

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of Esther

1) 1:1

Esther is the third of the three historical books that belong to the period of the Exile and after. The king Ahasuerus mentioned in the first chapter and throughout the book is thought to be king Xerxes I, who reigned from 485-464 B.C. If we remember that Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in 450 and 444 B.C. respectively, we are able to 'place' the book as to its historical context. But the general time of the return from exile is sufficient for our purpose, without entering into any other detail.

The book deals with the fortunes of the Jews in the land of their captivity, in Susa (Shushan) in Persia, where many had apparently been sent from Babylon, and were now spread throughout the land. That is to say, it deals with the fortunes of those who did not return from captivity when the others did, under Zerubbabel, and were later to do, under Ezra and Nehemiah. It is this fact that explains, as it seems to us, a good deal in the book about which questions have been raised. Questions of ethics have been raised, for example, concerning the whole matter of Mordecai the Jew encouraging, aiding and abetting Esther to become the wife of a heathen king, contrary to the known laws of marriage existing among the Jews, contrary also to a sense of propriety - making us question whether they were living on the highest spiritual level. Then, there is the ugly spectacle of the butchery of the Jews' enemies towards the end of the book - an unsavoury act of revenge which cannot be justified on moral grounds - and so on.

But the truth is that the Jews mentioned in Esther were not living on the highest spiritual level. They were men who opted to stay on in the land of captivity rather than return to the Promised Land, esteeming the relative comfort and affluence they had attained a much better proposition than the austerities and disciplines they would undoubtedly have exercised as returned exiles. And having opted out of God's best, directive, will for them, they had perforce to make do with a second best. This is sufficient to explain all the lower levels of spiritual testimony and the neglect of Divine law.

2) 1:1

But - and this is one of the great lessons of the book, having a number of significant applications - although they were out of God's best will for them, they were still His people, and He did not leave them or forsake them, but exercised His guardian and fatherly care over them, protecting them from their enemies and prospering them, within the limits that they themselves had set upon Him. God is very careful of His own, even when they are not what they should be, and defends them against their enemies who are intent on destroying them. In this respect the book of Esther unfolds a principle which is of constant and unflinching relevance in that it is a kind of foretaste of God's care for the Jews down the ages, even when, and perhaps especially when, they have refused His will and His calling for them. 'Hath God cast away His people whom He foreknew?' asks Paul in Romans 11. And his answer is, 'God forbid.' And history's answer is the same. There is an unaccountable Divine protection upon this ancient people. This is very clearly and dramatically seen in the modern situation in the Middle East. Recognition of the protective hand of God upon His people is something that circumstances make inevitable and unquestionable. But this does not imply that God necessarily approves of all that Israel has done in the Middle East today, any more than He approved of all the things they did in the book of Esther. God has His own way of dealing with the sins of His people, but He has also His ways of dealing with any who take it upon themselves to persecute and oppress them.

3) 1:1

The lesson, then, in Esther, is that of the sovereignty of God at work to preserve and further His purposes in His people in the world. The Feast of Purim, mentioned in the last chapter, has significance in this connection. The word 'Pur' is said to mean 'a lot', and is taken from the fact that the wicked Haman cast lots to decide which day would be auspicious for the accomplishment of the destruction of the Jews. And by the sovereign providence of God, the day appointed for destruction was turned into a day of deliverance.

Here is a great lesson of encouragement. God will not fail of His purposes which He purposes for us and in us. And if He can do this for a people who were out of His best will, how much more will He do so for those in it. What heartening for the Lord's servants in hard and difficult places today! The day of crisis will become a day of deliverance, and God will protect and vindicate His people and His purposes in and through them. One can think of the encouragement this story would bring to the early Church, for example, when Peter was imprisoned and due to be executed. Prayer was made without ceasing by the Church to God for him. And prison doors opened! The day of crisis became a day of deliverance. Is this a message for someone today? At the critical moment God will intervene, things will happen, things unlooked for, things marvellous and miraculous, simple providence that will prove anew that God is sovereignly in control of the situation.

4) 1:1

It is a very striking thing that there is no mention of God anywhere in this entire book. Nowhere does His name appear. This is one of the factors that make some commentators and scholars think that the framers of the Old Testament canon committed a serious blunder in including the book in their collection of the sacred writings. But this is a cavalier way of solving a problem, and we may be sure that there is a better explanation and a deeper significance than appears on the surface.

One commentator suggests that the book is a fragment of secular 'profane history that has been captured for sacred purposes, perhaps copied bodily from Persian history, and incorporated in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures'. This may be; and if so, it remains simply for us to say that there can be two very different interpretations of the same passage of history. If, as has been suggested, this book had a Persian authorship, doubtless its writer saw only the facts of the story curious, even inexplicable, but not otherwise significant - a mere chance series of happenings which explains the institution of the Jewish feast of Purim. But the makers of the canon saw the hand of God everywhere, and the entire story an evidence of the working of Divine providence. For those who have eyes to see, God is everywhere in this story, and it comes through at every point, in spite of the absence of the name of God. Whether or not, however, this is the case behind the mystery of the 'absence' of the name of God, it is the case that determined attempts are often made to exclude and excise God from the pages of history, and to write a secular account of it. But you cannot exclude God, this way or any other way, from history. He is there. He is the God of history.

5) 1-1

There is another lesson, however, that can be drawn from the seeming absence of God from the pages of Esther. The book is an enormous encouragement to all who work on and struggle in seeming darkness and desolation, when God seems to be nowhere, and the heavens are as brass. For it tells them that God is there, 'silently planning in love for them'. This is the lesson taught by the words of Faber's wonderful hymn.

Workman of God! O lose not heart,
but learn what God is like,
And, in the darkest battlefield,
Thou shalt know where to strike.

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.

Ah! God is other than we think;
His ways are far above,
Far beyond reason's height, and reached
only by childlike love.

This is a biggish lesson to learn, and it is one of the functions of the book of Esther to teach it to us.

6) 1:1-9

The general lesson of God's providence will therefore be at the back of our minds throughout the study of the book, and we shall see the progressive unfolding of His counsel and will through seemingly chance happenings and coincidences.

