

The Book of Esther and the Providence of God

By Jay Wegter

v.1 – Mordecai realized that he had prompted this genocidal retaliation by Haman. Mordecai reacts to the edict when he learns what Haman was plotting—he expresses his grief and humiliation in typical oriental fashion. He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and sprinkled ashes on himself. Then he walked about the city wailing loudly. Are we uptight by way of contrast? (What would happen if: Ezekiel 39:6; Revelation 18:15-19?)

vv.2-3 – Mordecai was not permitted within the king's gate while wearing sackcloth. A person in mourning was considered ceremonially unclean. It's likely he was attempting to attract Esther's attention. Not only was Mordecai in mourning, but Jews in every province where the edict was announced were fasting, weeping and wailing. Many also lay down on sackcloth and ashes.

vv.4-5 – Some of Esther's maids and eunuchs must have seen Mordecai at the king's gate, so they reported his behavior to Queen Esther. Esther was distressed to learn of Mordecai's sorrow. She sent clothes for him to wear in place of the sackcloth likely so he could enter the palace; but he refused to accept them. This probably indicated to Esther that his actions were not caused by personal sorrow, but by a public calamity. Esther sent Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who had been assigned to attend her to find what was troubling Mordecai. If Mordecai had the proper clothing, he could then enter the king's gate and talk with Esther directly. Hathach was a trusted eunuch who knew of Esther's background.

vv.6-7 – When Hathach met up with Mordecai, he explained to the eunuch why he was in mourning. He told Hathach how much money Haman had agreed to pay into the royal treasury for the privilege of destroying the Jews. Mordecai's specific knowledge of the edict gives us further evidence of his prominent position in Persia.

v.8 – Mordecai had a copy of the edict for the Jews annihilation that was being circulated in Susa. He asked the eunuch to give it to Esther and explain it to her. He told Hathach to urge Esther to go to the king to plead for mercy for the Jews. Mordecai's request would require that the queen reveal her Jewish identity.

vv. 9-11 – Once Esther got the message, she instructed Hathach to return to Mordecai to remind him that no one could approach the king in the inner court

without a royal summons upon penalty of death. Only when the king extended his golden scepter would an uninvited person receive mercy. The law that no one could approach without a summons was a practice designed to protect the king's life from would be assassins. Since Esther had not been summoned by the king for a month, she did not know if he would forgive her if she approached him without a royal summons. She may have had in the back of her mind that she had lost the king's favor.

vv. 12-14 – Mordecai responded by telling Esther—don't think you will escape Haman's edict against the Jews because you are in the king's house. If she remains silent, deliverance of the Jews would come from another source. But, if she did not overcome her fear and cowardice, she and her father's family would perish. Not even royal status could protect her from the king's edict. Then Mordecai asked the question that has become the classic support of the doctrine of providence as a key to the understanding of the book of Esther. "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" Mordecai saw that her exaltation as queen, was God's way of obtaining a Savior for His people. He likely remembered the Lord's promise to Abraham, and exhibited a healthy faith in God's sovereign power to preserve His people.

vv. 15-16 – Esther sent a reply to Mordecai affirming her willingness to risk her life on behalf of her people. She asked him to assemble all the Jews who were in Susa to fast for her three days and nights. Afterward, she would go into the king even though to do so was contrary to law. In a final expression of courage and willing submission she said, "If I perish I perish." Esther's heroic willingness to die for the sake of her fellow Jews is commendable.

Def. of God's Providence: God's works of providence are the acts of His most holy, wise, and powerful government of His creatures and their actions. There is no such thing as blind fate. Even the way the dice fall is under the providence of God. "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Prov 16:33).

The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all" (Ps 103:19).

"I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom *endures* from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and

no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Dan 4:34-35).

When God chose to save the peoples of the Mediterranean Basin from death by famine, He gave **two dreams** to a young shepherd boy named Joseph (Gen 37). When young Joseph relayed those dreams to his brothers and his parents, it didn’t go well. Why? There was dad’s favoritism, the many-colored coat, and the assignment to Joseph to report to dad about his brothers. So, after Joseph told his two dreams, his brothers did not say, “Wow, that’s awesome, next time you have another dream about us bowing down to you, be sure to share it with us right away!” “We always knew you were special!”

