

The main theme of the book of Esther is how God worked behind the scenes to deliver his people, the Jews, from extermination. The bad guy in the story, Haman, hated the Jews and had made a decree, in the name of the king, that on such and such a date all the Jews in the empire were to be killed. The Jews were the people whom God had chosen to eventually give birth to Jesus Christ who was the one through whom salvation from sin and hell would come to the world. Haman was an evil man who wanted to see all the Jewish people killed. The story told in the book of Esther tells how God foiled that plan through Esther, a Jewish woman who had become queen and Mordecai, her older cousin. God's name is never mentioned in the story. However, the story is told in a way that makes it clear that God is working behind the scenes directing events so that his purposes for his people are accomplished.

God working in this way is called his providence. According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "God's providence is His completely, holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action." Jesus, in Matthew 10:9, teaches that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father in heaven. Ephesians 1:11 says that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will." There is no such thing as chance. God is control of everything that happens either by making it happen or by allowing it to happen. And God is so great that he is able to do so without being responsible for sin and without violating anyone's will. We are all responsible for our actions. This is a great mystery. But it is very comforting because we can know, as God's people, that God is working everything that happens for his glory and for our eternal good.

The chapter we are going to look at this morning gives us a delightful look at God directing events to bring about Haman's downfall and Mordecai's rise to prominence in the kingdom. In this chapter, God is setting things up so that when Esther does finally ask the king to deliver her people the Jews, Haman's evil will have been exposed and the king will be inclined to take the Jews' side against Haman and will order Haman to be hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

This all happens because one night the king could not sleep. This is the turning point in the story. God had been at work setting things up in the story told so far, but this seemingly insignificant event led the king to see that the Jews were no threat to him and that Haman was a wicked man for wanting to exterminate them.

So the king would not sleep. And he ordered one of his servants to get what the text calls "the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles" - and read from it for the king's entertainment - or to bore him enough to lull him to sleep. And lo and behold, the reader read the account of how Mordecai the Jew had foiled an assassination plot where the king had been the target. That story has already been told in the book of Esther - Esther 2:19-23. Mordecai had overheard a couple of the king's servants plotting to kill the king. He had told Queen Esther what he had heard, who told the king, who ordered an investigation, which found that Mordecai's intelligence was true, and the would-be assassins were hanged.

So in the part of the story that is before us now, the king is reminded of this event and asks whether Mordecai had been rewarded for coming forward and warning the king of the assassination plot. That was normal procedure. Perhaps out of gratitude, but certainly for the king's own safety. These were brutal times. Kings were regularly assassinated. It was for the king's benefit if his servants knew that if they took the risk of passing on intelligence of a plot against the king, they would be handsomely rewarded.

So in this nocturnal reading the king is reminded of a man who had taken the risk and saved the king's life without being rewarded. That was bad. The king did not want his servants to think that if they risked their lives for the king, their sacrifice would go unrewarded. A handsome reward in this kind of situation would encourage others to come forward in a similar situations.

So the king wants this fixed immediately. But this king seems incapable of making any decisions on his own and so he asks if there are any of his advisors in the house and he is told that Haman had just entered the building. Haman had come to work very early in the morning because he wanted to be first in line to see the king so that he could ask him for permission to hang Mordecai the Jew on this 75 foot high gallows. Mordecai was still refusing to bow down to Haman and Haman wanted him dead. He wanted him hung 75 feet in the air to show what happened to anyone who failed to honor him.

So the king told his servants to usher Haman into the room. And before Haman had a chance to open his mouth, the king brought his own urgent matter before Haman. The king asked Haman, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" Haman does not know that the king is thinking about Mordecai. Haman thinks that the king is thinking about honoring him. And so he answers the king based on that assumption. He gave his answer thinking that what he suggests will happen to him. And so he suggests that the man be dressed in royal robes, set on a horse that the king has ridden – a horse all decked out with a royal headdress. And he suggests further that one of the king's most noble officials should lead the horse and the man through the square of the city and proclaim, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." Haman could just imagine enjoying himself on the horse.

But he is in for the shock of his life for the king told him to find Mordecai the Jew – put the royal robes on him, set him on the royal horse and Haman himself was to lead Mordecai through the public square shouting as they went – "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." Can you imagine how Haman felt leading Mordecai through the streets on the king's horse and proclaiming as he went, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" Can you imagine his humiliation?

