

Esther: Hidden, Silent Providence

Genesis 50:20; Esther 1:1-22; Hebrews 1:3; Romans 8:28; Acts 2:23; Acts 14:16; HC 27 & 28

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Congregation of Christ: Did you know that the Book of Esther was not well-received in the first 700 years of the church, with no commentaries written on it? That Martin Luther himself wished that the book did not come into our hands? That John Calvin did not write a commentary, or even preached a single sermon from this book? And today, I wonder how many pastors would labor to preach a series on this whole book. Why? Because this short book is full of doctrinal and theological gems waiting to be mined by diligent pastors and teachers. I praise God that Pastor Lance chose this book for a sermon series during these next several Sundays.

Esther is the subject of many sermons to encourage women, “Dare to be an Esther.” But this is a big mistake. For one, preaching is not telling a story with a moral lesson, like Aesop’s fables. If this is true, then we can just preach from the examples of great moral leaders of our time, like Mahatma Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, or Mother Theresa. Second, was Esther herself really a good example for women? Most sermons you will hear about her will trumpet her “godly” character, her “faith,” and her courage. During the course of this series, Pastor Lance will expound whether these characterizations are real or not so real.

But before we consider any book of the Bible, we must first take a look at its author, main theme, purpose, and historical background.

Its author is unknown. Some have suggested a high Persian government official, even Mordecai as the writer. It was probably written a few years after the reign of Ahasuerus, 486–464 B.C. The book is the story of how Esther, a Jewish girl, became Queen of Persia and saved her people from a plot to destroy them. Mordecai, her cousin and guardian, was her adviser. It seems that the writer’s purpose was to explain the origins of a special Jewish festival called Purim, which is still celebrated by Jews today.

The events in Esther obviously happened during the reign of King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes I, in 486-464 B.C. Recall that the Babylonians conquered Israel, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and sent most of the Jews to Babylon as slaves in 586 B.C. But 47 years later, in 539 B.C., King Cyrus of Persia defeated King Nabodinus of Babylon, so the Jews then came under the Persians. The fall of Babylon to the Medo-Persians are found in the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, particularly Isaiah 13:17-19. In Daniel 5, King Belshazzar, the son whom Nabodinus appointed as co-ruler, was defeated by the Medo-Persians while he held the iconic “handwriting on the wall” feast.

In 538 B.C., a year after Cyrus conquered Babylon, he issued a decree freeing the Jewish exiles to return to Canaan (Ezra 1:1-4). In Isaiah’s prophecy, Cyrus is even called by God, “my shepherd” who would rebuild the Jerusalem temple (Isa 44:28). So, 50,000 of the exiles returned to Canaan, but 60-70 years later, Esther and Mordecai were still living in Susa, the capital of Persia. Most of the Jews continued living in the Persian empire for generations.

It is well-known that there is no mention of God or any of the laws of God in the book. This is why it was unpopular in the early church and with Luther and Calvin. What then should we make of this book? The Jews had always considered it as part of the Old Testament, but should it be considered even a part of the Bible? What benefits can we Christians gain from it?

In addition to the Purim festival, the other main theme of this book is the providence of God. While God is not mentioned, he was working silently behind the scenes. The Book of Esther has so much to teach about God's providence, a doctrine most beneficial to Christians.

Preserving God's People . . .

What then do we mean by "providence"? In early American history, "providence" is a very important word. The capital of the state of Rhode Island is the city of Providence. Many other cities, hospitals, universities, and even some warships were named "Providence." Christians often referred to God as "Providence." American pastors and theologians, even Presidents, referred to God's "providence" in the history of mankind.

The word providence comes from a compound Latin word *providentia*: *pro*, a prefix which means "before"; and *videre*, from which we get the English word *video*, which means "to see." So "providence" literally means "to see beforehand." Divine "providence" therefore means that God sees beforehand and controls the affairs of men and nations from eternity past. But "providence" has also come to mean that God is the one who "provides." This is also a Biblical word, when Abraham said in Genesis 22:8, "*God will provide*" a sacrificial lamb.

God sees beforehand because he had decreed all that will happen from beginning to end. How then does God fulfill his decrees from eternity? He is in control of every minute detail of his creation, both man and events. He preserves his creation by providing for it and upholding it with his grace, both common and saving grace. This is one of the aspects of divine providence.

Where is *divine preservation* found in the Book of Esther? In terms of common grace, God provided peace and prosperity to the godless, pagan Persians who ruled over the Jewish exiles. King Xerxes had so much wealth and power that he gave a feast to all his officials and army for six months! Wine and food were served in vessels of gold, silver and other precious metals. Wine flowed like a river. Both the righteous and the evil are beneficiaries of God's good providence. That is why Hebrews 1:3 says, "*he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*"

Because of this prosperity, the Jews also enjoyed some measure of freedom and prosperity. This is the reason why only 50,000 exiles returned to Canaan (Ezra 2:64), while the rest of the hundreds of thousands, including Mordecai and Esther, remained. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God instructed the Jews in exile,

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters . . . But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jer 29:5-7).

What if there was no Queen Esther? There would be no Jews left in the Persian Empire, because King Xerxes would have ordered a total genocide of Jews. And if there were no more Jews left, there would be no Jesus. And if there was no Jesus, there would be no salvation for even a single human being. That is how vital the story of Esther is to us Christians. Esther was one of God's instruments in preserving his people.

