

George Philip Bible Readings
The Book of Esther

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1:1-9

The IVP Bible Dictionary says, "This book tells how Esther, a Jewess, became wife of a Persian king, and was able to prevent the wholesale massacre of the Jewish race within the Persian empire." Even people who know little of the Bible tend to know that there is no mention of God in this book, no obvious sign of God's presence. But we must not conclude that God is absent. The whole story tells of the providence, power, people and purposes of God. It is the story of God's work being preserved and moved forward in a situation of alien and antagonistic culture. It tells of a time when the circumstances of God's people were unfavourable and dangerous and when the faith of God's people was weak and debilitated. If we are to understand the story, to thrill to it and to learn from it, we must set the historical context. From the Book of Joshua to the end of Second Chronicles we have the history of God's people in the land God promised to give them. The latter part of the story tells of the spiritual and moral decline of the nation in spite of the ministry of the prophets and the disciplines and mercies of God. The climax is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:15-21. Judah was overrun. Jerusalem and its Temple were ruined and the country virtually emptied of its Jewish population. The picture is of "trains" of captives marched off to Babylon. Into that story we must fit such characters as Daniel and his friends, and also Ezekiel the prophet. There was a remnant of faith among the Jews in Babylon and at first, shocked by what had happened to them, they recovered a degree of spirituality and looked back to better days as in Psalm 137:1-6. But they did forget. Like many backsliders, as the years went by they adjusted to their new circumstances, found interesting and profitable ventures in their new land and became worldly "believers". Parents forgot their spiritual priorities and inevitably their children had no spiritual commitment. When the time came that God was ready to do a new thing and to restore them to their land, as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah make plain, not many of them were interested, let alone willing.

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1:1-9

To get the feel of the historical setting we consider some dates.

586 BC The Fall of Jerusalem and the Jews taken captive to Babylon.

538 BC First year of Cyrus (2 Chron. 36:22-23) and, according to Ezra, the return to Jerusalem began, led by Zerubbabel. It was a comparative small number who returned but in spite of opposition they persevered and built the Temple (Ezra 4:4-5; 6:15).

518 BC (6th year of Darius). During the twenty years of the rebuilding the Jews in Babylon went on as if nothing was happening.

483 BC Ahasuerus is king of the vast Persian empire and this is the time of the story of Esther. But it was not until 458 BC that Ezra himself, in the reign of the son of Ahasuerus, returned to Jerusalem to accomplish the building of the walls of the city, and so re-establish God's work in God's place.

This very brief historical summary sets the story of Esther and of the Jews into the, context of over one hundred years and this fact alone is instructive. We all tend to take far too narrow a view of the on-going work of God. We must learn to see God striding down the generations of history and we must learn, as the hymn, "Thy Kingdom come! on bended knee the passing ages pray" says, that the passing ages and the slow watches of the night (when nothing seems to be happening) all belong to God and serve His purposes. We must learn also that the work of God in the world will always be under attack. We referred earlier to Ezra. 4:4-5 and must see there that there was an anti-Jewish movement in the great Persian empire. The story of Daniel tells of other outbursts against the Jews (Dan. 3:8ff; 6:4ff.). The Devil is always up to something, especially in the initial stages of a new phase of God's work.

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1:1-9

The scene is set. The empire of Ahasuerus with its twenty-seven provinces (Judah was one of them) stretched from India to Ethiopia and the Mediterranean Sea. It was vast, glorious and immense in wealth and in

indulgence. It was also an empire riddled with political intrigue. But within its administration, as might be expected, some Jews had risen to places of trust and responsibility in the Civil Service. Daniel was one such man (Dan.6:1-4); Nehemiah was a trusted servant in the king's household (Neh. 1:11-2:8) and in our present story Mordecai was in a position of influence. But God had other servants placed and ready to do His will when the time came. Queen Vashti, although there is no suggestion that she was particularly religious, was to take a stand on a moral issue and so set in motion the whole plan of God for His people's safety. The picture in this passage is of a magnificent royal banquet, totally secular, just like many modern occasions of celebration. There is no sign of God's presence; no-one was thinking about God or religion; no doubt many were angling for a position near the king, hoping for his favour and possibly for advancement in the social sphere if not in the political and economic sphere. How dangerous these occasions are! There was a similar banquet in Daniel's story (Dan. 5:1-6) and God interrupted that party and put the fear of death into everyone by His writing on the wall. God does sometimes weigh situations in His balance and if Christians are in the company when they should not be, then they too may well suffer God's devaluation. Ahasuerus' banquet went on undisturbed and the king displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom including, no doubt, the booty his royal house had gained from Judah. The king was in a benevolent mood and, though wine flowed freely, each man was allowed to drink in his own way. There was no compulsion, but it would take a brave man of real conviction to resist the social pressure of such a situation. The words "everybody does it" have the mark of the Devil in them, and the Devil is a liar.

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1:10-12

Did anyone have a sense of the impending crisis? Was anyone aware that the Devil was at work in enmity against a woman of principle, dignity and purity? Did anyone realise that God, the unseen, ignored God, was in fact beginning to move in a vast and significant way? Note how short a step it is from the king's drunken merriment (10) to his drunken rage (12). When will people, including Christians, learn that strong drink is a mocker (Prov. 20:1)? It deceives, bewilders and distorts the thinking; and under its influence the most dogmatic and irrational decisions are made. Read Prov. 23:29-35 and Isaiah 28:1, 3, 7. The king was happy, with a wine-induced happiness, but his true feelings and his great capacity for wise decisions which had made him a mighty emperor had been dulled. Vashti was his queen and held a place of unique regard in the life of Ahasuerus who, like other monarchs of his day, had a vast "household" of women. The king was proud of Vashti's beauty and character, and no doubt he loved her. But in his drunken state he wanted to show her off and boast about her as if she was part of his "property". But being a true woman, Vashti refused to be paraded before the leering, and no doubt lustful eyes of the male guests. Such a refusal of a husband's command was unheard of but the Queen was right. If she had consented she would have dishonoured both her own womanhood and her husband. We must admire the woman for her womanliness. Some may say it was her pride that motivated her. But there is a right kind of pride that refuses to give way to unseemliness of behaviour or dress or undress and that is something our generation needs to learn. When women's modesty and dignity decline and disappear (for whatever reason) then the whole of society is in danger. Here is a woman who, as far as we know, did not have faith, but who did right. It was to cost her dearly. But her action, under the providence of God, was the key to the deliverance of the Jews.

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1:13-22

The fact that one woman in godless society had had the grace and courage to be true to her womanliness sent a surge of panic through the ranks of the men in a way that sobered them up very quickly. They saw their total domination of women threatened. Perhaps they envisaged a suffragette movement, a women's liberation army behaving in a way that would make the men a laughing stock. They failed to see that in their stupid, drunken befuddlement they *were* in fact a laughing stock. They had already unmanned themselves. The king had asked for counsel regarding Vashti, seemingly realising that something of a constitutional crisis had arisen concerning the place and authority of the Queen. The stability of the government and the preservation of the empire and its economy were no doubt his main concerns. But the nobles were more concerned about their own little "patch" and it seems they were not at all sure about their capacity to handle their wives. They wanted a law passed to make sure wives honoured their husbands. That sounds like New Testament teaching. But men who refuse to be true and worthy men do not deserve to be respected, let alone honoured, and that also is New

Testament teaching. But the king seemed to think the idea was a good one and with little or no thought he gave the royal consent and the whole drama moved forward a significant stage. It would be easy to assess all this on a mere political or sociological level. But the truth is that God was in it all, preparing a royal place for the girl who was to play such a significant part in the plan of salvation. But we must not forget the hurt and pain involved, nor the shame and regret that came upon the king as well as others. Right behaviour and right relationships are a vital part of Christian life and witness. Read Eph. 5: 21-33.