The first picture we are given is that of an oriental court, a heathen, godless scene, with the usual accompaniments to such a scene. One of the impressions that grow on one, in studying this first chapter, is that the author, whoever he was, is writing satirically, and is intent on making a critique of the whole of Persian society, and especially of the court and the king. And the satire is often humorous in a quiet and concealed way. G.K. Chesterton maintains that the Divine humour is generally hidden in Scripture, and this may be so; but it is not absent. 'He that is in the heavens shall laugh', the Psalmist says, 'The Lord shall have them in derision'. This, it would almost seem, is what we see here, if the picture presented of the king is any indication. Here is the most powerful man in the world, the monarch of all he surveys (1); and yet one has the distinct impression that he is being portrayed to us in the most uncomplimentary of terms. He is a debauchee; he is a slave to ungovernable fury; he is, in spite of his power, used as a pawn by wily counsellors and schemers at court; he is a slave of his own machinery of government, making laws impetuously which he immediately regrets, but is unable to alter; he is tossed this way and that by the winds stirred up by his courtiers, and is the victim of every court intrigue. This is Ahasuerus as he is presented to us in the opening verses of the chapter. We shall continue to consider this theme in the next note.

7) 1:10-12

The poet says, 'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown', and this was particularly true of Ahasuerus. We are told at the beginning of chapter 6 that he suffered from insomnia, and it is certainly little wonder, for his kingdom was too much for him to cope with! One commentator calls all this the revenge that absolutism takes upon those who practise it. It is true, and it is a tragi-comical picture. 'The man who is exalted to the pedestal of a god is made dizzy by his own altitude'. This is a valid observation, on the world scale and in personal life alike. You usually lose your balance when you stretch too much! And there are never wanting those who 'take the mickey out of' such people. They need it. And the writer of Esther does so.

We should note, in this connection, the vulgar effects of the extravagant luxury and self-indulgence seen in the degraded Persian court life. See what this drunken orgy led to! One thinks of a similar, fateful feast in Daniel 5, with Belshazzar, and a thousand of his lords. Surely the writer is holding up the whole picture to be viewed with contempt. And can we not think of contemporary situations in our own society which would merit such treatment.

8) 1:13-22

Even more so is the ridiculous edict that emerged from the refusal of Vashti the queen to obey the drunken king's command. Even in Persia, under despotic rule, there must have been some wry smiles when the edict was made public! It was simply unenforceable. Tyrannical husbands would certainly not be waiting for a royal proclamation before exercising tyranny over their wives! And conversely, there would be numerous subtle ploys engineered by the more managing wives to controvert a law which threatened the, to them, congenial status-quo!

The attitude of queen Vashti is worthy of note. She was summoned, at the height of the feast, when the king's heart was merry with wine, to parade herself before the lecherous eyes of the nobles of Persia. And she refused to do so. She stood against this vulgar, ignominious suggestion, and honoured her womanhood by taking a stand on principle against something that her whole soul must have reacted against in distaste and revulsion. She had the courage of her convictions, knowing that what she did would certainly cost her position, and perhaps her life - for she would know that at court there were those only too eager to down her and bring her into disgrace. One has only to think of her situation to see what a royal and queenly act this was, and one fraught with great danger. For although the writer has been at pains to satirise the king and his court and hold them up to ridicule, it nevertheless remains true that he wielded absolute power, and men - and women - stood against his whims and caprices at their peril!

9) 1:13-22

Vashti's stand must have caused great consternation in the court, particularly among those who waited on her. One wonders how many thought privately that she was a fool, throwing away her position, and in one decisive moment sacrificing her entire wealth and security - and even life, for all they knew. But there are some intangibles more important than position, wealth or security, and an inviolate conscience is one of them. She would sleep peacefully that night! After all, what shall it profit a man - or woman - if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

We do not live today under a despotic rule - as yet - although some people do, and suffer. But we all tend to be the victims of ugly despotisms for all that. Society today is the 'despot' that 'prescribes' patterns of behaviour for us, and it exercises the same petty, contemptible tyrannies over men and women as Ahasuerus did in olden time in Persia. And we surely need the same two things today as we see in the story of Esther - a biting satire on the pathetic nature of the despotism of society, holding it up to ridicule, till men see the tawdry, inconstant thing it is; and on the other hand, men and women to take a stand against its vulgar demands, and to be moral and spiritual nonconformists in face of the lowering standards everywhere around. We shall look at these two points in more detail in tomorrow's Note.

10) 1:13-22

As to the first of the two points mentioned in the previous note, one is tempted to say, respectfully, that if some of our talented university people in the country turned their energies to this kind of positive satirical exposure, instead of indulging in violent protest and fomenting revolutionary activity, they might make a more hopeful contribution to the regeneration of society. As to the second, we should try to realise that the situation today is really very like what it was in the time of Esther. We are no more free now than men were then; we are slaves to modern trends; we are got at by 'hidden persuaders' behind the scenes, who manipulate us just as successfully as Memucan manipulated Ahasuerus. Think, for example, of the commercial interests that have cashed in on the youth of our time! Think of the world of fashion! Think of the world of entertainment! Think of patterns of behaviour! And the very last thing in the world a youngster will do is to dare to be different, or be odd-one-out, and face the criticism and contempt of the majority. This is how corruption - of any kind, whether moral or intellectual - sets in. First of all, fear to stand for what one instinctively feels is right, because to stand for it would be regarded as 'fuddy-duddy' or 'square' - then, the suppression of conscience that leads to the undermining of morals, and so on to moral and intellectual suicide. This last will bear thinking about a little more, and we shall continue the thought in the next note.

11) 1:13-22

The following quote from 'The New Morality' by Lunn and Lean serves to crystallise the issue. 'If chastity is outmoded, it is precisely because boys and girls are afraid of being social outcasts. Taking his seemingly sophisticated and popular friends as examples, the insecure young person who wants to be accepted socially is afraid to hold back from what may seem general custom....The dread of being a social outcast brings the barriers down. The same kind of pattern obtains in the matter of alcoholic drink. Young people become drinkers, not through intemperance, but through fear of being thought unmanly or straight-laced - aided and abetted by skilful advertising. But there is such a thing as intellectual immorality as well as the other kind, and the pressures here are even greater, in the realm of ideas. To be an intellectual outcast, to swim against the current here, to be a 'square' here - this is intolerable. One must be progressive at all costs - and not excepting the theological world either. Those who have read C.S. Lewis' novel 'That Hideous Strength' will know just how desperately subtle and dangerous this trend can be, and how destructive of all integrity. The need? To take a resolute stand against the soul-destroying trends of our day, for truth, for righteousness, for decency, as Vashti did, even if it means suffering. This is the kind of challenge that faces us in society today.

