

The Hand of Providence

How often have you wanted God's hand in your life to be more clear? You look at your life, and you are certain of your sin. But you are less certain as to whether or not God is still working his plan in and through you. You live each day and there does not seem to be much of the extraordinary in it. Rather than extraordinary, your life feels ordinary.

You read the Bible and you often see amazing stories of God's working in and through his people. But your life feels less than amazing. Does God work in less than miraculous ways? Does He work in the ordinary?

Even after you have failed God through seasons of sin, can He still use you to carry out His plan? Or has his perfect plan passed you by? Or worse yet, has it been lost forever?

The book of Esther addresses these questions, and many others like them. But until recently, many have struggled to see the value of the book of Esther as a part of God's sacred Word to his people.

Fredric Bush has written this about Esther:

"It is indeed an opus non gratum, an unacceptable work. True, when the church took over the Bible of the Jews as part of its canon, it did embrace the book of Esther. But for the most part it has been a cold embrace indeed. Often cited is Luther's statement, "I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and Esther that I could wish that they did not exist at all, for they Judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety." Fredric Bush

Calvin did not ever say anything so strong as Luther, but he never preached from the book of Esther.

I am thankful for more recent commentaries that have gone back and struggled to make sense of this important portion of God's Word.

Theme: God works providentially to save his people from extermination.
- Or: God does extraordinary things through ordinary means.

Unique Qualities to the book:

- A book to God's people outside of the Promised Land - (like Daniel and Ezekiel)

- No Word from God
- No true prophet
- No Temple Worship
- No Priests
- No King
- God's people do understand that they are living far away from their home under the rule of another people, because they have sinned. They do understand that they have royally messed up God's plan for their lives.
 - Ester takes place in the Kingdom of the Medes and Persians, in one of the capital cities of the Empire of Xerxes. (Modern day Iran)
 - The plot occurs some 50 years after king Cyrus issued his decree for Jews to return to the promised land. For whatever reason, not necessarily all sinful, many Jews did not return with the returnees that we read about in Ezra.
 - These Jews are living daily apart from the regular means of grace.

The book has no mention of the name of God.

There is no true miracle in the narrow sense of the word.

But, as we will see as we go along, God is working throughout the entire book.

And as I have read through the book and began to study it more thoroughly, I have been convinced that this book is a diamond in the rough. It is a true treasure for God's people.

Through its pages, we are able to see very clearly the hand of providence working in ordinary and often very hidden ways to carry out God's plan of redemption.

The book of Esther was written, at least in part, to explain the Jewish Feast of Purim. It is a very "Jewish" book, and it is not readily apparent how it relates to Christ and to Christians.

Purim is one of the most joyous and fun holidays on the Jewish calendar. It commemorates a time when the Jewish people living in Persia were saved from extermination.

During this yearly celebration, the entire book is read.

The Jews celebrate the feast of Purim to express their confidence that God will continue to preserve them as a people in this world.

If you listen to “End Times” teachers, such as Jimmy DeYoung, you will be encouraged to apply the book of Esther and its message of the preservation of the Jews to the modern state of Israel. God is continuing to preserve the Jews from extermination. You will hear that the modern day Haman is Ahmadinejad of Iran. In other words, they say the message of Esther continues for the Jews, but only tangentially for Christians.

But the truth is that those who are born again believers in Jesus as Messiah - our Savior and Lord - are the true sons of Abraham. The Church is not something separate from OT Israel, but rather a continuation of the one people of God throughout all of history.

Therefore, God’s providential working to preserve the Jews in the book of Esther applies directly to us. God has always and will continue to the end, to preserve a people for himself.

Even though the powers of this world rage against the Church, God will work in mysterious and hidden ways to frustrate their efforts.

So, the book of Esther is very much for us as Christians. It has a ton to teach us. In some ways, our own interactions with God more closely parallel Esther than many other books of the Bible.

Consider for a moment your own relationship with God. When you first came to know God, did he come and talk to you as he did to Abram in Ur or Paul on the road to Damascus? I would be surprised if he did.

How about your ongoing walk with God? How often has a prophet shown up at your doorstep to make your flour jar miraculously not run out? Or when is the last time God raised up a Samson in the Church?

We all understand that God has not worked in THESE ways in our lives, but none of us would say that God has NOT worked in our lives.

But the way in which God works in our lives is more like the way in which he worked in the time of Esther. He works through his hand of providence.