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2:1-4

Note the word "later"(after) and remember that we have to live with the consequences of the decisions we make even when we have made them in a befuddled state, prompted by inclination and anger. The king remembered various things: his exhibitionism, wilfulness and the fact he had been manipulated by his nobles. He realised that his outburst of anger had caused him to put away the very woman he loved above all others; and that the dignity of his wife had exposed the shame of his own unseemliness. He knew he was trapped because the law of the Medes does not change. But he was a totalitarian ruler and could have changed the rules to suit himself. No doubt the nobles were aware of this and they began at once to manipulate the king, possibly appealing to his vanity, but presumably having a vested interest in maintaining the "status quo" politically in order to preserve their own position and power. What we have to learn from this is the danger of allowing ourselves to be manoeuvred into a position where people have power over us. There is danger also in having so rigid an attitude to the "establishment" that we countenance wrong rather than "rock the boat". One of the reasons the High Priest and the other leaders hated Jesus was that He challenged the system and was not deterred by the claim that things had always been done in a certain way. There is no place for rebellion just for rebellion's sake, but there are times when in the interest of truth and honour we must stand our ground no matter what it costs us. The king was not willing for that and agreed to the plan for acquiring a new wife. The mess he was in all started when he got drunk. We need to remember that other things than drink or drugs lead to intoxication: popularity, emotion, power and pleasure, to name but a few things, can all go to our heads.

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2:5-7

This is a very human story of a beautiful orphan girl who had been brought up by her cousin. They were a family whose circumstances had been tragic because they were exiled from their own land which meant so much to them and to all Jews. Now Mordecai, being a Jew, would have a sense of history and of destiny, no matter how much it had been dulled by years in Babylon. It may have been that he had great sympathy with the Zionist cause and may even have sent money to support the rebuilding of the Temple but he stayed in Babylon. He may have begun to feel deep in his spirit a new awareness of God, a kindling of hope of some kind that he did not fully understand. There were few signs that God was about to do wonderful things. But there had been little sign of God and of His intentions away back in Egypt when the Jews laboured under their taskmasters (Ex. 1:8ff). Mordecai may have been reading the signs of the times, aware of political intrigue, and aware of how easily at any time in history that can burst out into a wave of anti-semitism. Mordecai may even have been recalling the past stories of his people, of how God raised up His servants ready for the day of His power. He may have recalled Joseph's elevation to be Prime Minister of Egypt (Gen. 41:37ff) to be ready to be the preserver of the family of Jacob. Mordecai may even have been praying that God would raise up a man to be His servant "at such a time as this", little realising the part *he* would have to play. Do we, when we pray for God's work throughout the world, realise that God is in fact at work in ways and on a dimension far beyond anything we have yet become aware of? Read such passages as Isa. 55:8-11; Isa. 43:11-13; Rom. 11:33-36. In Babylon God had His servants ready and in place, although they did not really know it as yet. But God would get the "message" through to them. He never fails.

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2:8-11

The context of the story is an unpleasant one because it has to do with the king's harem and his many concubines. It would appear that then, as now, the life of society, high and low, was obsessed with sexual indulgence. It is to be hoped that the Jews, with the Ten Commandments and their best traditions, kept themselves apart from that way of life. It would have been part of their witness to a holy God. Behaviour in

relationships is still part of witness and we are commanded to abstain from even the appearance of evil (1 Thess 5:22 AV). When Esther was taken, along with so many others, she had no option and Mordecai could not prevent it. But, godly Mordecai was also wise and he had taught and guided the young girl well (10). Neither of them gave way to impulsive reaction or opposition because that would have possibly meant immediate execution and God needed them both alive and in good health. Esther submitted. There must have been real faith or else she could not have maintained the gracious bearing that so impressed the supervisor (9). She may not yet have known why God was dealing with her in this way but she humbled herself under His mighty hand (1 Pet. 4:12-19). Perhaps as a Jew she instinctively accepted suffering as part of life. In the harem she accepted what benefits and luxuries were given her. She may well have known the story of how Daniel and his companions refused all such benefits (Dan 1:5ff). But different situations call for different actions and it is our business to do what we believe God would have us do and not to copy slavishly what others have done. It may be that other Jews from Esther's and Mordecai's community criticised the girl and reckoned she had "failed to take a stand" for all things Jewish. Mordecai would have been aware of that, day by day as he sought news of how it was with his cousin (11). If he was a man of prayer at all, he would certainly have a new earnestness. We think of Mordecai again tomorrow.

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2:8-11

If we look on to v.11 and 19 it seems that Mordecai was to some real extent an accepted figure in the civil service with access to the office of administration (the king's gate) and with some freedom to be walking near the well-guarded court of the harem. It may have been through the "office" that he knew in advance of Esther's name on the conscription list and had time to counsel her. If this is so we have to see the meticulous detail of God's planning. Do not forget that God is in all this, planning to frustrate the hellish attack soon to be made on His people. The heart of Mordecai must have been burdened and exercised day by day as months went by. Compare 1:3 with 2:16 and see that four years go past. Four years is a long time to pray and to wait for an answer. Mordecai was very human. True godliness is always so. You can imagine him worrying about his cousin. He may well have been rebuking himself, thinking that if he had gone back to Jerusalem with his family none of this would have happened to Esther. But if he had gone to Jerusalem he would have been out of God's will and would have missed the significant service for which he had been prepared by God over many years. You could imagine him wondering what he had done with his life apart from trying to be a true man of God in his daily job. But that too is witness and service. He would ask himself what he should do now. And what *could* he do? There was nothing to be done but to wait upon God, to "render to Caesar the things that were Caesar's and to God the things that were God's" (Matt. 22:15-22) and in that way to let nothing complicate or confuse his walk with God. That is the way to be ready for God when clear thinking and decisive action are required. It went on for a long time without any apparent development but Mordecai did not grow weary in well-doing (1 Cor. 15: 58). Esther had a good prayer-partner.

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2:12-18

It seems that each girl conscripted to the harem was regarded as automatically "married" to the king and "available" at his pleasure. For any girl of sensitivity it must have been a nightmare existence. Esther had not let it be known she was a Jew but right from the start she was recognised as being in a class by herself (9, 15, 17). There was no suggestion of her seeking to manipulate the situation in order to gain favour (15), and as the story goes on it becomes very clear that it was the beauty of character and not just appearance and gorgeous clothes that made the king choose her as his new queen. We are not told of Esther's personal reactions when she realised she was to be made queen to this bad-tempered pagan ruler who was given to such extravagant gestures as recorded in chapter one and again here in v.18. No one was ever quite sure what Ahasuerus would do next, as the first verse of chapter 3 makes plain. We are not told if Esther prayed. We are not told how aware she was of the God of Israel, even though she had been well taught by Mordecai. It is easy for us to say she needed to look to God and to wait for God, but we are not in her position. Perhaps both she and her cousin were at this stage just accepting these difficulties and dangers as things that happen to anyone. The Jews had already been through a lot; was this just one more thing? But, whether they were aware of it or not, what was happening to Mordecai and Esther was all bound up with what was happening in Jerusalem and it was part of God's saving preparation to preserve His people and His work in the face of a great assault against them by the powers of

evil. We will never understand our experience as Christians if we interpret everything only in respect of ourselves. We are part of God's work, part of His plan, servants of His will and, in ways beyond our understanding, the things that happen to us work out for the furtherance of the Gospel (Phil. 1:12-14). We do well to ponder Paul's words to the Colossians whom he had never met (Col. 1; 24). The story in Exod. 17:8-13 shows how prayer in one place affects events in another place. We are involved with a God who is working.

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2:19-23

The drama heightens and a simple happening is recorded in the books of the king's court. It was to prove significant in the near future. How we need to learn not to despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10), nor to dismiss simple acts of righteousness and loyalty as having no spiritual significance. Note the words "in those days" (21 RSV) and note also that God had Mordecai in a place of influence and Esther in a place of opportunity. Someone was managing and directing this drama with great skill. What a God we have! The story concerns plans for a coup, an attack on the person and position of the king. The scheme reached Mordecai's ears. Perhaps he made it his business to listen and to know what was going on. We must not be too simple or innocent in a world like this. When the good civil servant heard of the plot, he did not react by saying, "It is just what the king deserves because of his ruthless indulgence and tyranny over these girls." As a Jew, well taught by God, Mordecai had a clear sense of loyalty to the throne and to its government, in spite of all its faults (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). This is something that needs to be remembered in our generation when it seems many people (and politicians) seem to think they have the right to ignore laws duly passed into the statute book simply because *they* feel the laws are bad ones. Mordecai did his duty as a citizen in exposing the plot against the king. Granted, he did it through Esther, and that may have been to strengthen the girl's position. But it may also have been to avoid any suggestion that Mordecai was trying to "cash in" on the situation and get promotion for himself. But in due time Mordecai's action, so simple and so non-spiritual in itself, was to prove *the* significant factor in God's scheme of deliverance. Such thoughts as these should give us a great sense of the importance of the routine of daily life. Trust in God and see to it that we do what is right.

