

Esther 8: The Grand Reversal

A Bible Study on the Providence of God

Study Bible Studies 15 February 2009

Esther 8:5

Exodus 17:16 (quoted)

1 Samuel 15:2 (quoted)

Joshua 6:21 (quoted)

Exodus 34:6-7 (quoted)

The Story So Far

Before turning to chapter eight, it is worth reminding ourselves of the road that has brought us here.

Vashti was removed as queen by Xerxes for the trivial reason of refusing to join him at one of his banquets. This paved the way for Esther to come into the king's life and become his new queen. Esther was a simple Jewish girl who was under the guardianship of Mordecai, her cousin, though she did not disclose her Jewish background to anyone.

Mordecai remained at the gate of the palace, often advising Esther, and in the course of this overheard a plot to assassinate the king. The danger was averted and the king's life saved. This good act of Mordecai was duly recorded in the court chronicles, but Mordecai was not rewarded for it.

During this time Haman, who was a traditional enemy of the Jews, was elevated to a position second only to the king. Mordecai's refusal to pay him respect enraged Haman to such an extent that, taking undue advantage of his position — and, perhaps, of the king's rather careless attitude — he had an edict issued in the king's name to exterminate the Jewish population throughout the entire kingdom. Mordecai and Esther put their efforts together to persuade the king to negate and nullify the edict and save the Jews. Esther, at great peril to her own life, presented herself before the king uninvited and invited him and Haman to a banquet. That night the king could not sleep, and had the court chronicle read to him, and so learned how Mordecai had once saved his life; he resolved to honour him. Ironically, it was Haman who was instructed to do the honours to his arch-enemy — the very man he was plotting to execute — which humiliated him further still.

Chapter Seven: A Second Banquet

Let us do a quick recap of chapter seven before we move on.

In this chapter we see the king and Haman attending the second banquet to which Esther had invited them. During the course of the banquet, while they were drinking wine, the king again urged Esther to

make known her request, and once again offered her anything, even up to half of his kingdom. By this time Esther judged the king to be vulnerable enough, and told him of Haman's wicked plan to exterminate the Jews, herself included. At this point she plainly disclosed to the king and to all present that she herself was a Jew. Though the king did not react outwardly to this disclosure, he was furious with Haman, and walked out of the banquet into the palace garden.

Haman, knowing that he was in grave trouble, tried to appease Esther and fell upon the couch on which she was reclining just as the king returned. The king mistook this for an attempt by Haman to molest the queen, and ordered his execution, hanging him on the very gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai. The order was promptly carried out, and the man who had posed such a great danger to the Jews was eliminated. The king's anger subsided, and Esther and Mordecai must have felt greatly relieved and happy at this turn of events.

We see, at the beginning of chapter eight, that both Esther and Mordecai received their rewards. Esther was given Haman's confiscated estate, and Mordecai, who now made his appearance before the king, was promoted to the position Haman had previously held; the king promptly gave him the signet ring. Everything seems to have come to a happy ending for the king, Esther and Mordecai.

End of the Story? Not Quite

And they lived happily ever after — or so it might seem.

But did the story end there? I am sure all of us have heard the saying, "it is not over till it is over." The events in the life of Esther are not yet at their conclusion. Had the narrative ended here, as most stories normally do, I doubt this book would have found its place among the Holy Scriptures.

There is, as the Hindi and Urdu idiom puts it, a bone in the kebab — *kabab mai haddi*: an unwelcome complication in something that otherwise seems to be going smoothly. Though Haman himself is no more, the dangerous edict he devised to eliminate the Jews had survived and had not yet been reversed. It was still hanging over their heads like a sword. We know that the edict had become an irreversible law, and that all of Esther's efforts might yet have been wasted. Much still hung in the balance at this point in the story.

The King's Reaction to Esther's Disclosure

It did not appear to trouble the king in the least when he learned that Esther was a Jew, and that Mordecai was her cousin and guardian. Far from being disturbed, the king elevated Mordecai to Haman's former position, second only to himself.

This makes one wonder about the wisdom of Esther's carefully chosen strategy. From a moral perspective, one might argue that it was inappropriate for Esther to have lived in deception about her Jewish background. We also see that for over five years she lived a life quite unlike that of a person with strong religious convictions, as we otherwise know her to be.

