

ESTHER

**An Explanation,
with Notes and Quotes,
Illustrations and Applications**

G. Michael Cocoris

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PREFACE

The purpose of this commentary is to provide a practical explanation of Esther. The objective is a balanced exposition—explaining the passage in context and applying its truths to life with illustrations. Some commentaries are, by design, of a technical nature, delving into the meanings of words and phrases even outside their use in the book under consideration. Those commentaries tend to ignore the context of the book and its application. Other commentaries go to the other extreme and concentrate on the application, often not fully expounding the passage. Commentaries should do both. They should offer a contextual exposition of the book and apply the truths of that book to life. Adding illustrations facilitates clarity.

First and foremost, this is a contextual exposition. The context is not just the paragraph or the chapter but the whole book. In studying any book of the Bible, the first question that should be asked is: “What is the subject of this book?” Each natural literary unit, whether a paragraph or a narrative, develops a subject. A legitimate exposition will show how the author develops his subject. That, and only that, is contextual Bible study. All details in a book must be explained in light of the message and structure of the entire book. Words only have meaning in a context. A detailed explanation of words and phrases ripped from their sentence and the broader context is not exposition. The flow of the thought of the passage in the context of the book is the message the author intends to convey.

The Bible was written for living (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Even the most brilliant explanation that stops short of the applications is an abortion of what God intended. Thus, the practical ramifications of every passage must always be considered.

The procedure of study I use is to first divide the biblical book into its natural literary units (narratives or paragraphs). Then, I analyze each unit. The analysis includes an outline of the development of thought in that unit (major points and sub-points), an explanation of each sentence, and a summary statement. After I have personally analyzed each unit, I read commentaries, deliberately reading commentaries from different theological perspectives. I credit commentators’ comments by putting their names in parenthesis, even if I had seen that point in the text during my study before I read their comments. Thus, each chapter of this material expounds a natural literary unit of the book of Esther.

In the process of study, I also wrote a tentative title, introduction, and conclusion as if what I was working on was a sermon. If I stumble across an illustration, I include it, but, at this point, I do not search for illustrations. I write all of this for each literary unit in the book before preaching the first sermon in the book. As a result, when I begin speaking through the book, I have the whole book in mind.

As I prepare to preach each literary unit, I may change the tentative title, introduction, and/or conclusion. I rarely change the explanation of the text. It is as I preach each unit that I search for illustrations. Again, having studied the whole book first is helpful here. I sometimes found an illustration I knew would fit better later in the book.

The introduction of each chapter briefly relates that section to life and/or the context. The captions throughout the chapters are divisions of that portion of Scripture and correspond to the main points of a sermon. The italicized headings correspond to the sub-points of a sermon.

Rather than footnotes, the author's name is in parenthesis in the text. While applications are made throughout the exposition, the passage as a whole is summarized and applied at the end.

May the Lord be pleased to use this approach to the Scripture to enlighten, encourage, and edify believers, thus glorifying His Son.

G. Michael Cocoris
Santa Monica, CA

INTRODUCTION

Esther has been called a “strange story” because God’s name is not mentioned in it (McGee) and a “crisis book” (Baxter). Esther could be called the book of Feast because all the events in the book revolve around three feasts: the Feast of Ahasuerus, the Feast of Esther, and the Feast of Purim. Only two books in the Bible are named after a woman. Ruth was a Gentile who married a Jew and Esther was a Jew who married a Gentile.

Author

The author of Esther is unknown. What is known is that 1) He was probably a Jew. The author at least knew Jewish customs. Jewish nationalism permeates the book. 2) He was probably a Persian Jew (not a Palestinian). The author knew Persian etiquette, customs, the palace of Susa, and the details of the events of the reign of Ahasuerus. 3) He wrote after the death of Ahasuerus (464 BC). Ezra 10:2-3 speaks of his reign in the past tense.

The Talmud said the men of the Great Synagogue wrote it. Josephus held that Mordecai was the author. Ezra and Nehemiah have also been nominated.

Mordecai was probably the author. Esther 9:20 says that he wrote. Harrison and others argue that mentioning Mordecai and his benevolence in the epilogue would seem to indicate he was not the author (see 10:2-3). On the other hand, whoever did certainly made use of his record if he did not write it. The author may have had access to the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia (2:23; 10:2).

Recipients

To determine the date of the book of Esther, the following factors must be considered: 1) Ahasuerus was king of Persia from 486-464 BC. 2) According to Esther 1:3, the feast of Ahasuerus took place in the third year, that is, 483 BC. This occasion provoked the king to get rid of the queen. The historian Herodotus referred to this banquet as the occasion of Ahasuerus’ planning for a military campaign against Greece. He was defeated by the Greeks at Salamis in 479 BC. 3) The contest and crowning of Esther were in 478 BC.

Herodotus says that when the Greeks defeated Ahasuerus, he sought consolation in his harem. This corresponds to when he held a “contest” and crowned Esther queen of Persia (2:16-17). 4) According to Esther 3:7-12, the events of the rest of the book took place in 473 BC. That means that the events of the book span ten years, from 483 (1:3) to 473 BC (3:7). 5) Esther 10:2-3 probably refers to the end of Ahasuerus’ reign in 464 BC. 6) The palace at Susa was destroyed by fire about 435 BC. That is not mentioned at all in Esther. Thus, Esther was written between 464 and 435 BC. The historical and linguistic features of Esther do not support a date later than 400 BC. There is no trace of Greek influence in the book.

The recipients were the Persian Jews who did not return to Palestine and who lived in Persia about 450 BC. Though they were disobedient by staying in Persia, and though they did not enjoy the blessing of God in returning to Jerusalem, nonetheless, they were still God’s children, and He provided for them.

Message

The subject of Esther is providence. God is never mentioned in the entire book of Esther, but everywhere in the book, things just somehow “work out.” It is not the design of any one person in the plot. For example, the queen refuses to appear; the king has a dream. Either luck is at work, or the Lord is at work. The message of Esther is that God providentially protects His children.

Webster defines providence as 1) the act of providing, 2) divine guidance or care. Chafer says theologically, the term “suggests the directing care of God over things animate and inanimate—embracing things with good and evil—especially over those who are yielded to His will.” (Chafer, *Systemic Theology*, vol. 7, p. 260). Berkhof says it is the continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all his creatures (Berkhof, *Systemic Theology*, p. 166). The doctrine of providence says that God works “behind the scenes.” He hides from view, but He works things out to take care of His own.

Some have rejected Esther because: 1) It does not mention the name of God, faith, prayer, or godly virtues. 2) It is not necessary for the line of the Messiah. 3) Neither Jesus nor the New Testament quote it. Nevertheless, Esther should be in the Bible because 1) It is not only in the Jewish canon, but it has been venerated, second only to the books of Moses, and used regularly in the observance of the Feast of Purim. 2) Jesus accepted it (Lk. 24:44). 3) The early church accepted it.

By the way, God’s name does not occur in the Song of Solomon either (Deut. 31:18). God’s name is not seen, but His hand is. If you don’t see God’s hand in the book, something is wrong with your eyes (or heart).

Structure

The literary structure of Esther, like Ruth, is almost pure narrative. The book of Esther is a story. The structure is the story itself.

I. The Danger to the Jews	1:1-5:14
A. The Divorce of Vashti	1:1-22
B. The Discovery of Esther	2:1-23
C. The Decree of Haman	3:1-15
D. The Decision of Esther	4:1-5:14
II. The Deliverance of the Jews	6:1-10:3
A. The Defeat of Haman	6:1-7:10
B. The Decree of Ahasuerus	8:1-17
C. The Defeat of the Enemy (Purim)	9:1-32
D. The Description of Mordecai	10:1-3

Purpose

The purpose of Esther is to remind the Jews who remained in Persia of God’s providential care of His people. It also records the origin of the Feast of Purim, which Mordecai instituted at

the suggestion of Esther in memory of the deliverance of the Jews of Persia from the murderous plot of Haman.

“Purim” means “lots.” The name was given to the feast because of the casting of lots by Haman to decide when he should carry out the decree issued by the king for the extermination of the Jews. It was probably given in irony. Outside of Esther, the first mention of Purim is in 2 Maccabees 15:36.

Summary: Providentially, the Jews were delivered from extinction in Persia.

Some have wanted to take Esther out of the Bible. In his *Table Talks*, Martin Luther condemned the book of Esther saying, “I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much and has too much heathen naughtiness” (Luther cited by Hoschander, p.8). On the other hand, the Talmud held the book of Esther higher than the book of the prophets (Hoschander, p. 9). After all, what use would the prophets have been, if the Jewish people had been exterminated (Hoschander, p. 10)?

Hoschander declares, “If we may depend upon undeniably historical facts, we are justified in contending that the book of Esther is strictly historical (Hoschander, p. 11). He goes on to argue that the events of Esther did not last more than four days, adding, “An event of this short duration did not make a lasting impression” (Hoschander, p. 12).

BEHIND THE SCENES

Is God working in your life? If your answer to that is “Yes,” you would probably prove it by giving some dramatic answer to prayer. Or you may point to something in your life that can only be explained because of the presence of the Lord in your life. While all of that is true, it is also true that God works in our lives in ways of which we are not aware.

The work of God of which I speak is called the providence of God. The providence of God is God’s continuing work to preserve creation and guide it to accomplish His purposes (Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 387). In simple terms, the providence of God speaks of God working behind the scenes. God works through miracles and God works through the mundane. The providence of God is God working through the mundane.

The greatest biblical illustration of the providence of God is the book of Esther. The book of Esther has been called a strange book (McGee, p. 10) because, among other things, the name of God does not appear in it, not one single time. On the other hand, the name of the heathen king Ahasuerus is mentioned 192 times (McGee, p. 11). The name of God does not appear in the book because God is working—behind the scenes. He is not working by revealing Himself to people. He is not working in answer to prayer. Nevertheless, make no mistake, this book is about God working to accomplish His purpose, which is to protect and preserve His people (4:14; Ps. 121:4).

This spiritual truth of the providence of God is taught in the Bible by telling a story. The story takes place during the exile. Babylon conquered Jerusalem and carried some of the people to Babylon. Years later, Babylon was conquered by the Persia. The story takes place in Persia.

The Greatness of the King

The King “Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia)” (1:1). Ahasuerus was the king of Persia, modern Iran, from 486-465 BC (Baldwin; Martin). His Greek name was Xerxes. According to Mardonius, the extent of the Persian Empire under Xerxes was from India to Ethiopia (Mardonius, *Herod.* 7:9, 7:97-98, 8:65, 69 cited by Keil). “India” is present-day Pakistan (*Ryrie Study Bible*), not the Indian Peninsula (Baldwin). The 127 provinces were geographical regions (Keil).

“In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the citadel” (1:2). Ahasuerus sat on the throne in Shushan, one of four royal residences (*NKJV Study Bible*). A palace, thought to be this very palace, has been excavated and in it is a great hall of marble pillars (NJFB, Martin).

The Feast “that in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and servants; the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces being before him” (1:3). In the third year of his reign, Ahasuerus made a feast for all his officials and servants. The year was 482 BC (*Ryrie Study Bible*). More specifically (Keil), the powers, the nobles, and the princes were present. The “powers” refer to the military officers (*Ryrie Study Bible*). The nobles were the magnates and the princes, that is, “officials” (Baldwin), were the chief personages of the civil government (Keil).

The Riches “when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all” (1:4). Ahasuerus showed the greatness and resources of the realm for six months. As it is written, the text appears to say that the feast lasted for six months, which is incredibly long. Baldwin suggests that the banquet was the culmination of the festivities. She says the intention is to conjure an impression of unlimited resources.

The purpose of this occasion was to demonstrate the possibility of carrying out his contemplated campaign against Greece (Keil). The historian Herodotus referred to this banquet as the occasion of Ahasuerus’ planning for a military campaign against Greece. He wanted to avenge his father’s defeat at Marathon near Athens (Martin). “The More lavish the king’s hospitality, the greater his claim to supremacy” (Baldwin). “To fill the minds of his captains with confidence, and to fire his soldiers with military ardor, he makes all this vain display and provides this munificence of self-indulgence” (Raleigh). The purpose of the banquet is not stated because it does not fit the book’s purpose (Keil). By the way, the immense fleet of Ahasuerus defeated the Greeks at Thermopylae but was defeated by the Greeks at the battle of Salamis in 480 BC and at the battle of Plataea again in 479 BC (Martin; Baldwin).

At the time, this man was the most powerful man in the world. His will was what got done. No one overruled this ruler.

The Generosity of the King

The Dinner “And when these days were completed, the king made a feast lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Shushan the citadel, from great to small, in the court of the garden of the king’s palace” (1:5). After the six months of celebration for the government officials, Ahasuerus made a seven-day feast for all the people in Shushan. Such large feasts were not unusual. On one occasion, Cyrus had a feast for “all the Persians” and a later monarch entertained 15,000 people (Barnes).

The Decorations “There were white and blue linen curtains fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on silver rods and marble pillars; and the couches were of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of alabaster, turquoise, and white and black marble” (1:6). The description of the decorations is designed to demonstrate the splendor of the dinner. The room’s hangings and the guest’s couches are described (Keil). On such occasions, it was customary not only to hang elegant curtains “but also to have a canopy of rich stuff suspended on cords from side to side of the place in which they feasted” (Clarke). Blue and white were royal colors (Martin; 8:15).

The Drinks “And they served in golden vessels, each vessel being different from the other, with royal wine in abundance, according to the generosity of the king” (1:7). An abundance of royal wine was served in various golden vessels. Every guest was treated like a monarch, privileged to drink royal wine in vessels of gold, which were diverse one from another, that is, never being used more than once, replaced as soon as they were emptied by vessels of other forms and patterns (Raleigh).

The Decision “In accordance with the law, the drinking was not compulsory; for so the king had ordered all the officers of his household, that they should do according to each man’s pleasure” (1:8). The public law of the Persians was that it was a point of hospitality to press the bottle even on the unwilling guest. “The generous hosts hardly felt that he had done his duty until his guests were reeling” (Raleigh). According to Herodotus and Xenophon, there was a law that whenever the king drank, everyone drank (Baldwin). People at a royal banquet were required to

drink each time the king raised his Cup (*NKJV Study Bible*). Today, when the guests at a wedding dinner rattle their glasses with the silverware, newlyweds are to kiss each other.

Although an abundance of wine was provided, drinking was not compulsory. People could drink as little as they chose. “An exception to the ordinary practice of compulsory drinking had been made on this occasion by the king’s order” (Barnes). Evidently, the “unalterable” law of the Medes and the Persians was suspended for this occasion.

There, every guest may drink and fill
As much or little as he will;
Exempted from the Bedlam rules
Of roaring prodigals and fools.
Whether in merry mood or whim,
He fills his goblet to the brim;
Or, better pleased to let it pass,
Is cheerful with a moderate glass.
Francis.

The greatest king in the world could also be generous and gracious.

The Decision of the King

The Directive “Queen Vashti also made a feast for the women in the royal palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus” (1:9). The Persian name Vashti means “a beautiful woman” (Keil). The queen made a separate feast for the women because, according to Oriental customs, the sexes did not intermingle in society (NJFB). This statement establishes the important distinctions between men’s and women’s status in the Persian Court (*NKJV Study Bible*).

“On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing her royal crown, in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold” (1:10-11). The seventh day was the last day of the public feast (1:5). The close of the feast was usually marked by “great excesses of a rivalry” (NJFB). Being drunk, the king commanded seven eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti to the party wearing her royal crown. He wanted to show off her beauty to the people and political officials. Regarding her as his most precious treasure, the king wanted to bring his great exhibition to a climax by displaying her beauty (Baldwin), which has been called “peerless” (Raleigh).