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3:1-6

If we compare 1:3; 2:16; and 3:7 we see that nine years have passed since the beginning of the story. For some (Esther and Mordecai) the time will have felt heavy but for others it will have flown past. The life of the empire went on in its godless way. The presence of a large number of Jews was not regarded as significant so long as they remained quiet about their religion. We may not criticise the Jews because so many of us keep quiet about who and what we are and come out into the open about our religion only on Sundays. The story goes on "after these events". After Esther was installed as queen and Mordecai's name noted as a faithful servant of the crown, just when some measure of hope for the future may have been stirring, a terrible thing happened. In a way typical of this impulsive king, Haman was exalted to high political power, and a tremor of apprehension went through the kingdom among the Persians as well as among the Jews. No doubt a variety of explanations would be given as to why this powerful and threatening character rose so quickly to political prominence. All the people of Persia had an interest because their lives would be affected and the political commentators would be assessing the possible consequences. It is all very up-to-date and reminds us of how necessary it is for Christians to be aware of what is happening in the nation and what trends are evident. All too often we begin to pray only after major political decisions have been taken. Christians pray now (1988) about the Abortion Bill but did we pray at the beginning when it was first introduced? We pray now about the teaching of homosexuality in schools but did we pray when first secular trends and Marxist philosophy began to permeate the school situation? Perhaps we were all too secular ourselves, too concerned with improving our standard of living and regarding luxuries as essentials. Sometimes God has to allow startling things into our situation to awaken us to spiritual priorities.

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3:1-6

We ended yesterday's note by suggesting that God, and not just the Devil, was in this emerging situation, and that is something we must never forget. Yes, the Devil works his evil plans in relentless enmity against God's people, but the Devil is not in charge of the world. It is God who rules in the kingdoms of men, raising up and

casting down politicians and parties and governments as He sees wise and good for the developing of His purposes (Dan. 4:17). But we must not forget history. Things are not as sudden as sometimes seems. Haman was an Agagite, and that links him with the Amalekites who should have been dealt with generations previously, as the story in 1 Sam.15:1-3,7-11 makes plain. Compare Deut. 25:17-19. Two lessons have to be learned. We have an example here of how past disobedience of a major kind catches up after a long time and precipitates a crisis. But we see also how the declared judgment of God, delayed for a long time, is not forgotten and here, in a new situation that seems at first to be disastrous for the people of God, the judgment of the Agagites is about to operate. But we see something else. In the face of evil the leaders and people all seemed to capitulate and they bowed to Haman. Evil had power. It seemed wise and politic to take no chances. But there was one notable dissenter and that disturbed people whose attitude was "peace at any price". When Mordecai would not do "what everyone else was doing" and made it plain that his attitude was based on his faith in God and that, as a Jew, he would not bow in worship before a man, they went to Haman. They were protecting themselves. They did not want Haman to think they were part of a "movement" of rebellion. At the same time they may have had a hope that, through the Jews, with Mordecai "high up" in the civil service, there might be a modification of the law. The mistake they made was in going to the politicians and not to the king. We too must learn to go right to the throne (Heb. 4:16).

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3:1-6

We stay with these verses in order to learn two final lessons. We must see that the first result of Mordecai's taking a stand on spiritual principle was that the situation immediately became worse, even to the point of disaster. The latent enmity of Haman and his tribe came out into the open. But this is not to be regarded as merely negative. In 2 Thess. 2:1-12 we see that it is part of God's plan to expose evil for what it is prior to His full final and swift judgment of it. Whether on a national or a personal level God has His methods of showing sin and evil for what they really are (Rom. 7:13). This introduces basic reality into our thinking about all situations. The second lesson we must grasp is the fact of the arrogance, pride, greed and anger of the Devil and all his servants. In spite of his exaltation to power, Haman could not enjoy it because one man, a Jew, a believer in God, refused to conform and bow down. It may have been that deep down Haman felt that this one "man of God" was an omen of disaster. His fury was not just an issue of personal affront, it is seen to be anti-God and with hellish intensity he set himself to destroy all the Jews. Many of a younger generation who read these notes need to make it their business to read some of the history of the last war to be reminded of the "holocaust" when a modern Haman, Hitler by name, set himself to destroy, systematically and without a trace of humanity, the whole Jewish race. If we read rightly the political comments of our own land we will sense that "anti-semitism" is by no means a dead issue. No one suggests that the Jews are perfect people. Indeed their nation is largely secular, but down through history God's hand has been on His chosen people and whenever a spirit of "destroy the Jews" has emerged history has been at a crisis point. For ourselves as Christians, learn this: there is an enemy who never gives up. That is why we must be sure of what we are doing before we take the kind of stand that is likely to precipitate a crisis.

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3:7-11

These verses are full of drama. The month of Nisan was the time the Jews celebrated the Passover, remembering God's great deliverance of His people from Egypt. Now the people of God were again facing crisis and seeming disaster. The evil man Haman resorted to the superstitious casting of lots to find out the best time for his plan to succeed. We *may* interpret this as Haman consulting the Devil (because magical rites, fortune telling, ouija boards and the like are not to be thought of as mere human foibles). But the end result, as we shall see, was not very competent. Just as in wartime we could jam the enemy's radar, so God can frustrate and complicate the enemy's careful scheming. There are many evidences of the Devil's activity in the story of Esther but we must see that God is more clever and more competent by far. Haman's approach to the king was a mixture of truth and lies, a technique that politicians and others, including Christians, often resort to in order to gain their end. The Jews (although Haman did not actually name them to the king) did have their own laws, but they did not disregard the laws of Persia except that they would not "bow down" to worship an earthly king. They had, of course, been counselled by God through Jeremiah to serve the king of Babylon and his land (Jer. 27:17; 29:7) and so humble themselves under God's mighty hand of discipline (1 Pet. 5:6). It is not always the

right thing to do to take a stand against what we regard as unrighteous and un-spiritual. Here the accusation was untrue and unjust and the King, fearing a loss of revenue and at the same time being assured of a "lump sum" payment, without making enquiry of any kind, gave consent. We have already had evidence of the foolishness and impetuosity of the king but even he should have raised questions when such vast sums of money were involved. He should have been worried about Haman's evident desire for power. Who might he try to destroy next? But there was a blindness on many minds. There often is when God purposes deliverance for His people.

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3:12-15

We say glibly at times that man proposes but God disposes, but there is Scripture to support the assertion. Read Proverbs 16:33. The advice of the "dice" (7) to Haman involved a delay of eleven months before the planned annihilation of the Jews. In one sense the delay is beyond explanation, just as Hitler's delay in crossing the English Channel in the grim early days of the last war was beyond explanation. In another sense, when you believe in a God who hears and answers prayer, nothing is beyond explanation. God's sovereign providence is the explanation. Of course it is not until the next chapter that we are told of the mighty wave of prayer among the people of God. It often takes a crisis of massive proportions to make believers become serious about prayer. It may be that in many unknown places there were those who were faithful in prayer for the people and work of God. We will not know until Heaven just how much we owe to those who pray for us. Prayer is largely a hidden work. It is long-term work and that is perhaps why it is so unpopular. The last verse of our passage is fascinating. The king and Haman were confident and unconcerned, never thinking for a moment; that anyone would have the desire or the power to question what they had decided. They may even have been unaware of the apprehension that was perplexing and disturbing the capital city. There were those who, although they may not have had any religious convictions or awareness, were aware that a crisis of some great significance was about to break. There may be a lesson here for all of us in the sense that we should make it our business to be aware of what is going on in the world, to discern the trends and developments in society, not least in order that our prayers might be more specific and that we should not be taken by surprise. We need to be prepared. That is why we must watch as well as pray.

