

Sermon 8: Esther 6: The Surprising Ways of God's Providence

OUTLINE

Providence over the insignificant
Providence over the sinful

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to God's providence, Christians are often guilty of what I call 'a headline mentality'. God's plan is on track depending on what the headlines reveal. If the headlines are full of bad things, then I must question God because He seems weak and I am full of anxiety and worry; if the headlines are full of success stories and things going well, then I can relax and talk about God's goodness because the evidence is before my eyes. We often walk by sight and not by faith; we are often at the mercy of those who write the headlines to get our attention. This headline mentality extends not only to the literal headlines of our favorite news carrier, but the bold headlines of our lives. If good things are happening God is good, things are going according to plan and I am content; if bad things are happening God is doubted, and I am full of anxiety. In this chapter of Esther and our study of the providence of God we come across the surprising ways in which God's providence works, the ways that a headline mentality will miss and forget about. We are consumed with the big things but God works in the insignificant as well. We are become discouraged when evil prospers but here we see how God allows evil to dig its own grave by letting it be itself.

The tension has been getting thicker and thicker. Haman has made a way to twist the king's arm to establish a law that has exposed God's people to genocide in less than a year. This has brought Mordecai, and Esther and the people of God to their senses, and they have sought the Lord with repentance and prayer. What will God do? Esther seems to be the only one in a position to do anything but she will have to risk her life to ask for the impossible; will she do it, will the king listen. We have seen her build up her nerve to enter into the presence of the king at the risk of her own life. We have seen her taking a slow and steady approach to asking the king for the lives of her people. And just before the feast where she is going to ask for her request an unforeseen development, something unknown to her takes place. As Haman was leaving the first feast that Esther put on, Haman just happened to encounter Mordecai, who just happened not to bow. Haman went home and he just happened to decide to take advice to make a gallows and seek the king's favor to put Mordecai to death *before* the feast where Esther would ask for their lives. Just when things looked like they were going well and moving forward according to plan, they all seemed to be going backwards. Have you ever felt like things were finally going your way only to be blindsided with another setback? Let us see how God works.

Providence over the insignificant

V1, 'On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king.' How does God change the world? He gives someone insomnia for a night. We don't see it in our own lives because it only becomes apparent through hindsight, but we can see here how God uses the insignificant and the mundane to bring his will to pass. A good example is the famous poem about a horse shoe nail:

‘For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
 For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
 For want of a horse the rider was lost.
 For want of a rider the message was lost.
 For want of a message the battle was lost.
 For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
 And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.’

God works through the mundane and so called coincidences of our lives. Esther is a book full of these little things happening to bring God’s will to pass.

‘Here are some of those “coincidences” or “stuff” Dever says “just seems to happen” in Esther:

- Esther just *happens* to be Jewish, and she just *happens* to be beautiful.
- Esther just *happens* to be favored by the king.
- Mordecai just *happens* to overhear the plot against the king’s life.
- A report of this just *happens* to be written in the king’s chronicles.
- Haman just *happens* to notice that Mordecai does not kneel down before him, and he just *happens* to find out that Mordecai is a Jew.
- When Haman plots his revenge, the dice just *happen* to indicate that the date for exacting revenge is put off for almost a year! (What does Prov 16:33 say? “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”)
- Esther just *happens* to get the king’s approval to speak, but then she *happens* to put off her request for another day.
- Her deferral just *happens* to send Haman out by Mordecai one more time, ...
- ... which just *happens* to cause him to recount it to his friends.
- They, in turn, just *happen* to encourage him to build a scaffold immediately!
- So Haman just *happens* to be excited to approach the king early the next morning.
- It just so *happens* that the previous night, the mighty king could not command a moment’s sleep, ...
- ... and he just *happened* to have had a book brought to him that recounted Mordecai’s deed.
- He then *happened* to ask whether Mordecai had been rewarded, to which his attendants *happened* to know the answer. Simply consider for a moment the fact that Mordecai *happened* not to have been rewarded for having saved the king’s life. How unusual this must have been! Someone who saved the king’s life never rewarded? I wonder if Mordecai ever chafed under that: “Doesn’t he realize what I did for him?” Well, it all just *happened*.
- Haman *happens* to approach the king just when the king is wondering how Mordecai should be honored.
- Later on the king *happens* to return to the queen just when Haman *happens* to be pleading with Esther in a way that can be misconstrued.
- The gallows Haman built for Mordecai just *happens* to be ready when King Xerxes wants to hang Haman (Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 455–56; emphasis original)¹

