

God Will Not Overlook Your Work

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Esther

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I'd like us this morning to continue our study in the book of Esther and reflect upon what we read there in the story which could in some senses be found in any secular history book, any record of a period of that time. For as we have noted on many an occasion, as we have studied the book of Esther, the name of God does not appear. Yet we are surely intended to see that God's hand is behind every event. That though God is not spoken of, yet, as we hear the account of these events, we are assured that God is working out His sovereign purposes for the benefit of His people and to confound the enemies of His people and of God Himself.

I'd like us, first of all, to see in this particular chapter a rather pitiable Prime Minister. A pitiable Prime Minister. I remember hearing a story, now many years ago, of a woman who was married to a husband who was far from being gracious. She suffered much at his hands and had much distress, not only of spirit, but indeed of body as a result. And yet, every time this rather poor specimen of a man came home, she would have his slippers ready for him and would do her best to comfort him at the end of a busy and burdensome day. And when her friend would ask, "Why do you do so much for someone who treats you so badly?" Her characteristic response was, "It may be that is the only bit of heaven he will ever know."

Well, we see this poor specimen of a man filled with much anger and hatred towards Mordecai and to the Jews in general, busy in his attempt to bring about the destruction of those whom he considers to be his enemy. He makes his way at an early hour of the day to the palace with one intent in mind, having set up a gallows, which, if we consider the height, would be taller than any building in Orland Park, in order that he might hang Mordecai very publicly. He's on his way to the palace to ask the king to hang Mordecai. But the commission that he is given from the king could hardly be more different. Rather than seeking the death, he now finds himself in the position where he is forced to do that which truly, if we have any understanding of the heart or mind of Haman, is furthest from his thinking, furthest from his liking. He is given orders to honor Mordecai. And indeed, as we see the plans of God unfolding, it is from the very mouth of Haman himself that the task is given. The Word of God reveals to us that which would otherwise be unknown to us, what was going on in the heart and mind of Haman at this time.

The king comes to him with a simple question. The question is just this, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And then God's Word peels back the veil that hides normally our view from what's happening in a man's heart. We are told, in his heart he thought to himself, "Well, who could the king want to honor more than me?" Such is the vanity of the man. And so everything that Haman could possibly imagine to do to honor himself he now lays out before the king. He says, "Let the royal robes be brought. Let them be placed upon the man whom the king delights to offer honor. Let him be set upon one of the king's own horses, a horse which bears the emblem of the king, the crown upon the bridle of the horse. Let one of the noble princes lead him through, be put in a place of subordination to him that it evidently and obviously so that that man of great standing is appointed, not an ordinary, as it were, page boy or some stable hand, but a man of significance to lead the horse. And let him proclaim throughout the square of the city, in other words the center of activity for the entire capital, 'This is what shall be done with one to whom the king delights to honor.'"

You could almost see it line by line as Haman is setting out these things. He is using all his imagination. All his imagination is brought to bear, so that that man in whom the king takes delight will be honored. And he is, of course, thinking in everything that he is saying, "This is what is about to happen to me. Who else could it possibly be?" Well, perhaps we have found ourselves at times and being rebuked in our own thinking that someone is speaking of us and saying nice things, "Who else could they be thinking of but me?" only to find later on that it is, in fact, somebody else. And in our hearts we shrivel a little bit thinking, "Was I really so vain?" Well, the answer is, "Yes, we are capable of that." And Haman was capable of that also.

Well, Haman takes Mordecai, clothes him in the royal robes, puts him on the horse, takes him round the square, and proclaims before him, "Thus shall be done for the one whom the king delights to honor." And then, we are told just very simply Mordecai returns to the king's gate, and Haman returns to his home to speak to Zeresh. We've seen this kind of response in the past where on the very previous day, the day immediately prior, Haman is full of himself, but agitated because Mordechai hasn't bowed down and given him the sort of respect that he thinks he deserves.

Now, he rushes home almost exactly twenty-four hours later, and he is again agitated because of Mordecai and he tells them all that has gone on. I suspect that they would have already known. After all, you don't do something like this every day, and it was done in a public place, the most public place. And no doubt, some of his friends were there in the square, and they heard Haman proclaiming, "Thus shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." And now, they're meeting with Haman privately. "I thought you said you were going to the palace to have him hanged, and here you are leading him about on the king's horse wearing the king's robes." Do you see the contrast between the end of this chapter and the end of the previous chapter? In chapter 6 verse 13 that we've just read together we read this, "And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, '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.'" Now, be reminded of what they

said twenty-four hours before in chapter 4 verse 14. Haman says, "'Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.' Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, 'Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast.' This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made."