12) 2:1-4

With this chapter the main theme and purpose of the story begins to develop and gain momentum. The first lesson it holds, however, relates to the weakness of king Ahasuerus. We have suggested that the writer's purpose seems to have been to satirise the king, and expose him to ridicule. If this was not his purpose, he has certainly done so inadvertently. It was in a drunken rage that Ahasuerus deposed and banished Vashti from the throne. But drunken rage subsides, in the cold, grey light of the morning; and now we see him thinking rather wistfully and ruefully of his erstwhile queen, feeling as if he wanted to erase the memory of the previous night from his mind. This presents a very interesting, and a very human, situation. What do people do at such times? Well, some are too proud to say they are sorry. They would die rather than humble themselves to apologise and say how ashamed they have been. And how many permanent breaches have been made in this way; breaches that need never have been, and should not have been! Human pride is a terrible thing.

But it may not have been thus with Ahasuerus. From what we read here, it looks as if he might have had second thoughts, and acted upon them. It looks as if he might have relented, and relaxed his decision, in spite of the immutability of the laws of the Medes and Persians. And it is a hopeful sign when a man is not prepared to be imprisoned in a prison of his own making where human relationships are concerned. But in the end, Ahasuerus did not do so. He allowed himself to be manipulated by his wily courtiers. How this happened we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

13) 2:1-4

Ahasuerus' wily courtiers stood to lose a great deal (not excluding their heads!), if Vashti were restored to favour. They were against her, and had been against her from the beginning, and were determined to keep her out. And they wilily played on the king's weakness for a pretty face, and side-tracked him from a truly moral action. This was his fatal weakness. He allowed himself to be beguiled from what he knew to be right.

There are some people talked out of salvation that way. In this respect they are more sinned against than sinning, although they are certainly without excuse. And it is a terrible thing when implacable opposers of the gospel of salvation talk people out of their anxiety or their concern or their dawning interest in the things of the Spirit. Offences must come, said Jesus, but woe unto that man by whom the offences come. Better for a stone to be tied round their necks and to be cast into the sea than for one of these to be offended and caused to stumble!

But behind all this, we have already discerned the hand of Divine providence; and in spite of our deep interest in these considerations we recognise that Vashti's deposition is going to fulfil an integral function in the ongoing purposes of God. This paves the way to the introduction of the two principal characters in the drama, Esther and Mordecai.

14) 2:5-20

We do not know how it came about that Esther was included in the king's selection of beautiful girls. Some suggest that scheming Jews were behind it; but this is only conjecture. There is no real evidence. It may be that she had no option, as a member of a captive race. But then, she did not disclose her identity as a Jew. But Ahasuerus was a despot; he could do what he liked; and still she would have no option. But that is not the most important thing. The important thing is that it was she who was chosen as Ahasuerus's queen, and that it was God Who arranged it.

There is one consideration that stands out here: it is that the hand of God was upon her, and prospered her, and prepared her for her destiny as her people's benefactress and deliverer. And she conducted herself as one who was conscious of this and therefore trusting in Him. It will be noted that it says in 15, 'She required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain....appointed' - that is, she did not have recourse to the arts and artifices the others employed to win the king's favour. She obtained favour for what she was. This surely speaks of a reliance and trust in God to see her through. It could possibly be interpreted as meaning that she was not interested enough to grasp at the honour, but it is much more likely that she had at least some dim perception that God was at work, and that it was important to trust Him, and not have recourse to human and prudential considerations. In this she sets a noble example that we would do well to emulate.

15) 2:25-20

One is reminded of Daniel and his companions in the court of Nebuchadnezzar in a similar situation. Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's meat; and God prospered him for the stand he took, and at the end of the appointed time he and his companions were fairer and fatter in flesh than all the others, and superior in wisdom. This is how it was with Esther. Her charm was of a different sort to that of the others! Her whole background and training shone through, and it did not need to be gilded and titivated. In other words, she also, like Vashti, was a non-conformist: she took a stand on principle. It is this that makes us usable in the service of God. Scheming and artifice never do!

Esther's cousin, Mordecai, who brought her up as his own daughter, is the other principal character in the story. There are two ways of looking at him. One is to regard him as the anxious, elderly cousin, who is full of agitation and foreboding as he sees his ward in a potentially perilous situation. Here he is pattering around the courtyard of the palace, anxiously gleaning news about his beautiful Esther, and how she might be faring. But this would be entirely to miss the point about him. It is true that at this point in the story he does present an anxious picture. But when we look at the rest of the story we see how strong, masterful and purposive he becomes. This is the indication that to interpret his attitude as anxious and rather feeble is entirely mistaken, and reminds us that there may be more than one reason for people hanging round the gates of a palace. A loafer may hang around; but so may a detective, on occasion. And he is certainly not weak and anxious in this sense. He is waiting - waiting for something to happen!

16) 2:21-23

Mordecai, as we said in the last Note, was waiting for something to happen. And this throws the entire story into a new meaning. For here is a man at the ready and available for God. This is the point. This is not to say that he knew what God was going to do. But he certainly was aware that God was about to do something. He had an instinct that could tell! And in this state of readiness, something happened. He may not have known the significance of it at the time; he may not have related it in any way to the plan and purpose of God, but it was destined to be central and critical to the whole outworking of God's deliverance of His people. It was the matter of the plot against the king. On discovering it, Mordecai did his duty as a responsible citizen, and reported it. And this was recorded in the king's chronicles, and was of tremendous significance at a very critical juncture in the future. It is important that we should understand the nature of the pattern that unfolds here. Mordecai did his duty, the thing that lay to his hand, while he was waiting for God to work. He did not try to force the pace; he did not try to anticipate God. He simply waited; and being at the ready, God used him, in the ordinary line of duty. And that was the strategic move in the whole matter.

This is an immensely challenging thought in Christian work. To be at the ready, and available for God, intent on doing with all diligence whatever our hand finds to do, this is where we need to be. Let us not look for the spectacular. Our extraordinary God is the God of the ordinary and the commonplace. We miss His working so often, simply because we are looking in the wrong place!

17) 3:1-5

In this chapter the story now begins to gain momentum. It is very striking to realise the nature of the dark conflict that was developing in the unseen world, and how a sinister attack was being mounted by the dark underworld of spirits on the people of God and on His purposes for them. How dramatic now to see Mordecai's 'waiting' and being 'at the ready' against this background!

We should note first of all the circumstances that led to the crisis. Here is the villain of the piece, Haman, son of Hammedatha. He has had numerous historical and modern counterparts! This ruthless, unscrupulous man somehow gained the advantage over all his colleagues and wormed his way into the confidence and favour of the king. And that was something in those days. Clearly, he was a man of vaunting ambition, and overweening pride. And he basked in the sunshine of his success and preferment. And the king, as was the custom, commanded his servants to bow down and reverence him. But one thing spoiled the whole business for Haman. There was one man who refused to do him obeisance, and that was Mordecai the Jew. This was more to Haman than anything else, a bigger irritation and cause of fury than if he had had no preferment at all. It took all the satisfaction of his elevation from him. They say that hell has no fury like a woman scorned, but this is just as true of some men when they are scorned. It certainly was so with Haman. It nearly drove him mad!