In the providence of God, those two little dreams touched off a **‘perfect storm’ of events** so to speak; in terms of the brothers’ jealous hatred, the dream *show and tell* was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The brothers sold Joseph as a slave to traders who in turn sold him to the Egyptians.

Ultimately near the peak of the famine, when his brothers are in Egypt for grain—long lost Joseph reveals that he has been made vice-regent of the kingdom. Then the whole family of Jacob (Israel) moves to Egypt.

Thereafter, the Jewish nation lived in Egypt 430 years prior to the Exodus, living a majority of that period as slaves. Now a few centuries after Joseph’s passing, **God placed a covert operative** right in the courts of Pharaoh—baby Moses. And how did Moses get there? **By what means?** His parents decided to float their baby down the Nile River in a water-proof basket. But an Egyptian princess had mercy on the crying baby boy—he was raised as royalty. And, 80 years after Pharaoh’s daughter picked up that basket and adopted the baby, Moses was back in Egypt as God’s Prophet, performing the miracles through which God would bring deliverance to His Hebrew people.

When I was **a junior high school kid in Sunday School** I was taught that the Jews were in Egypt for 400 + years. I thought, “I don’t wish to be disrespectful, but that seems a little slow to me. That is several generations; centuries of praying before deliverance came.” Was God accomplishing anything while the Jews were slaves, building storage cities and being abused by the whips of their Egyptian taskmasters? Well the Lord often does not explain a great deal of what He does by way of His providence (Dan 4:35), but at times He gives us great insights into the wisdom of His dealings. One example is in Deuteronomy chapter 8 where He tells us why the children of Israel had to eat manna for 40 years (*not by bread alone but every word. . .*).

So back to the question, “**Did any discernable good come from those centuries of slavery?**” Yes! If the sheep-herding children of Israel were ever to build a civilization, a technically advanced nation, they would need more than shepherd’s staffs, fold-up tents, and the knowledge of animal husbandry. In Egypt (yes, an idolatrous nation) the Jews learned stone masonry, metalsmithing, architecture, engineering, gemology, trade, economics, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, embalming, shipbuilding, and civil engineering. These skills became vital in building their nation after the conquest of Canaan.

In addition, **the reputation God accomplished for Himself** through the 10 plagues in/by mortifying—utterly embarrassing the Egyptian pantheon of gods—**that fame** preceded the Jews to Canaan—even setting things in motion for their victory over the Canaanites. And, that final indignity suffered by the Egyptians—the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea. That act by the God of the Israelites kind of blunted the Egyptian’s desire to wipe out the Jews once the Hebrews had settled the land of milk and honey.

There is no doubt more that God does not tell us behind His purposes for the 430 years in Egypt. But, I can think of at least one more: **the learning that Moses** had accrued in Egypt also was a factor in his leadership, his speaking ability, and his training as a man of letters. Think of the mastery of composition, research, compiling, and editing that must have been involved in his writing of the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the OT)—the Torah is the very foundation of the Jewish culture still with us today. Not to mention Moses’s flawless work as foreman in the construction of the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant (Heb 3:1-5; 8:5—**God warned**).

The Bible does not just give us stories, precepts and divine dealings—**it gives us God Himself**. For the Word of God is mighty—it creates faith in God—it speaks to faith and sustains faith. We cannot know God unless we know something of His works, ways, wonders, and will as revealed in His infallible self-revelation, the Holy Scriptures. **History is His Story**—because His works of providence are His rule over all things.

So much of God’s providential works are **not by direct ‘first class miracles’**. A first class, or first order miracle is supernatural and cannot be explained by natural law. First order miracles would be the burning bush, the raising of Lazarus, the feeding of the 5000, 40 years of manna, fire from heaven consuming the sacrifice on Mt. Carmel, the translation of Elijah to heaven in a fiery whirlwind and chariot, the survival of Daniel’s friends in the furnace, etc. These miracles are completely independent of natural law—they clearly involve

supernaturalism.