WSC (Westminster Shorter Catechism) **1:11** What are the works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are his most holy,(1) wise,(2) and powerful preserving(3) and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.(4)

- (1) Ps. 145:17
- (2) Ps. 104:24; Isa. 28:29
- (3) Heb.1:3
- (4) Ps. 103:19; Matt. 10:29,30,31

I know in my own life I can look back and see God's hand working all over the place. I could give you one coincidence after another. But if we understand Esther and really the rest of the Bible, there is no such thing as random luck. God controls all things. And he controls them for his own glory and for the good of his own people.

The problem with providence is that it is easier to deny. And unbelievers are always looking for reasons not to believe.

When God brought his people up out of Egypt, even Pharaoh, after the many plagues, had to admit that God was working. It was visible and open for all to see. But when God works providentially, it is easier to look at the situation through unbelieving eyes. This is one reason why Esther is such a wonderful book. God's hand of providence is recorded for us in Scripture. So we have an authoritative interpretation of God working.

The events of Esther are recorded for us purposely to show us the hidden and ordinary hand of God. And as we look at the details of this book, we will see ourselves as well. God is continuing to work to preserve his people in a hostile world.

Some question whether Esther is actually historical.

The period described in the book of Esther is not without extra-biblical historical accounts.

History by Herodotus: A Greek Historian of the 5th C. BC.

- Queen Amestris
- No mention of Esther
 - o The easiest way to explain this is that although Persian kings were known for large harems, they usually had one wife through which the royal line would be carried on.
 - o Usually, this wife is the only one recorded for the history books.

[Keep in mind, that this book is intended to be read in its entirety, in one sitting. We are going to only read one chapter today. You will feel like there is not true closure.]

- This is not ideal for a sermon.

- But it is like our lives. Our stories of God's hand of providence in our day are not finished either.

Read Esther 1:1-4.

ESV **Esther 1:1**

Now in the days of Ahasuerus,
the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia
over 127 provinces,
² in those days
when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa,
the capital,
³ in the third year of his reign
he gave a feast
for all his officials and servants.
The army of Persia and Media
and the nobles and governors of the provinces
were before him,
⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal
glory
and the splendor and pomp of his
greatness
for many days, 180 days.

Our story does not begin with Esther or with Mordecai.
Our story begins with a Persian King: Ahasuerus. This is the Hebrew form of the name Xerxes.

Xerxes I ruled from 485 - 465 B.C., presiding over ancient Persia's decline from mighty power to fading empire. His father Darius was defeated by the Greeks at the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.), and 10 years later Xerxes assembled a vast army to invade Greece and avenge his father's defeat. (The best-known reports on the invasion come from the historian [Herodotus](#).) Xerxes crossed the Hellespont (now called the Dardanelles) and methodically overran Greece. He won a costly victory at Thermopylae -- the famous battle which ended with 300 Spartan warriors defying the entire Persian army in a last battle to the death -- and finally reached Athens and sacked the deserted city. But the invasion ended in disaster when the Persian navy was routed by the Greek fleet at Salamis (480 B.C.). Xerxes retreated to his palace in Persepolis, leaving behind an occupying army which was defeated by the Greeks shortly thereafter. Persia remained a

formidable nation but Xerxes withdrew from active life, devoting himself to what Herodotus called "the intrigues of the harem." 15 years later Xerxes was stabbed to death, probably by his subordinate Artabanus, and was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes.

The writer knows that the Persian Empire is on the decline. We don't know how much later he is writing, but we do know that he is looking back upon these events as he is describing them. So, when he describes King Ahasuerus there is a degree of humor that is going on.

His description is extravagant.

- from India to Ethiopia
- 127 Provinces
 - o The Medo-Persian kingdom was vast and mighty.
- As Xerxes plans for war against the Greeks, he gathers to himself a sort of War Council.
- But it is different from the war councils that we are used to today.
- Ahasuerus throws a party - a six month party.

What sort of King preparing for war, throws a six month party?

- Ahasuerus would have wanted to assure his army that he was wealthy enough and mighty enough lead them into battle against the Greeks and reward them richly upon their return.
- These leaders were from all over the realm and would not have known much about their king.
- A weak king would not have inspired the confidence necessary.
 - o he showed the riches of his royal glory
 - o and the splendor and pomp of his greatness

It would be difficult after six months of seeing such glorious wealth to believe that anyone in all the world was greater than Ahasuerus.

Read Esther 1:5-8.