According to Persian customs, the queen, even more than the wives of other men, was secluded from the public gaze (JFB), but this order was not “out of harmony with the character of Xerxes; and is evidently related as something strange and unusual. Otherwise, the queen would not have refused to come” (Barnes). The way the incident is introduced indicates that had the king been sober, he would never have asked the queen to do whatever he requested (Unger).

The Defiance “But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command brought by his eunuchs; therefore the king was furious, and his anger burned within him” (1:12). Queen Vashti refused! She knew her disobedience would cost her the crown if not her life.

The reason she refused is not stated. What caused her to refuse has been the subject of much speculation. Some say there is no indication that the king asked her to do anything immoral

(Martin). Others say she was asked to make a “lewd display” (*Ryrie Study Bible*), “to make an indecent exposure of herself before a company of drunken revelers” (JFB), or to come naked (Targum, cited by Clarke). Whatever the reason, it transgresses the limit; “it was a mandate which neither husband nor king had any right to issue. It touched her purity, her womanhood, her intuitional queenliness” (Raleigh). It was a breach of etiquette (Martin). “Her courage was equal to her modesty” (Clarke).

The king was furious. Wives are supposed to obey their husbands, not resist them, rebel against them and certainly not rule them (Raleigh). The king’s pride was wounded.

It is customary for the wife of the president of the United States to have a project she promotes. Ronald Reagan’s wife, Nancy, worked and promoted an antidrug program. Her slogan was, “Just say, “No.” There are times when we just have to say, “No.”

There are times when a person must say “No.” The Bible records a number of people who did just that and paid a price for it. Joseph refused the temptation that came to him through Potiphar’s wife and, as a result, was cast into prison. Daniel’s three friends said “No” when they were told to bow down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar and, consequently, found themselves in a fiery furnace. Daniels said he would not obey the order to discontinue praying, a refusal which landed him in a lion’s den.

Concerning the conflict between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15, Hughes says, “What does this reveal about how God directs his servants? While God did not cause the disagreement or the fateful separation, he used it to guide both men into increased fruitfulness and service. There were now two missionary teams instead of one.”

There are times when you should not say a wicked “yes” or a weak “maybe” but a firm and final “No.”

In the Foreword to R. T. Kendall’s book entitled *Grace*, Terry Virgo says, “Saying no is a vital part of holy living. The downward gravitational pull of human society is so all-pervasive that if we do not learn to say no, we will soon be in trouble. If young women do not learn to say no, they will be quickly compromised by the opposite sex. If young men do not learn to say no, they will soon be experimenting with drugs and alcohol. *No* is a word we must be instructed to say. It is an antisocial word. It goes against the tide. It takes courage and commitment to say it. It needs strong motivation, and grace motivates powerfully” (Kendall, pp. xii-xiv).

The Discussion “Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times (for this was the king’s manner toward all who knew law and justice, those closest to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who had access to the king’s presence, and who ranked highest in the kingdom): “What shall we do to Queen Vashti, according to law, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus brought to her by the eunuchs?” (1:13-15). Seeking counsel, the king summoned seven wise men. He had absolute authority, but he sought wise counsel.

The seven men are said to be wise; they have practical wisdom (Barnes). They were probably magi (JFB). They understood the times, that is, they were astrologers and magi who gave counsel according to celestial phenomena (Keil). They also knew the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:14; *Ryrie Study Bible*). In other words, they were a combination of astrologers and lawyers whose names are Persian (Unger). It was the king’s custom that before deciding a matter, he would seek the counsel of those skilled in law and judgment to hear their opinions (Keil).

These seven men were closest to the king. They were the most trusted of the wise men (Baldwin) and his private counselors (Clarke). They were princes with the unusual privilege of

access to the king's presence, a rare prerogative (Baldwin). They were also the highest authorities in the realm (Keil) and the nearest to peers in his realm (Baldwin).

The combined wisdom of all was enlisted to consult with the king about what course should be taken after such an unprecedented occurrence as Vashti's disobedience (JFB).

A commentator writing in 1880 said, "Our English King Henry would have probably made shorter work with any English queen in the like case (Raleigh).

The Decree "And Memucan answered before the king and the princes: "Queen Vashti has not only wronged the king, but also all the princes, and all the people who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus" (1:16). Memucan, the last one listed in verse 14, speaks as spokesman for the rest before the king and the princes, that is, before the solemn assembly (Keil). Memucan declared that Vashti not only wronged the king, but she also wronged the nation!

Memucan explains, "For the queen's behavior will become known to all women, so that they will despise their husbands in their eyes, when they report, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in before him, but she did not come.' This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media will say to all the king's officials that they have heard of the behavior of the queen. Thus there will be excessive contempt and wrath" (1:17-18). In a shrewd move, Memucan took the issue beyond the king's personal resentment to a wider context (Baldwin). He made a personal affair a national crisis (Unger). What Vashti did would become an example that would lead all wives to despise their husbands. There would be a "social insurrection" (Raleigh). He turned a personal matter into a national crisis, threatening male supremacy (*Ryrie Study Bible*).

Beware of being influenced by the world. Wives beware of anger and contempt toward your husband.

Memucan suggests, "If it pleases the king, let a royal decree go out from him, and let it be recorded in the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it will not be altered, that Vashti shall come no more before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. 20 When the king's decree which he will make is proclaimed throughout all his empire (for it is great), all wives will honor their husbands, both great and small" (1:19-20). Memucan suggests that an irrevocable edict be published decreeing the divorce of Queen Vashti (Keil). This statement that her replacement would be better than her anticipates the introduction of Esther (Baldwin). He says such an action will result in all the wives honoring their husbands.

"The decree was not unnecessary. The undue influence of women in domestic and even public matters is a feature of the ancient Persian monarchy. Atossa completely ruled Darius. Xerxes himself was, in his later years, shamefully subject to Amestris. The example of the court would naturally infect the people. The decree, therefore, would be a protest, even if ineffectual, against a real and growing evil" (Barnes).

Wives should honor their husbands.

The Decision "And the reply pleased the king and the princes, and the king did according to the word of Memucan" (1:21). In that country and in that court, the will of the sovereign was absolute (JFB).

The Delivery "Sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province in its own script, and to every people in their own language, that each man should be master in his own house, and speak in the language of his own people" (1:22). The decree was to be delivered in the various languages of the people. The inscriptions of the Achaemenian monarchs, from Cyrus to Artaxerxes Ochus, were bilingual and trilingual (Barnes). The Persian post system is in harmony with the accounts of Herodotus and Xenophon (Barnes). The Persians were known for their

excellent postal system (*NKJV Study Bible*). Their vast relay communication system was like an ancient pony express (Martin). Unger calls it the first pony express.

The husband's rule was to be shown by the fact that only his language was to be spoken (Keil; Barnes; Unger). No other language was to be used in the house. The Targum adds, "Each woman should speak the language of her husband."

Baldwin points out that the story is presented objectively. "The author avoids comment, attempts no character study, no psychological interpretation, and passes no judgment." She goes on to point out the contrast between the king at the beginning of the story, "when he was the world's greatest monarch, rich and powerful, aloof yet generous" and the king at the end of that chapter, "attempting to maintain his dignity despite the defiance of his wife." "The great king who ruled the known world and enjoyed unlimited resources and prestige was never the less vulnerable" (Baldwin).

Summary: God works behind the scenes, even using a drunken request and a life-risking refusal.

The point of this book is that God is working to provide for, protect, and preserve His people (4:14). That is providence. The English word "providence" comes from a Latin word that means "to see before, foresight." It has been said that it comes from "pro," which means "before" and "video," which means "to see." God sees what is coming and uses events to accomplish His purposes. In the case of Esther, God knew there was going to be a plot against His people. To protect them, He would need someone near the king who could influence the king. That someone was Esther. She will be the queen, but the king already has a queen. God providentially worked to replace the queen.

Some think God is *not* involved in the world. Some perceive God as being totally separated from the world (deism) and some proclaim that God is everything in the world (pantheism). The Epicureans taught that the world was governed by chance and the Stoics taught that the world was ruled by fate. God letting the world operate on its own is like putting an airplane on automatic pilot, a car on cruise control, or an electric drill in the "on" position and using a locking device to keep it running.

The biblical position is that God is sovereign over the world, and at the same time, He is involved in the world (providence). The term "providence" is not in the Scriptures, but the concept is. Throughout the Scripture, God is seen as preserving (Neh. 9:6; Mt. 6:26-31; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3) and governing the world (Ex. 21:13; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; Ps. 135:5-7; Dan. 2:21; Mt. 5:45). He directs the course of events to fulfill His purposes (Erickson, p. 388). He is in control, sometimes in dramatic ways but more often in subtle ways. He sometimes works in supernatural ways and, at other times, He works through natural means, but the point is God works in the world. "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Prov. 16:33; Acts 1:23-26). He is the pilot flying the plane. He is the driver controlling the car. He is the carpenter with his finger on the on button of the electric drill.

God working in the world does not mean He is causing all that happens. Other forces are also active. God sometimes simply uses what happens (1:19). "The free actions of humans are also part of God's governmental working" (Erickson, p. 397). "Even the sinful actions of humans are part of God's providential working" (Erickson, p. 398; Acts 2:23). "God is able to allow evil men to do their very worst, and still he accomplishes his purposes" (Erickson, p. 400; Gen. 50:20).

The issue is awareness. Some are not aware. When Caesar-Augustus made his decree concerning a census (Lk. 2:1), he was not aware that what he was ordering made it possible for Micah's prophecy to be fulfilled.

We should be aware. "Erickson states that providence means "we are able to live in the assurance that God is present and active in our lives. We are in his care and can, therefore, face the future confidently, knowing that things are not happening merely by chance" (Erickson, pp. 387-88; Ps. 31:14-15). Erickson tells of an English major who applied to graduate school. One institution assigned him a number, telling him it would not be necessary for to use his name in future correspondence; the number would be sufficient. He chose a different university, one which still used names. Erickson adds, "The doctrine of the providence of God assures us that his personal relationship to us is important. He knows each of us and each one matters to him" (Erickson, p. 403).

A Christian lady told of having to make an unexpected trip out of state. She lived in a small town about 100 miles from a major airport. She made the trip, but when she landed back at the airport in her home state, she did not have a way to get to her house a hundred miles away. There was no public transportation. As she was pondering what to do, she bumped into a neighbor. As it turned out, the neighbor dropped her off at her doorstep. Later, she was telling the story to a Christian friend, who said, "Isn't that just like the Lord?" To which the lady replied, "I thought it was luck." She was unaware, that is, it was not luck; it was the Lord.

C. S. Lewis said, "He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labor is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake" (Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, p. 75).

Many of the Psalms praise God for one thing or another. Some of the psalms praise God for His sovereign rule. These have been called royal psalms, enthronement psalms, and theocratic psalms. They were used in Israel's worship to praise God and they were prophetic pictures of the coming rule of the Lord on earth through the Messiah. Psalms 93 is such a psalm. It begins with the words "the Lord reigns" (Ps. 93:1). The Psalmist speaks directly to the Lord, saying, "Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting" (Ps. 93:2) and "Your testimonies are very sure" (Ps. 93:5). From God's Word, we take comfort that the Lord is in control and we learn to praise Him for His present and future reign. Now, go take on the day knowing that the Lord reigns.

IN THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

God is providentially working in the world, that is, He is working “behind the scenes” to provide for and protect His people. Just exactly how does God do that? An episode in the book of Esther illustrates how the providence of God works.

The Suggestion

The Aftermath “After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her” (2:1). The expression “after these things” has been taken to be a reference to a considerable amount of time (Raleigh). The divorce from Queen Vashti occurred in the third year of the reign of King Ahasuerus (1:3). Ahasuerus was absent from Persia in his fourth year. He passed the winter of that year in Sardis. During the next summer, he lost the battle of Thermopylae. His entire fleet was destroyed in his battle against the Greeks (McGee). In the fall, he was engaged in the battle of Salamis and the year after that were the battles of Plataea and Mycale. After his return, it was at least a year before he saw Esther (2:12). The text says Esther saw him in the seventh year of his reign (2:16). Thus, it was four years from the time of the divorce to the time of the events of this chapter (Raleigh).

The fact Ahasuerus remembered Vashti implies some uneasiness over the whole incident, but he was trapped by his decree (Baldwin). Apparently, Ahasuerus had second thoughts about the deposed queen. Perhaps he desired a reunion with her, accompanied by the thought that she might have been too harshly treated (Keil). Some say the king “was pierced with poignant regret for the unmerited treatment he had given to his beautiful and dignified queen. But, according to the law, which made the word of a Persian king irrevocable, she could not be restored” (JFB).

The Advice “Then the king’s servants who attended him said: ‘Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel, into the women’s quarters, under the custody of Hegai the king’s eunuch, custodian of the women. And let beauty preparations be given them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti’” (2:2-4a). The servants of the king, that is, the court officials, made a suggestion to prevent a return of affection for his rejected wife ensuing, “a circumstance which might greatly endanger all who had concurred in effecting her repudiation” (Keil). The suggestion is that a search be made “for the greatest beauties throughout the empire, in the hope that, from their ranks, the disconsolate monarch might select one for the honor of succeeding to the royal honors of Vashti” (JFB). In the Hebrew text, two different words are used for virgin. The one in verse 3 signifies merely young women of marriageable age (Keil).

The Acceptance “This thing pleased the king, and he did so” (2:4b). Having a personal beauty pageant to find a replacement pleased the king. The more he failed abroad, the more he needed to succeed at home (Raleigh).

The Search

Mordecai “In Shushan the citadel there was a certain Jew whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite” (2:5). Before relating how the suggestion was carried out, the author introduces two people who are “indispensable for the plot” (Baldwin, who thinks that 2:5-7 is a parenthesis).

The first to be introduced is Mordecai, whose genealogy is given. Jair, Shimei, and Kish are not the father, grandfather, or great-grandfather of Mordecai (Keil). They were probably well-known men from the family of Saul, making Mordecai a man from the royal line (Baldwin). Being a Benjamite indicates he was a member of God’s chosen people who inherited the promises. “For this reason, some special fulfillment of the promises is expected” (Baldwin).

“Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been captured with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away” (2:6). Mordecai’s ancestors had been taken captive to Babylon in the invasion by Nebuchadnezzar when Jeconiah was king of Judah, that is, 597 BC. That the family of Mordecai was taken during this captivity probably indicates that he was among the nobility (Baldwin).

Esther “And Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman was lovely and beautiful. When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter” (2:7). Since Esther was an orphan, Mordecai became her foster father. He adopted his cousin.

Hadassah, that is, “myrtle,” was Esther’s Hebrew name. Her name was changed to Esther, that is, the star Venus, indicating beauty and good fortune (JFB). Josephus and the Vulgate make her Mordecai’s niece, but it is best to follow the Hebrew text (Clarke). Esther had “a fine figure and beautiful countenance” (Keil). The Hebrew indicates she was “beautiful in form and lovely to look at” (Baldwin). “Evidently, she possessed unusual beauty” (Raleigh). It has been estimated that Mordecai was between 30 and 40 years of age and that Esther was about 20 (Barnes).

W. W. Dawley, referring to this truth, says, “God gave Moses a rod, David a sling, Samson the jaw bone of a donkey, Shamgar an oxgoad, Esther the beauty of person, Deborah the talent for poetry, Dorcas a needle, and Apollos an eloquent tongue and to each the ability to use his gift. In so doing, every one of them did most effective work for the Lord.”

Hegai “So it was, when the king’s command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, under the custody of Hegai, that Esther also was taken to the king’s palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women” (2:8). When the king’s command was proclaimed throughout the kingdom, many maidens gathered together in Shushan. According to Josephus, there were 400 such young women, but Paton estimates that at the rate of a different girl per night for four years, there were 1,460 young women in this group (Baldwin). At any rate, Esther was received into the royal harem under the keeping of Hegai.

Hegai was a eunuch who was superintendent of the royal harem (Keil). This position was filled with “usually a repulsive old man, on whom the court ladies are very dependent, and whose favor they are always desirous to secure” (JFB).