The point for us is knowing that there are no accidents in our lives, no part that is not planned, no part that is an area of chaos where God is not ruling, His sovereignty extends to the little things. This helps with regret and the ‘if only’ moments; this helps with being content when the small stuff keeps coming apart;

1 Landon Dowden, [Exalting Jesus in Esther](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2019).

this helps when the headlines are bad news and everything looks like it is going wrong. A large ship is turned with a small rudder and God is in control of the little things.

V2-3, 'And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ³ And the king said, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's young men who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." 5 years, that is how long it has been since Mordecai saved the king's life. Mordecai has probably moved on and forgotten the fact that he has not been rewarded. Mordecai has had to pick himself up out of bed and go to work everyday without receiving due recognition. The king may not see, but God sees. We have a reminder here that our good deeds are seen by God, that we live to do the right thing, to please him and not man. Mordecai is a model of doing the right thing without gaining recognition. Now the Persians were actually quite good at recognizing another's good deeds. In fact it is a small miracle that Mordecai has been so overlooked. A man once saved the king's brother's life and he was awarded Cilicia to govern, a whole area. Once again we see God using the little things. It just so happened that the king needed some boring bedtime reading, it just so happened to be the book of records, and it just so happened that he was paying attention at the time of Mordecai's deeds were being spoken.

V4-5, 'And the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. ⁵ And the king's young men told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." Meanwhile...and here you need to imagine the camera picking up the story line of our villain. You can see it in your mind's eye: while the king is in his pajamas, being read to in bed in the early hours of the morning, Haman unable to sleep anymore gets up early to get his own exciting day started. Leaving his house while everyone was still in bed, he put on his best robes and made preparations to make a favorable impression on the king. Unlike Esther he does not risk his life to impose upon the king, he goes in early to make sure he is first in line as soon as the king is ready to conduct business. And it seems that just as he arrives, instead of having to wait around for a few hours, the king wants to see him immediately. You can imagine it. Haman is humming to himself 'Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay! My, oh my, what a wonderful day. Plenty of sunshine headin' my way, Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay!' Everything in his universe is going well, all his plans are on track. Compare the external appearance of Mordecai's life to Haman's; Esther well laid plans to Haman's, whose plans seem like they are going to succeed? Does it appear that evil will prosper and have the last word?

Providence over the sinful

It sounds counterintuitive to say that God overcomes sin by letting sin be sin, but this is what we will see. You have heard of digging your own grave; or falling on your own sword, these describe well the way in which God often allows sin to glorify Himself, advance His plans, benefit His people and judge His enemies. Unbeknown to Esther Haman had built a gallows and was orchestrating a morning execution before the feast that will rescue Mordecai and the Jews. Well here we see the tables turned, unbeknown to Haman, the king has not slept and an oversight of rewarding Mordecai is the first item on his agenda. V6, 'So

Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" The first way in which we see God's sovereignty over sin is the fact that He is in control of the timing of the situations of our lives. This preemptive question by the king because of a sleepless night is all it takes to overturn a bloodfeud and a premeditated murder. The second way we see God's sovereignty over sin is the way in which Haman's own sin of pride blinds him. He has come with a plan to kill Mordecai but he will become the unwitting tool to glorify him. Haman is led by the nose, but it is all through him freely exercising his massive ego, and deceiving himself. I cannot help but think of Satan. It was his desire to rule Christ, to kill Christ, to disrupt God's plan of salvation by removing the Son of God. But this is the way God works. In humiliating Christ on a cross, hanging him on a tree as one cursed by God, He became our substitute dying for our sins. In killing Christ hoping to overcome God's plan with death he drove the last nail into the coffin of death itself, as death died in the death and resurrection of Christ. In crushing the Seed of the Woman in death he thought he would secure his victory over the prophecy that foresaw his final defeat and in doing so killed himself. Satan and Haman were freely choosing all the sinful desires of their own hearts, seeking to bring about destruction, and in the process became unwitting tools of God and brought about their own destruction. There is a delicious justice here where it is not merely a case of an eye for an eye, but in the very act of the wicked one poking out an eye, they poke out their own eye. We see demonstrated that God's permissive allowing of sin is not an act of weakness or indifference but a judicial act.

