

"GREAT REVERSALS"

I. Introduction

A. Chapter 7 of Esther ended with the king ordering that Haman be executed on the very gallows that he constructed for the purpose of doing away with Mordecai.

1. Here in chapter 8 Haman is gone, but the decree that he issued under the royal seal still stands.
2. The decree that ordered people throughout the Persian empire to slaughter Jews and plunder their property is still in effect.

B. Esther 8 tells us how this decree was reversed.

1. In fact, there are a number of reversals in this chapter.
2. Previously, Mordecai was the object of Haman's murderous hatred, but here he is given the place of honor that Haman used to occupy.
3. Previously, the Jews were mourning over their threatened annihilation, but here they break out in celebration when they hear of the new decree.
4. Previously, Mordecai was walking around in sackcloth, but here he goes out from the king's presence wearing royal robes.

II. Mordecai's Promotion

A. Our passage picks up right after the king's order for Haman to be hung from his own gallows has been carried out.

1. In verse 1 we learn that Ahasuerus gave Haman's property to Esther.

2. This tells us that she still had the king's favor.
 3. After the things that unfolded in the previous chapter, we might worry that Ahasuerus would begin to see Esther as a nuisance, but that was not at all the case.
 4. The fact that he gave Haman's property to Esther communicated his desire to show her how upset he was over what Haman had tried to do.
- B. The opening verses of our passage also tell us that Esther told the king about her connection with Mordecai.
1. Not only had Mordecai saved the king's life, he was also the queen's cousin and adoptive father.
 2. Ahasuerus expressed his appreciation to Mordecai by giving him his signet ring.
 3. This was the same ring that used to belong to Haman.
 4. By giving the ring to Mordecai, the king was also giving him the office that Haman used to occupy.
 5. This rectified the injustice that was described in chapters 2 and 3.
 6. Chapter 2 ended with Mordecai saving the king's life, but chapter 3 began with Haman getting promoted to a place of honor.
 7. Here in chapter 8 that wrong is set right.
 8. This is something that we see again and again in Scripture.
 9. As Mary says in her Magnificat, "[the Lord] has shown his strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate." (Lk. 1:51-52)

- C. This raises an interesting thought.
1. Up until the previous chapter, Esther was carefully keeping her Jewish identity a secret.
 2. She did this in obedience to Mordecai, who thought that her Jewishness would prevent her from winning the king's favor.
 3. Notice, however, that Esther has not fallen out of the king's favor now that he knows who she really is.
 4. It seems that Mordecai's and Esther's fears were all for naught.
 5. Consider what might have happened if Esther had not been hiding her Jewish identity and her relation to Mordecai back in chapter 2.
 6. Perhaps it would have been Mordecai, not Haman, who received the promotion.
 7. And if that had happened, the threat to the Jews would have been averted altogether.
 8. This stands as a warning to us.
 9. In the words of Iain Duguid: "very often we are led into sin because we are afraid of dangers that will never materialize... It is worth reminding ourselves that the sin we think will smooth our path in fact often complicates our lives in unforeseen ways and leads us into even greater difficulties than the ones we feared." [100]

III. The Irrevocable Decree

- A. In the next part of our passage we see that while Esther still has the king's favor, she refuses to accept her own deliverance and if it means letting her people perish.

1. Instead, she uses the influence that she has with the king to ask him to revoke Haman's decree.
 2. She tells him, "how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?"
 3. She says, "if I have found favor in [the king's] sight" and if "I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman."
 4. She is essentially telling the king, 'If you care about me, you will grant what I ask of you in this matter.'
- B. It is remarkable that the king did not lose patience with Esther here.
1. Before she regained her composure and started following the proper court etiquette she fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him.
 2. Remember, this is a man who only thinks of himself.
 3. He has no sense of compassion.
 4. He would not be able to identify with Esther's distress over what is about to happen to her people.
 5. The fact that he did not grow angry with her really was remarkable.
 6. It is an example of the proverb: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." (Prov. 21:1)
- C. Ahasuerus' response to Esther gives us a sense of his bewilderment over her distress.

1. He says, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews."
 2. It is as if he is saying, 'Why are you so upset? Haman got his comeuppance. What more could you want?'
 3. The king cannot understand Esther's concern for the welfare of her people, but this does not cause her to fall out of his favor.
 4. Instead, he responds to her pleas by telling her that she has his permission to write another decree in his name concerning the Jews.
- D. The first decree could not be revoked, because that is how the laws of the Persians worked.
1. Royal decrees were irrevocable.
 2. At the same time, there were ways of getting around this problem.
 3. A second decree could be issued.
 4. And the second decree could be worded in such a way as to make it difficult or even impossible to carry out the previous decree.
- E. Notice what this tells us about the king.
1. This whole mess was created because he let Haman make a decree under the royal seal without knowing what the decree actually said.
 2. Ahasuerus didn't even know what group of people were going to be exterminated under that decree.
 3. Yet here we see him authorizing Esther and Mordecai to do the same thing all over again.