18) 3:1-5

Mordecai, then, refused to reverence Haman. Was this political as a reaction to the king's decree? Some have suggested that there might have been a place for a more diplomatic attitude on the part of a captive in another country, and that Mordecai was unnecessarily provocative in his refusal to bow before the king's favourite. But this suggestion hardly makes the point that is being made. What Mordecai was being asked to do was to commit idolatry. The kind of parallel we need to compare it with is the story in Daniel 3 of Nebuchadnezzar's image, which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to and worship. The fact that this was the situation is perhaps obscured by the way 4 is rendered, a rendering which suggests that he simply revealed his nationality to them as a matter of fact. But if we translate the indirect speech into direct, it reads, 'He said to them, "I am a Jew"'. Do we see the force of this? They were asking, 'Why do you not bow down like the rest of us?', and he said, 'I am a Jew; that is why I do not bow down. As a Jew I cannot do this'. Mordecai's refusal was made on principle, and on religious grounds.

Our spiritual stand as believers will always eventually lead to this kind of collision. The words 'I am a Christian' are meant to be an explanation of a certain kind of behaviour and attitude. And taking a stand will always be costly, involving, sooner or later, a collision. But think what would have happened if Mordecai had not taken a stand. The purposes of God would have been frustrated. That is the risk we face when we hide our light under a bushel! It may cost us to stand true to our profession, but ultimately it will cost far more not to stand true!

19) 3:6

Haman's reaction was to institute a vendetta against the Jews, to destroy them throughout the kingdom. Perhaps we may think this is a 'tall story', an exaggeration, such that it might make us think the story rather 'apocryphal'. But we have only to bear in mind the history of the 20th century to realise that this is far from being apocryphal. We have seen a very determined attempt in our time at genocide. How many millions of Jews did Hitler send to the gas-chambers?

But why should there be such a thing as anti-Semitism at all? Why, so often down history, has it been such a grim reality? For this reason: the Jews stand for God in the world, they are His chosen, peculiar people; and the world is basically anti-God. This goes to the very foundations of theology, to the revolt of man against God in the Fall. The story of the Garden of Eden is the story of man's rebellion against God; and this is what anti-Semitism is, at root. Men do not like to retain God in their knowledge, and therefore try to dismiss Him, abolish Him; and therefore react against anyone that reminds them of Him. Hitler was anti-God and anti-Christ; that is why he tried to exterminate the Jews. And so it was also with Haman.

20) 3:7-14

To ensure the success of his undertaking, Haman had recourse to casting lots (7). Astrology, we are told by the scholars, played an important part in the thinking of ancient peoples, and courses of action were generally determined by consulting the pundits concerning a favourable time and opportunity. One is tempted at first to remark on the sheer credulity of wickedness, and the irrationality of evil men. But perhaps there is more in this than that. What we may have here is an evidence of men selling themselves, deliberately and of set purpose, to dark powers. The dividing line between the credulous and the sinister is a fine one! How modern and up-to-date this is! The 'horoscope' syndrome is one of the saddest and most pathetic characteristics of our time - the appeal to Lord Luck (the superstition of the masses), and the belief that such powers can be appealed to irrespective of the kind of life one lives. This is 'religion without morals' with a vengeance - it is a very convenient religion that makes no demands on one! But - and this is where the sinister emerges - an appeal to 'powers' to help and favour you in what you are doing against the true and living God means that you are deliberately subscribing to a false god, and a false religion. This is to set oneself up against God, and this is, in effect, what Haman was doing. He was asking for the help of supernatural power to aid him against true supernatural power. How terrible, and how tragically amusing! 'He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh' (Ps 2:4).

21) 3:15

The final verse of the chapter completes, in one dramatic stroke, the picture of the plight of God's people. One is reminded of Israel's seemingly hopeless predicament at the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's hosts behind them, and the impassable barrier in front of them. In both cases, it was a case of being 'shut up unto faith'. This is so often how God works with His people. He corners them, by the very power of circumstances, until they cannot but cast themselves helplessly upon Him. Then He delivers them. This was certainly the pattern, so far as Mordecai and his companions in Shushan were concerned. With great dramatic skill the writer leaves us poised on the brink of disaster, inviting us, as it were, to stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord. Paul's famous words in 2 Corinthians 1 come readily to mind here, indeed they provide the aptest kind of commentary on the situation. 'We were pressed out of measure, insomuch that we despaired even of life. But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver us: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us....'

But we must add a qualification to this; shut up unto faith we may be, but this is not something that inevitably or automatically happens. There is another reaction - despair and moral and spiritual collapse. And this is avoided only by the exercise of faith. And there is always the possibility that we will not exercise it. It is this that constitutes the challenge to us - as it did to Mordecai, as the next chapter will show.

22) 4:1-9

The action of this chapter is quite clear, and needs little in the way of comment or exposition. It was an inevitable reaction on the part of Mordecai and the Jews that there should be widespread dismay, distress and fasting at the news of the fateful decree. But Mordecai was very decisive. We have before pointed out that he was on the alert, and at the ready, for God; and now, when the crisis came, he went into action with resolution, and without hesitation. Even in the extremity of danger and peril, he would surely see clearly how the Divine pattern was unfolding, see now the meaning of the mysterious providences at work in the past years, see the significance of Esther's placement in the palace of the king - a place of potential and critical importance at this particular juncture. And it would seem the most natural thing in the world to him to appeal to Esther to intercede with the king for the safety of the Jews. That is what she was there for! His faith in God expressed itself in the use of ready and available means - he was a practical realist in this respect. Furthermore, as we shall see in 14, he was in no doubt that God would intervene to deliver His people. 'Enlargement and deliverance shall arise to the Jews.'

It is wonderful, in time of extremity, to be as sure of God as this, sure that He will work, sure of His purposes in the world and in His people. God give us such faith! But do not let us forget its integral relationship to the quality of the stand Mordecai took. Perhaps if we stood as resolutely for God as he did ('I am a Jew'), our faith would increase proportionately!