⁵ And when these days were completed,
the king gave for all the people present in Susa, the citadel, both great and small,

a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

⁶ There were white cotton curtains
and violet hangings
fastened with cords of fine linen and purple

to silver rods
and marble pillars,
and also couches of gold and silver
on a mosaic pavement
of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious
stones.

7 Drinks were served in golden vessels,
vessels of different kinds,
and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the
king.

8 And drinking was according to this edict:
"There is no compulsion."
For the king had given orders to all the staff of his
palace
to do as each man desired.

At the end of the six months Ahasuerus gave a week-long grand finale of a party.

This party was for the entire city, both great and small.

No expense was spared.

- The furnishings were amazing.
- Each visitor received his own goblet made of gold and handcrafted in some unique fashion.
- Wine was supplied in plenty and you could have as much as your heart desired.

The point of all of this is ironically portray the worldly greatness and pomp of the Persians in contrast to the seeming insignificance of the Jews, who are not at this point even mentioned.

Read Esther 1:9.

9 Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the
palace
that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Ever so briefly, we are also given an account of the party that Queen Vashti throws for the women. It was not that it was not wonderful in its own right, but in comparison to the pomp of Xerxes' party it was insignificant.

Read Esther 1:10-11.

10 On the seventh day,

when the heart of the king was merry with wine,
he commanded
Mehuman,
Biztha,
Harbona,
Bigtha and Abagtha,
Zethar and Carkas,
the seven eunuchs who served in the
presence of King Ahasuerus,
to bring Queen Vashti before the
king with her royal crown,
in order to show the peoples and the
princes her beauty,
for she was lovely to look at.

11

At the climax of the finale of Xerxes grand display of power and wealth, Xerxes decides to bring in his queen. His motivation in doing this is once again to display his greatness. Not only does he have wealth, he also has the most beautiful of women as his own.

We should not make too much of the king's having been made merry with wine. The Persians were known for their drinking, even while they were making important "war-council" decisions.

"... it is their [the Persians] custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk, and what they approve in their counsels is proposed to them the next day by the master of the house where they deliberate, when they are now sober and if being sober they still approve it, they act thereon, but if not, they cast it aside. And when they have taken counsel about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk." Herodotus

"This custom may seem bizarre to us, but the ancients believed intoxication put them in closer touch with the spiritual world." Jobes

Nor should we draw too many conclusions as to the way in which Xerxes wanted to show off his queen. It very well may have been in some sort of seductive dance. But that is not explicit in the text. What is clear is that Ahaseurus wanted everyone to see the beauty of his queen - for she was lovely to look at.

Still no mention of any Jews.

Read Esther 1:12.

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

In an unexpected turn of events, the queen refuses to come at the king's command. Needless to say, the king was not happy.

He has spent the last 6 months displaying his wealth and power. Now, at the very climax, he cannot control his own queen.

Vashti has not only made Ahasuerus look foolish, she has made him look weak. If you are a Jew reading this, or listening to it read, you would most likely find this humorous.

Many Christian interpreters throughout history sought to determine who was right and wrong in this situation.

Some sided with the King. He had the authority and every right to call his wife in. She was clearly in rebellion and needed to be dealt with.

Some sided with the Queen. She was a model of women's liberation from the tyranny of men. But I believe that neither of them are right. The writer is not concerned about the moral virtue of either the King or the Queen. They are not given to us as models to emulate.

What is going on and what we need to see is the hand of providence working in unbelievers and their decisions.

The King has no thought of the Hebrew God. He is simply acting in accordance with his own heart.

The Queen is doing the same. What we have here is a squabble between a pagan king and his queen. What possible significance could this have for the people of God?

This would be on the level of the marital affairs of President Obama and his wife - Michelle. What possible significance could a personal squabble between the two of them have upon the welfare of God's people?

It is these sorts of actions that are under the sovereign hand of God's providence.

Even though, as of yet, we do not see how.

The Jews are still not even mentioned.

Read Esther 1:13-22.

13 Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times
(for this was the king's procedure
toward all who were versed in law and judgment,
14 the men next to him being
Carshena,
Shethar,
Admatha,
Tarshish,
Meres,
Marsena,
and Memucan,
the seven princes of
Persia and Media,
who saw the king's
face,
and sat first in the
kingdom):

15 "According to the law,
what is to be done to Queen Vashti,
because she has not performed the command of King
Ahasuerus
delivered by the eunuchs?"

