

The Great Reversal

Please turn with me to Esther 9 and let's pray together.

On December 7, 1941, at 7:48 am, Japanese fighter planes attacked the US Military base in Pearl Harbor, in the US territory of Hawaii. The intent of the attack was to neutralize the U.S. Pacific Fleet so that they wouldn't interfere with Japanese interests in the Pacific. The day after the attack, while most Japanese military staffers celebrated their success, the man who came up with the idea of the attack, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, spent the day in a deep depression. He would write in his diary, *I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve*. Indeed, on Dec. 8, rather than the US Pacific Fleet being neutralized in the Pacific, it became fully engaged in it as the United States declared war on Japan. The attack on Pearl Harbor resulted in the exact reverse of what the Japanese hoped for.

As we come to Esther 9, we find another military plan that results in the exact reverse of what was hoped for. An evil man named Haman had earlier planned out an attack on the Jew Mordecai and his people, and attack that was designed to humiliate Mordecai and annihilate the Jews. But God had other ideas and Haman begins to find that his plans are resulting in the exact reverse of everything he wanted. He wants to exalt himself and humiliate Mordecai, but he ends up humiliated and Mordecai ends up being the one exalted. Finally, in chapter 7 Haman is hung on the very gallows that he had built for Mordecai. But there is still one aspect of his plan that is still moving forward: the decree that he had the king authorize saying that on the 13th day of the 12th month, every Jewish man, woman, and child was to be killed by the Persian people was still in effect.

Esther begged the king to revoke the law, but once a Persian law was passed by the king, it could never be repealed or revoked. The planes have left the aircraft carriers and they can't be recalled. However, the king suggests they write another law, giving the Jews the full backing of the king to ferociously defend themselves. And that's where we pick up the story in chapter 9. For the sake of time we're not going to read all of it, so follow with me.

Esther 9:1,5-10; 16-17.

Psychologically the king's second edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves against any attack changed everything for most Persians. Not only were the Jews allowed to defend themselves (and they had a reputation for being pretty good fighters), but just as importantly the Persians knew that the king was now favorably disposed towards the Jews and that the man now second in command, Mordecai, was himself a Jew. But there were still many people who, like Haman, burned with a hatred for the Jews and they still prepared to exterminate the Jews on the given day. Among them, not surprisingly, were Haman's ten sons, who not only inherited their father's hatred of the Jews, they also now wanted revenge for their father's humiliating death.

Finally the day comes and tens of thousands of people attack the Jews in various cities throughout Persia, and the Jews defend themselves - with great success. God is with them and at the end of the day 75,000 people, including Haman's ten sons, are killed and the Jews celebrate their victory with a feast, and a holiday called Purim is born, a holiday that Jews celebrate to this day.

The book of Esther ends on what might seem a discordant note: bodies lying everywhere, blood all over everything, and the Jews throw a party! They eat and drink and are merry for two days. It could seem kinda heartless and callous, but we need to take a closer look. The Jews didn't go out and kill 75,000 people, they defended themselves against 75,000 people who viciously attacked them and their families. The king's second edict didn't give them authority to kill their enemies, it gave them authority to defend themselves - and then to plunder the goods of anyone who attacked them. But the Jews refused to plunder their enemies. To them this wasn't about self-enrichment, it was about self-preservation. In that light, it's no surprise that their hearts are filled with joy to find at the end of the day that they are still alive, their wives and children and friends are still alive after living under the threat of extermination for months and months. I think if we were in their situation we'd celebrate too!!

In every way now, Haman's plot has had the exact reverse effect of what he wanted. The day he meant to be the day of the Jews devastation has become a day of celebration for the Jews. And his own sons, of whom he was so proud, have been hung on gallows just as he was. It is a great reversal. There is a very real way that this applies to our lives as Christians today. The gospel is the greatest military reversal that has ever happened, and Jesus won the greatest war ever waged. But before we talk about that, I feel like it's impossible to ignore a complicated issue that this passage raises. So bear with me for a few minutes as we take a detour on a different kind of topic this morning.

Is It Ever Acceptable for a Christian to Use Force to Defend Themselves and Others?

Recently Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Christian college Liberty University, raised eyebrows when, in response to the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, said, "If more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in and killed them". He then encouraged Liberty students to carry a gun to class saying, "let's teach them a lesson if they ever show up here."

On the other end of the spectrum there are sincere Christians who believe that self-defense, particularly if it requires harming someone, is never allowable for the Christian. They point to NT teachings such as: Matt. 5:38-39: ³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

And Matt. 5:43-44: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

And Romans 12:19-21: ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it^[i] to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In verses like these, and others, they believe Christians are commanded not to defend ourselves against evil people or violent threats. They also point to Jesus' example and the example of the disciples. Jesus didn't pull a Jack Bauer on the Roman soldiers who whipped and crucified him. Paul didn't establish a Christian militia to counter the Jews who were trying to kill him. The first disciples accepted suffering and dying as part of following Jesus. They were martyrs for Christ, not paramilitary for Christ.