Verse 12 tells us that "Mordecai returned to the king's gate." The understated description suggests that Mordecai was not overly impressed with the honor bestowed on him. But Haman was devastated. We are told that "Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered." For a man who lived for his own glory this was the most humiliating thing that could possibly happen to him. And his wife and friends

understood that this was the beginning of the end for Haman. They say, "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."

These were pagan people. But somehow they sensed that Mordecai's Jewishness meant that Haman was not going to overcome him, and that the humiliation that Haman had experienced was the beginning of the end for Haman.

Now this story is a wonderful illustration of God's providence at work. It is full of what appear to be coincidences which are not coincidences at all, but rather God at work directing events to accomplish his purpose of bringing Haman down and lifting Mordecai up. Through all these apparent coincidences, God is preparing King Ahasuerus to grant Queen Esther's request later that day to save her people from Haman's decree of extermination. So it just happens that the king cannot sleep. And he just happens to have a servant read to him from "the book of memorable deeds." And the servant just happens to read the part that told of how Mordecai had foiled an assassination plot against the king. And it just happens that Mordecai had not been properly rewarded at the time. And it just happens that Haman has come to the king's court early because he was so anxious to get permission to hang Mordecai on his 75 foot gallows. And it just happens that the king asks Haman to advise him on how to honor someone whom the king desires to honor. And it just happens that Haman thinks that he is the one the king wants to honor. And so it just happens that Haman is wrong and is forced to do the very opposite of what he had planned to do to Mordecai.

This great stack of apparent coincidences are making the point that they are not coincidences at all, but rather the unfolding of a plan. All of these apparent coincidences are part of an elaborate plan. They are all directing events towards a goal. There are many, many steps to this plan. Indeed all of the events that make up the book of Esther to this point are part of the plan. All of the events that had brought Esther to be queen. The assassination plot described way back in chapter 2 and the fact that Mordecai overheard it and brought the news to the king. All of these seemingly random events were part of an elaborate and intricate plan that would eventually lead to deliverance for the Jews. Every one of those steps along the way was necessary for the plan to accomplish its goal. We are getting an insight into how God is at work in history working everything together to accomplish his overall plan for his glory and the salvation of his people and the renewal of all things.

And notice the pivotal role of something as seemingly insignificant as the king not being able to sleep. If that had not happened, the whole story would have turned out differently. That seemingly insignificant event was actually a very significant event in the unfolding of God's plan to save his people from Haman's hatred – first Mordecai and then the whole of God's people. This story shows how God is at work in everything that happens to accomplish his purposes. He is at work in this way in each of our lives. And he is at work in everything that happens so that all of history is being directed towards the goal of his glory, the salvation and spiritual growth of his people and the overcoming of evil with good.

That plan involves sin and suffering as well as deliverances. In this chapter we are seeing how God worked in these circumstances to set up the deliverance of his people. We see a proud man humiliated and a humble man honored. But the plan of God as it is unfolded in the story of Esther included the wickedness of King Ahasuerus in the manner in which he went about replacing his queen. It included the sin of Esther in taking part in that perverse contest and hiding the fact that she was a Jew. It included the hatred of Haman against the Jews and his diabolical plan to eliminate them. It works both ways. God's plan includes the bad as well as the good. If a sparrow does not fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father then certainly Haman and his plan to exterminate the Jews did not happen apart from the will of the Father.

That, of course, is troubling. It's one thing to say that all good things are part of God's plan. It's quite another to say that God's plan includes wicked things as well. But the Bible explicitly teaches that God's providence encompasses everything that happens. Ephesians 1:11 speaks of God was the one "who works all things according to the counsel of his will." The story of Joseph has an important text in this regard. Joseph's brothers sinned grievously in selling Joseph into slavery. But once God's plan for Joseph had unfolded, Joseph could say to his brothers, Genesis 50:20, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...."

But God is able to include sin and evil in his plan without that tainting him with sin and evil. The Bible insists that everything belongs to God's plan, but it also insists that God does not commit sin. The Bible insists that God is righteous and holy and untainted by any sin. Psalm 33:5 says of God, "He loves righteousness and justice...." Psalm 54:7 says of God, "[Y]ou have loved righteousness and hated wickedness."

What this means is that God is able to include sin and evil in his plan without being sinful and evil himself. We do not understand how this can be, but the Bible insists that it is so and we must accept that. The fact is that God is so much greater than we are that he is able to make sure that something evil happens while being morally unconnected to that thing. He was able to make sure that Haman tried to exterminate the Jews. Haman was responsible for that. And God was not responsible for Haman's sin. How that can be we do not know, but there is no question that God nothing happens apart from God's will and God is not the author of sin.