V7-10, 'And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, ⁸let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. ⁹And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.' Maybe you have already decided how you would spend a million dollars if it suddenly fell into your lap, well Haman as a ready wish list for the question what should the king do for the man he delights in. Royal robes, which in the ancient world would be thought to hold magic; the royal horse, the royal crown and publicly paraded down the street. This would be like driving in the queen's carriage at the changing of the guard; or a ride in Air Force 1 and driven in the presidential limo and given breakfast at the Whitehouse. We see the folly of sin put on display here, sin is an endless hunger in what it wants as it seeks to satisfy its desires. It has a long list of desires that are ridiculously selfish and unreasonable. So many live by the rule of just taking and having whatever you want. Do not deny yourself. Haman is living his best life now and wants to take as much as he can to gratify his heart's desire to be honored. It is this pride which has led him to feel insulted that someone would not bow to him; it is this pride that led him to murder a whole race; it is this pride that led him to build a gallows; it is this pride that will lead him to humiliate himself. But this is us, maybe our sin preference is different but we have a wish list to gratify the sins of our hearts; we take revenge on those who attack what is precious to us. Are you on a path of self-destruction as you are looking to sin to satisfy your requests?

The punch line comes and the joke is on Haman, v10-11, 'Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have

mentioned.” ¹¹ So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” He is shattered by this turn of events that he runs from his workplace, and the feast he is supposed to be at to cry at home. And there his wife puts things into perspective for him, v12-13, ‘Then Mordecai returned to the king’s gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. ¹³ And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.”

We began with the feeling that Haman’s plan was irresistible, that he had the inside line to the reigns of power, that his timing was going to disrupt the plan of Esther and Mordecai, but then God’s invisible hand is shown and we see a turning of the tables, and in such a way that makes sin its own punishment. V14 has a sense of the inexorable plan of God that Haman is now caught up in, the illusion of control has fallen and the last actions that will lead to Haman being completely overcome are set in motion, ‘While they were yet talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.’ Like us in sin Haman has no idea how bad it is and he is soon going to learn how serious the trouble is that his sin has put him in.

What do we learn from this chapter. We learn that the best plans can fail but God’s plan cannot. Esther and Mordecai had a plan, but it seems ready to be overcome; Haman had a plan and it was overturned. God is the invisible hand that is driving history and whose plan will come to pass.

We learn to walk by faith and not by sight, to trust that God is in the little things, and not let the big things that go wrong unsettle us. We learn that God’s timing is perfect.

We learn to be faithful even if we do not receive recognition.

We learn that sin will not have the last word but that God will have the last word.

We learn that God’s permissive will allows sin enough rope to hang itself with.

We see again the deceiving nature of sin and how we pander to its endless hunger with a long list of requests we hope it will fulfil.

There are also some suggested hints towards Christ through Mordecai in this section. We see that Haman’s knee was forced to bow and his tongue was forced to confess the honor of Mordecai. We know that one day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord. The question is not whether Christ will be Lord but whether we will be those who believe in Christ and bow willingly, or like Haman consumed and enslaved to our sins that day will be a rude awakening where we will have to acknowledge Christ unwillingly just before we will be judged by Him. the other suggestion of Christ is in the line, ‘the man whom the king delights to honor.’ Christ became a man, He obeyed the law on our behalf, the pleasure of the Father is in Him, He receives the fullness of God’s rewards and shares those rewards with us.