23) 4:10-17

So much for Mordecai, and his faith. But what of Esther? It is on her that the real attention of the chapter focuses. The great question is: How will she react to this being 'shut up unto faith'? It is clear that she found herself in a terrible dilemma; and it must surely have been a possibility for her not to approach the king, through fear, or unwillingness to implicate herself in such a hazardous operation. It was also open to her - as Mordecai realised - to allow self-regarding motives to prevail and to seek to preserve herself in her privileged position as queen, and ignore the appeal to her to help her own people. But the extremity of the crisis demanded a very forthright challenge, and Mordecai was not slow to give it. His words to her are almost harsh in their severity, but it is the urgency of the situation that explains them. There was no time for diplomatic approaches or gentle emotional pressure. His words crack out like bullets. In the phrase 'think not with thyself' (13) he challenges any rationalisation that might be going on in her heart, as she weighed the pros and cons, or tried to reason herself out of what she knew to be right. One translation of the words in Isaiah 1:18, 'come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord' reads, 'come now, bring your reasoning, your arguing to an end'. This is what Mordecai is saying to Esther: and it is what sometimes needs to be said today, when the will of the Lord is being disputed and rationalised by God's people.

24) 4:10-17

The temptation for Esther, as we see from 14, was to remain silent when she should have spoken. In the previous chapter we saw that Mordecai spoke up - 'I am a Jew' - regardless of the consequences; and so must she. In what follows in 14b, Mordecai gives expression to something that is very basic in the teaching of the Old Testament as a whole, and particularly in the historical books, viz., that God is sovereign, and sovereignly works out His purposes in the world. He invites the co-operation of men in the furtherance and fulfilment of these purposes; if they respond, they are caught up into the onward and ongoing march of the Divine enterprise. His purposes are fulfilled, and they are blessed in the fulfilment of them. If they do not respond, but fail of the grace of God, His purposes will still nevertheless be fulfilled (through other agents and instruments), but they will suffer in the process, and be impoverished, cast aside and disqualified. That is what Mordecai underlines to Esther. Opportunity is knocking for her - the tide is at the flood, and it must be taken now, otherwise irreparable loss will come to her. Mordecai's final words in 14c, give the encouragement in the challenge. He is reminding her of all the circumstances that have led her to this situation. It was as if he said, 'All your history, all your experience, all the providences of God have been leading you and preparing you for this time. This is what it has all been for. Are you going to deny your destiny now?' And Esther rose to the occasion, magnificently and without reserve. She loved not her life even unto the death (16).

25) 4:10-17

It is surely not difficult to see the wide application the lessons of this chapter have for today, in God's work at home and abroad. It might at first be thought that the parallel does not hold, since we do not face any such threat as this in our own land. True, although it could arise very speedily, as it has done in other lands. But there are crises and crises, and discerning spirits know that there is a major crisis in the religious life of our land at the present time. It is time to be up and doing, and it may be later than we think. There are opportunities now before us which may not be before us much longer. Is God laying His hand on men and summoning them to His service? Is the call going out today, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And is the response to be 'Here am I, send me'?

We need hardly underline the state of urgency in the Lord's work abroad. It is always urgent. And doors are closing, and opportunities that present themselves today may be gone before another year is out. Oh, God's purposes will be furthered and fulfilled, it is true, but what a tragedy it will be if He has to bypass us when He is calling, because we are unwilling, and have to call others to do the work that we were supposed - and destined - to do. It may already be that on the mission fields of the world work is being done - and done heroically and sacrificially - by men and women whom God found willing to go, work that was to have been done by men and women who are still at home in the comfort and complacency of the Christian west, who turned a deaf ear to the call of God to their souls.

26) 4:10-17

Christian work at home, missionary work overseas - these, it may be, are the dramatic, spectacular aspects of God's work. But the kind of crisis mentioned here can arise - and does arise - day by day, in all sorts of different ways. It is in the ordinary run of duty that this challenge generally comes to most of us, at work, in the home, in society, in the life of a congregation. And this same sense of destiny should invest so-called ordinary tasks with tremendous significance - all we do, all we are called to do - is strategic for the furtherance of the Divine purposes in our work. Let us learn to see our work in this light, and see how strategically important it may prove to be. For to work in this light is to work as the Scriptures encourage us to do. This is how to 'redeem the time' in evil days. We may never know just how critical and strategic our obedience - even in mundane, little, unimportant things - may be for the furtherance of God's purposes.

27) 5:1-14

After the tremendous challenge made by Mordecai and Esther's magnificent response to it, one must confess to a little sense of anticlimax in reading this chapter, for so little seems to happen in it. One might have expected a decisive move, and evident tokens of divine action and intervention, after the build-up in chapter 4: But no; the whole matter seems to be held in suspended animation. One is almost tempted to cry out, in irritation, 'Come on, Esther, and get a move on'. But this in itself holds lessons for us. For one thing, it is easy to say that if our faith is real, we should be able to go forward in perfect confidence, nothing doubting; but it is quite another thing to do it, especially when it means walking a tightrope, and one false move means certain disaster. That was Esther's position, and she knew it. From this we may learn that true faith is compatible with hesitating, trembling, even faltering steps. How true to experience this is, and how encouraging for us! The important and critical factor is not the trembling and fearfulness, but the fact that, notwithstanding these, she went forward. But Esther's caution is commendable for another reason. The well known words 'He that believeth shall not be put to shame' have another rendering which reads 'He that believeth shall not make haste'. Rash, impetuous action is not a mark of faith, but often of uncertainty and even fear. And we must learn to leave God to work His purposes out in His own way, and in His own time. His timetable is never out, and He is never late.

28) 5:1-14

We must learn, then, that we cannot hurry God, or jostle Him into precipitate action. The moral is: Do not get out of step with God, and do not allow impetuous rashness to usurp the place of quiet, thoughtful waiting upon God for His will and purpose. What is more, we must also be careful about expecting tremendous things to happen all of a sudden when God begins to work. His thoughts are not as our thoughts, nor His ways as our ways. If God chooses to work in insignificant, unobtrusive ways, who are we to dispute this, or say, 'What doest Thou?' Remember the Incarnation! Is this how we would have initiated the world's salvation, by sending a Baby into the world - so insignificant a thing that no one could possibly have guessed a thing about it! Ah, let us remember that God is the Lord, and that He reserves the right to be sovereignly mysterious in His workings, to remind us that we are but men.

Examples of this principle abound in Scripture. In the story of Joseph, it will be remembered that after God had started to work in his life, and prepare him for his destiny in Pharaoh's court, two long years passed after the king's butler had been reinstated to favour before Joseph's situation was even remembered by him - two seemingly senseless years of delay. But God must have had a purpose in them, though we cannot see it. In the story of Moses and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, the beleaguered people must have felt for so many years that the promises of God were a mockery, and that God had forgotten to be gracious, when all the time God was doing something, had done something, for a little child had been born into a Levite family and even then was the object of the special care of God and being prepared for a significant destiny. How wrong we often are, when we assume that situations have reached an impasse, just because we cannot see what is going on!