There can be few things that are more vexing, irritating, frustrating, than receiving the wisdom of your friends, some advice that they give you, you act upon it, and then the next time when it's all fallen apart they say to you, "Well, you really shouldn't have done that, should you?" Do you see how God's Word is showing us that Haman was being deprived of any possible comfort? He wasn't even getting comfort from Zeresh, his wife, and his friends. Twenty-four hours before it was their advice, "This is what you ought to do. Build your gallows. Make it fifty cubits high, seventy-five feet high, and then go to the king and ask for him to be executed on your gallows, and then just enjoy the feast!" Twenty-four hours later, as Mordecai is being led around the square, and his family and friends see that, and he comes back, and he says, "What's happening here?" "Oh, well, you really shouldn't have done that, should you? Mordecai is a Jew. If you resist the Jews, then you've begun to fall, and there is going to be no stopping you now." You could have forgiven Haman if he had responded, "What do you mean? It was your advice! That is what you told me to do! And now you're getting all superior about it telling me, 'You shouldn't have done it!'" Haman is entirely without any comfort, not even his own wife, and family, his friends give him any comfort. They just add to his vexation.

The second thing, as we study this particular chapter, is a common theme: it is the perplexing providences of God. How God is working out His purposes through seeming coincidences that are set before us. But anyone who has the eye of faith says, "No, I can see God's hand at work here." It is not stated explicitly, but you would have to be without any spiritual sensitivity or understanding at all if you do not see that God is working out His purposes. Why of all nights should this be the night that the king is robbed of sleep? Why should it be just then that the king is robbed of that rest which his body needs? And why should the king say at that particular point, "Bring forth the Chronicles." Why not, "Bring me a cup of warm milk" or "bring me a large cup of something a bit stronger." It's as though you might say when you're finding it a little bit difficult to sleep you say to your spouse beside you, "Slip in one of the minister's sermons, and that will just help me to get over." They're reading the Chronicles. "Just read me the section minutes from five years ago." He's hoping to get to sleep. "Bring me the Chronicle, something really quite tedious and dull, and perhaps that will help me to just sleep." But it's the very Chronicles that wake him up even more.

He hears about a time, long since passed, when Mordecai uncovered a plot to kill the king. Now, as a matter of honor we can understand this. This is not strange for us. A matter of honor in the Persian court would be that if somebody does something of note, then you reward it. It would be taken as something of failing on the part of the king not to have rewarded somebody who had uncovered a plot. It doesn't take any imagination to recognize that. And now, as he is hearing about the plot and how his life was saved, he says, "Well, what did we do for Mordecai?"

So why was the king bereft of sleep that night? Why send for the Chronicles? Why that particular part of the Chronicle should be read? Surely all of us as we are reading this with the eye of faith said, "This is not some strange and bizarre wonderful coincidence, lucky charms that just happened along the way." You say, "God is at work. Esther and the Jews have been at prayer, and God is answering their prayers." He's showing Himself gracious to His people, even though, at this time, we can assume that neither Esther nor Mordecai had any understanding or any knowledge that the king, Ahasuerus, was sleepless that night, nor anything of what he had been reading.

But even surely down to the smallest of details, we can see the hand of God at work. Ahasuerus says to Haman, "What shall I do for Mordecai?" Now, if he'd phrased the question that way, which is basically what the question was in Ahasuerus' mind, but that's not the way in which he expressed it. There was an ambiguity about it that allowed Haman to think, "He must be talking about me." Ahasuerus could just as easily have said, "I want to honor Mordecai for uncovering the plot," but he doesn't phrase it that way. Can we not see that in the very question which Ahasuerus asked, the way in which it is asked, God is working out His purposes.

That recognition which had failed to be given so long ago that no doubt Mordecai had long since abandoned any expectation or hope that he would be recognized for having saved the king's life. It wouldn't be an unrealistic expectation that there would be some reward, some recognition, and yet so long had passed that it is gone from memory. But God reminds the king at that point in the history of His people when it would do most good.

We see a comparison here that Esther put on her royal robes and entered into the presence of the king. Now, we find Mordecai dressed in royal robes. And if we see it's not terribly surprising when we see a queen in royal robes, yet this is a surprise to us when Mordecai is dressed in royal robes for there is something beyond that which surely we are encouraged to see. And it is brought out in the most simple of ways, by the way in which Haman responds to the events, the way in which Mordecai responds to the events.

What does Mordecai do? He is unexpectedly elevated with royal robes and a horse bearing the king's emblem and led around the city square with the Prime Minister himself leading the horse proclaiming, "Thus shall be done to the one whom the king delights to honor." For that the conclusion of such an unusual event, Mordecai goes back and resumes his place, his seat, in the king's gate, a place where judgments were given. This is not merely telling you his physical location, it's telling you something about what he was doing. Mordecai, in other words we are being told in subtle ways, was unaffected by the high honor. There is a covering for the saints which is greater by far than royal robes. That humility of spirit which we saw in Esther, we can see she learned it from her guardian. Mordecai returns to the king's gate. Haman goes to his friends to complain. God is surely at work.

Which brings us therefore to the third aspect to which I would draw your attention today: the perfect plan. The perfect plan, but it's not Haman's. Haman has his scheme. We have

it laid out before us exactly what the scheme was. He wants to destroy the Jews. He has set in motion a scheme by which the Jews throughout the empire are going to be destroyed and he wants the first one to be destroyed to be Mordecai. He has his plan for how he is going to accomplish this. But in this chapter we see it all unraveling. It's coming apart. His own family sees that it is falling apart, and without any shred of comfort towards him tell him that he is doomed. "You have begun to fall, and you will continue to fall, and there is no stopping you now." He came for Mordecai's death, but left leading his horse around the town. The plan of Haman is being overturned but the things of God are being worked out.