“Now the young woman pleased him, and she obtained his favor; so he readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance. Then seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king’s palace, and he moved her and her maidservants to the best place in the house of the women” (2:9). Esther pleased Hegai, who was charmed by her (Baldwin). The word

“allowance” is apparently a reference to her food (Unger says it means “her portions”). Unlike Daniel, she did not object to eating Gentile food.

Because Esther won Hegai’s favor, besides the allowance given to all the others, Hegai gave Esther beauty preparations, seven choice attendants and the best lodging. “He took them out of the ordinary rooms and placed them in the best apartments, probably in the state-rooms, where those who were accustomed to being brought to the king used to dwell” (Keil). By doing all of this, Hegai seems to have singled out Esther as the favorite for the queenly succession (Baldwin).

Esther “Esther had not revealed her people or family, for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it” (2:10). This is “a supplementary remark” designed to show that Hegai gave Esther this kind of treatment because of her obedience to Mordecai’s command not to show her Jewish extraction; “for a Jewish maiden would hardly have experienced such friendly usage” (Keil). Ryrie says Mordecai feared for her life (2:11) or her position (2:19). “He who guards his mouth preserves his life” (Prov. 13:3).

One way to look at this is that Esther was not just a pretty face; she had discretion. “Discretion enhances beauty” (Baldwin). “A wise man heeds his father’s instructions” (Prov. 13:1). On the other hand, McGee says her silence was tantamount to a denial of her religion because the denial of her nationality was a denial of her religion. He adds that the fact that Mordecai and Esther remained in the land of captivity is an indication that they were out of the will of God. Yet it was no accident that Esther was given a prominent place: Providence is the way that God leads people who would not be led.

Mordecai “And every day Mordecai paced in front of the court of the women’s quarters, to learn of Esther’s welfare and what was happening to her” (2:11). Every day Mordecai walked in front of the enclosure of the women’s house, to know the welfare of Esther. Keil thinks that because of his “high office,” Mordecai had free access to the royal palace and, therefore, could be in constant communication with Esther” (Keil). Barnes says that Mordecai occupied “a humble place,” probably one of the porters or doorkeepers at the main entrance to the palace. Jamison, Fausset, and Brown say that hints were given to him through the eunuchs. Since we are left to our imagination, how Mordecai did this is unimportant to the story, but, as Baldwin points out, servants love to prove that they’re in the know.

The Young Women “Each young woman’s turn came to go in to King Ahasuerus after she had completed twelve months’ preparation, according to the regulations for the women, for thus were the days of their preparation apportioned: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and preparations for beautifying women (2:12). Before relating the appearance of Esther before the king, the description of the yearlong preparation of all women is given, including six months of treatment with myrrh, valued as a sweet perfume (Baldwin, who cites Ps. 45:8; Prov. 7:17).

Clarke explains why this treatment was necessary. He says since young virgins from all the provinces of Babylon were selected, some were from the lower class. They fed on strong food, which produced an odorous perspiration. So they were given a different diet, hot baths, and were rubbed with olive oil, which in almost every case removed all that is disagreeable. The text does not mention diet, but Clarke may be on to something. Diet can affect body odor (garlic), and the text does mention perfume. Baldwin calls this preparation for marriage.

Ladies today do this with cleansers and creams for smooth skin. Professionals can make the most homely-looking girl look like a gorgeous woman.

“Thus prepared, each young woman went to the king, and she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the women’s quarters to the king’s palace” (2:13). After the year’s

preparation when each woman was to be introduced to the king, she could take with her anything she wished. In other words, each woman appeared before the king adorned and dressed according to her own taste (Keil). They would obviously choose the dress, jewels, etc., they thought best to set off their beauty (Clarke).

“In the evening, she went, and in the morning, she returned to the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch who kept the concubines. She would not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and called for her by name” (2:14). The fact that the women went in the evening and returned in the morning indicates that the women had been prepared to have sexual relations with the king (Martin). After the visit with the king, the women were taken to a second house where the concubines stayed. This was a “house of the concubines” (Barnes). Another eunuch, Shaashgaz, was in charge. A woman only saw the king again if he specifically requested her by name. Clarke contends that they were never given in marriage to anyone else (see also the *NKJV Study Bible*, which points to 2 Sam. 20:3). They were treated like widows.

The Selection

Her Entrance “Now when the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his daughter, to go in to the king, she requested nothing but what Hegai the king’s eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her” (2:15). Esther is identified as the daughter of Abihail, who is named for the first time. Unlike the other women, when she went to see the king, she only took with her what Hegai recommended. The others probably loaded themselves with ornaments, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, anklets, etc., but Esther let Hegai dress her (Barnes).

“So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign” (2:16). Esther first saw the king in the seventh year of his reign, that is, 479 BC (Martin). The long delay in replacing Vashti was due to the king’s absence in Greece (Unger).

Her Acceptance “The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti” (2:17). Apparently, it was love at first sight. On Esther’s first visit, the king preferred her above all the others and chose her to be queen (Keil).

“Then the king made a great feast, the Feast of Esther, for all his officials and servants; and he proclaimed a holiday in the provinces and gave gifts according to the generosity of a king” (2:18). To celebrate the choice of Esther as queen, the king threw a party fitting for a king. He gave everyone a holiday and gifts according to his generosity.

Her Secret “When virgins were gathered together a second time, Mordecai sat within the king’s gate” (2:19). Even after Esther was chosen to be queen, a second group of virgins was assembled. Polygamy was prevalent. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. According to Keil, The words “when virgins were assembled for the second time” serve to define the time when the conspiracy of the two courtiers took place.

Mordecai being at the king’s gate probably means that he held an official position in the emperor’s judicial system, which is how he could have uncovered an assassination plot (Baldwin; Martin). “It was at the time of this second collection that Mordecai had the good fortune to save the king’s life” (Barnes).

“Now Esther had not revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her, for Esther obeyed the command of Mordecai as when she was brought up by him” (2:20). Even after Esther was chosen to be queen, she obeyed Mordecai as she did growing up.

The Secret Plot

The Plot “In those days, while Mordecai sat within the king’s gate, two of the king’s eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, doorkeepers, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus” (2:21). Two of the royal guards (Martin) became so furious with the king they sought to lay hands on him, that is, kill him (Keil). Apparently, conspiracies inside the palace were ordinary occurrences; Ahasuerus was ultimately murdered by Artabanus, the captain of the guard, and Aspamitras, a chamberlain (Barnes).

Why were the guards so upset with the king? “The Targum says that they found out that Esther had intended to use her influence with the king to get them removed from their office, and Mordecai put in their place; therefore, they determined to poison Esther and slay the king in his bed chamber. It is very likely that they were creatures of Haman, who probably affected the kingdom, and perhaps were employed by him to remove the king, and so make his way open to the throne” (Clarke). Another theory is that this conspiracy probably arose out of revenge for Vashti’s divorce, in whose interest and at whose instigation these eunuchs may have acted (JFB).

The Discovery “So the matter became known to Mordecai, who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai’s name” (2:22). Josephus says that a Jew named Barnabasus overheard the plot, told it to Mordecai, who told it to Esther, and Esther informed the king (Clarke). In light of the fact that the Persian kings were virtually isolated, the queen’s influence was potentially very great (Baldwin on 1:18-20). Raleigh says the king dwelt in absolute seclusion and was dependent on his ministers for information. At any rate, Mordecai was given credit for the discovery.

The Results “And when an inquiry was made into the matter, it was confirmed, and both were hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king” (2:23). An investigation confirmed that the report was true. As a result, the two conspirators were hanged and a record was made of what had happened. “Rather than being hanged by the neck on a modern-type gallows, the men were probably impaled on a stake or post” (Martin).

Summary: In the providence of God, Esther was chosen queen and Mordecai discovered a plot to assassinate the king. The Lord providently puts people in places to fulfill His purpose.

The Lord works providentially. Raleigh points out that if Esther’s mother and father had not died, she would have been at home with them and *they* would never have thought of doing what Mordecai did. Nothing would have happened had the feast been interrupted before the king’s heart was merry with wine. Had the thought of exhibiting the queen never entered the mind of the king—nothing would have happened. Had Vashti not gone when she was sent for—nothing would have happened. Raleigh adds, “A link dropped in the chain spoils the chain. It will pull nothing, hold nothing. Any *one* event of a long series dropped out would alter all that comes after. God’s providence, therefore, is minute and particular. It concerns all that happens—all that men think, and do, and are. Human freedom is untouched, and yet divine will is perfectly wrought.”

The Lord works providentially by placing people in significant places to accomplish His will. Esther being chosen as queen happened before Israel needed help, but the original readers would have realized that this was another instance of God protecting His covenant people (Martin).

The Lord works providentially in spite of people. “We do not need to justify Mordecai in everything; or Esther and everything; or, still more, the king in his universal lawlessness, to see the working of a perfect providence in all” (Raleigh). Mordecai and Esther were out of the will of God. They should have returned to the land. Esther did not obey the food laws, had sexual relations with a man who was not her husband (Ex. 20:14), and married a pagan (Deut. 7:1-4). The Lord used them even though they were not living according to the Law (Martin). J. Vernon McGee says, “There are many things in this world that God’s people do and in the doing are out of His will. But in spite of it all, He will overrule and make it work out for His glory and fulfillment of His purpose” (McGee, p. 32). Things happen because of the divine will in spite of human will. Esther was out of God’s will, but she was not out from under His control.

God works providentially to save people. Steve was a Jewish teenager living in Miami. He had to pass the college entrance exam to get into the University of Florida. Although he was a senior in high school, Steve did not drive. He had to rely on the bus to get to school. On the day of the college entrance exam, the bus driver figured that all the students who were taking the exam drove to school, so he did not run his bus route that day. In the meantime, Steve was standing on the corner waiting for the bus to come by, and while he waited, it began to rain. He waited and waited and waited. It rained and rained and rained. He tried to get out of the rain, but after a while, he was soaking wet and frustrated and furious that he was going to miss the college entrance exam. Somehow, the message got to the bus driver that Steve needed a ride to school and he showed up to take Steve to school. When Steve got to the exam, he was soaking wet and very frustrated. He was allowed to take the exam, but he put his answers in the wrong place because of his frustration. As a result, he did not make a high enough score to make it into the University of Florida.

He did manage to make it to college. The University of South Florida accepted him on probation. While he was at the University of South Florida, he met a Christian who began to witness to him concerning Jesus being the Messiah. Steve would have nothing to do with it. He was noxious, trying to drive the Christian fellow away. It didn’t work. The Christian was persistent and eventually led Steve to Christ, and Steve ended up in the ministry. As he tells the story, there is no doubt in his mind that in the providence of God, there was a bus driver who didn’t do his job, rain he couldn’t get away from, and his own anger and frustration that led to an encounter with a Christian who led him to Christ (taken from a sermon preached by Steve Kreloff in 1986 at the Lakeside Community Church in Florida).

God works providentially to protect people. McGee says, “A Jewish woman became queen of one of the greatest Gentile monarchs and world powers; this was a strategic moment in the history of the world. Had she not been in that position at this decisive moment, “God’s entire purpose with Israel would have been frustrated and the wave of anti-Semitism would have blotted out these people” (McGee, p. 32).

Late one night in rural Mississippi, a man showed his pastor, Slim Cornett, around a county airport. As he flipped a switch, the man said to his pastor, “This switch lights up the runway.” He explained that if a plane is in distress, he would throw the switch to turn on the search lights. As the night skies lit up, a small plane materialized out of the darkness and landed. The pastor and his friend watched in amazement as the pilot and a young man exited the plane. The pilot had been flying the young man back to school in Texas when the electrical system shut down,

leaving them stranded in the Mississippi night without lights, radio, or guidance. From out of nowhere, the search beam had come on and guided them to the landing strip. The young man was Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham. “As Franklin’s mother, Ruth, tells the story, earlier that evening before they left home, Billy Graham had prayed for the Father to protect and guide his son and the pilot” (Joe McKeever, “God Winks,” *Leadership Weekly*, 12-18-02).

The Lord works providentially to encourage people. Pastor John Aker boarded a DC 10 at Newark Airport; the plane was nearly empty. The computer, however, had assigned him a seat next to a man named Richard. Once airborne, the two began talking. Richard had come from the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research. His condition: skin cancer. Doctors gave him ten months at best; he was going home to Nebraska. “May I tell you about something that changed my life?” John asked. Richard nodded. John explained the way of salvation. ‘Will you trust Jesus for your future, for what lies beyond the grave for you?’ (10,000 feet over Chicago, Richard trusted Christ). Months later, John again boarded a plane at Newark. This time, he sat next to an elderly woman who was on her way to Beatrice, Nebraska. As they talked, John was amazed to learn that this was Richard’s mother. She told him that her son was growing in the Lord. When John told the mother that what she told him really encouraged him, she replied, ‘You know, this wasn’t my seat. Just before you came on the plane, a woman asked me to change seats with her’” (*Our Daily Bread*, 4/21/1987).

JUST HOW BAD CAN IT GET?

We all experience bad days, but sometimes, the situation goes from bad to worse. As things spiral down, we ask, “How bad can it get?” It starts with something simple, such as the car needing major repairs. After that, someone in the family needs a major operation. You begin to ask, “How bad can it get?” Then, the main breadwinner gets laid off. In a bad economy, it is difficult, if not impossible, to quickly find another job. The savings account begins to be drained and perhaps disappear. Next, you dip into the retirement account. It begins to affect the whole family seriously. The family will not be able to take the trip planned for next summer. The one graduating from high school will not be able to go to college. The family may lose the house.

How bad can it get, and what do you do when things look bleak?

The Promotion

The Promotion “After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him” (3:1). “After these things” is either after Esther became queen (Baldwin) or after the king was saved from the assassination (Barnes; Martin). Does the plural (things) indicate both the selection of Esther and the deed of Mordecai?

Haman was promoted to the highest post (Keil), Prime Minister (Clarke), second only to the king 10:3 (Baldwin). Although Mordecai saved the king’s life, the king promoted Haman (Baldwin).

Haman was the son of Hammedatha the Agagite. Because Hammedatha was one of the Amalekites taken prisoner by Saul and hewn in pieces by Samuel (1 Sam 15:8, 33), Jewish and Christian expositors regard Haman as a descendant of the Amalekite king, which is possible, though it can by no means be proved (Keil). The problem is that the names of Haman, his father, and his sons (9:7-9) are Persian (Barnes). Archeologists have uncovered an inscription that indicates that Agag was also the name of a province in the Persian Empire, which explains why Haman was called an Agagite (Martin).

The Practice “And all the king’s servants who were within the king’s gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage” (3:2). As the king commanded, all the court officials (Keil), bowed before Haman, but Mordecai refused. He was not a “yes” man (Baldwin).

As the next verse shows, Mordecai did not compromise his spiritual convictions. “He might have compromised with conscience and found some plausible excuses if he had wished. He could have put his own private interpretation on the prostration and said to himself, ‘I have nothing to do with the meaning that others attach to bowing before Haman. I mean by it only due honor to the second man in the kingdom.’ But the monotheism of his race was too deeply ingrained in him, and so he kept ‘a stiff backbone’ and ‘bowed not down’” (Alexander MacLaren).

How bad could that be? The worst thing that could happen is that he would lose his life. Right?

The Plot

Inquiry “Then the king’s servants who were within the king’s gate said to Mordecai, ‘Why do you transgress the king’s command?’” (3:3). It was obvious that all bowed before Haman, except Mordecai. So naturally, the court officials inquired of Mordecai why he’d disobeyed the king’s command. They did this daily (3:4).