29) 5:1-14

Nothing much, then, seemed to be happening. But let us look more closely, to see just what was in fact happening in this 'waiting-game'. We sometimes say, 'Give an evil man enough rope, and he will hang himself'. This is grimly and literally true, in the case of Haman. This is what God was doing, as He often does, and has to do - He was bringing evil out into the open, giving it its head, so to speak, so that it might destroy itself. And how it came about was through the request Esther made to the king that he and Haman might come to a banquet she would prepare for them. Haman was overjoyed, thinking his cup of favour was now full to the brim, and went off home to break the news of his further preferment. But on the way he saw Mordecai the Jew, who once again refused to do him honour, and everything was turned sour for Haman. Up went the gallows for Mordecai's execution - gallows that ultimately cost Haman himself very dear. Thus were the purposes of God brought to fulfilment and fruition. But notice, it was the sight of Mordecai that triggered all this off. There is a word used in chemistry which affords a good illustration of what happened here on the spiritual level. A catalyst, according to dictionary definition, is a substance which without undergoing change in itself aids and effects a chemical change in other bodies with which it comes in contact. This is exactly the effect that Mordecai had on Haman. He simply sat there; he did nothing; he remained the same but he put Haman mad with insensate rage, and so wrought upon him that he sealed his own destruction. We see Mordecai having the same sort of effect on Esther, in the opposite direction. He bore witness to her, he was simply himself, true to himself, and his words did something to her, produced a change in her that made her serviceable to God in an hour of supreme crisis and opportunity (cf 2 Corinthians 2:15, 16). Living testimony always has this two-way effect. It is not possible but that it should be so. For God is a living God, and no one can remain unchanged when He is present.

30) 6:1-9

The lessons we underlined in chapter 5 are further substantiated here. We are not allowed as yet to see the expected exposure of Haman - that comes in the next chapter - but we see something else: the outworking of the Divine plan in all its perfection, and with growing wonderment we are made to see how supremely well He works the counsel of His will and brings it to pass. It is really a dramatic situation. On the one hand, we see the unfolding of the principle that God often delays action in order to give evil its head, so as finally to destroy it. At the close of chapter 5 we almost feel that the delay in any decisive action taking place is becoming crucial and dangerous, not to say fatal; for has not Haman allowed his rage and hatred to erupt and go beyond all reasonable bounds, and plotted the death of the queen's guardian. A case might even be made out, by someone adopting the attitude expressed in the words 'Get a move on, Esther, and do something', for saying that it was precisely because she did not get a move on that Mordecai's life was now in jeopardy and peril. But there is a higher interpretation. God was not dilatory; He is not asleep. And this chapter gives us an instruction on strategic movement. There are two points: one is that God moves at precisely the right time; the other is that His move at this time, rather than earlier, reveals that this action was not only the best, but also the only way for the crisis to be resolved. The threat to Mordecai was needed for the full flowering and accomplishment of the Divine purposes. This is a thought that merits further consideration, and we turn to it again in tomorrow's Note.

31) 6:1-9

The threat to Mordecai was needed. Does not this throw a flood of light on the seemingly perplexing and inexplicable experiences that God's people sometimes have to pass through? Job's dark experiences were needed by God for His sovereign purposes in the battle between good and evil. Furthermore, in this situation, it was the only way for the crisis to be resolved. For Haman had to be exposed as the villain of the piece, and proved to be so to the king. A wily villain like he could easily have found a way out of condemnation, even if the plot against the Jews had been exposed on the first occasion of Esther's appearing to the king, and the edict rescinded. He had to be caught red-handed, so to speak, so as to prevent any possibility of escape for him.

The other point to be made is about God moving at precisely the right time. One cannot fail to admire the Divine skill and 'expertise' as He moves into action. Mordecai has been the object of Haman's malevolent thoughts - he has been breathing out threatenings and slaughter against him - but God has been having thoughts about him too, thoughts of another kind, thoughts of peace, not of evil. And His thinking was to some purpose, for we see what it led to!

When we consider the nature of the battle that was raging over Mordecai's soul, we are reminded of Jesus' words to Peter, 'Satan hath desired to have you, but I have prayed for thee'. This is how it was with Mordecai - his soul was the battleground for the contest between good and evil. On the one side we have Haman, plotting and building gallows for his hapless, unsuspecting victim, ready to go to the king in the morning to ask for his life. On the other side, the silent, purposive, easy activity of God, countering Haman's fell design by the simple expedient of giving the king a sleepless night! That was all it took to bring to naught the schemings of this evil man. Thus effortlessly does God accomplish His sovereign will!

32) 6:10-14

One might perhaps have thought that what would be done would be to warn the king in a dream that mischief was afoot, and that Haman was to be guarded against. But no; that again would be to look for spectacular signs and wonders, and God reserves the right to work more unobtrusively and economically than this. So all He did was to keep the king awake. And in the hours of sleeplessness, memory was providentially stirred to recall something that had been forgotten all about - the plot against his life (2:21 ff) and the man who had been instrumental in exposing it, thus saving his life and his crown - Mordecai the Jew. And the king was stirred to resolve, and to a determination that he be honoured and rewarded, making amends for his lack of gratitude and favour in the past.

Well, here is a situation! Haman is going to come to court first thing in the morning to ask the king for Mordecai's life. But God has forestalled him, putting very different thoughts of Mordecai into the king's mind. Thus simply does God frustrate the designs of evil men! This is an important lesson for us. God is not put out or strained to bring to nought the works of darkness. It is easy for Him to do so. The only question that should remain for us is - not whether God will help us, or find it difficult to do so, but how He will do so, and change the situation in a flash.

Haman's humiliation was complete. If we are tempted to feel sympathy with his misfortune, let us not forget that this is the man who has planned genocide against the Jews 'Pride goeth before a fall', the saying has it, and we see how truly this is fulfilled here. How he preened himself, intoxicated as he was with his own importance. What a deadly combination vanity and power can be! And God makes Haman seal his own humiliation, by making him pronounce Mordecai's advancement as 'the man whom the king delighteth to honour'. Ah, he brought it all upon himself, did he not, by giving rein unreservedly to his overweening pride, vanity and conceit.