These are compelling verses that no doubt call us as Christians to follow Jesus in a life of loving, not hating, our enemies. They also warn us that when religious groups adopt a militaristic attitude they are straying far from the spirit of Jesus. So when you hear about supposedly Christian sects boarding themselves up in their homes or compounds ready to shoot any government authority that approaches, you can be sure that they aren't operating in the spirit of Jesus.

But what about when someone's home is broken into by an intruder who means you and your family harm? What about when an evil person enters a crowd of people and opens fire? In cases like these is it ever acceptable for a Christian to defend himself and others? I believe it is, and I want to share a few brief thoughts to say why. Let me first say that this can be a controversial subject and I believe there is room for sincere believers to about this so I'm going to share my convictions based on my understanding of God's word respecting the fact that some might see things differently. What is important for all of us in this is that 1) we accept God's word as our final authority and 2) we try to handle God's word on these matters as carefully and as responsibly as we can.

Let's begin with the NT teachings and examples that seem to teach against self-defense. As with any scripture, it is important that we seek to understand these scriptures in their context. We never want to detach verses from their context because to understand what God's word says, we need to understand it in context.

1. A closer look at the context of the "no self-defense" scriptures in the NT

I think many believers think that self defense was allowable in the OT but is forbidden in the NT. This is one of those areas, they think, where NT principles override OT principles. Clearly the OT teaches that self-defense and the defense of others who are being threatened with bodily harm is not just allowable, it's good and right.

Ex. 22:2 says, If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account. If someone means harm, and the person being attacked responds and the attacker dies, there is no guilt in that case.

Psalms 82:4 - Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.

The account we just read in Esther a case of God's people defending themselves against wicked people who mean them and their families harm. Note that they aren't out looking for enemies to kill, they are defending themselves. The same is true in Nehemiah when the Jews rebuilding the walls in Jerusalem were threatened by enemies. They worked with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other - ready to defend themselves if attacked. It is clear that defending oneself and others against evil criminals was acceptable in the OT. But then we come to the NT verses that seem to do away with the OT standard such as those we've already mentioned.

- *"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Rom. 12:19) To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Rom. 12:20*

- *[Jesus speaking] "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Matt. 5:38-39*
- *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt. 5:43-44)*

But is it correct to say that these verses do away with the principles of order, love, and civil responsibility that God establishes in the OT for a higher NT principle? What's interesting about all these NT verses is that, rather than contradicting the OT, they are all based on the OT. When Paul writes " *Beloved, never avenge yourselves... for vengeance is mine...says the Lord*" he's not revealing some new truth never seen before, he is quoting directly from Deut. 32:35. Likewise when Paul calls believers to be kind to our enemies and feed them, he isn't contradicting the OT, he is quoting the OT, specifically Prov. 25:21-22. It wouldn't make sense to say these verses are meant to do away with OT principles when these verses are themselves from the OT. If they didn't contradict God's directions for self-defense and the defense of others in need of defense when they were written and included in the OT, why would we assume that when they are quoted in the NT they are meant to abolish those directions?

But what about Jesus' teaching to not resist the one who is evil, but if he slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Is this teaching us to allow evil people to do whatever they want, and in fact allow them to do more? To put it bluntly, if you catch a man trying to kidnap your daughter, are you to offer them your son as well?

The fact is Jesus isn't talking about self-defense in this passage, he's talking about retaliation. The OT allowed for retaliation - if they took an eye, you took an eye. It's similar to what Paul is saying not to avenge ourselves on our enemies. Avenge, revenge, retaliation - the Lord calls us not to seek these things. But revenge and retaliation are very different things from self-defense. If they wrong us personally - slap our cheek, rather than retaliate (slap them on the cheek) we are to turn the other cheek. Let them wrong us. The context isn't about ignoring someone's evil, criminal actions, the context is retaliating against someone who has wronged us personally.

When Jesus says to love and pray for our enemies, the context puts it in relationship to their persecuting us for our faith. Earlier in Matt. 5 Jesus says, "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:11-12)*". The persecution Jesus is speaking of is being treated badly because of our faith, not the criminal activity of someone seeking to harm us or our family.

Context is important to these verses. I don't see in these passages that Jesus or Paul are speaking to the issue of defending our lives and others against evil people committing criminal acts. They are speaking about persecution and retaliation.