Investigation “Now it happened, when they spoke to him daily and he would not listen to them, that they told it to Haman, to see whether Mordecai’s words would stand; for Mordecai had told them that he was a Jew” (3:4). Mordecai told the other court officials that the reason he would not bow before Haman is that he was Jewish (Barnes). “As a Jew, he could not show that honor to man, which was due to God alone” (Keil). The Jews bowed before kings (2 Sam. 14:4; 18:28), but the Persians regarded this homage as an act of worship to a god. Therefore, when the king commanded that this homage be paid to Haman, Mordecai refused (Keil).

Clark explains that Persian kings received a species of Divine adoration, “lying down flat on the earth, with the hands and feet extended, and the mouth in the dust.” He adds, “The Targum says that Haman set up a statue for himself, to which everyone was obliged to bow and to adore Haman himself. The Jews all think that Mordecai refused this prostration because it implied idolatrous adoration. Hence, in the Apocryphal additions to this book, Mordecai is represented praying thus: ‘Thou knowest that if I have not adored Haman, it was not through pride, nor contempt, nor secret desire of glory; for I felt disposed to kiss the footsteps of his feet (gladly) for the salvation of Israel: but I feared to give to a man that honor which I know belongs only to my God.’” “Had the homage been a simple token of civil respect, Mordecai would not have refused it; but the Persian kings demanded a sort of adoration, which, it is well known, even the Greeks reckoned it degradation to express” (JFB).

The court officials told Haman what Mordecai had told them “to see whether Mordecai’s words would stand,” that is, whether his excuse that he was a Jew would be allowed as a valid reason for his refusal (Barnes).

“When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath” (3:5). After being informed of Mordecai’s practice, Haman himself saw that the report was true and was filled with rage. The egotistical Haman was infuriated beyond reason (MacDonald). He was an unscrupulous man full of boundless ambition and the loftiest pride (Raleigh).

Intention “But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus; the people of Mordecai” (3:6). Haman was intent on destroying all of the Jews because he assumed that if Mordecai did not bow before him because he was Jewish, all of the Jews would feel the same way (Keil).

“In the East, massacres of a people, a race, a class, have at all times been among the incidents of history and would naturally present themselves to the mind of a statesman. The Magophonia, or the great massacre of the Magi at the accession of Darius Hystaspis, was an event not then fifty years old and was commemorated annually. A massacre of the Scythians occurred about a century ago” (Barnes).

This was anti-Semitism. Killing all of the Jews throughout the kingdom included killing all of those living in the land of Palestine! Anti-Semitism was born in the brickyards of Egypt under the cruel hand of Pharaoh. Haman dreamed of exterminating the Jews. Antiochus Epiphanes (175-165 BC) attempted to wipe out the Jewish religion. In Acts 18:17, the citizens of Corinth

“expressed their indignation or perhaps gave vent to their long-cherished hatred of the Jews by beating their official representatives” (Alexander). This is a “flagrant display of anti-Semitism” (Wiersbe). Then there were the Arabs and, of course, Hitler. 1933-45, during Hitler’s reign, a German encyclopedia said, “In less than 100 years, the Jewish problem will be solved. The race will have simply disappeared.” Haman was the Hitler of his day

“A massive execution of thousands of Jews would thwart God’s program. However, God cannot be thwarted (Job 42:2). He can overturn man’s diabolical efforts, sometimes by miraculous acts and sometimes through seeming acts of happenstance as in the following sequence. God is always working on behalf of His people” (Martin).

The Proposal

The Plan “In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, the lot), before Haman to determine the day and the month, until it fell on the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar” (3:7). The date was March-April of 474 BC (Barnes; Clarke) or April-May of 474 BC (Martin). The subject is left indefinite, “because it is self-evident that this was done by some astrologer or magician who was versed in such matters” (Keil). As the author explains, “Pur” is the Persian word for “lots.” They cast lots to determine the lucky day (Barnes). The method is unknown.

Many ancient Persians were extremely superstitious. Their religious system stressed fate and chance (Martin). Hence, Haman cast lots. He was seeking the luckiest day, the one favored by omens (Baldwin).

Haman did not realize that God was in control even of the casting of lots (Prov. 16:33). God had already prepared a means of delivering His people from Haman’s plot. “The original readers of this book would have understood that God was working to protect His people even in the timing of events. As things worked out, the Jews had almost a year in which to prepare themselves for the conflict with their enemies” (Martin).

The Proposal “Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people’s, and they do not keep the king’s laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain” (3:8). Haman approached the king, accusing the Jews of refusing to obey the king’s laws. What he said was a subtle mixture of truth, half-truth, and lies in that order. It was true that the Jews had their own laws, but it was false to accuse them of disobeying the law of the state (Baldwin).

Haman proposed their extinction. In 522 BC, after the death of King Cambyses, Smerdis the Magus usurped the throne. When he was put to death as the result of a conspiracy, all the Persians in the capital took up weapons to kill every Magus they could find. Had darkness not put an end to the slaughter, the whole caste would have been exterminated (Baldwin). Herodotus says, “The anniversary of this date has become a red-letter day in the Persian calendar, marked by an important festival known as Magophonia, or Killing of the Magi, during which no Magus is allowed to show himself—every member of the caste stays inside indoors until the day is over” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 3.79).

“If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king’s treasuries” (3:9). Haman offered to pay the executioners, which would put money into the king’s treasure, now badly depleted by the king’s losses in Greece (MacDonald). He was willing to pay

ten thousand talents of silver. According to Herodotus, the regular revenue of the Persian king consisted of 14,560 silver talents. Thus, Haman's offer would have exceeded two-thirds of one year's revenue (Barnes). Haman must have been a man of immense wealth. Ten thousand talents of silver weighed about 750,000 pounds, an enormous amount worth millions of dollars in present-day currency (Martin). There are secular accounts of an individual with enormous wealth (see Clarke and JFB).

It has been suggested that Haman made this offer because he feared the king might object that the extermination of so many of his subjects would seriously impact public revenue. In other words, Haman promised to compensate for the loss (JFB).

The Pronouncement "So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews" (3:10). The signet, or seal, ring was engraved with the king's name and the name of his kingdom (JFB). For a document to have the King's seal was the equivalent of him signing it. MacDonald comments that with his signet ring, Ahasuerus sealed the death of "thousands of innocent men, women, and children to be sacrificed at the altar of Haman's pride."

"And the king said to Haman, 'The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you' (3:11). Some say this means the king did not accept Haman's offer (Keil), but others say it means the king told Haman that the people and their possession belong to him (Barnes; MacDonald). The king did not realize that his queen was Jewish and, therefore, would be included in the plan for the extermination of all Jews (Martin).

"Then the king's scribes were called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and a decree was written according to all that Haman commanded; to the king's satraps, to the governors who were over each province, to the officials of all people, to every province according to its script, and to every people in their language. In the name of King Ahasuerus it was written, and sealed with the king's signet ring" (3:12). On the 13th day of the first month, the decree was publicized in every province in every language. That means the Jews throughout the empire had from 9 to 11 months of warning (Barnes).

All the Jews in the Persian Empire were to be executed in one day. "Such acts of frenzied barbarity have, alas! been not rarely authorized by careless and voluptuous despots, who have allowed their ears to be engrossed and their policy directed by haughty and selfish minions, who had their own passions to gratify, their own ends to serve" (JFB).

It has been suggested that the delay would allow "many Jews to leave their property and escape to other lands, for the sake of preserving their lives. Thus, Haman would attain his object. He would be relieved of the presence of the Jews, and be able to enrich himself by the appropriation of their possessions" (Clericus, cited by Keil).

At any rate, "The providence of God overruling the event in the interest of the Jews is unmistakably evident both in Haman's haste to satisfy his desire for vengeance and in the falling of the lot upon so distant a day. It was only because there was so long an interval between the publication of the decree and the day appointed by lot for its execution that it was possible for the Jews to take means for averting the destruction with which they were threatened" (Keil). Baldwin points out that the appointed day was the day before Passover, during which the Jews rehearsed God's deliverance from Pharaoh.

The Proclamation "And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions" (3:13). Had this order been carried out the entire population of the Jews in the

world would have been exterminated. This was the universal massacre of all the Jews on one day (JFB).

“A copy of the document was to be issued as law in every province, being published for all people, that they should be ready for that day” (3:14). The letter was law and it was given to everybody so that all might be ready on the appointed day to execute the Jews.

“The couriers went out, hastened by the king’s command; and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan the citadel. So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed” (3:15). As the couriers hastened to the provinces to deliver the proclamation, Ahasuerus and Haman sat down to enjoy a drink, but “the cruel measure could not but fill all peace-loving citizens with horror and anxiety” (Keil). “The decree was sufficiently strange and ominous to ‘perplex’ thoughtful citizens (Barnes). They were aghast (Baldwin).

Clarke makes the interesting observation that “even the Persians could not hope to escape without being spoiled when a desperate mob had begun to taste of human blood and enrich themselves with the property of the murdered. Besides, many Persian families had, no doubt, become united by intermarriages with Jewish families, and in such a massacre, they would necessarily share the same fate with the Jews.

Summary: When Mordecai refused to pay reverence to Haman, Haman proposed to the king, and the king accepted a plan to exterminate all the Jews.

This chapter illustrates just how bad it can get. A situation can arise that can threaten your very existence and the existence of others. Life can get very bad because there are wicked people in the world who could be in a position to seriously affect you and others in your life.

In this case, Mordecai, a man with spiritual convictions, had an encounter with an arrogant and vindictive political official who worked for a despot with absolute power over life, limb, and death. MacLaren says that Haman is “the type of the unworthy characters that climb or crawl to power in a despotic monarchy, vindictive, arrogant, cunning, totally oblivious of the good of the subjects, using his position for his own advantage, and ferociously cruel.” As for the king, MacLaren says, “He does not even ask the name of the ‘certain people,’ much less require proof of the charge against them. The insanity of weakening his empire by killing so many of its inhabitants does not strike him, nor does he ever seem to think that he has duties to those under his rule. Careless of the sanctity of human life, too indolent to take the trouble to see things with his own eyes, apparently without the rudiments of the idea of justice, he wallowed in a sty of self-indulgence and, while greedy for adulation and the semblance of power, let the reality slip from his hands into those of the favorite, who played on his vices as on an instrument, and pulled the strings that moved the puppet.”

It can never get so bad that God’s purposes are not accomplished. In the context of the book of Esther, the point is that the Lord works providentially to accomplish His purpose—in spite of human schemes. Alexander MacLaren “Behind them is an unseen and unnamed Presence, the God of Israel, who still protects His exiled people.” In this case, had Esther not been on the throne, the Jews would have been obliterated, literally blotted out. “The king’s decree was issued and posted, but the King of kings would have the last word” (Jensen, cited by MacDonald). “God was in it all; He was standing in the shadows directing the affairs” (McGee). The rule of the king was overruled. “There is in the heavens a hater of wrong, a helper of the helpless, a divine controller of *all* that happens on the earth” (Raleigh). Israel has been the “pallbearers at the funeral of every nation that has persecuted them” (McGee).

So, we need to look beyond the immediate situation to see the unseen hand of God. We need to trust Him to accomplish His purpose in our lives.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish neurologist and psychiatrist who spent World War II in a Nazi concentration camp. After he got out, he wrote a book about his experience entitled *Man's Search for Meaning*. In it, he says, "I had no intention of losing hope and giving up. No man knows what the future will bring, much less the next hour. Even if we could not expect any sensational military event in the next few days, who knew better than we, with our experience of camps, how great changes sometimes open up, quite quickly, at least for the individual" (Frankl, p. 103).

If a Jewish man in a Nazi concentration camp can say, "I had no intention of losing hope and giving up," how much more can a believer in Jesus Christ say, "No matter how bad the situation looks, God is at work to accomplish His purposes."

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Think about where you are. You are in the United States, a specific state, and a certain city. You are in an extended family, an immediate family, at a definite address. You are also involved in a particular work and church.

Why are you in that particular place at this specific time? Many answers exist, such as, “I grew up here” or, “My work is here.” There is also a spiritual reason that is often overlooked. What is it, and what do you do with it?

The Reaction

Mordecai “When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry” (4:1). Mordecai was among the first to hear of the king’s decision (JFB). When Mordecai learned of it, he was overcome with grief and publicly lamented it. If Mordecai’s reaction strikes you as extreme, it may be because we tend to keep our grief private, even unexpressed. Mordecai was not being merely melancholy or over-dramatic. The ancient Jewish custom, as well as the local custom, was a demonstrative, loud lamentation (Baldwin).

“He went as far as the front of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth” (4:2). Mordecai’s public lamentation was in the open space before the entrance to the royal palace (Keil). He did not go into the palace itself because no one was allowed to enter it wearing mourning garments. Mordecai’s “approach to the gate of the palace, under the impulse of irrepressible emotions, was to make an earnest though vain appeal to the royal mercy” (JFB).

The People “And in every province where the king’s command and decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes” (4:3). The Jewish population was stunned (MacDonald). When the king’s decree was announced, the Jews in every province of the empire began weeping and wailing and fasting and many sat in sackcloth and ashes. Where evil rains, there is sadness (MacDonald). According to Oriental fashion, the actions of Mordecai and the people were expressions of “the most poignant sorrow” (JFB).

We have not experienced anything like this. Perhaps the closest we can come to such an experience is the Kennedy assassination or 9/11. When those things happened, the whole nation felt sick. Imagine knowing something a thousand times worse than 9/11, a year ahead of time.

The Report

The Report “So Esther’s maids and eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was deeply distressed. Then she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and take his sackcloth away from him, but he would not accept them” (4:4). Living in the seclusion of the queen’s quarters, Esther knew nothing of the decree (McGee). Esther’s attendants told her that Mordecai was in sackcloth and

ashes. She probably assumed that Mordecai had experienced some temporary (Raleigh) and material loss (Baldwin).

Esther sent Mordecai clothes to put on instead of the sackcloth. Several reasons have been suggested for this. She did it so that he could enter the palace to tell her what had happened (Keil; Clarke). Custom prohibited Esther from leaving the palace, so she sent Mordecai clothes to prevent him from being seen by the king and losing his life (MacDonald). Mordecai refused the change of clothes.

The Request “Then Esther called Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs whom he had appointed to attend her, and she gave him a command concerning Mordecai, to learn what and why this was” (4:5). Esther sent another attendant to find what Mordecai was doing and why.

The Reason “So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the city square that was in front of the king’s gate. And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries to destroy the Jews” (4:6-7). Mordecai told Hathach about the king’s decision, including how much money Haman had promised to give to the king.

“He also gave him a copy of the written decree for their destruction, which was given at Shushan, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her, and that he might command her to go in to the king to make supplication to him and plead before him for her people” (4:8). Mordecai even gave Hathach a written copy of the decree to give to Esther. His purpose was to get Esther to go to the king to get him to change his mind. The expression “her people” revealed to Hathach, if he did not know it before, that Esther was a Jewess (Martin).

“So Hathach returned and told Esther the words of Mordecai” (4:9). Hathach took the information to Esther.

The Response

Esther “Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and gave him a command for Mordecai: All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, he has but one law: put all to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter, that he may live. Yet I myself have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days” (4:10-11). Esther sent a message to Mordecai to remind him of the law that to appear before the king uninvited was a capital offense unless the king held out his golden scepter. This law applied to all in the king’s court and the people in the empire.

“The law alluded to was first enacted by Deioces, king of Media, and afterward, when the empires were united, adopted by the Persians, that all business should be transacted and petitions transmitted to the king through his ministers. However, the restriction was not intended, of course, to apply to the queen, yet from the strict and inflexible character of the Persian laws and the extreme desire to exalt the majesty of the sovereign, even his favorite wife had not the privilege of *entree*, except by special favor and indulgence” (JFB; see also Baldwin).

Thirty years after this, Nehemiah (Esther happened between Ezra 6-7) faced a similar situation (Neh. 2:1).