One might also wonder whether, had Esther revealed her Jewish background and her connection with Mordecai back in chapter two, the whole threat to the Jewish community might have been circumvented altogether. The king might have promoted Mordecai there and then, and Haman might never have risen to power as he did. Or, equally, the king might have reacted quite differently, and the fact that Esther had concealed her Jewish background from him might unwittingly have opened the door to danger for her people.

All such speculation may seem far-fetched. What we must remember is that God chose to unfold His redemptive purposes through the events in precisely the manner and sequence in which they happened, and that this makes His sovereign power abundantly clear to us. Like Esther's reluctance to disclose her identity with the Jews, it is certainly true that we, too, are very often led into sin because we fear dangers that never in fact materialise. How often have we failed to bear witness to our Lord for fear of what others might think, only to discover, when we timidly open our mouths, that the response is quite contrary to what we had feared.

Esther's Second Request

Moving on in the chapter, we see that Haman's edict to exterminate the Jews remains in force and still needs to be dealt with. The king, it seems, had not thought that far ahead, and assumed that all was settled once the evil Haman had been put to death. But Esther and Mordecai knew better, and the queen had to approach the king once again. This time, however, we see her quite unlike her earlier, cool and calculating self: she threw herself at the king's feet, weeping, and pleaded with him to nullify Haman's evil edict. The similarities and differences with the previous chapter are striking. There we saw Haman fall before Esther, but his concern was to plead for his own life, and he was unsuccessful. Here we see Esther fall before the king to plead not for her own life but for the lives of her people — and she was granted what she asked for.

Let us consider what really appealed to the king as he gave Esther a patient hearing. She prefaced her request with a long preamble in four parts, following the King James wording of Esther 8:5: "If it please the king," "if I have found favour in his sight," "and the thing seem right before the king," and "and I be pleasing in his eyes." Two of these concerned whether the matter under discussion was acceptable to the king, and the other two whether Esther herself was acceptable to him.

We notice that Esther made no appeal to right and wrong, or to justice and injustice. Such considerations would scarcely have registered with the king. She was appealing instead to the king's own self-interest in her — he could not have remained indifferent to her misery, had something untoward happened to her people, because he loved her.

May the Best Edict Win

The king's reply amounted to something like bewilderment: he had already given her all of Haman's wealth, and had put her enemy to death for scheming against her people — what more, he seemed to ask, could she possibly want? A self-centred man like him could scarcely have imagined that Esther's concerns stretched beyond her own interests to the interests of her whole people.

The king quickly realised that Esther was not satisfied with his initial response. At the same time, his earlier edict could not simply be revoked, and he could not be bothered to work out a way around this difficulty himself. So he left Esther and Mordecai to draft a further edict to the Jews in his name, and to seal it with his signet ring in whatever manner they thought best. This was promptly done, and a contradictory edict was written and sent out to all one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia. Mordecai's edict mandated measure-for-measure retaliation by the Jews against their enemies. This was not merely a licence for self-defence, but neither was it a licence for indiscriminate slaughter. The verb used in verse thirteen to describe the action of the Jews is *naqam*, which indicates punitive retribution for a prior wrong.

Having accomplished his mission by sending out the new edict, Mordecai went out from the palace in royal splendour, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown upon his head. Seeing him, the people of Susa shouted and rejoiced. Recall that when the first edict, Haman's, had gone out, Mordecai went about clothed in sackcloth and ashes, and the city of Susa was thrown into confusion, with the whole community responding in mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing. Now, by contrast, they responded with gladness, joy and honour.

Ironically, no sooner had Esther shed her fears and disclosed that she herself was a Jew than many non-believers began to pretend to align themselves with the Jews, motivated, perhaps, by fear of facing the onslaught of the Jews. Some may have been genuinely converted to join God's people. There is no evidence that the fortunes of the Jews saw any dramatic material change; there was no needless killing or looting, and the empire in which they lived was no better a place at the end of the book than it had been at the beginning. But their outlook had changed, and they saw a wonderful new world before them.