This is the doctrine of divine preservation, that God *"upholds heaven and earth with all its creatures"* (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 27). To us Christians, this preservation includes not only preservation in terms of our physical needs, but more importantly, preservation of our souls, our faith, to the end of our lives on earth.

... By Cooperating with Sinners,

The second aspect of God's providence is that of "concurrency." This is a deep, theological word, but with a simple meaning. Louis Berkhof has a good definition: "the co-operation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do." This means that every action of every human being and every event in human history do not happen by chance or randomly, but God sovereignly governs them for his all his purposes.

Many examples of this doctrine are easily seen in Scripture. Joseph's brothers sold him to slavery in Egypt because of jealousy, but God used this evil action to save his people, Jacob's family from starving to death. So Joseph told his brothers years later after he had become Egypt's Prime Minister, *"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today"* (Gen 50:20). Another book about a Midianite woman named Ruth repeats the phrase, *"it just so happened"* about many events. But these events were not mere "coincidences." They were under the sovereign design and decree of God in order that Ruth and Boaz will produce King David as one of their descendants, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, the wicked Pilate, Herod, and the leaders of the Jews all conspired to crucify our Lord Jesus Christ. But the apostle Peter said of this evil in Acts 2:23, *"this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."* Therefore, divine cooperation with sinful people does not absolve them of their guilt, as the Jews were guilty of the murder of Christ. Even more, it cannot indict God with causing sin (Jas 1:13). But man's sinful acts cannot be independent of God's sovereign will. Man's acts are 100 percent his own, and God's acts are also 100 percent his own.

In the Book of Esther, King Xerxes displayed pompous pride and filthy extravagance in staging his six-month feast. His uncontrolled pride was pricked when Queen Vashti refused to display her beauty before drunken, wild men. And the wise men of Persia flattered the king's pride and power to keep their favored position in the king's court. God used all of these wicked people to accomplish his goal of making Esther the Queen of Persia to save his people from being exterminated by the Persians.

Today, our brother Lawrence made a public profession of faith before the congregation. How did he find our church? It was through Facebook, a social media full of posts and pictures that reject, dishonor, and ridicule our God and his Word. But God has used the same Facebook to bring Lawrence and many others to worship, study and fellowship with us.

... And Governing Creation

Finally, divine providence also includes God's sovereign government over the whole universe. He is its only rightful King, because he is its Creator. But God is not only sovereign over all creation; he is also sovereign over time, from eternity to eternity. This means that since he does not change, it is a mistake to think that God has changed from the mighty, holy God of the Old Testament to the gracious and merciful God of the New. No, God's "*consuming fire*" in Deuteronomy 4:24 is the same "*consuming fire*" in Hebrews 12:29. And as God was merciful and gracious with Israel (Psa 145:8), so is he merciful and gracious to the church (Heb 4:16).

Our Heidelberg Catechism defines divine government as God governing all creatures, "that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand." Note "not by chance." If there's any such happening as "chance," "luck," or "coincidence," God is not God. As R. C. Sproul used to say, "If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God's sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled."

Man is arrogant and foolish in supposing that man's irresponsible actions can change the worldwide climate, or that he is able to prevent "global warming." But Jeremiah 5:24 says that it is only God "*who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest.*" In Deuteronomy 28, the LORD promised Israel the blessing of rain and plentiful harvest for obedience. But he also warned them of drought, famine, hunger, pestilence, disease, defeat and exile if they disobeyed his commandments. Who can do these things except the Sovereign LORD of the universe? He is the only cause of "climate change."

This is why Jeremiah 14:22 asks, "*Are there any among the false gods of the nations that can bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers?*" So all these proud and foolish climate change idolaters who worship creature and creation should take note of God's ridicule in Zechariah 10:2 of those who think they can send down rain from heaven, "*For the household gods utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies; they tell false dreams and give empty consolation.*"

In the Book of Esther, who gave Xerxes a great army to defeat the Babylonians? Who swayed him to ask Queen Vashti to maybe dance in flimsy clothes before the king's wild, drunken men? Who made Vashti refuse the king's order, on pain of death? Who gave the plan to the king's wise men to dethrone Vashti? Who else but the Sovereign Lord of the Universe, so he could accomplish his purpose of saving the Jews in the whole empire from sure destruction!

Proverbs 21:1 says, *“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”* Evidence of this is in Ezra 1:1, where *“the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia”* to allow the exiles to return to Canaan and rebuild the cities and the temple.

Beloved people of God, the doctrine of divine providence gives all the glory to God for the salvation he has planned from eternity past and accomplished in the fullness of time through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. May it also be a comfort to us that, *“for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”* (Rom 8:28).

All Christians affirm Romans 8:28, but when we also affirm God's providence, it is even more comforting because we know that he is in sovereign control of all things. Consider this: If God is not in absolute control of every single molecule in the universe, how will he fulfill his promises to us? Have you ever wondered how Christians are patient and even joyful through all their sorrows and sufferings? It is only because of the doctrine of providence. Why can you say with suffering Job, *“The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD”* (Job 1:21)? It is only because you know that his saving grace can give both suffering and prosperity.

May we always be comforted by what the Heidelberg Catechism says about the benefits of divine providence: that *“we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future, have good confidence in our faithful God and Father.”*