

## **“A HOLY GOD AND HOLY WAR.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Scripture Texts: Esther 8:10-11; 9:5-6, 16**

### **Introduction.**

We are returning to Esther for one final sermon to address an issue that is lurking under the surface. You may have felt the tension. It has to do with this issue of war, and all the killing in the OT, especially of women and children.

Some people like to point a finger at the OT and criticize God for being a God of war, who is mean, harsh, vengeful.

Christians and non-Christians shudder and struggle with God’s wrath and judgment in the OT especially when they contrast that with the love and forgiveness of Jesus in the NT. Some go so far as to say the God of the OT is different than the God of the NT.

Why does the God of the OT tell His people to fight against their enemies, but in the NT He tells them to love their enemies?

Esther eight and nine raise a fundamental moral issue, the ethics of Mordecai’s edict. Was it right for Mordecai to issue a decree permitting the Jews not just to defend themselves but to retaliate against their enemies and their families and households, including women and children?

Is there a double standard, what Haman decreed against God’s people was wrong, but the actions of God’s people against their enemies was OK? We are glad that the good guys won, but what about the fact that the good guys turned on the bad guys and then seemed to act like the bad guys?

There is a lot of talk these days about the abuse of power. Is Mordecai really any better than Haman when it comes to the use and abuse of power?

### **Holy War in Esther.**

Haman’s edict against the Jews in Esther was motivated by personal animosity and was a part of the larger hostility between the Amalekites and Israel. Twice in chapter 8 we are reminded Haman was an Agagite.

The aggression against Haman the Agagite and his sons was a continuation of a holy war God commanded King Saul to wage against the Amalekites and King Agag in I Samuel. The reason for God's wrath against the Amalekites goes back to Exodus.

The Amalekites were the first people to attack the young nation of Israel after Israel fled from slavery in Egypt.

**Exodus 17:14-15** Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

**Deuteronomy 25:17-19** Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, 18 how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. 19 Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.

God's wrath and judgment are on Amalek for what they did to His people.

Later God sends King Saul on a mission to finish the job and utterly destroy the Amalekites. King Saul's failure to finish the task long ago, resulted in this continuing conflict centuries later.

Now days when one nation tries to completely eliminate another nation or race of people, we call that genocide, and we say it is evil. So why is it OK for God to do it?

***The name for it is Holy War and it is different from other kinds of war.***

First, holy war is decided by God, not by kings or rulers. God is called the Lord of Hosts, the commander of His armies.

Second, holy war is a war waged by God. Sometimes God conducts the war on His own with a flood as in the days of Noah or fire falling from heaven as with Sodom and Gomorrah. And sometimes God used His people, the nation of Israel, to be His agent to accomplish His just judgment on His enemies.

A holy war was not a political war, it was not an ethnic cleansing or land grabbing. It was spiritual and judicial, it was the executing the justice and righteousness of God against **His** enemies. It was the judgment of God against wickedness done against God.

Third, this is why one of the unique features of a holy war was Israel was not allowed to keep anything for themselves, there were no spoils of war to be taken. It's God's war, it all belonged to God.

Remember at Jericho God commanded no plunder be taken, but all were to be put to the sword. So when Achan took some of the plunder and hid it in his tent, God brought judgment on him and his entire family. The same happened with King Saul who didn't do as God commanded and let King Agag live and kept some of the sheep. God's judgment fell on Saul, he lost his kingship and his entire family was killed.

In a holy war the people don't die because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the people who die are not basically good or innocent people. They die because they are sinners against a holy God, which is why death is required of all, even women and children.

Holy wars were never hasty or capricious or impulsive. God is compassionate and very slow to anger. He waited hundreds of years to bring about the flood and four hundred years to bring judgment on the Canaanites and Jericho and another four hundred years before judging Amalek and in each case He rescued out those who were righteous, Noah and his family, Lot and his family, Rahab and her family.

**Deuteronomy 9:4** "Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you."

God is patient beyond measure, but His patience has an end. He will not tolerate hatred against Him forever. One day judgment will fall on all who reject and despise Him.

**Deuteronomy 7:9-10** Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, 10 and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. 11 You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.

The only people in the Bible that God destroys are wicked people who hate Him. They deserve everything they get. They are not good or innocent, they hate God and everything associated with God.

***Why does the OT allow for killing enemies, but the NT does not? Is this a contradiction?***

It is because of another great reversal, like the one we saw in Esther. The great reversal is seen when God waged war against His own Son

**Isaiah 53:4-6** Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, ***smitten by God***, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and ***the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all***.

**II Corinthians 5:21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

All the stored up wrath against all of humanity's wicked rebellion for all of history, past and future, was poured out in full measure on Christ on the cross. Like Haman, Jesus suffered the shame and curse of being hung on a tree, the ultimate sign of God's judgment (Deut. 21:23).

What God did to Canaan and Sodom and the Amalekites, He did to Jesus. We are saved from the wrath of God by the blood of Jesus (Romans 5:9-10).

The death of Jesus Christ brings to an end the concept of holy war. God's war with His enemies ends with His war against the greatest enemy, Satan, sin and death. The wages of sin are met, the penalty is paid, justice is satisfied, vengeance belongs only to God.

After the cross there is no more holy war in human history. The only nations who wage holy war today are nations that reject the gospel of Jesus Christ and reject the moral commands He has given.

“Now there are no nations, no peoples, no tribes to be defeated, because the crucified Lamb has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). The enemy is not nations, not peoples. The enemy is sin, and Satan, and hearts that hold fast to the insurrection” (John Piper).

With the coming of the Holy Spirit we now have the power to love our enemies and forgive those who sin against us.

God's army is now the church and the battle ground for holy war is now in the human heart. It is here that we do battle with sin and evil, with spiritual armor against spiritual enemies.

**Ephesians 6:12** For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Our battle is not against flesh and blood, it isn't against Iran or Syria or Islam or ISIS. Our battle is waged in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is waged in love, it conquers through prayer and salvation and conversion.

The good news is the victory is already won.

"He who is in [us] is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). We conquer "him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [our] testimony" (Revelation 12:11).

God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Colossians 2:15). The war is won on the cross.

The promise of Genesis 3:15 is fulfilled.

**Romans 16:20** The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

### **Implications and Application.**

*I want us to take away from all of this two things.* When we think about the violence and war in the Bible there are two applications for us, two ways to improve this teaching for the benefit of our souls.

*First*, we should tremble to know that every great pouring out of wrath and judgment on earth is only a foretaste of a great and terrible day of judgment that is to come.

He sent a flood that destroyed the entire world.

He sent fire down from heaven that consumed two whole towns.

He sent His people into Canaan to drive out and destroy entire nations.

These things are a gracious warning of how seriously God takes sin and how seriously we should take it. These things are a call to repent lest we too perish. There will be a final reckoning for all wickedness, evil, rebellion and sin.

**Romans 2:4-5** Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

*Second*, we should take to heart that all of life is spiritual warfare and we are called to arms, to take up and put on the spiritual armor, to fight the good fight of faith and to fight against the sin in our hearts and the temptations of the world and of Satan.

“Our first conflict is with ourselves—against our wickedness, selfishness, laziness, and every other evil thing that keeps us from loving and serving God as we should” (Toby Sumpter).

Let us not be complacent in these things for the enemy is great and the danger is real and hell is eternal.

But God is faithful and He has not left us to fight alone. He is with us, He has given us His Holy Spirit and His Holy Word and His Holy Church, the fellowship of believers. We have the victory of Christ on the cross and everything we need to share in His victory and to receive His inheritance and crown.