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4:1-3

There was a new spirit of prayer among the people of God and it was allied not only to concern but to a basic spirit and expression of repentance. There was an earnestness among God's people that had not been much in evidence before this crisis. It may have been that part of the concern of the Jews was with regard to their worldly position and possessions. But on the other hand it may have been that at long last the Jews were beginning to waken up to the vast, spiritual significance of the fact that for some time the work of rebuilding Jerusalem had been going on. They had been aware of it since the decree of Cyrus; they had no doubt rejoiced in it, and they may have contributed financially to the venture out of a sense of national loyalty and in memory of the "great days of their spiritual past". But that is not the same as commitment, and the many who had had no inclination to go to Jerusalem (disrupting the routine of their lives) may now have felt that they had lost out in a way that was irretrievable, a way that was now going to cost them life itself. It may have taken this terrible crisis to bring home to the Jews that the work of God is one work and not separate sections, one in Persia and one in Jerusalem. The work is one great battle-field but the fierce fighting can move from one section to another. What was happening in Persia may have been specifically an assault by the Devil in an attempt to stop the spiritual advance in Jerusalem going any further. Think this way: what is happening in the home congregation may need to be interpreted in terms of what is being fought for and won on the mission field where our brothers and sisters are serving. The great danger is that in crisis we forget about the Devil; we see everything in terms of the decisions and actions of evil men; and we forget God. But if we forget God, we lose our assurance, peace and hope. If we remember that God is on the throne we will look to Him (Rom. 8:28; Ps. 73:2-3, 16-20).

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4:4

The appearance of Mordecai dressed in sackcloth at the King's gate resulted in Esther getting to know what was going on. Her first reaction was to try to defuse the situation, to make it less obviously a spiritual confrontation.

But Mordecai would have none of this. It seems he was more assured than ever that this was the way forward. He could not believe that God would allow His people to be slaughtered totally. Mordecai was already thinking of the far future and God's plans. That would need men to be leaders. Where were they? Somewhere in Persia, perhaps even in Susa, there was a teenager called Ezra and a little boy of perhaps four years of age called Nehemiah. They, as we now know, were destined for significant service for the future of God's work, and here was Haman, like Herod after him, seeking to slaughter the young and the old. Ezra may have been at the stage of wondering what God's calling was, and Nehemiah's parents may have been praying that their son might be raised up to serve God's cause. What do we pray for our young folk? *When* do we start praying for them in earnest in respect of their spiritual future? To what extent do we encourage the young to be spiritually minded? When do we start encouraging the young to be prayer-meeting Christians? Or do we pamper young converts, providing more and more for their spiritual comfort, thereby debilitating them in terms of true, committed costly discipleship and service? Of course, we cannot encourage our young folk to do what we ourselves refuse to do. The trouble is that crisis can come overnight. We know not what a day may bring. It is best to be prepared because when the crunch comes there is no time to recover spiritual slackness. Remember that in due time, out of this situation that was resolved by prayer, Ezra became Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs, and Nehemiah became Private Secretary to the King. God is a good organiser, certainly far better than any of us.

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4:5-9

Take the development slowly to see the full picture. It started in v.1-3 with a great wave of what seems to us extravagant spirituality. That can sometimes be superficial, a sign of self-pity, an indication of despair which can anchor us to our failures. It can, of course, be an awakening to the fact of spiritual drifting and the beginning of a returning to God. In this case we see the wise providence of God in over-ruling Haman's timetable to give the Jews time to waken up properly and to sort themselves out spiritually. This is one of many examples of God out-smarting the Devil (Ps. 2). We saw in 3:15 that Susa was perplexed and this may have been amazement at the sudden surge of spirituality among the Jews. Up to this point they had not realised that their neighbours took God so seriously. I wonder what *our* neighbours and workmates think about us! No doubt the Persians were mystified by the Jews' reactions, expecting rather some sort of political protest or appeal. Worldly people simply cannot see any point in prayer. But note also that Mordecai's activities were not exclusively "spiritual". He wanted Esther to have all the details of the situation. He also wondered (8) if the king was in fact aware of the exact terms of the legislation to which he had given consent. Mordecai was prepared to use all legitimate means to approach the king and to appeal for a change of heart. Of course, this was placing Esther in a dangerous position (v.11). What is more, on Mordecai's advice, she had kept her Jewish nationality secret (2:20). Was it wise to make this revelation now? Would it accomplish anything? Was there not someone else more strategically placed to do this particular task? We cannot but sympathise with Esther, although some suggest that she had accommodated herself to her new "station" in life and did not want to endanger it. It is very easy to criticise, isn't it?

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4:10-17

How would we have reacted in Esther's place, being apparently out of favour with the king (11), and facing what certainty seemed an impossible request? The young woman was very aware of the crisis facing her people and aware of the very unpredictable temperament of the king. No doubt she was also aware of the fact of God and the power of God who had preserved her in this new and exalted position as queen. But it is a demanding challenge when our orthodox theology is put to the test in a specific and dangerous situation. Esther was willing, but felt intervention was hopeless and impossible. Mordecai's answer to her was plain and blunt and realistic. It could not have been easy for him to speak thus to someone he loved. It is fairly easy to be "straight" spiritually to those with whom we have an "official" relationship and we can make very plain to them what is the right thing to do in obedience to God. But when it is someone we love, and when spiritual obedience will be costly for them and even dangerous, it is not easy to speak. But we must be faithful to God. We cannot allow our loved ones to go wrong. That would be a denial of love. Mordecai's counsel and exhortation to Esther was simply, "Put yourself at God's disposal." God had put her where she was. God had preserved and advanced her. It was not accidental the way her life had worked out and the God who had led her step by step thus far would not now allow the situation to abort. There is a consistency about God and there is seldom need for sudden or

radical changes of direction. Whether we are aware of it or not God keeps our going out and our coming in (Ps. 121:8). Granted it is alarming to discover that you are God's appointed man or woman for a crisis situation, but we are not allowed to conclude that God has made a mistake.

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4:10-17

Esther was made to realise that she was one of the Jews and therefore would live or die with them. She would be challenged, "Are you one of them?" just as Peter in the New Testament was challenged. Would she then deny God (John 18:25-27)? Esther was also told that if she refused to serve the God of her salvation then God would find another person to do His will. Think of Jesus' words to the Pharisees about the kingdom being taken from them and given to a people bringing forth the fruit of obedience (Matt. 21:43). Spiritual privilege *brings* responsibility, it does not *excuse* us from responsibility. The words at the end of v.14 stir, constrain and challenge the heart. Who knows but that we are the men and women for this particular time of crisis in our own church and nation? Are we ready? Are we capable? Are we spiritually equipped? If not, why not? When God challenges as to who will go for Him, is there reluctance? Do we react by thinking of someone "better than us" who should do the work? At other times we tend to be resentful if there is the suggestion that others are "better" than we are. It takes a time of crisis to reveal what we are and to expose the shallowness of our spirituality and the reservations in our commitment. Esther responded to the direct challenge which had, of course, an element of warning in it. But she was aware that she could not stand alone in this matter. She called on all the Jews to stand with her and to stand in for her in the presence of God in the matter of prayer. This is something that every servant of God in the front line of the spiritual battle against the powers of evil is entitled to ask for. This is what our missionaries are entitled to expect on a long-term basis. From every corner of the field there comes the cry, "Brethren pray for us." (1 Thess. 5:25) A missionary was giving thanks for prayer and said, "There are few Christians prepared to go on praying for us as long as twenty years." Do we lose interest in what God is doing unless it is in our little corner?