Our Westminster Confession of Faith has a clear statement of this biblical truth. WCF 5:4 4. "The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God manifest themselves so completely in his providence that it extends even to the first fall and all other sins of angels and men—not by a bare permission, but by a permission which has joined with it a most wise and powerful limiting, and otherwise ordering and governing of them in a varied administration, for his own holy purposes. However, the sinfulness comes from the creatures alone and not from God, who, because he is most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin."

Esther 6 gives us a wonderful glimpse into the mystery of God's providence. The way the story is told makes it clear that what is going on is not a bunch of coincidences, but God at work directing events towards the

deliverance of his people. And it helps us to see how God is at work both in the big picture of the coming of his kingdom and in each of our lives. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

This is a tremendous comfort if we are among those who love God and are called into the fellowship of his people. God is working all the events of our lives together for our good. It is a good in the light of eternity. It is a good that prioritizes holiness over ease and comfort. God working everything together for our good does not mean that we won't suffer. And yet we can go through life knowing that God is directing our lives for our spiritual and eternal good.

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches us how we can live in the light of this doctrine in answer 28. “We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing in creation will separate us from his love. For all creatures are so completely in God's hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.”

So Esther 6 tells a story which wonderfully illustrates God's providence. There is something else in this chapter that requires some attention. It is kind of funny. Not in the sense of laugh out loud funny. But funny in the sense that we enjoy what happens to Haman in the story. It's kind of funny to read about Haman thinking that the king is going to honor him only to learn that he is going to honor the man that Haman is so anxious to kill. Haman is hurrying his pompous self into the king's court to ask the king for permission to hang and humiliate Mordecai only to find out that instead he is going to have to lead Mordecai through town on the king's horse shouting as he goes, “Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” There is something satisfying about that.

A literary term to describe this is “irony.” One internet definition of irony is “a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often amusing as a result.” What happened to Haman in this story is certainly ironic. He expected to humiliate Mordecai the Jew and instead the opposite happens. Haman is humiliated and Mordecai is honored. And that is amusing and satisfying.

This reminds us of Psalm 2. Verses 1-2, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against his Anointed...” Verse 4, “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.” This is not the laughter of mirth. It is a laughter that conveys how ridiculous any opposition to the Lord is and that would include any opposition to the LORD's people. It is utterly, utterly futile. Haman was plotting against the Lord and against his people and what happens to Haman in our text passage is the LORD demonstrating the absolute, laughable futility of Haman's plot against God's people.

This is not to say that God is mean and delights in punishing his enemies. God is always willing to receive and forgive those who repent and turn to him. But those who persist in being God's enemies remain under his

wrath and judgment. And God makes sure that we his people know that the opposition of God's enemies is absolutely in vain. Job 5:8 says, "He frustrates the devices of the crafty, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end."

The ultimate expression of this principle is the death of Jesus on the cross. In this story there is this ironic turn around whereby Haman is plotting against the LORD and his people, but the LORD is plotting against Haman. When Jesus was crucified, his enemies thought that they won in their battle against Jesus while by that very death Jesus won the victory against them. Jesus' enemies killed Jesus, but by his death Jesus overcame death and won eternal life for his people. Jesus' enemies sought to destroy Jesus. But Jesus' death accomplished the opposite. Jesus overcame death by suffering for sin. Jesus' death was the way to life. Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God. Just as God frustrated the scheme of Haman so he frustrated the schemes of those who put Jesus to death.

Paul speaks of the preaching of the cross in these terms. He writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Then he continues quoting from Isaiah 29:14, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." And he continues in 1 Corinthians 1:25, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." What the story of Haman illustrates is that God accomplishes his salvation through surprising reversals. Haman built gallows for Mordecai. But he himself would die on those gallows. The enemies of Jesus had thought that killing Jesus would be the end of his influence, while the death of Jesus was the way through which Jesus was exalted and his message spread throughout the world.

The "word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." The gospel of a crucified Saviour seems foolish to the world. The world worships its own power and its own wisdom. God works through weakness and foolishness. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Do not be impressed by the Haman's of this world. Do not be impressed by worldly wisdom and worldly power. Follow the one who was executed as a criminal, but who was raised from the dead and who has been exalted to the right hand of God. Trust in the God who laughs at the pretensions of his enemies and who is the God of surprising reversals.

Job 5:8 says, "He frustrates the devices of the crafty, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end."