We may notice a certain restraint in their response. Being practical people, they perhaps realised that there was nothing to prevent Mordecai from suffering as rapid a fall from power as Haman had done. By contrast, when life goes badly for us, we are quick to become anxious and to despair about the future, and slow to bring our concerns before God in believing prayer. Yet when life goes well, and our trials are over, we quickly rejoice and celebrate, but all too often forget to give thanks to God. It is always God's providence which engineers our lives, and all the circumstances that surround us.

Mordecai's Holy War

Mordecai's edict permitted the Jews not merely to defend themselves against their enemies, but to carry the battle to them — to take the offensive, as we would put it — and to put to the sword not only the combatants but their women and children too.

On a personal note, when I reached this stage of my study I stopped, and very nearly decided to give up. It troubled me endlessly. I thought I would pass this session on to someone more knowledgeable, better able to deal with the conflict it raised. I simply could not reconcile the fact that the seemingly just Mordecai and Esther were now apparently ready to wreak vengeance on the innocent as well as the guilty. More than this, the very idea sat uneasily with me, especially when I recalled one of the two great commandments given by our Lord Jesus Christ: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." But humbly accepting the limits of my own understanding, I pressed on.

Haman's edict against the Jews had not been merely a matter of personal animosity; it was an expression of an age-old enmity between the nations and God's people. Seen in this light, Mordecai's edict of retaliation was a form of holy war. The enmity between the Amalekites and God's people is recorded as far back as Genesis. In Exodus 17:16 we read, "For he said, Because the LORD hath sworn that the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." Again, in 1 Samuel 15:2 we read, "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt." What we see here is that the war against the Amalekites was to continue until they were fully removed, and that this was itself part of the plan God had set in motion.

In the holy war, the Jews acted as agents of God's righteous judgement against sinners. In Joshua 6:21 we read, "And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword." We see them functioning, in a sense, as a kind of human counterpart to the fire and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, or to the flood of Noah's day, which wiped out an entire generation. In each of these cases, the people concerned were not destroyed because they merely happened to be in

the wrong place at the wrong time, but because they were sinners steadfastly opposed to God.

Fortunately, God does not always carry out His sentence immediately. He reveals Himself as "the LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7).

It is important that we understand why we ourselves are not called to this kind of holy war. It is not because holy war was somehow wrong in its original historical context, as I had at first felt, nor was it a sub-Christian practice unworthy of the followers of Christ. We have not abandoned holy war simply because we are modern people who have become more civilised. Rather, it is because we now live in an era of the outpouring of grace, in which we fight with spiritual weapons to bring the gospel to the nations, defeating God's enemies not by destroying them but by seeing them graciously transformed into subjects of Jesus Christ.

The Grand Reversal

Unlike Haman's edict, which would have allowed no escape for God's people, Mordecai's edict condemned only those who attacked the Jews and their families. Those who bore no hostility towards God's people were unaffected by it. And yet it remains, in a sense, a complex situation for us to ponder. How can any of us stand in the presence of a holy God, when we ourselves have rebelled against Him in thought, word and deed? Who will deliver us from the sentence of death that still stands against us in the heavenly court? We need an Esther of our own — someone who will set aside personal interest, safety, dignity, honour, even life itself, in order to plead our case.

Such a mediator is ours in Jesus Christ. He was bruised for our transgressions, wounded for our iniquities, dishonoured for our glory, and plunged into darkness that we, rebellious sinners, might see light. This is the grand reversal to which all the reversals in Esther's story point.

Conclusion

Every Lord's Day is a day of feasting, when we celebrate the great reversal of our eternal fate. Are we celebrating that reality in our hearts, Sunday after Sunday? Like the unbelievers in Esther's time, people still go to church and identify themselves with the community of true believers for all manner of reasons. Simply being in church on a Sunday is no evidence in itself of our genuine standing as belonging to Christ. We must ask ourselves: Am I trusting in Christ's death in my place? Am I a genuine part of His community today? Will He say of me

personally, on the last day, "This one is one of mine"? If the answer to these profound questions is yes, then we have every reason to celebrate, for then nothing and no one in all creation can ever separate us from Christ's love.

Let the peace that comes from Christ's complete victory daily guard our hearts and minds against the wearing down of our experience in this fallen world. Let us look forward to the day when the end will indeed come, when we, too, will be able to sing with all the redeemed the praises of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.