2. *The example of Jesus and the disciples*

The example that Jesus and the disciples set for us is that when a government or authoritative body opposes us, particularly for our Christian faith, we are not to grab our guns and fight them. If our government ever begins to persecute Christians for their faith, as Christians we need to accept that as a

part of our Christian witness and suffering for Christ. The NT really doesn't address specifically self-defense or the defense of others against an evil person or people doing terrible, criminal things.

3. *Loving our neighbor as ourselves requires us defending the innocent and defenseless*

Jesus says to love our enemies and pray for them. That is true. Jesus also said we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to love everyone, we are to live a life of love for others. But love always has to be attached to the greatest good of those we love. If loving a mass murderer means passively allowing them to go on murdering, then we're not loving the innocent victims whose lives he will take. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who joined in a plot to assassinate Hitler. That wasn't unloving, that was a loving act. I can't see that it would ever be loving to innocent victims or loving to society as a whole for us to stand idly by while evil people commit atrocious acts. When that terroristic couple started shooting in San Bernadino or 20 year old Adam Lanza, after killing his mother, drove to Sandy Hook Elementary School where he killed 20 children between 6 and 7 years old and 6 school staff members, a true and practical love for those victims would have been to do everything possible, including using lethal force, to stop these evil people.

Recently it was reported that three policemen were caught on their dash cams debating whether to rescue three teenage girls from a stolen car as it was sinking in a Florida pond. That initial report may have been inaccurate, but when I read that it struck me as terribly wrong. To stand by debating when people's lives are endangered is so wrong. In the same way if Christians stand around debating whether we can defend others from evil people while innocent people are being harmed seems very wrong to me. If an evil man is in the act of kidnapping a child, he is about to destroy that child's life and the lives of his parents, siblings, family, and friends. It can't be loving not to do everything we can to stop it, even to the point of lethal force if we can.

Let me try to summarize the difference in what I believe that Jesus and Paul are saying and self-defense. If the government authorities were to come to my house and demand that my family deny Jesus or they will put us to death, I pray I'd have the faith and courage to urge my family to stay true to Jesus and we'll meet on the other side. But if someone breaks into my home and threatens the lives of my wife and kids, I pray I'd have the courage and ability to defend my family even if it meant sending the intruder to the other side.

I know I've taken a lot of time with this, and that some of you might disagree with my conclusions. But I think it's an important, practical and spiritual topic and hopefully I've stirred you up to ask God to help you come to sound, biblical, loving convictions in this matter.

The greatest reversal

All right, let's bring this plane in quickly for a landing. Esther presents a story of a great reversal. Haman, in wickedly trying to exalt himself and destroy the Jews, he, his sons, and all those who share his hatred of God's people the Jews, are brought devastatingly low, and Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews, ironically because of Haman's evil plan, are not only victorious over their enemies, they are exalted and admired throughout the empire. What was meant to be a day of agony turns into a day of gladness. It really is a great reversal.

But the greatest reversal was accomplished for us by Jesus at the cross. When Lucifer tempted Adam and Eve in the garden, it was a tactical attack on God. He would take God's precious creation, man, created in the image of God, and hurt God and destroy man by turning our hearts against God. Sin cuts us off from all good things which come from God, but the greatest blow of all is that sin has the power to separate us from God forever and there was nothing we could do to save ourselves. Like the Jews in Esther, we were waiting for doomsday to arrive - the day of judgment.

But Christ won the decisive victory on the cross, not only fully paying for our sins, but dealing a death blow to the devil. It is the greatest reversal - Satan's plan was to destroy us, but through Christ God has reversed the effects of the enemy's plan and has brought our greatest good from it. Through faith in Christ we aren't just spared destruction, we are made over comers. Victorious in Christ. In Christ we have been elevated to the highest position in the universe under God Himself. The Bible tells us that we will one day judge angels - including the fallen angel Satan himself. Through the redemptive plan of God, we haven't just been restored as God's precious creation, we have been adopted as God's sons and daughters. That's something no other creature will ever be able to say. What Satan meant for our great evil, God has reversed for our greatest good.

God wants you and I to live in the good of that great reversal. If you are trusting in Christ, live in the good of knowing that you aren't an enemy of God, you aren't even a distant acquaintance of God, you are a child of God. You aren't rejected by God, you aren't even just tolerated by God - you are ferociously loved by God! In Christ, you aren't a victim, you are a victor, reigning in life. In Christ your life isn't without meaning or purpose, it is full of God-given meaning and eternal purpose. Esther wasn't used so powerfully by God to accomplish so much good because she was a perfect person, we have seen that she was a very flawed person. But God in His grace chose her - a flawed and mixed up young girl - to do amazing things. We have a lot in common with Esther. We aren't perfect people - we are flawed people. But God in His grace wants to use our lives to accomplish great works of grace. The gospel is the greatest reversal.

Let's pray.