Furthermore, the king had not summoned her in a month. Before this, she had frequently been summoned before the king, so she concluded the king did not wish to see her (Keil). She may have somehow incurred his displeasure (MacDonald). Besides, asking the king to set aside an irrevocable decree, sealed with the king’s seal, appeared to Esther to be impossible (Keil).

“So they told Mordecai Esther’s words” (4:12). Esther gave the message for Mordecai to Hathach (4:10), but it was he and others (“they”) who delivered it. He was no longer the sole messenger (Baldwin).

Mordecai “And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: “Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king’s palace any more than all the other Jews” (4:13). Mordecai’s rebuttal was to point out if the Jews were slain, she would not escape, even if she was the queen (MacDonald). One way or the other, she was going to die, either at the hand of the king or at the hand of Haman (Martin).

“For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (4:14). Mordecai argues that if Esther refuses to act now, someone else will rise up to deliver the Jewish people, but she and her family would be destroyed. He believed that God would protect His people (Martin). God’s purposes are not thwarted by the failure of one individual (Baldwin).

No worker in God’s work is indispensable. No one is so important that their absence spells the difference between the success and failure of God’s program. Few are so essential in their church that their lack of involvement would close its doors.

Mordecai adds that perhaps the reason she had been exalted to the throne was for the opportunity to save people. God has put you in a place for you to be the instrument for people to be saved.

Esther “Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: ‘Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!’” (4:15-16). In response to Mordecai’s appeal, Esther requests a three-day fast of all the Jews in Shushan. Although prayer is not mentioned, most commentators conclude that it was included (Raleigh). Esther decided that after she and her maids had fasted, she would see the king, which, she reminds Mordecai, is against the law. It has been suggested that Esther “had surrounded herself with Jewish maidens, or women who were proselytes to that religion” (JFB).

In the Old Testament, a one-day fast was obligatory on the Day of Atonement, but fasting was a voluntary act on special occasions. Esther’s three-day fast indicates the seriousness with which she regarded the situation (Baldwin). Fasting is neither a means of twisting God’s arm, nor a religious exercise to impress others, nor a way of gaining merit for oneself; but on special occasions, it is used to render the experience of prayer more effective and prepare oneself for communion with God (Baldwin).

Everything was against Esther being successful. The law of the Medes and the Persians was unchangeable. The king’s actions were uncertain in light of what happened to Vashti. Nevertheless, she was resolved that if she perished, she perished. Her reluctance was turned into resolve. Instead of being solely concerned for her personal safety, she committed herself to do what she could to save her people. Sometimes, circumstances hem us in, demanding that we commit ourselves to act courageously (Baldwin).

Winston Churchill said, “but let us ... brace ourselves to our duties, and bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say: ‘This was their finest hour.’”

“So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther commanded him” (4:17). Having won the argument, Mordecai instructed the Jews of Shushan to fast.

Summary: God had providentially placed Esther in a place to influence the king, but she had to decide to seize the opportunity, even though it meant possible danger to her.

The Lord providentially places people in places of influence. In Esther's case, Vashti had to be dethroned and Esther had to be enthroned. She had to win the Miss Persia Beauty Pageant. The Lord has providentially placed you where He can use you to minister to others, especially to save others.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told the disciples to go witness to the world. They promptly sat in Jerusalem. So God had to move them providentially. In Acts 7, Stephen is stoned. God used that to providentially put His people in a place where they could save others. Luke says, "Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial* and greatly lamented him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them" (Acts 8:1-5; note "then Philip went"). Wherever you are is where God wants to use you to save others.

You have to decide to speak. Do not be silent (4:14). Pray for boldness (4:15; Col. 4:2-4). Trust God to work. That was the point of fasting. John told the disciple, "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me" (Jn. 15:26). Then He adds, "And you also will bear witness because you have been with Me from the beginning" (Jn. 15:27). As they speak, the Holy Spirit would do His work of testifying concerning Jesus. When we witness, the Holy Spirit works.

Some churches banded together for a united evangelistic effort. I was invited to be the evangelist. One night I invited people to come forward to trust Christ. A young man came and a trained personal worker led him to Christ. After he did, the fellow reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun. He handed it to the counselor and said, "I guess I will not need this now." He then explained that he was planning on committing suicide that night. Before he did, he called a friend to say goodbye. She brought him to the service and he was saved spiritually and physically.

If she had not spoken, what would have happened? Answer: God would have used someone else. Don't miss the opportunity to be used and rewarded by God.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

On January 28, 1813, Jane Austen published her famous novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The title *Pride and Prejudice* refers (among other things) to how Elizabeth and Darcy first view each other. Elizabeth's pride and Darcy's prejudice prevent the two from recognizing and admitting their love for one another. Permit me to borrow the title of Austen's great novel. I want to tell you a biblical story that illustrates the consequence of pride and prejudice. Those two vicious vices often lead to more sinister things in real life. It is that story I would like to tell.

The Resolve of Esther

Esther's Approach "Now it happened on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, across from the king's house, while the king sat on his royal throne in the royal house, facing the entrance of the house" (5:1). Esther entered the inner court of the king's palace. The palace of Persepolis has been identified and reconstructed. The "Hall of Pillars," modeled after Shushan, had 36 columns, shoring to 65 feet (Baldwin).

Esther stood in the inner court dressed in her royal robes on the third day after her agreement with Mordecai (Keil) and, on that day, the three-day fast was complete. Part of a day was counted as a whole day (Martin). The king sat on his royal throne, which was not a *throne* but simply a chair so high that it required a footstool. It was made of gold, at least inlaid with gold and covered with tapestry (JFB). Being uninvited, Esther was risking her life.

The King's Approval "So it was, when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, that she found favor in his sight, and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther went near and touched the top of the scepter" (5:2). When the king saw Esther, he approved of her presence and extended his scepter to her. The monuments of Persia and Assyria contain pictures of King Darius enthroned in the midst of his court and walking abroad in an equal state. In both cases, he carries in his right hand a slender rod about equal in length to his own height, ornamented with a small knob at the summit (JFB). Esther touched the top of the scepter, "the usual way of acknowledging the royal condescension, and at the same time expressing reverence and submission to the august majesty of the king" (JFB).

As Esther approached the king, she had two concerns. Would he spare her life? Would he grant her request? So far, so good. Her life was spared.

The King's Assumption "And the king said to her, 'What do you wish, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given to you; up to half the kingdom!'" (5:3). The king not only approved of Esther approaching him, he assumed she had come for something (Martin). He knew that she would not have come unannounced unless it was something urgent, some matter of great importance (McGee). So he offered to grant her anything she requested up to half his kingdom, a figure of speech meaning that he would give her anything within reason (MacDonald). It denotes great liberality (JFB).

Did you see it? God was at work! It is easy to look at this passage and see the resolve of Esther or the grace and generosity of the king, but if that is all you see, you miss the point of the book, namely the providence of God. God is working behind the scenes to accomplish His purposes.

Solomon says, “The king’s heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Prov. 21:1). The backdrop of this proverb is the Eastern method of watering the land. Several canals are dug from one stream, enabling the farmer to direct the water where he wills (Clarke; JFB; Kidner). Likewise, the Lord directs the thoughts of kings “that his favors may fall, not at random, but in harmony with a divine order” (Barnes). Just as a canal directs the flow of water, so “the Lord rules and overrules a king’s thoughts and actions” (MacDonald; Buzzell). Bridges says this reminds us that God acts providentially. Then, he adds that God turns political projects to His own purposes “without interfering with the moral liberty of the king’s will.”

God had often moved officials to make decisions that favored His people. He turned the heart of Pharaoh to Joseph (Gen. 41:37-45). He induced a Babylonian officer to show special favor to Daniel and his three friends (Dan. 1:9). He had given Nehemiah, who had “prayed to the God of heaven,” favor ‘with the king (Neh. 2:4-6).

The Request of Esther

First Request “So Esther answered, ‘If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him’” (5:4). It has been suggested that Esther seems to have been afraid to make her real request too abruptly (Barnes), but the fact that she invited Haman to her dinner-party suggests Esther had a plan. She was simply being prudent in her presentation (Raleigh). Another suggestion is that she did not request what she wanted here because too many other people were present. Granted, there would be attendants at the dinner party, but it would be much less public and formal (Baldwin). Besides, she knew the king would be more likely to listen at her dinner party (Raleigh).

Inviting Haman was in keeping with the king’s recent promotion of him (3:1), whom he had made his friend (3:10, 15; Baldwin). She wanted to charge him to his face (Raleigh).

“Then the king said, ‘Bring Haman quickly, that he may do as Esther has said.’ So the king and Haman went to the banquet that Esther had prepared” (5:5). The king granted that request. For Haman, “it was an unusual honor to be invited to a banquet with the queen, for Persian officials were protective of their wives” (Martin).

Second Request “At the banquet of wine the king said to Esther, ‘What is your petition? It shall be granted you. What is your request, up to half the kingdom? It shall be done!’” (5:6). The Persians meal consisted of two courses: the first consisted of meats, etc., at which they drank water, and the other consisted of fruits when they drank wine (Gill). At the banquet of wine, “the greatest cheerfulness would prevail” (Keil). Realizing that coming to a banquet was not the real request, the king again asked Esther what she wanted.

“Then Esther answered and said, ‘My petition and request is this: ‘If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, then let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said’” (5:7-8). Numerous reasons have been given as to why Esther put off giving her request, including that her courage failed; she wanted to ingratiate herself to the king; she wanted to build up an element of suspense and impress upon the king that her business was vitally important and no mere whim; she wanted to inflate Haman’s pride and catch him off guard before she exposed him (MacDonald). Perhaps she felt the time was not appropriate yet (Keil). There is a time to be silent and a time to speak (Eccl. 3:7). Wives (and, on some

occasions, husbands) sense these things. When it comes to speaking, you have to know when to hold'em, when to fold'em, and when to walk away.

The Response of Haman

Response “So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with indignation against Mordecai” (5:9). Haman left the banquet full of joy. Then Mordecai did not stand to honor him. Apparently not standing was “a serious breach of Persian etiquette” (Barnes). Haman was filled with indignation. The Hebrew word translated “indignation” means “burning anger, rage.” Haman’s happy heart was turned into a hate-filled heart. Anger is a killjoy. If anger kills joy, why would anyone want to stay angry?

Report “Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh” (5:10). Although filled with rage, Haman managed to restrain himself from violence against Mordecai (MacDonald). He gathered his family and friends to relieve himself of his rage (Martin).

“Then Haman told them of his great riches, the multitude of his children, everything in which the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and servants of the king” (5:11). Haman was a proud man. He bragged about the greatness of his wealth, the size of his family, and the success of his career. He had enormous wealth (3:9) and ten sons (9:7-12). According to the ancient historian Herodotus, next to prowess in arms, being the father of many sons was regarded as the greatest proof of manly excellence in Persia (Barnes) and was the one reason Asiatic sovereigns had so many wives and concubines (Clarke). In fact, the king annually sent presents to the man with the greatest number of sons (Keil). He was second only to the king. The order of his achievements puts riches first, even before his sons (Baldwin).

“Moreover Haman said, ‘Besides, Queen Esther invited no one but me to come in with the king to the banquet that she prepared; and tomorrow I am again invited by her, along with the king’” (5:12). On top of all of his other accomplishments, Haman boasted about the fact that he had been invited to be the “guest of honor” (Martin) at a private banquet with only the king and the queen present—on two successive days. Haman was so filled with ego and pride that the king had invited him alone to have lunch with the queen (McGee).

“Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate” (5:13). Haman was a prejudiced man. As far as he was concerned, all his fame and fortune were nothing as long as Mordecai was alive. Amazing! Haman had everything, but the one thing he thought was lacking made everything else useless. “Haman was so overwrought about Mordecai that he could not enjoy his good position” (Martin). His joy was outweighed by one killjoy (Baldwin). “The only cloud on his horizon was that stubborn Jew!” (MacDonald). “The only moth in his Persian rug was Mordecai (Don Sunujian).

Pride and prejudice produce resentment and prevent happiness. “Pride will ever render its possessor unhappy. He has such a high opinion of his own worth, that he conceives himself defrauded by everyone who does not pay him all the respect and homage which he conceives to be his due” (Clarke).

Someone has said the size of people’s characters is determined by the size of the things that bother them. Haman was bothered by a relatively small thing. McGee says, “In the church today (1951), how many people say ... ‘Well, Mrs. Jones didn’t speak to me today. And you know, I

was at a morning service and the minister looked right at me, but he did not later shake my hand. And I feel so miserable about it.”

Someone has written “A deacon with a long history of service to the Lord now wears a hang-dog look on his face, doesn’t sing in church, and is becoming increasingly cantankerous. Why? Because he doesn’t like the song leader. A woman who has always been looked upon as a pleasant person stares at the floor to show her disdain whenever’ the deacon board chairman makes an announcement. When asked why she refuses to look at him, her answer is, ‘I can’t stand the smug look on his face.’” Both of these people are being controlled by an obsession. Haman, whose story is recorded in the book of Esther, had the same problem, and it ultimately cost him his life. He became a hate-filled man bent on destroying Mordecai the Jew because he couldn’t stand the sight of this man who refused to bow to him. He was being consumed by an irrational response.”

The Reaction of Haman

Reaction “Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, ‘Let a gallows be made, fifty cubits high, and in the morning suggest to the king that Mordecai be hanged on it; then go merrily with the king to the banquet.’” (5:14a). Haman’s wife, a woman like Lady Macbeth (Raleigh), and friends suggested having Mordecai hanged so that he could enjoy the banquet the next day.

The seventy-five-foot-high gallows (Barnes), an impaling stake (Keil; Clarke says the Hebrew word translated “gallows” signifies wood, a tree, or pole), was a common method of execution in the ancient world. The purpose of such a high place of execution was to be a lesson to all who saw it. Being higher than the trees, the person on the stake would be visible from all directions (Martin). “The higher the stake, the further it would be seen” (Keil). They took it for granted that, without hesitation, the king would agree to Haman’s proposal to execute Mordecai (Keil).

Result “And the thing pleased Haman; so he had the gallows made” (5:14b). Haman made the gallows. Haman sought revenge. Thomas à Kempis said, “When anger enters the mind, wisdom departs.”

God was in that element of the story. There is a prayer in the book of Acts that illustrates the point “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done” (Act 4:27-28).

Summary: God providentially works, even when men are filled with pride, prejudice, rage, and revenge.

Pride and prejudice produce resentment, rage, and revenge and prevent happiness. The ultimate issue is pride.

The solution is humility, which produces a right relationship with God. “The soul was made for God, and nothing but God can fill it and make it happy. Angels could not be happy in glory when they had cast off their allegiance to their Maker. As soon as his heart had departed from God, Adam would need to go to the forbidden fruit to satisfy a desire that was only an indication of his having been unfaithful to his God. Solomon, in all his glory, possessing everything heart could wish, found all to be vanity and vexation of spirit because his soul had not God for its portion. Ahab, on the throne of Israel, takes to his bed and refuses to eat bread, not merely

because he cannot get the vineyard of Naboth, but because he had not God in his heart who could alone satisfy its desires. Haman, on the same ground, though the prime favorite of the king, is wretched because he cannot have a bow from that man whom his heart even despised. O, how distressing are the inquietudes of vanity? And how wretched is the man who has not the God of Jacob for his help, and in whose heart Christ dwells not by faith!" (Clarke).

The solution is forgiveness, which produces a loving relationship with people. Gordon MacDonald tells about meeting a man who had been imprisoned for five years with the great South African president and leader, Nelson Mandela, on Robben Island. The man and Mandela had rooms next to each other. Gordon MacDonald eagerly asked the man what the great Nelson Mandela had taught him.

The man answered, "He taught me to forgive. I was a bitter young man and Mandela picked it up immediately when we first met. He said to me, 'Son, you are no use to our movement until you learn to forgive the white man. You can hate his cause, but you cannot hate him.'" (Gordon MacDonald, "A Resilient Life," p. 187, Nelson 2004)

In the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Darcy overcome their pride and prejudice. They overcome the judgments and opinions that they have formed about each other and ultimately experience love together. When we overcome our pride and prejudice, we will be personally happier and better able to love one another.