16 Then Memucan said in the presence of the king
and the officials,
"Not only against the king has Queen Vashti
done wrong,
but also against all the officials
and all the peoples who are in all the
provinces of King Ahasuerus.

17 For the queen's behavior will be made
known to all women,
causing them to look at their
husbands with contempt,
since they will say,
'King Ahasuerus
commanded Queen Vashti
to be brought before
him,
and she did not come.'

18 This very day the noble women of Persia

and Media
 who have heard of the queen's
 behavior
 will say the same to all the king's
 officials,
 and there will be contempt and
 wrath in plenty.

19 If it please the king,
 let a royal order go out from him,
 and let it be written
 among the laws of the Persians and
 the Medes
 so that it may not be repealed,
 that Vashti is never again to come
 before King Ahasuerus.
 And let the king give her royal position to another
 who is better than she.

20 So when the decree made by the king is
 proclaimed
 throughout all his kingdom,
 for it is vast,
 all women will give honor to their husbands,
 high and low alike."

21 This advice pleased the king and the princes,
 and the king did as Memucan proposed.

22 He sent letters to all the royal provinces,
 to every province in its own script
 and to every people in its own language,
 that every man be master in his own household
 and speak according to the language of his
 people.

For all of his pomp and show, Ahaseurus does not really know how to overcome the situation before him.

One lesson from chapter one is that even though it appears that the rulers of this world have power, in reality, they do not.

- Jesus says as much to Pilate when he tells him that he could do nothing to him if his Father in heaven did not give him such power.
- God is the only one who has true power.
- Vashti makes this abundantly clear.

He calls in his royal council for advice.

They are concerned that this one act of rebellion would become a rallying cry for all the women of the empire.

They would need to demonstrate that such an act of willful rebellion could not go unpunished.

Memucan - one of the officials - devises a plan.

Again, to the ears of a Hebrew, his plan would seem humorous.

Queen Vashti is to never again come into the Queen's presence.

Her place is to be given to another - better than her.

Why is this humorous?

- because now, everyone throughout the empire will know of the Queen's rebellion. He sends this new command out to every province of his empire. There is none who would not know of Vashti's rebellion now.
- And even though she is punished by losing her position, she does not suffer severely.
- Some think that Vashti may even have been pregnant with Xerxes' heir at this time.
- There is much we cannot be sure of.
- But we do know that God is providentially orchestrating each and every one of these decisions for his own glory and for the good of his people.

I don't really want to end the sermon only getting through chapter 1.

But I can see the wisdom in it for you.

Our lives are always in process. As long as we live our story is not over.

And many times we cannot see how the events that are happening in our world really relate to God's plan of redemption.

What significance does it have for God's people whether or not President Obama has a dispute with his wife?

If you were a Jew living under the reign of Xerxes, you would often question, "What is God doing in the world? If anything at all."

We too sometimes struggle to make sense of the world in which we live.

It is significant that we have gone one full chapter without even mentioning the Jews, or God for that matter.

Is this not where we find ourselves so often?

We read about God's powerful workings in the Bible. We want to have him do similar things in our own lives. Instead, life just goes on.

Wars are fought.
Kingdoms rise and fall.
Where is God?
Where is the growth of the Church?

We often cannot see.

And yet, you already know the story of Esther. All that is happening so far is the hand of God setting up for his work of reversing the fortunes of his people.

We have an opening for the position of Queen. And we already know who it is that God has chosen for this role.

How do you live your life?

Do you live each day believing that God's hand of providence is actively working to carry out his will for your life?

Do you believe that all things work to the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose?

Do you believe that there is no such thing as a truly random event? That God controls even the most insignificant of events?

In this story, God will use the very human actions of a pagan king and queen to bring about his will for his people.

They are not pictured as particularly righteous or rebellious. It really does not matter. They are not consciously making decisions for or against God's plan at this point. They are simply acting according to their nature. And God is wonderfully working out his plan, even if we cannot see the end of that plan.

Our response is to be one of trust.
And from that trust is to come joy.

When the Jews celebrate the feast of Purim each year, it is the most joyous feast of their whole year. It is similar to our day of Christmas.

Where does their joy come from?

It comes from the belief that no matter how hard it gets, God is in control and is working to reverse whatever struggles they are now experiencing. I find it sad that they cling to this joy while denying the author of Joy himself - Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Do you have this joy in your life?

If you are in Christ... there is a reversal coming.

Live with a true joy knowing that your God is working to redeem a people for himself in ordinary ways.

Amen.