33) 7:1-10

This chapter brings us to the beginning of the denouement of the action. Haman is brought down and destroyed, and in the remainder of the story his wicked scheme to destroy the Jewish people is set at nought. The account here is grimly simple and inevitable, as the evil Haman is brought to his doom. There is a saying 'the devil looks after his own', but our story here gives an emphatic lie to it. The devil is in fact not interested in his own, as people. He simply makes use of them, as a means to an end. His tools are entirely expendable to him. Here is Haman, a tool of Satan, sold into his hands and his employment, given over to work his will. And he has been a useful and effective instrument of evil. But he has gone too far; Satan has driven him too far. Mordecai and Esther have outwitted him, outplayed him, and the game is up, so far as he is concerned. Now look at how 'the devil looks after his own'! After the exposure, the king goes out furiously into the palace garden - probably to call the guard and have Haman arrested. While he is out, Haman, unnerved and realising his extreme peril (7) casts himself down at Esther's feet, imploring her to spare his life. At that point the king re-enters, and seeing his compromising position accuses him (whether in earnest or simply as an excuse) of making improper advances, and orders his immediate execution. It was, of course, an unjust, unfair accusation, with no foundation to it. Haman's sin did not lie in that direction at all. But his luck was out, and his master did nothing to help him. So far as the devil was concerned, Haman's usefulness was over; the plan to destroy the Jews had miscarried. That was what Haman was for, in Satan's calculations. And when they misfired, he has no further use for him, and he cast him thoughtlessly and contemptuously aside. The pleasures - and rewards - of sin are only for a season, a short season, for the devil's time is short, and in the end he will always throw his discarded tools on the rubbish heap. Well might the Scriptures say, 'The way of the transgressor is hard'!

34) 7:1-10

But there is something else also that we can learn from this. The king was also under the control of the evil one. Yet he worked against Haman in this instance, to the latter's downfall. And this bears witness to something of immense importance and encouragement to us in the work of the gospel: the kingdom of evil, which often looks massive and monolithic in its unified opposition to the gospel and the will of God, has in fact within itself the seeds of its own disintegration and destruction. We learn from Revelation 17:12-18 that the unity of the kingdom of evil is a unity permitted by God and forged by Him for His own purposes, and exists only so long as He wills it to exist. When He says the word, the real nature of evil becomes plain, and the powers of evil are straightway at one another's throats. The ten horns mentioned in Revelation hate the harlot, and make her desolate and naked, and cut her flesh and burn her with fire. They agree only until His words are fulfilled. Then, when He begins to move, the rot sets in: and evil is exposed for what it is, as having the seeds of destruction within it. There is no loyalty within the kingdom of darkness. How could there be, indeed, when every separate evil power wants to lord it over all the others! This is something we do well to remember, when the powers of ill all seem to be ganging up against us. God says, 'Wait, watch what happens among them'. And He sometimes allows us to see the opposition destroying itself before our very eyes. God often says to His hard-pressed people, 'Ye shall not need to fight in this battle' (2 Chronicles 20:17)... 'Fret not thyself because of evildoers...For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be' (Psalm 37:1, 10).

35) 7:1-10

There is another lesson of importance to be gathered from this chapter. Consider Psalm 18:25, 26, 'With the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward....' The point about these words is not that God 'gets His own back' on evil men, but that there is a fundamental ethical principle of cause and effect at the heart of the universe, Paul states it categorically in Galatians 6:7: 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap'. Think of how it was with Haman: he made use of the fickleness of the king, and his impetuous, weak-willed nature, in his wily scheming against Mordecai and the Jews. He played on these characteristics of the king, to attain his wicked ends. And now he falls by these very things. It was again the king's fickleness and impetuosity that spelt his doom. The king's accusation was unjust, unfair, and only a fickle, impetuous, weak-willed monarch would have taken action on such an accusation. But then, you cannot have it both ways. This was how it suited Haman to have the king act, in the earlier situation. And God said, 'All right, Haman, this is the kind of man you want the king to be. Very well, he will be that kind of man'. And it boomeranged upon him, with a terrible effectiveness. Haman was the victim of his own manipulation of the king. He encouraged these wild, unreasonable traits in his monarch. And they were his undoing. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap!

36) 8:1-11

The subject matter of this chapter is the undoing of Haman's wicked works. At the end of the previous Note we saw how Haman's unscrupulous manipulation of the king boomeranged upon him, and quoted Psalm 18:25.

'With the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward'. This is underlined even more clearly in the verses before us. We should compare 1 and 7 with 3:10, 11. An exact reversal of the situation has now taken place, by the intervention of God: right is exalted and wrong is put down. This is the unchanging principle in the government of God, and this is always what we must expect and hope for. Faith can always look for this, however long it may be coming

'For right is right, since God is God
And right the day must win'.

How comforting this is, to all who may not as yet have seen the fulfilment of God's purposes in their particular situation. Sometimes it takes years for the redress of wrongs, but God sees to it that it always comes.

The unfolding of the story, however, needs a little explanation, and we must spend time in tomorrow's Note to look at it in more detail.

37) 8:1-18

The situation was as follows. Already, the decree of the king had gone forth, at the instigation of Haman, to the effect that on a certain day all the Jews would be exterminated (3:13). One might think that it would have been a simple matter to reverse the decree and be done with it. But not so. The laws of the Medes and the Persians were irreversible and irrecoverable. Once promulgated, not even the king could revoke them. This was the problem, and the king recognised it, as he remitted to Mordecai and Esther to do what they could to nullify its effects. And another decree was sent out, granting to the Jews the right and power to 'stand for their life, to destroy, stay and cause to perish all the power of the people and province that would assault them' (11). The effects of this decree would surely be to cancel out the sinister effects of the first, in all but a determined minority who were Jew-haters, and reduce the opposition to manageable proportions. It would release all the generality of people who would have had to conform to the first decree, under duress, for the ugly duty of genocide, and leave only those who were avowed and bitter enemies of the Jews to be reckoned with. Little wonder that the Jews rejoiced throughout the empire, as also those who sympathised with them! This throws a rather different light on the slaughter recorded in the next chapter, for it indicates that the Jews acted in self-defence, not in revenge. But we shall look more closely at that problem when we come to it, in chapter 9.

38) 8:1-18

It is possible to look at this part of the story in the way we look at the story of the Passover and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, for this is in fact what happened here. If, then, we 'spiritualise' the story (as surely we are entitled to do, since the Old Testament is God's 'picture-book' in which He illustrates the truths of redemption), the spiritual lessons begin to take shape and form in our minds.

For one thing, the action of this whole chapter flows from, and depends on, the statement in 7:10, 'Then was the king's wrath pacified'. When that was accomplished, everything flowed from his favour in the remainder of the story. Moreover, that wrath was pacified by a death which was a judgment upon wickedness and evil. It is not difficult to see a shadow both of the Passover deliverance (which was also based on death) and also of the greater spiritual redemption and deliverance of the New Testament. For the wrath of God was turned away by the death Jesus died, the Just for the unjust, and it is on that basis that grace and divine favour flow to man; furthermore, the command that 'the handwriting' against God's people be reversed is given in the name of the king, and is sealed with his signet ring! Is not this the message of the gospel, as expressed in Colossians 2:13-15?