THE TWIST AND TURNS OF LIFE

Life is full of twists and turns. It is fascinating to watch the unexpected come, the unimaginable happen, and the unbelievable appear. Life is like a novel; it is filled with suspense. You never know what will happen next.

The unexpected, the unimaginable, and the unbelievable are not surprises to God. In fact, He is sometimes involved! Just consider what happens next in the story recorded in the book of Esther. This has been called a “chapter of coincidences” (Baldwin). Before this point, a man named Haman has been elevated to the position of second-in-command in the entire Persian Empire (3:1). He has managed to arrange that all the Jews in all the Persian world be exterminated (3:6). He has also decided that Mordecai must die by hanging (5:14). He was on top of the world and Mordecai was on the bottom.

The Sleepless Night

The Sleepless Night “That night the king could not sleep. So one was commanded to bring the book of the records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king” (6:1). The king could not sleep (Baldwin says literally translated: “sleep fled”).

Have you ever experienced a sleepless night? What caused it: Grief? A great burden? Guilt? Was it what you had for dinner? In this case, “God kept Ahasuerus awake to thwart the evil scheme” (MacDonald).

“At stake, in a very real sense, was the entire divine program for the ages. If Israel perished, there would be no Messiah, no redemption, no Church, no future Kingdom of God among men. With such issues in jeopardy, we might not have been too much surprised to see the arm of Deity breaking forth into the affairs of men with some great supernatural intervention; perhaps something like the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Egyptian Pharaoh. But nothing of the kind happens. There is not even any mention of God. The writer of the Book of Esther merely records what might be regarded as the master understatement of all time: “‘On that night could not the king sleep’ (6:1)” (McClain, p. 27).

What do you do when you can’t sleep: toss and turn in bed? Get out of bed to read or watch TV? To make the best of his insomnia, the king commanded that the book of the records of Chronicles (2:23) be read to him. Herodotus (3.138 ff.) and other historians wrote that the Persian kings kept records of outstanding services to the kingdom and rewarded faithful service (NJFB; Martin). There were scribes whose duty it was to keep a journal of every occurrence worthy of notice. “It has been a custom with Eastern kings, in all ages, frequently to cause the annals of the kingdom to be read to them. It is resorted to, not merely as a pastime to while away the tedium of an hour, but as a source of instruction to the monarch, by reviewing the important incidents of his life and those of his ancestors” (Barnes). Baldwin says the heavenly counterpart can be seen in Malachi 3:16.

The Starling Discovery “And it was found written that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, the doorkeepers who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus” (6:2). At this point, Ahasuerus had ruled for 12 years and it had been five years since Mordecai had revealed the plot against the king (2:21-23; Martin; Raleigh says it had been six

years). Of all the records that could have been selected by the librarian, of the hundreds of chapters to choose from (Raleigh), by “divine coincidence” (MacDonald), the one about uncovering the assassination plot was chosen. Coincidence is when God chooses to remain anonymous.

Martin observes, “Almost incredible circumstances point to God’s hand guiding the course of events. The entire course of history for the Jewish nation was changed because a pagan king, hundreds of miles from the center of God’s activities in Jerusalem, could not sleep. Jewish people all over the Persian Empire, and especially in Palestine itself, were unaware of God’s dealings till long after the fact. But read in the light of God’s covenants to Abraham, Moses, and David, the readers could well appreciate the sovereign action of God.”

The Searching Question “Then the king said, ‘What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?’ And the king’s servants who attended him said, ‘Nothing has been done for him’” (6:3). The king wanted to know what honor had been bestowed upon Mordecai. Whistleblowers were rewarded. In ancient Persia, “royal benefactors” were to receive an adequate reward. In fact, “the names of such persons were placed on a special roll, and care was taken that they should be properly recompensed, though they sometimes waited for months or years before they were rewarded” (Barnes). This very monarch gave Megabyzus a golden mill weighing six talents for his service at Babylon. Themistocles, the famous Greek, had three cities and above 200 talents given to him (Raleigh). Kings rewarded such whistleblowers to encourage others to do the same.

Again, God’s unseen hand is seen, even in the question the king asked in the middle of the night. While the king was asleep, God was awake and working (Ps. 121:4)! The eternal God is the God of time and timing.

Martin: God’s people are preserved through an unlikely set of circumstances. Even the forgetfulness of a pagan king could be used by God to preserve and protect His people.

The Self-serving Suggestion

The King’s Question “So the king said, ‘Who is in the court?’ Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king’s palace to suggest that the king hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him” (6:4). When the king asked, “Who is in the court,” he was looking for an official that he might consult concerning the honor due Mordecai (Keil). Apparently, it was already morning when it was customary for people who wanted to see the king to assemble at the outer court (Keil). It was the custom to transact business before the sun got hot (NJFB). Haman had come to suggest that the king hang Mordecai. He just happened to be there (Martin). “Strangely enough, it was at the very same time that the king had an impulse to reward the man who had saved him from the assassins” (MacDonald).

The Servant’s Answer “The king’s servants said to him, ‘Haman is there, standing in the court.’ And the king said, ‘Let him come in’” (6:5). “Haman was standing in the outer court “By divine arrangement” (Ryrie).

The King’s Question “So Haman came in, and the king asked him, ‘What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?’ Now Haman thought in his heart, ‘Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?’” (6:6). When the king asked Haman, “What should be done for a man the king wishes to honor?” “the egotistical Haman was beside himself with joy and enthusiasm” (Martin). Haman thought the king was talking about him!

The Self-serving Answer “And Haman answered the king, ‘For the man whom the king delights to honor, 8 let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head. 9 Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king’s most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honor. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!’” (6:7-9). Thinking he was recommending something that would be given to him, Haman suggested that the king’s robe be put on the one to be honored, the king’s horse be used, and the king’s crest be placed on its head, and let one of the king’s most noble princes prepare the man, who is to be paraded through the town with a public announcement to be made as the parade moved through the city. Stone carvings of horses with royal crests on their heads have been found at Persepolis, another Persian capital (*NKJV Study Bible*). Reliefs from Persepolis indicate that the horse’s crown was the horse’s hair placed in a special arrangement between the horse’s ears (Baldwin).

Think of all the things Haman could have suggested. Apparently, he had enough money. If he requested governorship over a distant city or province, he would no longer live in the capital next to the king. How about a great title? He was already second in command. He did not want gold, governorship, or a great title. He wanted a gigantic honor bestowed upon him. He wanted to be king. Instead of riches or governorship, he wanted to be dressed up in the king’s robes and ride around on the king’s horse, receiving public acclaim (Baldwin). Haman immediately votes for the greatest possible mark of honor (Keil). He suggests that the one to be honored be given honors second only to the king himself (MacDonald). Haman no doubt thought this would prepare the people for the time when he would be king (McGee). He was probably thinking, “Admiring peoples, behold! If ever a monarch should be needed, you know where to find him!” (Raleigh).

Haman’s suggestion reveals his vast ambition, his overblown pride, his devilish enmity (Raleigh). Yet, “Haman unwittingly prescribes honors for his hated enemy” (NJFB). “One cannot miss the irony and humor of this turn of events” (*NKJV Study Bible*).

The Surprise Twist

The King’s Command “Then the king said to Haman, ‘Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king’s gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken’” (6:10). The king liked Haman’s ideas and told him, of all people, to carry out the plan on Mordecai the Jew! It was Haman who wanted to exterminate all the Jews and hang Mordecai. This was a double blow. The words he had to proclaim publicly were like gravel in his mouth; he was utterly humiliated (Baldwin).

How the king knew Mordecai was a Jew who sat at the gate is not stated, but the servants who told the king about Mordecai’s discovery of the conspiracy probably told him about Mordecai’s current position (Keil). As for the king not remembering that all the Jews were to be exterminated, “such forgetfulness in the case of such a monarch as Xerxes cannot surprise us” (Keil).

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). “What we see here is a reversal of the proverb ‘The early bird gets the worm’; here the worm got the early bird! (Moore, cited by NJFB).

Mordecai’s Parade “So Haman took the robe and the horse, arrayed Mordecai and led him on horseback through the city square, and proclaimed before him, ‘Thus shall it be done to the

man whom the king delights to honor!” (6:11). Josephus says that when Haman came with the horse and the robes, Mordecai thought Haman was mocking him. (Raleigh). “How astonishing is the conduct of Divine providence in all this business! From it we plainly see that there is neither counsel nor wisdom against the Lord; and that he who digs a pit for his neighbor, is sure to fall into it himself” (Clarke).

Haman’s Distress “Afterward Mordecai went back to the king’s gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered” (6:12). Crestfallen, Haman retreated to his house to report these strange developments (MacDonald). The covering of the head is a token of deep mourning” (Keil).

The Wise Men’s Predication “When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, ‘If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him’” (6:13). “The Persians made much of omens and signs. For them, “Fate, chance, and luck were considered important in everyday life. The Book of Esther stands as a polemic against such a fatalistic view of the world. To many who are not of the covenant community, Israel, the world’s events appear to be fatalistic and to happen by chance. But those who are the people of God’s covenant know that God overrules fate. He moves events and circumstances for His good pleasure. Pagan advisers and the pagan wife of an evil man unknowingly stated the central thrust of this book: neither Haman nor any other human can possibly stand against God’s Chosen People, the Jewish” (Martin).

“The revival of the Jewish people since the times of Cyrus was sufficient to induce, in the minds of heathen who were attentive to the signs of the times, the persuasion that this nation enjoyed divine protection” (Keil).

Esther’s Call “While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs came, and hastened to bring Haman to the banquet which Esther had prepared” (6:14). While Haman, his wife, and friends were trying to figure out what to do, the king’s eunuch came to hurry him off to the dinner-party Esther had prepared. Haman dare not keep the king waiting (Baldwin).

Summary: In the providence of God, Haman’s self-serving suggestion turned out to be what he has to do to his worst enemy.

God uses the twists and turns of life to accomplish His purpose. In this case, Mordecai stumbled upon a plot to kill the king. The King could not sleep. The very book that recorded Mordecai’s unrewarded deed is the book that was chosen to be read to the king in the middle of the night. Haman was handy that morning. God used all of these twists and turns to humiliate Haman and honor Mordecai.

This chapter begins with Haman on top of the world. It ends with Haman being humiliated. “The LORD will destroy the house of the proud” (Prov. 15:25). God can do a better job of handling your enemies than you can. “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19-21).

This chapter begins with Mordecai at the bottom. It ends with him being honored—by the king! Don’t look at the next twist or turn and give up hope. The Lord is standing around the corner—out of sight. “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6).

God is in control and He uses twists and turns. The cry of a baby in a basket caused Pharaoh’s daughter to rescue Moses, who became a deliverer of the nation of Israel. That big fish

just happened to be there where Jonah was tossed overboard. An unmolested linen cloth convinced the disciples of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “When kingdoms are tossed up and down like a tennis ball (Isa. xxii. 18), not one event can fly out of the bounds of His providence. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without it. Not a hair, but it is numbered by it” (cited by Bridges in his comments on Prov. 16:33).

Here is what I have learned. Life has unexpected twists and turns, but God is in control. God uses the twists and turns of life to accomplish His purposes. You have heard it said, “The Devil is in the details.” I say to you, “That is sometimes true, but it is also true that God is in the details. Years ago, in a conversation with my brother, I said, “You never know what will happen next. It’s like the ring of the phone. You never know *who* is on the other end or *what* the message will be.” Since that conversation, he and I often mention “the ring of the phone.” It is our code for, “You never know what is going to happen next.” I never know what is going to happen next, but I know who is in control of the next thing that happens.

He failed miserably as a schoolteacher. He did not like his students, and they did not like him. When he was fired, he wrote, “I do not know what will become of me and I do not care much I wish I were fifteen years old again. I believe I might become a stunning man, but somehow or other, I do not seem in the way to come to much now.” We sometimes experience what we discern as a failure and cannot see the hand of God’s guidance. That teacher who failed was Philip Brooks, who went on to become a great preacher. His statue stands in front of Holy Trinity Church in Boston. His spiritual greatness came out of his personal failure as he yielded to God’s redirection in his life. When we are at the bottom, we need to look up to see God’s purpose. At such times, we need to trust Him to work out His purpose in our lives. We should not seek failure or excuse it, but we can learn from it and grow through it.

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

An often repeated proverb says, “What goes around comes around.” The point is simple enough. What you do to others gets done to you. The deceiver gets deceived. The swindler gets swindled. The robber gets robbed. One of the all-time classic stories of this principle is tucked away in the book of Esther. It is worth our time to consider it because it contains several valuable lessons.

The Queen’s Request

The King’s Question “So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther. And on the second day, at the banquet of wine, the king again said to Esther, ‘What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request, up to half the kingdom? It shall be done!’” (7:1-2). With Haman present at the second dinner party, while relaxing over the wine at the end of the meal, the king repeated his invitation to Esther, this time using her title, Queen Esther.

The Queen’s Answer “Then Queen Esther answered and said, ‘If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request’” (7:3). After the usual introductory phrases, including a returning the courtesy of calling him king, she requests her life and the life of her people. Perhaps this is the first time the king learned that Esther was Jewish (Barnes).

“For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king’s loss” (7:4). Esther explains (“for”) that the reason for her request is that both she and her people have been sold to be killed and annihilated. She is repeating the words that Haman put into the decree (3:13). She is calling Haman’s offer to pay a large sum for the extermination of the Jews being “sold” (Keil).

She adds that if they had been sold to be slaves, she would have remained silent, but the king would not have been compensated for the loss, that is, “although the enemy (Haman) would not (even in that case) compensate (by his payment to the treasury) for the king’s loss of so many subjects” (Barnes; Clarke; JFB). The way Esther presents her case, Haman is a traitor to the king as well as an enemy of the Jews (Baldwin).

The King’s inquiry

The King’s Inquiry “So King Ahasuerus answered and said to Queen Esther, ‘Who is he, and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?’” (7:5). Keil says that the wording indicates the king’s agitation. MacDonald says the king indignantly asks. “He was at once struck with the horrible nature of a conspiracy so cruel and diabolic” (Clarke). This is like the First Lady telling her husband, the President of the United States, that the Vice President is planning on killing her.

The Queen's Answer "And Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!" So Haman was terrified before the king and queen" (7:6). This was the moment for which Esther planned and patiently waited. She had wisely invited Haman to the dinner party "for just this moment" (MacDonald). Looking at Haman, she either nodded with her head or pointed with a finger, revealing him as the culprit.

Haman was terrified! When he asked that the Jews be eliminated, he had no idea that included the queen (McGee). "The realization that he had inadvertently threatened the queen's life was a knockout blow on top of the earlier humiliation" (Baldwin). All the blood drained from his face. There was that sinking feeling in his chest like his heart had fallen through his toes. His knees began to tremble. He knew this probably meant his execution! "'Fate' was working against him" (Martin).

The Prime Minister's Plea "Then the king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went into the palace garden; but Haman stood before Queen Esther, pleading for his life, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king" (7:7). The king was furious. He could not imagine anyone plotting to take the life of the queen (McGee). "He stalked out to the palace garden like a raging panther" (MacDonald). "The sudden rising of the king in anger was the same as if he had pronounced sentence" (JFB).

Realizing what was happening, Haman did not follow the king out of the room; his only hope was to beg for his life before the queen. Haman knew he could expect no mercy from the king unless the queen would intercede for him (Keil; Baldwin).

The King's Decision

The Kings' Decision "When the king returned from the palace garden to the place of the banquet of wine, Haman had fallen across the couch where Esther was. Then the king said, 'Will he also assault the queen while I am in the house?' As the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face" (7:8). When the king left the room, Haman remained with the queen. This was a bold move because the rules regarding the harem were so strict that it would have been difficult for Haman to converse with the queen without causing an offense. Had he not been so desperate, he would have followed the king out of the room to avoid any possible problem with remaining behind with the queen (Baldwin).

