

I remind you again that the main theme of the book of Esther is how God preserved his people, the Jews, from genocide. In subtle ways the author shows us how God worked behind the scenes directing events toward the goal of keeping his people from being annihilated. The great theological theme of the book of Esther is the providence of God which is the biblical teaching that nothing happens by chance – that everything that happens is under God’s control. This includes sinful actions even though God is never the author of sin.

God’s providence includes events that to us look like coincidences, like the king not being able to sleep, as we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at chapter 6. In fact, the whole of chapter 6 emphasizes these apparent coincidences which are actually God working to fulfill his plan. But God also works through his people as they self-consciously work towards a certain goal. And that is the focus of chapter 7. What we see in chapter 7 is still God working out his plan to save his people, but in chapter 7 Esther is using wisdom and insight in her quest to deliver her people. God is working through her, but in this chapter, Esther is involved in pursuing her own plan to save her people from being exterminated.

The reason that the Jewish people were in danger of being exterminated is that a man named Haman, who was a very powerful man in the kingdom, had made a decree in the king’s name that on a certain day all the Jews were to be killed. King Ahasuerus had signed off on that decree. Haman did not have the authority to make such a decree on his own. The king was the ultimate authority behind it. But Haman was the driver behind the bill and the king had given him the permission without paying a lot of attention to it himself. Haman had told the king about a people group within the empire who were troublemakers and suggested that he make that problem go away by eliminating them and the king had given Haman the authority to do so without giving it a lot of thought.

Esther had quite a challenge before her if she was to convince King Ahasuerus to stop this genocide from happening. It was not possible to change laws and decrees that had been made in the king’s name. It would not be easy to undo what Haman and the king had done. This king was not likely to do something that would cause him to lose face. What the book has already shown us about this king is that he was a very proud and self-centered person and not likely to do something that would suggest that he had made a mistake.

And who was Esther? She was Ahasuerus’ queen. That did put her in a position where she had a chance to bring the matter before the king and try to get him to find a way to save her people, but it’s not that she had much clout or even security in that position. The last queen had been replaced because she had displeased the king. As queen she existed for the king’s pleasure. She could be replaced on a whim. Haman was a very high ranking official. It would cause some embarrassment for the king to try to undo what he had done. Humanly speaking it was not likely that Esther would be able to get the king to change his mind. Humanly speaking, she was up against long odds.

So, she needed to be as wise and as insightful as she could possibly be, and the text describes her in this way. She had already invited the king and Haman to a feast during which she was not yet ready to bring her request to the king. The feast described in this chapter is the second feast to which she had invited the king and Haman. She knew that she could not just blurt out her request. The timing had to be just right. The way she expressed her request had to be just so. She had to figure out a way of making her request that had the greatest chance of being successful with this selfish and fickle king.

So, this is what she says, when the king asks her to make her request. “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men, and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.”

She is respectful in the way that she addresses the king. She is careful not to put any blame on the king even though he was blameworthy. She still does not tell him that she is a Jew. The time will come for that, but she will wait until it is the right time. So, she presents the facts in a way that most likely to bring the king on board with her request. “Someone has sold me and my people to be killed.” She knows that the king is not likely to care about her people, but that there is a chance that he would be upset about someone planning to kill her. Once he is upset about someone planning to kill his queen, he will more likely be upset about that someone planning to kill her people. She uses whatever value to king may place on her life to move him towards anger about the plot to kill her people.

And the king does get angry. He says, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” Someone is planning to kill his queen and he is not amused. Esther has managed to present her request in such a way as to make the king angry against the one who has threatened her and her people. Esther answers, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!”

Now all of this is happening by the providence of God as much as the fact that last night the king could not sleep and all of the apparent coincidences that followed. But in what happens in this part of the story, Esther is very active and is using wisdom and insight as if her life depended on it. And that illustrates for us how God’s providence does not take away the need for human effort and skill and wisdom. Esther is presented here as acting in a wise and carefully thought-out manner. She has planned. She has thought deeply about what kind of approach would most likely work. She showed a profound understanding of the king and what made him tick. She had carefully come up with an approach that was most likely to succeed. And all of that mattered.

What she did not do is sit back and say, “God is going to save his people anyway, so it does not matter what I do or how I do it.” We also know that God is going to do certain things because he had promised to do so. He will save his people from their sins. His kingdom will surely come. He will direct our lives for our eternal wellbeing if we are his people. But that never means that what we do is superfluous. That never means that we don’t have to worry about acting wisely, working hard, and using skill in the things that we do. Jesus will build his church, but that does not mean that we should not be wise and diligent in contributing to that. Our Father will provide us with all that we need, but that does not mean that we should not work hard to provide for ourselves. God works through directing seeming coincidences. But he also works through our wisdom and our skill and our efforts. And in the end whether in success or failure, we know that God is working everything together for our good in the light of eternity. This passage shows us how God uses Esther’s wisdom and insight in accomplishing his purpose – in this case the deliverance of the Jews from annihilation.