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5:1-8

We have to view the development of events from two standpoints. There is no doubt that Esther was very aware of the over-ruling providence of God, since her opportunity to enter the king's presence came within three days and the king made very plain from the start that he was disposed to regard her favourably. No doubt Esther gave thanks in her heart to God for this truly wonderful answer to prayer. But she kept her head; she had planned carefully and she did not rush with her ultimate request. There is a time for diplomacy and tact, and no doubt the king was flattered in thinking that his beautiful queen thought as highly as he did of Haman. Perhaps murmurs of complaint about Haman's appointment had reached the king and he was glad of this apparent assurance that he had been right. With so much on her mind and heart we cannot imagine that Esther enjoyed the party and yet she gave that impression and issued a further invitation which, of course, led the king to repeat his extravagant promise (3,6) which, being made in public before witnesses, would be binding. We can imagine Esther's continued praying for God's hand to be on her, to keep her right in all she was doing. But now, think of the reaction of Mordecai and all the other praying Jews. They were crying to God to restrain and to bring down the evil man Haman, and they were praying with thanksgiving for Queen Esther, one of their own, who was taking a stand for them and acting as intercessor. What did they think when the news of this double banquet in honour of Haman got round? They had been told of Esther's great confession, "If I die, I die" (4:16) and their hopes rose. Had she gone back on it? Had she failed? Had God denied their earnest prayers? Were they tempted to stop praying? The Devil would certainly tempt them to do so and all too often, because things do not work out the way we expect, we stop praying. That is the wrong thing to do.

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5:1-8

The Jews were praying as they had not prayed for a long time. There was a sense of urgency in their prayers, but everything seemed to be going from bad to worse. That was certainly what appearances suggested. The only thing they could do was to trust God and wait to see what would happen. God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform and He often hides both His presence and His activity (Isa. 45:15; Hab. 3:4). But His ways are perfect and His methods are sure (Isa. 55:8-11). If we are to trust God and to trust ourselves to His gracious

power, then we must make it our business to learn what God is like. He does not awaken us by His Spirit to pray with specific purpose only to deny our requests and to baffle us. Of course our faith is never perfect. Time and again we pray and then are surprised when God answers our prayer. Think of the unbelieving surprise and astonishment in the story in Acts 12:12-16. The company did not believe Peter was at the door because they were in the very process of praying for his release. But does not God say in Isa. 65:24, "Before they call I will answer, and while they are yet speaking I will hear." When we are praying we must believe that the same Holy Spirit who inspires our prayers is at the very same time active in furthering the sure purposes of God. This linking of prayer and the work of the Spirit is spoken of by Paul in Phil. 1:19. But God is not only working salvation for His people, He is also preparing sure judgment, in this case for the man Haman, in whom we see something of an incarnation of evil. How much there is in this story to encourage us to trust the unseen God:

"Thrice blest is he to whom is given

The instinct that can tell

That God is on the field when He

Is most invisible.

"He hides Himself so wondrously,
As though there were no God;
He is least seen when all the powers
Of ill are most abroad." (

(Faber)

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5:9-14

The Jews had concluded that Haman was greatly in favour and that filled them with apprehension. The success of Haman was manifest as he made his way home, but his gloating triumph and devilish expectation were spoiled for him by seeing Mordecai still refusing to bow to him. What total vanity marked this man! His wrath in v.9 is typical of all who take an anti-God stand. The boasting in v.11-12 is likewise a typical mark of "anti-Christ" in the world. Evil can give such an appearance of assurance, never dreaming for a moment that it will be frustrated. Evil and unbelief always have a very poor opinion of God. Yet in v.13 we see something of the essential insecurity and dissatisfaction of evil. Evil and evil people are usually restless, seldom able to enjoy even their successes, and pressing on to "prove" to themselves that they really have won the war. Think of the agitation of the Chief Priests when, having accomplished the death of Christ, they still wanted to set a guard on the tomb even though they were, as they claimed, quite sure the promise of resurrection was a fraud. Now note in v.14 how eagerly the family and friends urged Haman on in his evil intent, assuring him that the wretched Mordecai would hang on the gallows the next morning. Think also of the grim spectre of the gallows against the sky. It would seem very ominous to the Jews. They would have a real sense of evil. Would they not pray, "Lord God, deal with the powers of evil and bring them to nothing." They did not know *then* that their prayers were being answered specifically and that Haman was being driven on to his day of judgment. And it was going to take him by surprise. But then, many will be surprised on God's day of judgment.

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6:1-5

Before studying these verses read Ps. 7:14-17 and Prov. 5:21-23. Never forget that God has His eye on everything and everyone. His eye runs to and fro on the face of the earth (2 Chron. 16:9; Zech. 4:10). We forget this, and we forget the wise perfection of all God's methods, often failing to see God in some of the simple things that happen and in some of the perplexing things. How many of the Jews saw the hand of God when Esther was conscripted into the harem of the Persian king? How many of the Jews remembered how Joseph, forgotten by his own people, was raised to power in the court of Pharaoh? Perhaps both Esther and Joseph were criticised for compromise. Perhaps some would boast of Moses who forsook the privileges of Pharaoh's court and exchanged them for a share in the sufferings of God's people (Heb. 11: 24-26). But it had been in Pharaoh's court that Moses learned the skills of a lawgiver. We are wise if we hesitate before saying of another that a real Christian would not go there or work there. But the main theme here is answered prayer: not a bolt from the blue, nor a miraculous sign or wonder, but a bout of sleeplessness caused perhaps by indigestion or over-indulgence in wine. Of course it could have been a sudden bout of worry about his empire, or perhaps Ahasuerus had a twinge of bad conscience regarding his recent neglect of Esther who had shown herself to be

such a worthy queen. He may even have had some remorse or even shame about how he had treated Vashti years previously. Whatever the actual cause, the explanation was simply that God needed the king awake. The natural reaction to a banquet would be sound sleep. But when God is active in answer to prayer things are not natural. We are dealing here with miracle, if only we can recognise it. The story is full of "coincidences". The king chose the right book to read. He read the right chapter. He was impressed and asked questions. And then - what a coincidence - at just the right moment Haman arrived in court. This drama has a glorious director who knows His business.

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6:6-11

Haman arrived at court ready to receive the final word of permission that would spell the end of Mordecai and all the Jews (5). It is clear from v.6 that the king's appreciation of Mordecai was far more important now than in 2:23 when the matter was simply minuted in the records. Some may have felt that Mordecai deserved at least some reward and many may have been disappointed by the lack of recognition. But had the reward been given earlier a vital factor in the plan of deliverance would have been missing now. God's denials can often be full of significance for the future. His ways are indeed past finding out (Rom. 11:33). But now look at the astonishing pride of the evil man Haman. He was totally consumed with himself. Haman was as blind here as Judas was in the Gospel story. The Devil is not a good master to work for. Even though Haman was oblivious of the drama that was being worked out, the Devil himself must have known by now that he had been out manoeuvred by God. Of course, at this stage neither Esther nor Mordecai nor the Jews were aware of this. Haman arranged the glorious level of the reward to be given and news of this "investiture" would have spread like wildfire. The crisis point came in v.10. Can you imagine Mordecai's feelings of apprehension as Haman strode towards him with his "king's escort" and with his face like thunder. But as Mordecai was led in procession (11) would not he and all the praying Jews give voice to the words of Psalm 126? The Lord had done great thing for them and they were glad! Perhaps they were also a little ashamed of their bouts of unbelief and despair. How we need to learn to trust the trustworthy God, especially when everything is very dark.

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6:12-14

All was not yet completed and we can but trust that the Jews kept on praying. Mordecai honoured publicly by the king for services to the crown, was back in his usual work position at the king's gate. Haman seemed resigned to some disastrous fate and felt totally humiliated, no doubt assuming that the invitation to the banquet would now be cancelled. He found no help among family and friends. Those very people who had been so enthusiastic and supportive in 5:14 when it seemed that they would share in Haman's advancement now became the "I told you this would happen" kind of people. They seemed to sense more clearly than Mordecai just how far-reaching results this situation could have. To what extent their attitude to persecutors of the Jews was mere superstition we cannot say. Some people may have had a good knowledge of history and may have drawn obvious conclusions from that. Some may have had, through their working contacts with Jews, knowledge of the words of the Jewish prophets. Had not Isaiah said that no weapon would prosper against God's people (Isa 54: 15-17)? In the renewing of the fortunes of the Jews and the return to Jerusalem had there begun to filter through to even the pagan population of Persia the fact that the Jews had a God who, even though He disciplined them for their sins, set a very high value on them, regarding them as the apple of His eye (Zech 2:8)? We cannot answer these questions with any degree of accuracy but we do not forget the presence, power and effective ministry of God the Holy Spirit. He is the great ally the people of God have in every situation and He knows no restriction or limitation. The words of family, friends and advisers in v.13 must have sounded like a death knell to Haman. Then at that very moment the king's messengers arrived to escort him to the palace and the banquet. He arrived there in haste, certainly not in a mental and psychological condition to face the biggest crisis and reverse of his evil life. It reminds us of the story of the man who was told, "This very night your soul shall be required of you." (Lk. 12:20) It is best to make sure we are doing right by God.