It is highly unlikely that Esther and Haman were alone in the room. Surely, servants were serving and guards were also present (MacDonald). At any rate, falling to his knees (Clarke), Haman began to beg for his life. Somehow, he fell across the couch.

When the king returned to the home, he interpreted what Haman was doing as an attempt to assault his wife sexually (MacDonald). That did it! Without waiting for an explanation, still infuriated, the king passed the sentence of death upon Haman (Keil). As the king uttered in words the thoughts of his heart, the king's attendants covered Haman's face, an act of preparation for execution (Clarke).

The Eunuch's Suggestion "Now Harbonah, one of the eunuchs, said to the king, 'Look! The gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good on the king's behalf, is standing at the house of Haman.' Then the king said, 'Hang him on it!' (7:9). The eunuch who informed the king of Haman's gallows was probably the messenger sent to get Haman and, on that occasion, had seen the gallows (JFB). When the king learned that Haman had built gallows for Mordecai, he ordered that Haman be hanged on the very gallows that he had built. This was another so-called "happenstance" in the providence of God (MacDonald).

The Prime Minister's Death “So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's wrath subsided” (7:10). Haman reaped what he had sown and the king's wrath subsided. “Never was condemnation more just, and retribution more merited, than the execution of that gigantic criminal” (JFB).

“Nor can there be a juster law than that the artificers of death should perish by their own invention.” This is like the inventor of the electric chair being executed in it.

Summary: When Esther exposed Haman's hideous plot, the king ordered Haman to hang on the same gallows he built for Mordecai.

This story illustrates that what goes around comes around. When Haman plotted to hang Mordecai, he was hung on the gallows he made for Mordecai. What you do to others gets done to you. The deceiver gets deceived. Jacob killed a goat, put the skin on his arm and used it to deceive his father. Years later, as a father, he suffered the same deception. The coat of his beloved son Joseph had been dipped in the blood of a goat and brought to him as proof of his son's death.

Proverbs says, “The righteous is delivered from trouble, and it comes to the wicked instead” (Prov. 11:8). There are times when God not only delivers the righteous *from* trouble, but He delivers it *to* the wicked. In the book of Daniel, the three Hebrews were delivered out of the fiery furnace and the fire consumed their would-be executioners (Dan. 3:22-26). The wicked received the trouble they planned to give to the righteous. God delivers the righteous from trouble and delivers it to the wicked. A Greek proverb says something to the effect, “The dice of the gods are loaded.”

Jesus says, “Judge not that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Mt. 7:1-2). We reap what we sow. Those who criticize others will be criticized. Those who judge others will be judged. According to James, if we practice mercy, we will receive mercy at the Judgment Seat of Christ. If we do not practice mercy, we will not receive mercy (Jas. 2:12-13).

The way you treat your parents when they are old is the way your children will treat you when you are old. I know of a case where a lady did go see her elderly father when he was seriously ill in the hospital. She said, “I can't stand to see him that way.” Years later, her husband, the father of her children, was seriously ill in the hospital and their daughter did go see him. She said, “I can't stand to see him that way.”

This story implies that when your enemy falls, you should not gloat. When Haman was hung, Esther did not gloat. Proverbs says, “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the LORD see *it*, and it displeases Him, and He turns away His wrath from him” (Prov. 24:17-18). Do not rejoice when your enemy falls. The Hebrew translated “falls” is never used for falling into sin. It is used of falling into trouble. The reason (“lest”) for not rejoicing is God will punish you for your gloating. Delitzsch says one ought to abstain from this joy so as not to experience God's displeasure. Barnes says, “Your joy will be suicidal, the wrath of the righteous Judge will be turned upon you, as the greater offender, and you will have to bear a worse evil than that which you exult in.” MacDonald says, “If the Lord sees anyone harboring a gloating, vindictive spirit, He will consider that spirit more punishable than the guilt of the enemy.” Kidner says, “Your glee may well be a more punishable sin than all the guilt of your enemy.” The point here is the same as Solomon said earlier, namely, “He who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished” (17:5). Do not rejoice when your enemy falls into trouble, lest The Lord punish you for your attitude. “God hates gloating because it suggests a

superior attitude over others. The proverb extends the duty of love even to an enemy; for it requires that we do good to him and not evil, and warns against rejoicing when evil befalls him” (Buzzell). When David’s enemy fell, David wept (1 Sam. 1:11-12).

This story indicates that God providentially works to accomplish His purpose. In the context of the book, God used ordinary human events, such as a drunken party, a beauty contest, and the stupid decision of a sinner to accomplish His purpose.

When you see the sinister schemes of sinners, the heart-filled hate of a Haman, and the diabolic devices of demons, you wonder how God can work in such a mess. Do not fret. None of those things hinder or even slow down God’s work in the world. God works in the midst of sin! Where sin abounds, grace does that much more abound.

I got saved a few months before I graduated from high school. I spent the next year in a Christian college. During that year, my roommate was a fellow whose parents were missionaries in Canada. Both of us needed money for the next year’s school bill. At his suggestion, we headed to Canada at the beginning of summer to get jobs. When we got to Chicago, I landed a job on an ore boat that sailed from Duluth, Minnesota to Gary, Indiana. That summer, there was a steel strike. I got laid off and dumped in Duluth, Minnesota. I took a train to Chicago, where my car and clothes were stored.

The train dumped me in downtown Chicago. I had never seen anything like that in my life. There was sin everywhere. At that point, I was a young man who had been saved about a year and a half, but I knew that grace does that much more where sin abounds. So, in the midst of those sinful dives, I began looking for grace. It did not take long for me to find a Christian Servicemen’s Center in the middle of that sinful mess to lead servicemen to Christ.

In the midst of the chaos, confusion, and corruption, look for God’s providential hand. God is working in the world to accomplish His will.

HOW PROVIDENCE WORKS

We speak of the providence of God. Exactly what is it? How does it work? The story of Esther illustrates how God works most of the time.

In Esther, a Persian decree had been issued that called for the extermination of the Jews. Israel faced an impossible situation because of the law of the Medes and the Persians, which could not be changed. It would take an act of God to solve the problem they were facing. With the exposure and execution of Haman, the tables had been turned, but there was still a major problem. The mandate to eradicate the Jews was still in effect.

The Request

The Rewards “On that day King Ahasuerus gave Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her” (8:1). The day Haman was hanged, his property was confiscated and given to Esther. The “house of Haman” means the house and all that pertained to it (Keil; Baldwin). Esther told Ahasuerus that Mordecai was her kinsman and foster-father (Keil).

At this point, the king has learned that Mordecai was not only related to Esther; he had experience, was faithful, and brave. Thus, the king concluded Mordecai was fit to fill the vacant office left by Haman (Raleigh).

“So the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai; and Esther appointed Mordecai over the house of Haman” (8:2). Esther got Haman’s property and Mordecai got Haman’s position (JFB). The king giving the seal-ring to Mordecai indicates that Mordecai was promoted to first Minister (Keil; Clarke). The seal-ring was the instrument for the royal signature (Barnes; Keil). It gave Mordecai the authority to act on behalf of the king (Baldwin). Esther appointed Mordecai as her steward to manage the large and opulent estate which had been assigned to her (JFB).

The Request “Now Esther spoke again to the king, fell down at his feet, and implored him with tears to counteract the evil of Haman the Agagite, and the scheme which he had devised against the Jews” (8:3). The edict for the annihilation of the entire Jewish population had been written in the king’s name, sealed with the royal seal and published in all the provinces of the kingdom. According to the law of the Medes and the Persians, it could not be recalled, revoked, or reversed (1:19; 8:8). Apparently, without being invited, Esther appears before the king (MacDonald; Martin). With tears, Esther fell before the king’s feet, imploring him to counteract the evil edict.

“And the king held out the golden scepter toward Esther. So Esther arose and stood before the king” (8:4). As a sign that he would graciously grant her petition, the king stretched out his scepter (Keil; JFB). Esther arose to stand before the king; she did not need to maintain the humble attitude of a suppliant (JFB).

“and said, ‘If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor in his sight and the thing seems right to the king and I am pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to annihilate the Jews who are in all the king’s provinces’” (8:5). With appropriate introductory phrases, Esther asked that the

edict calling for the extermination of the Jews be revoked. To ask for a Persian's law to be revoked was to ask for the impossible (Baldwin).

"For how can I endure to see the evil that will come to my people? Or how can I endure to see the destruction of my countrymen?" (8:6). Esther explains ("for") that she could not endure seeing her people destroyed. If the edict were not repealed, their destruction would be inevitable (JFB).

All of us have faced impossible situations, such as financial, relationship, or health issues. During those times, we often ask God to work. What we have in mind is something like Him parting the Red Sea. God works, but the way He works is not always the way we expect. What does He do?

The Record

The Reminder **"Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew, 'Indeed, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows because he tried to lay his hand on the Jews'" (8:7).** The king could not simply revoke the edict issued by Haman, but ready to perform her request, he first assures Esther of his good intentions, reminding her of what he had done for her and Mordecai (Keil).

The Ring **"You yourselves write a decree concerning the Jews, as you please, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for whatever is written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet ring no one can revoke" (8:8).** In the Hebrew text, the word "you" is emphatic (Baldwin). The king gave Esther and Mordecai permission to write a decree concerning the Jews and seal it with the king's signet ring. He also reminded them that anything written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet ring could not be revoked.

The Record **"So the king's scribes were called at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and it was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews, the satraps, the governors, and the princes of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces in all, to every province in its own script, to every people in their own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language" (8:9).** As in the case of Haman's decree, Mordecai dictated a letter that was sent to all the provinces in the Empire (3:12-15). Sivan corresponds to our June; it was the second month from the issue of the first edict (Barnes, Clarke, and Baldwin say it was our May and June; Martin says June and July).

"And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horseback, riding on royal horses bred from swift steeds" (8:10). The decree was signed, sealed, and delivered. "Some went on camels across the Arabian Desert; others on horseback up the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Still others were sent into India and some into Africa" (McGee). Clark points out that there is confusion and not much consent among learned men as to the exact nature of the animals used, but it is of little importance. He adds that they were no doubt "the swiftest and hardiest beasts that the city or country could produce." JFB say that they were the swiftest kind of camel. Baldwin says they were equivalent to today's racehorses.

"By these letters the king permitted the Jews who were in every city to gather together and protect their lives; to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the forces of any people or province that would assault them, both little children and women, and to plunder their possessions" (8:11). Clark explains, "Whatever had passed the royal signet could never be revoked; no succeeding

edict could destroy or repeal a preceding one: but one of a similar nature to the Jews against the Persians, as that to the Persians was against the Jews, might be enacted, and thus the Jews be enabled legitimately to defend themselves; and, consequently, placed on an equal footing with their enemies.” The Jews were permitted to protect themselves and to even destroy, kill, and annihilate any who assaulted them.

“On one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, a copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province and published for all people, so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies” (8:13). The Jews were authorized to attack and destroy all who assaulted them—on the day appointed for their extermination (Keil; Barnes), which set a limit on the possible bloodshed (Baldwin). “However strange and even ridiculous this mode of procedure may appear, it was the only one which, from the peculiarities of court etiquette in Persia, could be adopted” (JFB). This was not revenge; it was justice (Baldwin). The Jews defended themselves; they did not seek vengeance. This let the people know that the king was opposed to the annihilation of the Jews (McGee).

God did the impossible. In a sermon on this passage, Chuck Swindoll said, “There is no scene so dark that God cannot brighten it. There is no writing so permanent that He cannot change it. There is no heart so hard he cannot soften it.”

God providentially used an ordinary means to do it. He used the writing of a decree. We think of the birth of Jesus as a mighty miracle and it was. There was the virgin birth, angels in the sky and a supernatural star, but God used several things to fulfill prophecy providentially. A Roman census moves Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem just in time to fulfill a 500-year-old prophecy that the Messiah would be born there.

The Result

Shushan Rejoiced “The couriers who rode on royal horses went out, hastened and pressed on by the king’s command. And the decree was issued in Shushan the citadel” (8:14). Between Sivan, the third month when the letter was sent out (8:9) and Adar, the twelfth month, when the struggle was to take place, the interval would be one of more than eight months. All haste was made so that there would be no misunderstanding (Barnes).

“So Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, with a great crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad” (8:15). After the Decree was sent out, Mordecai appeared in public dressed in blue and white clothes with a crown of gold on his head. Being dressed in blue and white was greatly estimated among the Persians; Mordecai was arrayed in the royal dress and insignia (JFB). The “crown” was not the king’s crown but merely a gold band (Barnes). The story of Mordecai is the story of sackcloth to “robes of splendor” (MacDonald). This city of Shushan rejoiced with Mordecai. Few lamented the fall of Haman; he was too proud to be popular (Clarke).

The Jews Rejoiced “The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor. And in every province and city, wherever the king’s command and decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a holiday” (8:17a). The Jews were overjoyed.

The People Converted “Then many of the people of the land became Jews, because fear of the Jews fell upon them” (8:17b). The people of the land were filled with fear, not wanting to be considered an enemy of the Jews. Many became proselytes to Judaism (MacDonald).

Summary: When the children of Israel in Persia faced an impossible situation, God worked providentially through some ordinary events to preserve the Jews.

God most often works through the mundane, not the miraculous. In this case, it was a cleverly written decree. We speak of an accident, fate, and luck. We say it is the way the mop flops, the cookie crumbles, and the ball bounces. It is not an accident; it is almighty God. It is not fate; it is our Father. It is not luck; it is the Lord. God works in the flop of the mop, the crumbling of a cookie and the bounce of the ball.

The Bible is full of examples of this truth. We think of the flood as a mighty miracle and it was, but God did several things providentially to cause the flood waters to recede. Genesis says, “And God made a wind to pass over the earth and the waters subsided” (Gen. 8:1). God employed natural means to cause the water to rise, and He did the same to make them recede. He sent a wind, which caused the waters to subside. The account of the decrease of the waters illustrates that God works through natural means. It also illustrates God often works slowly.

History illustrates this truth. Napoleon said God was on the side of the heaviest battalions, but Waterloo proved him wrong. When the Spanish Armada was anchored off the coast of England, the entire history of the British Empire would have been changed—except for the fact that a storm arose, destroying the Spanish Fleet. When Columbus made his voyage to this country, he would have landed on the coast of Virginia or the Carolinas—except for the fact that the flight of pigeons changed his course to the West Indies. The fact that the Spanish flag was not placed on the soil changed the course of American history. During the Revolutionary War, Benedict Arnold sold the secrets of West Point to the British. Major Andre of the British forces had those secrets in his possession as he was riding toward White Plains, New York, but he did not know the way. Coming to a crossroads, he paused for a moment and took the road to the right. That was the road where revolutionary soldiers were stationed. When they stopped him and searched him, they found in his boot the papers of betrayal of West Point. The change of direction changed the course of American history. Personal experience demonstrates this truth. Shakespeare said, “There is a divinity which shapes our ends, rough-hew them how he will.” Someone has suggested that the word “disappointment” should be spelled with an “H”—His appointment!”

God works providentially to accomplish His purpose. In this case, it was to preserve the Jews. Notice the emphasis on the Jews in this chapter (8:1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 16, 17). In our case, it is to provide for us, to protect us, or to perfect us. I know of a Christian lady who had a part-time job and needed a full-time job. Her boss was also looking for her. He stumbled across a job on the computer and said to her, This job is you. Go. Apply now.” She did. She beat out 200 other applicants. Imagine needing a job and God using your boss to get you one.