So, Esther has finally come out with her request and has identified Haman as the one who behind the decree to kill her people. The king is angry, and Haman is terrified.

We are told that “the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden.” Clearly, he needed time to think about what he had just heard. He has a problem. He had agreed to allow Haman to make the decree in his name. Such a decree could not be rescinded. He had not known that Esther belonged to the people he had sentenced to death. Haman had not known that either. It would be difficult to get out of this predicament without a lot of embarrassment.

Haman helped the king decide what to do with him. While the king was outside, Haman begged Queen Esther for his life. The text says that “Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was.” Haman was desperate, but that was a huge mistake. No one was allowed to come within 7 feet of any of the king’s concubines, let alone the queen. No doubt the king knew that Haman was not trying to assault the queen. But it gave the king the excuse he needed to get rid of Haman. And so, he accuses Haman of assaulting the queen. “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” Haman is in big trouble.

And he does not appear to have any friends in the room. A servant who attended the king mentions the gallows Haman had built intending to hand Mordecai. He says, “Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” A not-so-subtle suggestion which the king takes. “And the king said, ‘Hang him on that.’ So, they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.”

So, Haman is out of the way. But the decree still stands. That problem still has to be dealt with. The Jews are not yet in the clear. But the execution of Haman is a step in the right direction. Certainly, Haman deserved to die. No one reading the story feels sorry for Haman.

But the king is really no better than Haman. The king had agreed with Haman’s proposal to annihilate the Jews when Haman first made it. He had not known that he was condemning the Jews to death, but he did know that he was condemning a people group to death. Without giving the matter much thought he had told Haman, “to do with them as it seems good to you” (Esther 3:11). The king had given permission to Haman to destroy a whole people group without even asking who they were. He shows an incredible callousness towards human life.

And the way that Esther has to approach him to plead effectively for her people, shows that he was not interested in justice. Had the king been a just man, Esther could have been much more direct and told the king that a great evil was about to take place, but instead she has to frame her request in such a way as to appeal to the king’s self-interest. Her first request is for her own life, hoping that the king placed some value on her life because of his attraction to her. And there was the whole matter of how Esther had to come before the king in the first place – that law that said that if someone approached the king and the king did not hold out the golden scepter, that person would be killed. The king’s queen had to risk her life in order to come before the king with her request.

King Ahasuerus was an evil man. He was self-absorbed. He was fickle. Human life meant very little to him. He used women for his pleasure. He was weak and easily manipulated by his advisors. And he is one example of many in history and still today. There have been many kings and rulers with other titles through the ages who have been like Ahasuerus in varying degrees. One of the great causes of misery in the world through the ages

have been kings and rulers and governments who ruled for their own glory and profit rather than seeking to serve and bless the people over whom they ruled. There have been relatively good rulers and governments by God's common grace, but a huge cause of suffering in the world has been and continues to be rulers and leaders and governments who are selfish and corrupt.

One of the great comforts in the Bible is that the ultimate ruler of the universe is not like that. When we think of King Ahasuerus as he is described in the book of Esther, we are reminded that the hope of the world and of each of our lives is that the King of the world is unlike the sinful and selfish rulers of this world. The highest power and authority in the world is good – perfectly good in every possible way. As John puts it in 1 John 1:5, "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." One of the ways that we see and appreciate God as a perfect King is to contrast him with the evil kings and rulers of this world.

We will consider some of the ways that the God of heaven and earth is not like King Ahasuerus.

One of the key ways that he is unlike King Ahasuerus has to do with access. It's an important part of this story that access to the king was severely restricted and even the queen was risking her life simply approaching the king with a request. And to be sure, it is necessary that people in high places are not accessible to everyone. They would not live long or get much done if anyone would walk up to them at any time. But how different that way is God – the King of the world.

This king is accessible to those who approach him in humility and trust. There is danger for his enemies, but for the humble and the penitent and the trusting, the way is open to come before him with our requests and our burdens and our needs. This theme of access to God is an important part of the message of the Bible in that Jesus opened the way of sinners to come into the presence of God. And Jesus himself is sitting at the right hand of God – the one who shares God's throne. So, we are invited in Hebrews 4:16, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

This is really quite awesome if you think about it. The one who rules over the whole universe – the one who is unlimited in wisdom, power and glory – is accessible to anyone who comes to him humbly and in faith. Jesus has opened the way for sinners who otherwise would be consumed in the presence of God to draw near to God and all such are promised that God will draw near to them. James tells us in James 4:8, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." Hebrews 7:25 says that Jesus "is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."

