentance is not manifested by Esther. How could it be, with the upbringing she had received from Mordecai? Proper instruction (preaching, catechism) had been lacking. It is noteworthy that the fasting of Esther was not accompanied by its usual counterpart, prayer (cf. Nehemiah 1:4; Jeremiah 14:11,12; Matthew 17:21; 1 Corinthians 7:5). To fast is also called 'to humble oneself' (Leviticus 16:29,31; 23:27,32; Numbers 29:7; Isaiah 58:3). It is an act of self-denial in recognition of one's own guilt and misery. Still, Esther's humiliation before God was in sharp contrast with Haman's casting of the lot. It was her preparation for contact with the king.

Esther decided to go at the risk of her own life, saying "If I perish, I perish" (4:16). She did not consider her own survival, and was prepared to complete her mission in spite of the great danger.

3. Esther before the king (5:1-8)

The road to the confrontation with the king was not necessarily easy (5:1). However, already from a distance, Xerxes saw Esther in the court. Esther won his favor (5:2) before she even uttered a word.

"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases." (Proverbs 21:1) The eastern farmer would usually irrigate his garden by directing artesian well water through ditches he had dug. This irrigation was variable. Over several days, different crops required the water that was brought to the garden by artificial means. Therefore, the gardener would guide the water to a certain crop one day and to another crop the next day. God dealt with Xerxes in the same way. The heart of this unpredictable king had to be watered here one day and there the next.

God moved Esther into position against Haman. This happened in three stages:

- 1) Esther invited the king *and* Haman to a banquet (5:4),
- 2) Esther invited them to a second banquet, and
- 3) Esther made her actual request.

This was wise, with respect to both the king and Haman. At the first banquet, Esther won the king's favour and prepared him for the importance of her request. She also made sure that Haman felt flattered, removing any suspicion on Haman's part, and setting the stage for an unexpected strike at the third banquet.

C. God Blinded His Enemy With Pride (5:9-14)

Returning to the concept of a chess game, we see that Satan made a second move to strengthen his position. The first move had been the royal decree to annihilate the seed of the woman. The second move was that Haman constructed and raised a pole of about 23 metres, on which to hang Mordecai.

But just as the Lord had frustrated the first wave of the attack with his providential care for the seed of the woman, the second move was also thwarted. The conspiracy aimed for the assassination of Mordecai. But even Haman's evil mind was subject to the high and holy government of God. The Lord blinded Haman with vain pride, so that he became indignant. The downfall of Haman illustrates the adage: "Pride comes before a fall."

Haman boasted about himself, showing that he was filled with personal pride. He named his money, his sons (the glory of his heathen generation), and his high position (5:11). Besides all this, he even boasted that Queen Esther was among those who honoured him (5:12).

When Mordecai again showed no respect for Haman, not even standing up at his approach (5:9), Haman (who craved honour from men) was greatly offended. Mordecai's death was the only thing lacking to make his happiness complete (5:13). Accepting the recommendation of his wife and friends, he set up a gallows for Mordecai. In so doing, he reversed the normal order of events: the gallows were ready while the conviction and sentencing had yet to take place.

The divine irony was that Haman had prepared his own scaffold (7:8-10). All his glory would disappear: the ten sons (9:12), his position (7:5-10), and his money (8:7). That is how it will always be: God's enemies will all perish.

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