Not only so: the decree of deliverance was decided upon; but it had to be made known and sounded out throughout the entire land. Mordecai and Esther were safe; but the safety of others depended on their diligence and enterprise. There was no time to lose. The news had to be posted to the furthest corners of the empire. The Jews were under sentence of death, and the news must reach them in time. This also is a picture of the gospel. We who know the decree of deliverance have a duty to proclaim it to our fellow-captives, and tell it out in urgent haste. Does not 17 read like something out of the Acts of the Apostles (cf Acts 8:4-8)?

39) 8:1-18

There are two further points that find a parallel in the gospel. The first is this. 'The decree of the king threw around them the favour and protection of the king, and did for them what they could not have done for themselves, yet they had to confront and beat down all the enemies who should rise up against them, and virtually gain a victory for themselves. They had to fight in the king's name, and with the king's weapons, and under the king's mandate. The conquest was sure, but the battle might yet be severe'. So says one commentator, and how right he is. It is the same idea as we have in the book of Joshua, which teaches the same lesson. The land was given to the Israelites, but they had to go in and possess it. So it is also in the gospel. We must appropriate by faith what God has wrought for us in Christ. 'Lay hold on eternal life', says Paul. The enemy has been vanquished, and the power of sin broken, but the victory still has to be appropriated, reckoned upon and made ours in personal possession. And this often involves the fight of faith in a very marked degree.

The second lesson relates to prayer. Esther's appeal to the king, and his invitations to her to ask, were made on the ground of relationship. It was because she was his wife, and his favourite, that she had this ground of confidence. And this is how it is in prayer to God. We are not heard for our worthiness, but because He is our heavenly Father, not for something in us, but for something in Him. And the king invited her to be specific in her prayers (cf 9:12). 'What is thy petition?'....or 'What is thy request further?' 'Ask of Me' says God, 'What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?'

40) 9:1 - 10:3

The final scenes in the book of Esther are scenes of fierce and bitter fighting and bloodshed. Not unnaturally they raise some very fundamental issues, and it would not be honest to gloss over them or ignore the problems they pose for our thinking. What happened was this: in accordance with the second degree promulgated in chapter 8, the Jews throughout the provinces were standing at the ready to defend themselves against attack from their enemies. We are told that 75,000 were slain by the Jews on the 13th Adar, and 500 in Shushan, including Haman's sons, with a further 300 the next day. This victory became the occasion of a memorial festival, the feast of Purim, so called after 'Purr' = 'lot', which Haman cast in the beginning (3:7) to fix a day for the Jews' extermination. It was celebrated then, and subsequently, as a time of rejoicing and thanksgiving, in commemoration of an act of God which had turned a day of promised doom and disaster into one of deliverance and victory. The story ends (10:1-3) with Mordecai administering the kingdom as Ahasuerus's Prime Minister - a picture reminiscent of the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis.

41) 9:1 - 10:3

For comment, the obvious place to start is with the slaughter of the 75,000 on the 13th of Adar. How can anyone possibly justify this frightful blood bath, it is asked? (Reference is made in this connection to similar accounts in earlier books of the Old Testament, e.g. Numbers and Joshua). Well, first of all, we should bear in mind the original intention of Haman to exterminate the entire Jewish people. One estimate puts the figure at more than 2 million. The 75,000, by comparison, could hardly be called a man-for-man reprisal. Furthermore, there were 127 provinces in the empire, which was estimated to have a population of over 100 million, and there were Jews in every province. A breakdown of the figures will show that something less than 600 on average were killed per province. Does not this begin to look as if the Jews really did only 'stand defensively' (8:11), and kill only as they were attacked? Do the figures really suggest a blood-bath? Were they so inept as to be unable, if they had been so minded, to make a better job of reprisals than this? This, to say the least, does make us revise our original estimate of the situation. If they had been intent on revenge, there would surely have been a very much greater slaughter.

Furthermore, consider the proposition that the Jews were, as they are explicitly stated in earlier books of the Old Testament to be, the instruments of the judgment of God against evil. If it is true to say that God used the heathen nations as the road of His anger to chastise and punish His own people for their sins, is it inconceivable that He might also use them as an instrument with which to chastise, punish and judge the heathen nations?

42) 9:1 - 10:3

There is something else along the same line of thought that we must consider. We may think that Esther's attitude was very ruthless in asking of the king to have a second pogrom the following day in Shushan. But consider: there had been a threat to exterminate the Jews entirely. Ruthless and implacable enemies were surrounding them and it is simply wishful thinking to suppose that when part of their power had been dealt with, the rest would call it a day, and let well alone. No. A surgeon has to be ruthless in cutting out a cancer from the human body, and he will generally err on the safe side, cutting even where there is no evidence of infection at the time. He cannot be too sure. This is the point here. Esther wanted to see the threat utterly destroyed, and that not for any merely personal or national considerations. Mordecai had spoken earlier of her having come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Yes - the kingdom of God! The purposes of God for the world were at stake here. If the Jews had been exterminated (and, remember, this would have included the returned exiles in Jerusalem, for Judah was also a province of the empire), what would have become of the Promise? What would have become of the gospel, and of the Saviour that was to be born? This is the supreme consideration. We must recognise this story of Esther for what it was, in relation to the redemptive history unfolded in the Scriptures. This was but one of many satanic attempts to destroy the purposes of God. This is why Esther was so ruthless. If any of the enemy had been left, it would only have been a matter of time before another attack would be made.

43) 9:1 - 10:3

A more general consideration is that the objections made against passages of this nature are due to the rooted objection people have to the very idea of judgment in principle. The whole concept is abhorrent to them and, as they say, unchristian. But the moment they use the word 'unchristian' they are on very uncertain ground, for in fact many of the most terrible and unequivocal statements about judgment are found, not in the Old Testament but in the New, and more on the lips of Jesus than on those of His apostles. The idea may be abhorrent to them, but they can hardly aver that it is unchristian. Are they not to allow God to judge finally at all, then? Do we not see the logical fallacy in such an attitude? It would mean that there are no absolute values, in truth, or right or wrong, no absolute distinctions between good and evil. Is evil always going to be a canker in the universe? This is the alternative to judgment. Let us not be afraid, or ashamed, that God is a God of judgment. He is not embarrassed at His judgments. Why should we be?