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7:1-4

We take the story in brief sections in order to see clearly how it develops, how Esther handled each stage, and how the hand of God's providence was ordering and controlling events. For the third time (5:3,6; 7:2) without

any pressure being brought to bear on him, the king made his sweeping, unconditional promise to Esther. What a guarantee this was that the issue would be sure! The time had come for the queen to confess her Jewish ancestry and to identify herself with her people in their time of need. She did so without launching an attack on Haman. She made her statement in terms of basic facts, making quite plain the devastating range of the execution edict, and making equally plain that it involved the king in losing the wife whom he now regarded with such favour. But Esther had thought well before making her appeal and there is a lesson here for all who are called to the defence of the Gospel, especially in places of authority, secular and ecclesiastical. Impromptu "off-the-cuff" speeches declaring passionately our loyalty to spiritual issues can be stirring and thrilling. But if we have not done our homework, if we have not thought through the issues, if we have not prepared well our minds, hearts and words, we are not likely to make any true impact. Those who oppose us will see the flaws in our arguments and will demolish our case. This is why we must regard committee meetings, Presbytery meetings and General Assembly gatherings as matters of importance and come to them well prepared. We must learn to work and to fight in the right areas, at the right time, and in the right way. Note how wisely Esther brought home to the king the economic results of the destruction of the Jews. Without them his kingdom would be vastly poorer, and he was told all this by his queen who was willing to be made a slave. This is powerful pleading.

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7:5-10

This is indeed a "crisis" passage. Esther had to name Haman. The king's reaction in rage must have been frightening to witness as he strode out of the room. Haman, accused as a foe and an enemy of the king (the plight of the Jews was not in sight at the moment) was in terror, fearing the worst. Esther could not at this point have been sure of what the unpredictable king would do. After all, in reaction to an earlier feeling of affront he had banished Vashti his former queen (1:12-19). But look at the once proud and ruthless Haman, a man without mercy, now begging Esther to be "nice" to him and pleading with her to intercede with the king on his behalf. There was no indication that Haman was repenting of his evil plan that stemmed from his hellish pride and desire for power. This was sheer self-interest. He had planned evil and it had all gone wrong. The consequences of his devilish actions and prejudice against the people who belonged to God were coming home to afflict him. He was faced with paying the price of his own wrongdoing and he was sorry for himself. But his passionate outburst of pleading, no doubt with tears and crying, was his undoing because as the king re-entered the room it seemed to him that Haman was making wrong "advances" to the queen. The king's words seem to have been a pronouncement of judgment, and the covering of Haman's face seems to signify his arrest and his being led away. At this point Harbona, one of the king's chamberlains (1:10), made known the fact of the gallows built by Haman to hang Mordecai who was now a favoured man in the sight of the king (6:3,10). That sealed the fate of Haman. We cannot but be amazed by the swift and total turn-around of the whole situation. At the beginning of the second banquet it seemed that evil was in total command and that the people and work of God were on the brink of disaster. At the end of the chapter the powers of evil were brought to judgment. Read Ps. 1:4-5; 9:16b; 27:2;147:6 and remember that God is the one with whom we have to do.

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7:5-10

Read the whole of this chapter and think about it in general terms. Life brings many discoveries, some pleasant, some devastating. It is shattering to think you are working for yourself and then to discover you have been in fact an instrument of the Devil, acting in direct opposition to God and to all that belongs to God. That is what Haman discovered. In the New Testament it shook Peter; who was so sure of his own spirituality and commitment, when he was told by Jesus that he was doing the Devil's work (Matt.16:21-23). And it no doubt angered some professing Christians in Philippi when Paul described them as enemies of the Cross (Phil. 3:18). It is also shattering when you think everything is going according to plan and then it all blows up in your face. This was Haman's experience. God is the great exposer, bringing all to light (1 Cor. 4:5) and working in and through evil men and their actions to bring about His purposes of good (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23,24). Of course, it is also thrilling, not shattering, to think and feel you are trapped, the victim of circumstances engineered by evil, and then to discover you have been in God's good hand all along. There should be a sense of wonder and thanksgiving, and a real sense of shame at our lack of faith and trust when, so swiftly at times, the whole situation resolves and out of disaster there emerges a glorious work of salvation. There are many examples of

this in Scripture. Think of how Sennacharib, the great enemy of the Jews, was turned away from besieging Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:1-7, 14-19, 32-37). What happened was contrary to all political and military expectations. But there was prayer, a lot of earnest prayer, such as there was in the story of Esther. When will we learn to pray? The wicked Sennacharib came to a sudden end, just as Haman did. The kingdom of evil can seem strong, but it is divided. It has the seeds of disintegration in it and King Ahasuerus and Haman were soon divided, and one became the executioner of the other. Of course, it was all God's doing. He is the victor in every situation.

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8:1-2

Ponder these two verses well because they make plain that a total and absolute victory had been won over the evil men and evil powers that had set themselves to destroy the people of God and the work of God they represented. And since the work of God, His plan of salvation, is worldwide and sweeps through history from beginning to end, we must see this "anti-Jew" outburst as being part of the endless enmity of the Devil against all that belongs to God. We must see also that although people like Esther and Mordecai, supported by the prayers of the people, were the instruments of the victory, the actual agent of the victory was God Himself, working in the power of the Holy Spirit. There was perfect timing, perfect placing of the various characters, perfect influence brought to bear even in such details as the king's sleeplessness, and perfect exposure of the monstrous nature of evil. The same perfection of detail is seen in the Gospels regarding the birth, life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the same devilish enmity was seen in the resolute opposition of the Pharisees to the sinless person of our Lord Jesus. But the victory was won. The initiative, which had never really been with Haman, although he thought it had been, was handed to Mordecai. The visible sign of the victory, and all that went with it, was given in the handing over of the king's signet ring. The visible sign in the Gospel is the fact of the resurrection of Christ, and the empty tomb. Here in these two verses we see how all that had once belonged to and had been in the possession of the evil man Haman was handed over to Mordecai and Esther, the representatives of the Jews. Because their representative Esther had risked her life and had stood in for them in their crisis of need and had won the victory, there was the hope of life and peace for those who had been sentenced to death. This is indeed a parable of the Gospel.

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8:3-8

Keep these sections of the story in the context of the Gospel which tells of the victory won by Christ in His death and resurrection. The exposure and judgment of evil in the person of Haman and the victory won on behalf of the Jews were real. But the victory did not operate automatically for the Jews in their actual and personal situations. The sentence of death had been passed on the Jews by the king's original edict and it remained in force because the laws of the Persians, once passed, could not be revoked. Something still remained to be done *on the basis of* the victory that had been won. The message of victory had to be proclaimed far and near. It had to be done urgently before time ran out. If the message was not heard, believed and acted on, then the Jews would still die. This is the situation we are in with the Gospel message of eternal salvation. Men and women, in danger of dying in their sins and dying under judgment, must be told of the way of deliverance. We will read of how this was done in Persia in the next passage. But there is another lesson here, another foreshadowing of New Testament truth. We see Queen Esther standing in the presence of the all-powerful king interceding on behalf of the Jews, her own people, with whom she had freely, gladly and at great cost identified herself. We cannot but think of the One greater than Esther, Christ himself, who "pleads our cause at God's right hand, omnipotent to save" (Rom. 8:33-34; Heb. 9:24). It is wonderful to have our thoughts led on from the Old Testament to the New Testament but we must not miss the wonder of seeing how Esther thought through the implications of the situation. She saw so clearly that unless the "good news" of victory was proclaimed and applied, then the victory was hollow. Learn to think not only how God's truth affects you but how it affects others.