4. He can't be bothered by such mundane details.
5. He has more important things to do than to worry about what kinds of decrees people are sending out under his royal seal.
6. In other words, he is a fool.

IV. The New Decree

- A. We turn now to consider the decree that Mordecai issued, along with the response that it evoked.
 1. In a nutshell, the decree said that if any Jews in the empire were attacked, they had the right to defend themselves against their attackers.
 2. It did not give the Jews permission to mount an offensive against just anyone.
 3. That being said, there is one part of the decree that may sound troubling.
 4. Verse 11 says that "the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods."
 5. It is the phrase "children and women included" that especially gets our attention.
 6. Children and women would not be among the attackers, so this is clearly going beyond mere self-defense.
 7. It is retribution.
 8. As it says in verse 13, it gave them permission "to take vengeance on their enemies."

- B. What are we to make of this?
1. Was Mordecai right to issue a decree that called for the slaughter of women and children?
 2. We can certainly understand the practical reason why he would have put such a thing in the decree.
 3. It would have been a strong deterrent.
 4. It put potential attackers on notice, warning them that they would be putting their families at risk if they tried to carry out Haman's decree.
 5. But what about the morality of such an action?
 6. How can God's people be permitted to take vengeance when Paul says in Romans 12, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (v. 19)?
- C. What we need to realize is that this is a form of holy war.
1. God gave the Israelites the same kind of instructions during the period of the conquest of Canaan.
 2. In that situation, the Israelites were commanded to wipe out the Canaanites, including the women and children.
 3. Mordecai is telling God's people that they should carry out the same kind of warfare as they defend themselves from those who seek to do them harm.
 4. This is not a matter of personal or ethnic vengeance.
 5. It is a matter of God's people being the instruments through whom he carries out his judgment upon those who stand opposed to him and his people.

6. That is the meaning of the Old Testament instances of holy war.
 7. God was bringing his judgment upon the wicked through his covenant people.
- D. There is no holy war today, but this does not mean that God's judgment is no longer hanging over his enemies.
1. It only means that we live in a different era in the outworking of God's purposes for the world.
 2. As Iain Duguid explains, "The Mosaic-era practice of holy war was itself a foreshadowing within history of the last judgment... Holy war is not obsolete; it has just been temporarily suspended during this era of grace." [109]
 3. A day is coming when the true holy war will take place, the day when God's judgment falls upon all of the wicked once and for all.
- E. When the Jews heard of Mordecai's decree, they rejoiced.
1. They knew that this would be a strong deterrent against carrying out Haman's decree.
 2. It was a cause for great celebration.
 3. In fact, the celebration was so great that the entire city of Susa is said to have shouted and rejoiced.
- F. This brings us to the statement in the last verse of the chapter: "And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them."
1. Here is another reversal.
 2. Earlier in the book, Esther was the one who was covering up her Jewish identity and blending in among the Persians.

3. But now it is the Persians who are declaring themselves to be Jews.
 4. In all likelihood, most of these people were only saying this out of fear.
 5. Nevertheless, this points to the only way a person can be delivered from the judgment that is coming upon this world.
 6. The only way to escape is to be truly identified with God's people by being united to Jesus Christ by faith.
- G. If this is true of you, then you have a real reason to rejoice.
1. You have been delivered from a fate that is infinitely worse than the one that was threatened in Haman's decree.
 2. You have been delivered from the Rider on the white horse, who leads the armies of heaven and "will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty." (Rev. 19:15)
 3. God has brought about a great reversal for you.
 4. He has removed your disgrace and clothed you with glory and honor.
 5. That is cause for great gladness and great joy.

V. Conclusion

- A. As we conclude our study of this chapter, I want to point out one other thing about the celebration that takes place at the end of this passage.
1. The Jews had not yet experienced the victory that they were celebrating.
 2. They were still anticipating this victory.

3. Yet when they heard the decree, they acted as if the deliverance had already taken place.

B. This is a picture of the Christian life.

1. We have not yet experienced the fullness of all that Jesus Christ has secured for us by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

2. But because Christ's victory has been announced to us in the gospel, we rejoice as we anticipate the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.