And there is this whole matter of favor. A number of times Esther asks whether she has found favor in the sight of the king. That was not something that she could count on. This king was fickle. Fickle means "changing frequently, especially as regards one's loyalties, interests or affection." Esther could not know from one day to the next whether the king was looking upon her with favor.

How different it is with the great King over all the earth! Once he sets his favor on someone, that favor will never be removed. Psalm 84:11 says, "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor, No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly." Isaiah 54:10 says, "For the mountains

may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you....” That term “steadfast love” is very very common in the OT and the point of it is that God’s love and favor for his people is constant and unchanging. It is a covenant word – the covenant relationship that God has with his people is a secure relationship – it is bound by oaths – it is a relationship that is secured by God’s unchangeable commitment.

When the Bible says that God does not change, this is what it means. Numbers 23:19 says “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” This is part of the significance of both baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both of the sacraments confirm the covenant that God has made with us -the promises that God has made to us in Christ. They are intended to confirm to us God’s steadfast love – this faithfulness to his promises – the unchanging nature of his favor upon his people.

What a contrast with King Ahasuerus! Esther did not know whether her king would show favor to her or kill her. By approaching him she was taking her life in her hands. But our God is the opposite of fickle. His love is steadfast. We can count on it. He is unchanging.

A third way that the King of the world is unlike Ahasuerus is that he is not selfish. King Ahasuerus was incredibly selfish. That is why Esther had to appeal to him as carefully as she did. She could not appeal to justice because he was not just. She had to find a way to appeal to his selfishness and so she had to hope that he still was attracted to her. Think of the whole harem apparatus that catered to his sexual desires. His fickleness meant that he was ruled by his desires. He had tremendous power and authority and that power and authority was used to satisfy his own lusts.

Again, how different is our God. There is a sense in which God is self-centered because he is the highest good. He is dedicated to his own glory as he must be if he is truly good. But that does not make him selfish. God is the opposite of selfish because he is love. Both creation and redemption are overflows of God’s love. In creating man in his image so that we could know and love him, God was being exceedingly generous because knowing God is the greatest possible joy and satisfaction. The beauty and the bountifulness of the creation demonstrates his generosity. And salvation is the greatest manifestation of love that is possible. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ....” (John 3:16). “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”

How wonderfully does the contrast between King Ahasuerus and the Great God who reigns over all illuminate the sheer goodness and beauty and generosity of God in Christ! It is because of who God is and what he is like that we can have security and peace and hope. What a reason then to look to him as the foundation and the purpose of our lives! What a reason for joy to know that the King who rules over all is absolutely good – not a hint of evil – completely and utterly good and that one of the ways that that goodness is expressed is in providing a way for sinful human beings who are not good, to be made good through the saving work of Jesus Christ. By nature, we are more like King Ahasuerus than we are like God. We deserve eternal condemnation just as he did.

But in his goodness God made a way, for sinners to be saved. He did it at great cost to himself. He gave his beloved Son to suffer and die for enemies. And he chose, out of the whole human race, a people, to deliver

from their sins, by changing their hearts, by showing them their sin and need, by opening their eyes to his love and grace in Christ and by drawing them to Jesus giving them faith and a willingness to repent. And by gradually conforming them to become good as he is good and as Jesus is good.

Come to this God. Come to the Saviour he has provided. Exult in their goodness and love and reliability. And know that those who rest in him are secure in his love and favor, for Jesus' sake.

And then there is Haman. He got what he had coming to him. The fact that he was hanged on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai is justice. The king who condemned him was not just himself. But in this case, by the providence of God, he meted out justice to Haman.

And he is a warning for us. He is an illustration of what Paul writes in Galatians 6:7, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap." Haman reaped what he had sown. And so will everyone who does not believe in Jesus. Those who trust in Jesus do not reap what they have sown because Jesus reaped the penalty that we have deserved. But those who reject Jesus will reap what they have sown. Like Haman they will receive what they deserve unless they repent and flee to Jesus. Haman reminds us that those who reject God and live as they please will get what they deserve in the end. But God saved the Jewish people from Haman's evil plan because he had chosen them to be the people from whom Jesus would be born. And Jesus has provided away for sinners to be saved. God sent Jesus that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.