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8:9-14

The message went out with clarity and urgency, written down so that there would be no uncertainty about it and no corruption of the substance of the message. The people who needed the "word" were to have it in writing.

Mere word-of-mouth was not sufficient. This is one reason why we have the Bible and why we must learn to live by it and have our minds informed, directed and restricted by what God has said. How necessary it is nowadays to be clear that "feelings" about spiritual issues are not and cannot be a sufficient ground for living our Christian lives. The word of authority is what is needed. But note the essence of the edict from the king. It gave the Jews the right to fight for and to defend themselves against all who would harm them and seek to take their lives from them. They had to believe the message and they had to take their stand on it and claim for themselves the victory that had been won on their behalf. In a real sense they had, by faith, to take a stand, to challenge the enemy, and to do it on the basis that they believed they had the right and power to do so. This is the victory that overcomes, even our faith (1 John 5:4). But faith is grounded in fact and in promise. It is only because the victory *has been won* that we can claim it by faith. In the empire of Persia there stood the decree of death against all God's people, but over against it stood the decree of deliverance and salvation. We are told in Col. 2:14-15 that the decree of death against us was taken away and nailed to the Cross. We are told in Rom. 6:14 that sin will no longer have dominion over us. In Rom. 8:1 we are told that there is not now any condemnation. In Heb. 2:14-15 and 1 John 3:8 we are told that Christ has destroyed the whole kingdom of the Devil and has come to set free those who were in his power. This is good news indeed, and we must think more of it tomorrow.

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8:9-14

Keep in mind that this story about the Jews is set between the past and future developments of the plan of redemption. No doubt many of the Jews, perhaps most of them, had no real awareness of the full significance of all that was going on. They would, as we often do, tend to interpret events simply in relation to their own personal situation and their own generation. But this is defective, as such passages as Heb. 11:40 and 1 Pet. 1:10-12 indicate. God's plans are always pressing on into the future and we are called to have faith and to go forward in trust, acknowledging that there are things we are simply not ready to be told and things we are not capable of receiving in our present spiritual condition and development (Acts 1:7; John 16:12). Keep on going back to 4:14, "Who knowsfor such a time as this." Now, continuing yesterday's gospel application of this story, think of how there may well have been many Jews in Persia hiding and trembling in terror, fearing the worst, waiting for disaster, having lost all hope, when in fact the judgment had been lifted. They were free to live life to the full, but they did not realise it. This is exactly the condition of many believers. They have not grasped the facts of what they have and have been made in Christ. If we have believed unto salvation, then we are new creatures and the old has passed away (2 Cor. 5:17). In Christ we stand in total liberty and must refuse to allow anything or anyone to bring us back into bondage (Gal. 5:1). In Christ we have a salvation that is full, perfect and guaranteed (Heb. 9:12). We have nothing to fear and everything to hope for. But we must grasp the facts. The evil person of sin, the Devil, and all the guilt and power of sin have been dealt with. When all this dawned on the Jews in Persia there must have been rejoicing indeed.

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8:13-17

Here is the rejoicing we mentioned yesterday. What a thrill and what an assurance and encouragement it must have been to all God's people to see Mordecai, their champion, arrayed in robes of glory. So long as he was there life and joy were secure. Does this not encourage us to think of our great Champion, crowned with glory and honour, seated at God's right hand till all His enemies are made His footstool (Heb. 10:12-13; 1 Cor. 15:24-27)? But note yet again that it was the coming of the "word" of the edict that brought the joy and gladness. The entrance of the word brought light and life (Ps.119:130). This gives tremendous importance to the preaching of the Word of God, to the hearing of it, and to the personal reading and studying of it. Read Rom. 10:14-17 and 1 Pet. 1:23-2:2. Note also in these verses that there is what we may rightly call an evangelistic emphasis, because when the people saw the transformation and the rejoicing of the Jews they realised that here was a people who had a God who did great things for them. There was a buoyancy and gladness of heart among the Jews that drew others to them. Granted there was an element of fear and apprehension in all this because the Persians may well have felt that, the tables being turned, the Jews would take the opportunity for revenge. The next chapter will tell us that there was in fact judgment by the Jews on those who would have killed them without cause. But here let us concentrate on the manifest difference seen in the Jews now compared to what they were at the beginning of the story. Then, they were complacent, adjusted to life in a godless culture, not particularly

keen to go crusading to rebuild Jerusalem and largely a people who no longer prayed. Now, after the "shock treatment" of crisis, they were a praying people, rejoicing in their God, and there was a magnetism about them that drew others to their side. Read Acts 4:13 and Zech. 8:20-23.

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9:1-10

We mentioned yesterday that the Jews had become a praying people and no doubt the earnest prayer continued as the crisis became a practical confrontation. The trouble is that when a crisis begins to ease and awareness of victory increases, there is a tendency for God's people first to become formal about prayer and then to stop praying. That simply means that in crisis we look to God and in time of ease we forget God. It is as plain and as blunt as that! But there is another thing clear in v.2 and it is the fact that there are people who are implacably and unchangeably opposed to the people of God and to all that belongs to God. If we do not face up to this we shall be disturbed and demoralised in Christian service. We are engaged in spiritual warfare against the principalities and powers of the kingdom of evil. The Jews in the Persian Empire were aware of this. There were those who hated them and wanted them destroyed *simply* because they were the people and servants of God. The attitude of such people never changes, not even on a day of judgment, as this story tells us, or on the great Day of Judgment as Rev. 9:20-21; 16:9, 11 tells us in the most vivid terms. When we come to v.5ff of today's passage we must not think in terms of personal vengeance which belongs to God alone (Rom. 12:19) but we must see men of faith refusing, resisting and striking against the personal representatives of the powers of Hell. If we do not see that there is a time to resist and to do so radically, as well as a time to turn the other cheek, then we live by sentiment rather than by faith. There is no place for religious prejudice and vendetta, and the comment about the plunder (10) being left untouched should put the picture into perspective.

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9:1-10

We referred yesterday to spiritual warfare and we should read Eph. 6:10-20, noting the emphasis on continuing prayer and thanksgiving. When we read in Esther of how no-one could stand against the Jews and of how governors, men of power and local rulers were subdued, it makes us think of the promises of God to Joshua (Josh. 1:2-9). The reaction of the rulers may have been nothing more than the normal reaction of politicians when they realise the power of public opinion and the popularity of one piece of legislation over against the other. There were two edicts in force regarding the Jews and all had a choice to make as to which side they would take. It was in fact a matter of life or death. Of course the subduing of many powerful people so that the Jews had safety should not have surprised the Jews *if* they had learned well in their own Scriptures. Had not their God delivered them from Pharaoh at the Exodus? Had not their God given them great promises of safety and vindication (Ex. 23:20-27; Deut. 2:25)? Do a Bible study with the help of a Concordance and trace the number of times that God sent a dread on those who would harm His chosen people. We can see it still in the life of many churches when, with no apparent explanation, those who would resist and refuse the Gospel either slip away or are taken away. We do not mean by death; it is just that they go away or, if they stay, they became affable and at times even supportive. What a God we have! But remember, God has enemies who will try anything, given the opportunity (Lk. 4:13). Be quite clear in your thinking. If the hurt, slander, and persecution are personal, then love your enemies, turn the other cheek, and leave it to God to vindicate. But if it is God's precious work that is assailed, then stand your ground, and if necessary strike hard. But if you have to take action, make sure *first* that you are a Christian who is consistent in prayer.