Therefore, the incredible thing about divine providence is that **God accomplishes so much through secondary causes**, what theologians and philosophers refer to as the **use of means** (through the exercise of human will—so that things fall out, or occur through moral cause and effect). In other words, how did God get **Joseph to Egypt**? Not by an immediate miracle, but by the use of **means**, what were those means? The murderous jealousy of Joseph's brothers. It got him there just as surely as if God has transported him there by a miracle.

So the **study of providence (Ps 78)** in giving us the knowledge of God—has a very practical result: fathers are to communicate to their families, the praises of God, His strength and wondrous works. “For He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers that they should teach them to their children, that the generation to come might know, *even the children yet to be born* that they may arise and tell *them* to their children, **that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God**, but keep His commandments, and not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God” (Ps 78:5-8).

The wonder of God's providence is that the **freeness of man's will** in no way limits the absolute sovereignty of the divine will. Take the **actions of Pharaoh**, in resisting God and Moses; the Egyptian king changed his mind after almost every plague, and then would reverse his decision (no, you can't go!)—which called for the next plague—finally he sent his own army into the Red Sea. In all of these situations, it was his will being exercised, he never felt an external power tampering with his will; he was doing exactly what he wanted to do. Yet, Scripture says that God raised up a powerful, arrogant man like Pharaoh for a precise purpose:

“So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO **DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU**, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires” (Rom 9:16-18). (The same **means** that softens one person may be the occasion for a person to harden himself—the same sun above that hardens clay, softens wax.)

“The king's heart is *like channels of water* in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Prov 21:1). What a testament to God's infinite wisdom and power—He is sovereign even over the sinful acts of men without in

any way whatsoever being a partner to their evil. He is light, there is no darkness in Him. And the transgressions committed by people are their acts alone. The Word of God teaches the **moral free agency** of human beings (Edwards example).

How serious it is to carry a **sin nature**. The gospel brings conviction of what we are **by nature**—the believing sinner cries to God for grace through Christ. Consider how often in history the righteous have been persecuted, even martyred because of the jealousy and envy on the part of unbelievers. It started with **Cain murdering Able**: Speaking of this envy, “For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, *who* was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because **his deeds were evil**, and his brother’s were righteous” (1 Jn 3:11-12).

Bear with my **edgy illustration**: if a toddler were told no cookies and ice cream until you eat your vegetables. And, suppose that child threw a tantrum—and if given the choice between eating the vegetables OR, having his ice cream immediately if he pushed a button that would kill 10 million people—well you get my point. All this to say that Haman’s infantile behavior in ordering the Jewish genocide becomes the epitome or full expression of full blown covetousness and hatred. (EX. *Deicide* and man’s hatred of the divine nature—would plunge a knife into the heart of God if he could do so. The murder of Jesus is proof.)

God’s providence **overrules so much evil in the world**. “And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains *will do so* until he is taken out of the way” (2 Thess 2:7). Yet, much **wickedness is allowed to run a limited course**—but at the end of the age it will be rounded up, publicly condemned, and hung on the ‘gallows of hell’ forever.

There are many promises in Scripture concerning divine protection for God’s chosen people: “Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness, to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive in famine” (Ps 33:18-19). Yet, there is no guarantee that believers will not be put in a situation in which they will **suffer and die for their faith** (note the martyrdom of the Apostles) (See Romans 8:35-37).

Scripture contains accounts of both divine **deliverances** as well as **martyrdom** and **persecution** of the faithful. Church history is filled with both deliverances and untold suffering. (**Note**: the small fish proliferating in a town in France. The hen landing in the attic. Martin Luther and ‘Junker George’. The spider spinning a web at the opening of a cave.)

Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that **God’s ways are not our ways**. And the difference

between His ways and ours is not measured by degree. No, as high as the heavens are above the earth are His ways different than ours. Now if we are to please God by trust and obedience, we need to know something about His ways. For Moses indicates that knowing God's ways was key in pleasing God and in enjoying His favor. "Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me **know Your ways that I may know You**, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people" (Ex 33:13).

What are some examples of how **God's ways differ from ours**? 1) He brings joy through suffering. 2) He increases hope through disappointment. 3) He strengthens faith through delays. 4) He exalts by humbling. 5) He brings deliverances through opposition. 6) He makes fruitful through close pruning. 7) He makes the plans of the wicked the means of their destruction (He specializes in turning the tables on His adversaries. That is the theme running through the book of Esther).

Haman carefully **inspected the gallows being built**. He wanted them to be much higher than normal. He wanted the corpse of the strangled victim to be on display for all to see—to make a statement: "Feast your eyes on this grisly sight; here is what happens to the man who opposes me and my honor." No doubt during the construction of the gallows, Haman attended to the appearance, the efficiency, and the location of the gallows. But, he never dreamed that he was building the device for his own execution. God overrules!

Psalms 22 suggests that at Christ's passion, the devil and his demons would ghoulishly leer at Christ at the base of His cross during His crucifixion. But God turned the tables; the death of Christ de-fanged the devil, it robbed him of his chief weapon (Col 2:13-15; Heb 2:14-15).

God's providential dealings with us, His people are **so often a mystery to us**. There are times when our circumstances appear to **contradict the promises of God**. In those times our faith can be severely tested. But, remember our study last year in 1 Peter 1:6-7? That God **tests the faith** of His people to refine, strengthen, prove and present their faith as more valuable than gold which is perishable? Trials, setbacks, humblings, infirmities, delays, rejections, disappointments—all appear to **conspire** against us at times. We can wonder, "Is God for me?"

But when we **trust God and obey Him** during those occasions (walking by faith and not by sight) the result is we grow in our love and knowledge of God. It is convicting for me to teach this necessity of unconditional trust, because on many occasions when the wheels appeared to be coming off of my life, I have let **my fears get the best of me**. "Lord, how is this circumstance a demonstration of your

love and goodness?”

The saint is assured that God’s providential dealings are in **no way arbitrary** nor can they be reduced to bare/raw cause and effect. The Lord is working His plan for His people. And we are to trust Him where we cannot trace Him. (EX. **Corrie Ten Boom** story at PBC, and the needlepoint crown.)

On the last day it will be revealed to our amazement—that **countless providential acts of God** turned out for the betterment, care, and sanctification of His people. **Romans 8:28** will be opened up to us in all its splendor; we will get a glimpse of God’s perfections manifested in His providence. How can our study and use of the book of **Esther assist and strengthen our walk** with the Lord? Conclusion: words to “This is my Father’s World.”

This is my Father’s world:
Oh, let me ne’er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world,
The battle is not done:
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and Heav’n be one.

Life has **losses, crosses, devastations, bereavements**. Erma Bombeck once said, “Life is like an onion, you peel another layer and cry.” God sure knows what He is doing when He commands us to love Him with our whole being. Trust and love for our God of providence is *fear reducing, courage inducing, love engendering*. You are redeemed, you are Mine, you are My people, I am your God, I love you, don’t go back to Egypt.

God **controls the world** by primarily by means. **1)** That should guard us from the misery associated with complaining and anxiety. **2)** That should protect us from a paralyzing fatalism; “What difference does it make?” No, we are to use the means ordained by God in order to run well. **3)** It will also guard you from presumption. Those who presume assume that they will see a desired outcome and result apart from the use of means. “Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming” (1 Jn 2:28).

God is **not limited by means**. He created the cosmos out of nothing. The Son of God entered human history through the womb a virgin. God is free to work

against means. But means are His normal way of working. His sovereignty over our choices does not make us determined automatons. No, just the opposite, His sovereignty gives incredible weight to our choices so that their significance is both temporal and eternal. God in Christ is **forming a new humanity** and the means by which He is doing it is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the great distinction between people. For Scripture says: “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned” (Mk 16:16).