“Life is a series of small decisions, insignificant events that become major later.” In the horrible hour of 9/11, it is said that these people from the Trade Center lived because of a little thing. The head of a company survived because he had to be there to start his son in kindergarten. Another man was alive because it was his turn to bring donuts. One woman was late because her alarm clock didn’t go off on time. Another was late, stuck because of a traffic accident on the New Jersey Turnpike. One missed his bus. One spilled food on her clothes and had to change everything. One’s car wouldn’t start. One went back to answer the phone before leaving. One couldn’t get a taxi. One had a child that dawdled and wasn’t ready in time. One man wearing a new pair of shoes developed a blister on his foot. He stopped at a drugstore to buy a bandage and is alive today.

In January 2010, another semester of the Disciples Bible Institute was to begin on January 12th. I had decided to wait until after the holidays to write a letter advertising the Institute. After the holidays, I realized that I had waited too long. On Tuesday, January 5th, I went to the church to do a mass mailing. Years before, I had used mail merge, but as I sat in front of the computer, I realized I had forgotten everything I had learned. As the minutes ticked by, I also realized that time was running out; this letter had to be mailed today. In desperation, I prayed, “Lord, help!” I had no sooner prayed that prayer than it dawned on me that a Jewish lady from the Sage Academy taught computers to first graders on campus. Maybe she could help me. I immediately arose from the desk and darted for the door. As I stepped outside, I almost ran over her. Within five minutes, she was able to get mail merge to work. In the providence of God, He used a Jewish lady to send out a Christian letter.

FROM NOW ON

The story of Esther is the story of God's provisional preservation of Israel. The story goes through a lot of twists and turns. The story is basically finished by the end of chapter 8, but Esther has ten chapters. What is the rest of the story? Mordecai worked behind the scenes, yet, in the end, he is exalted.

The Defeat of the Enemies

The Result "Now in the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day, the time came for the king's command and his decree to be executed. On the day that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, the opposite occurred, in that the Jews themselves overpowered those who hated them" (9:1). The thirteenth day of the twelfth month was the day Haman's "superstitious advisers" (JFB) selected as the day of the extermination of the Jews. On that very day, the Jews overpowered those who hated them. Clarke remarks, "Must not these heathens have observed that the uncontrollable hand of an Almighty Being had worked in behalf of the Jews? And must not this have had a powerful tendency to discredit the idolatry of the country?"

The Reason "The Jews gathered together in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could withstand them, because fear of them fell upon all people" (9:2). In all the providences of the Empire where the Jews dwelt, they gathered together to lay hands on those who sought to do them harm. The people of the land did not withstand them because of fear of what would happen to them. Martin comments, "The people who attacked the Jews may have seen this as an opportunity to get rich at someone else's expense. However, since they had no backing from others, they were in a cause they could not win." Their greed turned to fear.

"And all the officials of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and all those doing the king's work, helped the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them. For Mordecai was great in the king's palace, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for this man Mordecai became increasingly prominent" (9:3-4). Even the government officials helped the Jews, "no doubt, with the troops under their command" (Clarke), because of their fear of Mordecai, who was "the second-most-powerful man in the kingdom" (MacDonald). They had their eyes firmly fixed on their political advantage (Baldwin).

The reason the Jews were so successful is that fear fell upon the people and the officials.

Recapitulation "Thus the Jews defeated all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, with slaughter and destruction, and did what they pleased with those who hated them" (9:5). At this point, the author concludes by recapitulating in more detail what happened. The Jews killed those who wished to kill them, but, apparently, they did not kill any who did not rise up to destroy them (Clarke).

"And in Shushan the citadel the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. Also Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, 8 Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vajezatha; the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews; they killed; but they did not lay a hand on the plunder" (9:6-10). On the day of the battle, Martin says in

March 473 BC, 500 men were killed in Shushan, plus the ten sons of Haman, whose names are listed (Keil; Clarke). Fighting men, not the defenseless population, were killed (Baldwin).

They did not lay their hands on the property of those they killed (Gen. 14:21-23). Not taking the spoils demonstrated that they were seeking their personal safety, not the property of their enemies (Clark), and, no doubt, the deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies would not go unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoils (Baldwin).

Report “On that day the number of those who were killed in Shushan the citadel was brought to the king. And the king said to Queen Esther, ‘The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the citadel, and the ten sons of Haman. What have they done in the rest of the king’s provinces? Now what is your petition? It shall be granted to you. Or what is your further request? It shall be done’” (9:11-12). It was reported to the king that in Shushan 500 had been killed as well as the ten sons of Haman. When the king gave that report to the queen, he wondered out loud what must have happened in the rest of the empire and what else she wanted to be done.

Request “Then Esther said, ‘If it pleases the king, let it be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan to do again tomorrow according to today’s decree, and let Haman’s ten sons be hanged on the gallows’” (9:13). Esther requested an extension of the decree to wipe out any remaining pockets of anti-Semitism (MacDonald). Mordecai probably informed Esther that there were still many enemies of the Jews who sought their destruction (Clarke). Undoubtedly, some concealed themselves while waiting for the decree’s expiration (JFB). Esther also requested that Haman’s sons be publicly hanged on a tree, that is, that the dead bodies be nailed on crosses (Keil), “as a terror to those who sought the destruction of the Jews” (Clarke).

Repercussions “So the king commanded this to be done; the decree was issued in Shushan, and they hanged Haman’s ten sons” (9:14). The king permitted the Jews to fight against their enemies one more day (Keil). The reason for the public hanging of the dead bodies of Haman’s ten sons was as a visual reminder to others not to commit the same crime (Martin).

“And the Jews who were in Shushan gathered together again on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and killed three hundred men at Shushan; but they did not lay a hand on the plunder” (9:15). The Jews killed 300 more in Shushan, but unlike Haman, they did not do this for money; they did not take the spoils. Also notice that they killed men. While they were allowed to slay women and children, it was not necessary for their preservation for them to do so (Raleigh).

“The remainder of the Jews in the king’s provinces gathered together and protected their lives, had rest from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of their enemies; but they did not lay a hand on the plunder” (9:16). What happened in Shushan happened in the rest of the empire. In the provinces, the Jews killed 75,000 of their enemies but did not take their property. In other words, they were interested in protecting themselves, not growing rich (MacDonald).

Raleigh estimates the population of Persia at one hundred million and the number of Jews to be about three million. He suggests that Shushan had a population of half a million. So, he does not think that the slaying of 75,000 in the province is out of line.

The Jews were protecting themselves. That is all. They had been given permission to do much, much more. “By these letters, the king permitted the Jews who were in every city to gather together and protect their lives; to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the forces of any people or province that would assault them, both little children and women and to plunder their

possessions” (8:11). They did not retaliate. They did not seek revenge. They did protect themselves.

Writing in 1907-1908, Paul Haupt commented, “If the authorities had allowed the Jews to organize armed resistance, the numerous massacres in Russia during the past few years would have been nipped in the bud ... But, as a rule, the assailants of the Russian Jews were supported by the governors, military commanders, officers of the police, etc.” (cited by Baldwin).

The Declaration of a Holiday

The Celebration “This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar. And on the fourteenth day of the month they rested and made it a day of feasting and gladness. But the Jews who were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day, as well as on the fourteenth; and on the fifteenth of the month they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness” (9:17-18). The Jews in the provinces celebrated on the 14th day of the month, but the Jews in Shushan celebrated on the 15th day of the month. The difference is that the fighting in Shushan lasted for two days (Martin). MacDonald says this was the beginning of the feast of Purim. Technically, it wasn’t designated a holiday until later. This was more of a spontaneous celebration.

“Therefore the Jews of the villages who dwelt in the unwallied towns celebrated the fourteenth day of the month of Adar with gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and for sending presents to one another” (9:19). Those who dwelt in the countryside, as distinguished from those who dwelt in cities (Barnes), not only celebrated the victory, they use the occasion to send presents to one another. Perhaps the sending of presents was sending a portion of the banquet to those who could not come to it (JFB; Baldwin, pp.112-114).

The Custom “And Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, to establish among them that they should celebrate yearly the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, as the month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them, and from mourning to a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:20-22). As a result of the spontaneous celebration, Mordecai wrote a letter establishing the 14th and 15th day of the twelfth month as an annual holiday.

“So the Jews accepted the custom which they had begun, as Mordecai had written to them” (9:23). Thus, the feast of Purim was established. “The two-day feast was for remembering the goodness of God working through a number of circumstances to protect His people from extinction” (Martin). It is been observed without interruption from that time to the present (Clarke).

“because Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to annihilate them, and had cast Pur (that is, the lot), to consume them and destroy them, but when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letter that this wicked plot which Haman had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. So they called these days Purim, after the name Pur” (9:24-26a). A summary of Haman’s decision to exterminate the Jews is given to show how Purim got its name (Baldwin). The way the feast of Purim got its name was that Haman used Pur, that is, lots, to determine the date for the extinction of the Jews (3:6-7; Keil). By the way, Purim is the plural form of pur. In English, to make a word plural, an “s” or “es” is added. In

Hebrew, nouns are made plural by adding “im.” For example, “cherub” is singular; “cherubim” is plural. “The Pur became a symbol of God’s using circumstances to deliver His own” (Martin).

In the Hebrew text, the word translated “Esther” is the simple pronoun “she.” Since Esther’s name has not been mentioned in connection with Mordecai’s letter, this has been translated “when the plot came to the king’s attention” (NIV; Baldwin).

“Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, what they had seen concerning this matter, and what had happened to them the Jews established and imposed it upon themselves and their descendants and all who would join them, that without fail they should celebrate these two days every year, according to the written instructions and according to the prescribed time, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city, that these days of Purim should not fail to be observed among the Jews, and that the memory of them should not perish among their descendants” (9:26b-28). The author concludes this subsection (“therefore”) by explaining how the spontaneous celebration became a custom. It was the letter Mordecai wrote as well as what they had experienced (Keil). The feast of Purim was to be observed by every family in every city throughout every generation. On both days of the feast, the modern Jews read the Book of Esther in their synagogues. “The copy read must not be printed but written on vellum in the form of a roll, and the names of the ten sons of Haman are written on it in a peculiar manner, being ranged, they say, like so many bodies on a gibbet. The reader must pronounce all these names in one breath. They make a terrible noise in the synagogue whenever Haman’s name is pronounced. Some drum with their feet on the floor, and the boys have mallets with which they knock and make a noise. They prepare themselves for their carnival by a previous fast, which should continue three days, in imitation of Esther’s; but they have mostly reduced it to one day” (JFB).

Confirmation “Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim” (9:29). A second letter was sent. This one was from Esther and Mordecai. This second letter gave the feast of Purim the force of law (Keil).

“And Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews, to the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth, to confirm these days of Purim at their appointed time, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had prescribed for them, and as they had decreed for themselves and their descendants concerning matters of their fasting and lamenting. So the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book” (9:30-32). Mordecai sent a copy of both letters to all 127 provinces of the empire. Unlike the letter sent by Haman, these letters contained words of peace and truth. The purpose of these letters was to confirm the establishment of the feast of Purim.

The Description of Mordecai’s Fame

Ahasuerus “And King Ahasuerus imposed tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea” (10:1). Keil observes that this statement “seems extraneous to the contents of our book.” The book of Esther begins by describing the greatness of King Ahasuerus and it concludes the same way. He imposed tribute on his 127 provinces, not just a local tribute (JFB) but the islands in his possession. The islands may be Cyprus, Aradus, the island of Tyre, Platea, etc., which remained in the hands of the Persians after the victories of the Greeks (Barnes).

Mordecai “Now all the acts of his power and his might, and the account of the greatness of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of

the kings of Media and Persia?” (10:2). The Persians kept exact chronicles of all public events (Clarke). In the official books, the accomplishments of Mordecai were recorded beside the accomplishments of the king himself (MacDonald).

“For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and was great among the Jews and well received by the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen” (10:3). As the author explains (“for”), Mordecai became the Prime Minister (Keil; Clarke) and was considered great among his people the Jews and was well received by the people of the land because he sought the good of his people and peace among the people of the empire. “The Targum is extravagant in its encomiums upon Mordecai: “All the kings of the earth feared and trembled before him: he was as resplendent as the evening star among the stars, and was as bright as Aurora beaming forth in the morning, and he was chief of the kings” (Clarke).

His experience illustrates the truth that he who humbles himself will be exalted (Mt. 23:12; Lk 14:11; 18:14). “From sitting contentedly at the king’s gate, he was raised to the dignity of the highest subject, the powerful ruler of the kingdom” (JFB).

Spurgeon applies his ministry to Christians: “Mordecai was a true patriot, and therefore, being exalted to the highest position under Ahasuerus, he used his eminence to promote the prosperity of Israel. In this, he was a type of Jesus, who, upon His throne of glory, seeks not His own, but spends His power for His people. It would be well if every Christian would be a Mordecai to the church, striving according to his ability for its prosperity. Some are placed in stations of affluence and influence, let them honor their Lord in the high places of the earth, and testify for Jesus before great men. Others have what is far better, namely, close fellowship with the King of kings, let them be sure to plead daily for the weak of the Lord’s people, the doubting, the tempted, and the comfortless” (Spurgeon, cited by MacDonald).

Armerding says, “The fact that we have no record of his death is quite remarkable because the history of most men concludes with some sort of obituary. Not so with Mordecai. Thus the impression is left in our minds of one who lives on and on. ‘He that doeth the will of God abides forever’ (I Joh. 2:17)” (Armerding, cited by MacDonald)

Summary: In the providence of God, Israel’s enemies were destroyed, Israel established an annual memorial, and Mordecai was greatly honored.

From this point on, they would remember the providence of God. Likewise, we should recognize and remember the providential acts of God.

Some say God is working when in reality, He is not. Erickson warns that we need to be careful what we identify as God’s providence. In 1934, German Christians thought the actions of Adolf Hitler were God working in history. They wrote, “We are full of thanks to God that he, as Lord of history, has given us Adolf Hitler, our leader and savior from our difficult lot. We acknowledge that we, with body and soul, are bound and dedicated to the German State and to its Fuhrer. The bondage and duty constrains for us, as evangelical Christians, its deepest and most significant in its obedience to the command of God.” A year earlier, a statement read, “To this turn of history (that is, Hitler’s taking power) we say a thankful ‘Yes.’ God has given him to us. To Him be the glory. As bound to God’s Word, we recognize in the great event of our day a new commission of God to His church” (Erickson, p. 404). You know God is working by measuring it by His Word. The Lord provides for, protects and perfects His people.

Likewise, we should remember the providential acts of God. Beyond the providential acts of God, we should use memorials as memory aids. God does. In the Old Testament, He established

Passover as a memorial of deliverance from Egypt. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan, they stacked stones in a pile as a memorial of God delivering them into the Land. Throughout history, people have established memorials to commemorate great events. The Romans built arches such as the Arch of Constantine and Titus in Rome. Americans have erected memorials on Civil War battlefields such as Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and Chickamauga. A memorial at Arlington National Cemetery has been erected depicting the raising of the US flag on Iwo Jima.

In the New Testament, God established two memorials: baptism and The Lord's Supper. For Christians, Christmas and Easter are memorials of what God has done. Why not create some personal memorials? I have not done that much, but I have done that. In my case, I remember my spiritual birthday. In the providence of God, Patricia's children each have the perfect job for them. Every year, on the anniversary of their first day at work, she calls them to remember that significant moment in their lives.

We tend to remember our past failures. If we remembered God's past faithfulness, we would be more spiritually-minded. In preaching through the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, I was struck by the fact that God told two churches to remember. He told the loveless church at Ephesus to "Remember therefore from where you have fallen" (Rev. 2:5) and He told the dead church at Sardis to "Remember therefore how you have received and heard" (Rev. 3:3). It dawned on me, when I was an evangelist, every Baptist pastor wanted me to revive the dead saints. Most evangelists do that by preaching on sin. I confess: I did my share of that. God wants us to deal with sin, but that is never where He starts. He says, "Remember." Then he says, "Repent." We need to recognize and remember what God has done.

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