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9:11-19

Some commentators make the point that this killing of the enemies does not accord with New Testament teaching about turning the other cheek and leaving vengeance to God. That may well be so, but in Scripture and history God uses human instruments to work both His work of salvation and judgment. Some commentators say Esther was simply vindictive in asking another day for purging out the enemies of her people. That also may be true, but in our own generation we have had to face the issue of terrorists, hi-jackers and takers of hostages, all operating in evil ways and for misguided objectives. Is it not the case that governments have had to take a strong line? Have not ordinary citizens in certain areas had to institute street patrols to curb hideous attacks on people and property? Are there not many who feel that "punishment" of an effective kind is the only thing to

bring to an end some of the hideous evils that scar the face of society? And, on the spiritual level, is it not time for those who stand by God's truth to oppose radically and thoroughly those whose whole activity is fighting against God and the Gospel? Of course, as we said before, we must be very, very sure that we are walking so closely in fellowship with God that we know His will in each situation. This is not an area in which to blunder on. But again, in these difficult passages dealing with "enemies" being killed, remember that the numbers relate to the population of an empire stretching from India to Ethiopia. In comparison with this the number of people killed on the roads by careless drivers (some of them Christians) is far, far greater. And when we think of the massacre of the Jews in Europe during the years 1939-1945, we must recognise that it was a policy of appeasement that in great part made that possible. We do well to think deeply before we criticise those who do things we do not like.

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9:20-28

Following on from the previous note it needs to be said that we will never understand the complications, travails and tragedies of history unless we face the fact that the judgments of God are abroad on the face of the earth (Ps. 105:7) as well as His works of grace and salvation. The thought of judgment sobers us and disturbs us, and rightly so. Who shall stand where He appears (Mal. 3:2)? On the other hand, the thought of God's work of salvation should thrill our hearts with great joy. We should never cease to be amazed that God has chosen us to be His people, choosing us in Christ and making us His particular personal possession (Eph, 1:4; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). And we should never fail to recognise and to remember that at times of crisis our God delivered us from the hand and power of evil. But in remembering, as is clear from these verses, we remember the solemn judgments as well as the glorious salvations. We see this in the story of the Exodus (Ex. 14:30-31) and in the song of Moses (Ex. 15). We see it also in the story of Amalek in Ex. 17:14-16, and we remind ourselves that Josephus, the Jewish historian, identified Haman as an Amalekite. If this be so, we are reminded of the age long enmity of the Amalekites, something of a spiritual Mafia, ruthless and diabolical in intensity. There cannot ever be peace with such a foe and any attempt at compromise will simply play into his hand. But God is the Saviour of His people and when He acts in salvation there is every ground for rejoicing, celebrating and remembering. Think of Psalm 124, especially the Metrical Version. Little wonder we say that our help is in the Lord's great name.

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9:20-28

What a transformation there had been in their circumstances. It was like a second salvation, from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). Little wonder Mordecai enjoined them to keep a feast of remembrance. He knew just how easily we can forget both our danger and our deliverance and slip back into shallow acknowledgment of God rather than dedication to Him. If we look at verses 19 and 22 we see that a practical expression of fellowship and sharing of good things was part of the spiritual remembrance. We find the same thing in Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-12 where the people rejoicing in the renewed ministry of the Word of God were urged to rejoice *and* to share with others, who were bereft of good things, all that God was giving to them. This is an important word to all of us who have so much of God's good things week after week. We have a duty before God to pray for, and where possible to give to, those whose lives are lived in conditions of a famine of the Word and of Christian fellowship and friendship. It is so easy to be selfish, and that condition often arises because we fail to remember just how much we owe to God. The Jews took it upon themselves to see to it that they and the generations after them would remember this great salvation. We have the same kind of remembrance in our communion services (1 Cor. 11:23-26). We need to be brought back again and again to the fact of our salvation, the price that was paid for that salvation, and the communion, fellowship and sharing that are part of that salvation. How we need to be saved from the sin of ingratitude, the sin of taking things for granted and the sin of self-centeredness. Pray, and ask the Lord to give opportunity to do for others something that is really sacrificial.

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9:29-32

A second letter seems to have been sent out in the joint names of the Queen and Mordecai giving added authority to the institution of this feast of Purim which, we understand, is still observed to this day by the Jews even though other feasts and celebrations have been discontinued. The whole matter was recorded in writing (32) as an added safeguard against the strange tendency to forget. The phrase "words of goodwill and assurance" (30) may have been simply the formal words of greeting at the start of a letter or proclamation, and yet, they seem to suggest more. We think of the peace that God made for the Jews in the time of Esther; the peace God accomplished through the Cross (Col. 1:20); the peace of God which passes understanding that can and should keep our hearts and minds (Phil. 4:7) and the peace which is of the very essence of God Himself and all His ways (2 Thess. 3:16; Rom. 15:33). Words of truth make us think of the Word of God that cannot lie or change or fade away (Matt. 24:35; 2 Pet. 1:23-25); the God of truth, whose living Word upholds whatever has breath" (Hughes); the truth that makes us free and shines like a light on our path (Ps. 119:105; John 8:32). Perhaps the emphasis should be on the truth about God because it is only as we learn what God is like that we begin to learn to look to Him and to trust Him when all around us is very dark.

"His oath, His covenant, and blood,
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay."

(Mote)

The more we learn to know Him, the more we will instinctively trust Him, no matter what happens. He knows the way we take (Job 23:10) and His plans are full of grace for the future (Jer. 29:11.).

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9:29-32

We have already noted in the Feast of Purim the emphasis on rejoicing, fellowship and sharing but we must not fail to note the further emphasis on fasting and lamenting. Look back to 4:1-3, 15-17. Think of how God's people were awakened from their contented complacency to a new seriousness in their dealing with God. Remember that God was in fact doing a new thing, new and significant work, in returning the Jews to their own land in preparation for and in anticipation of the eventual coming of the Saviour. Many of the Jews had been insensitive to spiritual issues and casual in their commitment and involvement. Now they must remember for future generations to be alive to God and, in this symbolic fasting, to signify their readiness and willingness to lay aside every weight so that they might go with God (Heb. 12:1-2; Ex. 12:11). God's people must always be a people ready to go forward. But note also the emphasis on lamenting. This has nothing to do with feeling sorry for ourselves because life has become hard and dangerous. But it has everything to do with godly sorrow that leads to and is the significant mark of true repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). Repentance is not being sorry for our sins, but being sorry enough to stop and to have done with the things that grieve God and hinder our usefulness. Sometimes our sorrow for sin and our distress is simply sorrow that we have been found out and that we have hurt and shamed people dear to us. To grieve over the distress we have caused to others is a good thing. To sorrow because we have been found out and our reputation has been tarnished is indulgence, and it is the kind of thing that tends to lead us back to the sin when we feel it is "safe" to do so. The Feast of Purim should make us think clearly and realise that it is when we are dealing rightly with God that God is about to do great things in us, for us and through us to further His work and to bring glory to His name. What an incentive this is to be good and pure and true!

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10:1-3

The pagan kingdom of Persia did not collapse. World politics continued on their way and no doubt there were still many intrigues, complications and confrontations to come. The stories of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah all tell of repeated oppositions to the work of God and many times of crisis. In such times as these it is the men and women of conviction and consistent prayer who are ready to be God's instruments for the safety and deliverance of His people. Think of Daniel and his young companions (Dan. 2:17-18; 3:16-18; 6:1-10). Think of Nehemiah and how he recognised that he was in God's hand, doing a great work, and therefore could not be enticed by either the threats or the bribes of evil men. Think of how Paul, the great missionary apostle, taught the believers that although we live, work and fight in the real world of history, the weapons with which we fight

are not worldly (2 Cor. 10:4). We do not pit eloquence against eloquence; nor personality against personality; nor passionate conviction against worldly doubt and denial, although there is always need to be ready to give a reason for the hope we hold (1 Pet. 3:15). The key weapon is prayer; the weapon that Christians nowadays seem most reluctant to use. But God still promises that if His people call on Him in prayer lie will hear and answer (2 Chron. 7:11-15). We cannot but wonder how long it was before the Jews in Persia lapsed back into a feeling of "ordinary" life and began to "ease off" spiritually. How truly the Psalmist speaks when he testifies that before he was afflicted he went astray but now he walked with God (Ps. 119:67,71). There are, of course, high moments of spiritual life and service, but "the slow watches of the night" are no less significant in God's work. Whatever our circumstances, we are left in the last verses of this fascinating story with the reminder that we have Someone, like ourselves, understanding our humanity, standing always in the presence of the King on our behalf. He is greater far than Mordecai, His name is Jesus.

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