

God's Providence in the Story of Esther

Intro: Martin Luther is quoted as saying about the book of Esther: "I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities." Yet this book may give us one of the most helpful glimpses in Scripture of the providence of God.

Do you ever think about what God is doing in the world and in your life? Have you considered the events and changes of your life and wondered if God influenced them? The book of Esther affords us the opportunity to think about the wonders and mysteries of God's inter-working in the affairs of our lives.

THE STORY OF ESTHER

The events of the book of Esther take place in the period between Ezra and Nehemiah in the reign of Xerxes who ruled in Persia from 486-464 B.C. It tells the remarkable story of God's protection and preservation of His covenant people against the machinations of an ungodly Gentile despot by the name of Haman. Since probably all of us are familiar with the story line, I'll only take a moment to summarize the content.

Orphaned as a child and brought up by her cousin, Mordecai, Esther was selected by King Ahasuerus to replace the queen when Vashti the reigning Queen was disgraced.

Haman, the prime minister, angry because of Mordecai's refusal to bow before him, persuaded the king to issue an edict of extermination of all the Jews in the Persian Empire.

Esther, on Mordecai's advice, endangered her own life by appearing before the king, without her being invited, in order to intercede for her people.

Seeing that the king was well disposed toward her, she invited him and Haman to a private banquet, during which she did not reveal her desire but invited them to yet another banquet, thus making Haman think that he was in the queen's good graces. During a second banquet, Queen Esther revealed her Jewish origin to the king, begging for her life and the life of her people, and naming Haman as her enemy and the enemy of her people.

Angry with Haman, King Ahasuerus retreated into the palace garden. Haman, in great fear, remained to plead for his life from the queen. While imploring, Haman fell on Esther's couch and was found in this ostensibly compromising situation upon the king's return. He was immediately condemned to be hung on the very gallows which he had previously prepared for Mordecai. The king complied with Esther's request, and the edict of destruction was then followed with permission for the Jews to avenge themselves on their enemies.

The Feast of Purim was instituted by Mordecai to celebrate the deliverance of the Jews from Haman's plot to kill them. Purim (from Akkadian, puru, "lots") is so called after the lots cast by Haman in order to determine the month in which the slaughter was to take place.

Lessons from the story of Esther

We see the providential care of God over His people

Our word providence combines the ideas of time and vision.

“Pro” (before) and “video” (to see). Hence to see beforehand;

"providence, in its absolute sense, is the Divine foreknowledge and the Divine activity which arises there from; and such providence implies that God wields absolute power over all the works of His hands". (Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*). The needs that God foresees, He also provides!

God had promised through Jeremiah and other prophets to bring His people through the captivity. Haman's plot threatened to destroy God's people and nullify God's promise. But God was faithful in keeping His promise to protect His people and provide a way of deliverance for them.

We see how human choices may set in motion events far into the future.

It is hard not to see in the Scripture that one event affects another, how one person's faithfulness or unfaithfulness can set up either great blessing or catastrophe.

Notice for example that Haman is an Amalekite (Esther 3:1). Sound familiar? Of course, you remember that God many years before issued a charge to King Saul to utterly destroy them (1 Sam. 15:1). Saul disobeyed. What if he had obeyed? There would have been no Haman! This threat to the people of God would not have existed.

Consider this. Another important character in the life of Esther was her uncle Mordecai. But again take a look at the past and see a remarkable truth. You may remember in the life of David the story of the rebellion of Absalom. And you remember how that Shimei of the descendants of Saul followed David and company along and hurled stones and uttered curses against David as he left the area (2 Sam. 16). David's men wanted to slay him; but David refused to take revenge. Later upon David's return Shimei would meet at the Jordan begging for mercy for his indiscretions. Again David's men urged him to take revenge; but David refused to do so (2 Sam. 19). It's a good thing he did. Mordecai was a descendant of Shimei (Esther 2:5). If David had acted vengefully, Mordecai would have never been born.

And see also how Esther and Mordecai's faithful actions would contribute to future faithful efforts.

Would Ezra have led the Israelites in the great reforms of that book?

Would Nehemiah have led the people in the accomplishment of so much good if it had not been for the faith of Esther?

We see how God uses the faithful acts of His people to accomplish His providential purposes.

The real message of Esther is that God, the invisible hero of this story, works out His will through those who trust in Him.

Some scholars debate the faithfulness of Esther and Mordecai and contend that God's preserves His people even when they are not faithful. But it seems to me that there are some clear indications of faith working in both Esther and Mordecai.

Mordecai expressed faith in the protection of His people.

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

Esther showed great courage in appearing before the king, risking her life to save her people

Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:16)

We don't always know how God will use us; but we can be assured that, if we are the kind of people God desires, we can have a part in his plan.

We see how God works mysterious behind the scene to help the efforts of His people succeed.

The faithful acts of Mordecai and Esther could not have by themselves produced the deliverance the book records. In Esther we see the silent and invisible nature of God's providential activity. We see God invisible but infallible; silent, but sovereign; unsuspected but clearly exercising His will in the world. Notice how many things just "happened" to take place to make this deliverance possible.

How was it that Vashti happened to fall from the king's favor at just this time, so that another queen could be selected?

How was it that Esther was selected among hundreds of girls to be the king's queen?

How was it that Esther was twice extended the golden scepter rather than lose her life for coming uninvited to the king?

How was it that when Haman wanted to determine what day to destroy the Jews that the lot kept coming up negative time after time until he reached the twelfth month?

How was it that the two men who plotted the king's death happened to speak in the presence of Mordecai?

And how was it that the king neglected to reward him immediately for his good deed?

How was it that the king happened to have insomnia the night before the banquet with Esther and to have read the report of Mordecai's help?

How was it that Haman had built the gallows of his own destruction the day before he would fall into the king's disfavor?

To what do we attribute the amazing coincidences that shape the story of the Jew's rescue?

What the natural man might call "coincidence" or "good luck", the believer might call "divine intervention".

In Esther we can see that God may be at work in the darkest times of life.

"Behind a frowning providence God hides a smiling face".

Never forget that in your times of trial. God knows the needs of His people and provides them (Mt. 10:29-31) What we see is not necessarily all that is happening.

Conclusion: A remarkable feature of the book of Esther is the fact that it not once mentions the name of God, almost as if this symbolizes in this historical drama itself the secret behind-the-scenes working of God to accomplish His purposes in the world. Yet though God's name is not mentioned, Esther teaches us that God is in control. He is working out his plan for the good of His people. And he is using such persons as you and me to accomplish it, if we are what we ought to be and He is helping us in way we can never ultimately see or know but are very real indications of His loving concern and faithfulness.