Things long forgotten are strangely brought to mind. It's being done in the timing of God. Perhaps at some point, Mordecai had wistfully regretted the amnesia of the king, wished that perhaps the king had rewarded him in some way, that he had received some recognition. We would hardly blame him if we had been placed in such a position. If through some strange set of events, the President had been visiting our town, and we had intervened to save his life, we might expect some degree of recognition. And when the President seems to forget all about it, it might be recalled to our mind, and in our hearts, and in our minds, "Well, evidently I thought more of that than he does himself!"

Well, Mordecai may have felt that. We would have understood. But surely we are seeing through every verse in the book of Esther that God is working out His purposes according to His timing. And His timing is not always our timing. And we have the benefit of reading through this story of Esther and we say, "Thank you God for not giving the reward to Mordecai at the time when it should have been given. Thank you so that at just the right time in God's perfect plan, God removes sleep from Ahasuerus and causes the king to be reminded." This was God's perfect timing. As we ponder the events of our lives and wonder sometimes, "Why is God not done what I would have expected to happen?" here we have in the story of Esther confidence to say, "You know, my times are in His hand. He will lead, and guide, and direct. And it might be that I'm not receiving the reward that I had expected at this time. Things have not worked out quite as I had hoped." It might be that you can say quite legitimately, "I do deserve to have recognition" in the same way that Mordecai could have said, "I deserve to receive recognition from the king for having saved his life." But God has a better purpose in mind.

Are we willing, as it were, to hand these things over to the Lord and say, "The Lord knows." To have confidence in the One who ultimately will give rewards? For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for His name in serving the saints. Perhaps you have done some service and it has been overlooked but God is not unjust. Where men fail, the King of kings will not fail. Well, do we sing so often, "Ye fearful saints fresh courage take. The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break with blessings on your head."

The lessons of Esther are not lost on us. Psalm 2 would remind us that, "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh. Why do the kings rage? Why do they hatch their plans?" And surely if we are reading any particular Psalm in conjunction with the story of Esther, the story of Esther is something of an illustration of that Psalm. Why do those men who think

of themselves as being so powerful hatch out their plans as Haman hatched out his plans against the Lord's anointed? They are taking up a cause against God Himself, and their plans and schemes will be thwarted.

There is set before us an understanding that we see that the history of this world is in the hands of our God. And though the book of Esther could take its place quite easily amongst the works of Herodotus or some other ancient historian, it gives to us a description of events that happened long ago without drawing for us any specific religious overtones, and yet, for those who have the eye of faith, we see here is God's hand at work in every detail. The history of this world will at last be brought to its conclusion when all nations, tongues, and people shall stand before our God.

There are many verses of Scripture which we might have read in conjunction with Esther chapter 6, but I would remind you of one portion, which I trust is at least somewhat familiar to you, when Jesus describes the events at the end of this world when all men shall be set before Him, you and me. We will be there of whom we have loved or whoever will live should the Lord tarry, all mankind from Adam to the last. And that in that great day, as the sheep and the goats are divided, there is, you will recall, that wonderful description that is given where Jesus says, "I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer Him saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" That which is long since forgotten to us is kept in the mind of God, and God will be proved faithful to His promise made to us in the book of Hebrews for God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for His name in serving the saints. Kings may forget to reward those who do good, but the King of kings forgets no good done to His people. Our response as the righteous is to question God's goodness and grace. "You speak as though I deserve it, but as I examine my own heart, I do not see it. When did I feed someone that was hungry? When did I feed you? When did I give you a glass of water to slake your thirst? When did I visit you when you were sick or in prison?" And the King will answer, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it for me."

Brethren, how do we treat one another? Do we treat one another with love, and with gentleness, and with kindness? Do we speak to them with tenderness of heart? Do you bring them a glass of cold water when they are thirsty? Do we feed them when they are hungry? Do we clothe them when they are naked? When they are in hospital, do we visit them? When our brethren are in prison, do we sit with them and visit them there? Jesus says, "If you do it to the least of them, you are doing it to me." What a blessing it is that we can serve our Savior by serving the saints, "for by this shall all men know that you are my disciples by your love one for another," to speak to them with love and grace, with tenderness and compassion.

There is a question that is posed by King Ahasuerus, and perhaps it goes unnoticed upon the pages of Scripture. We read it in its context, and we see it answered, and we think perhaps but little of it. A question that Ahasuerus asks Haman is this, "What should be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?" But here we have set before us, a greater, an infinitely greater question. What shall be done for the one whom the King of kings delights to honor? For those who love His name and who have served the saints, what shall be done for Howard, one whom this day the King of kings delights to honor? The answer is found in Matthew 25. "Come ye blessed of my Father. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." This is the God who we worship. This is the King whom we serve. To Him be all honor, and glory, and praise.

Let's pray together.

Our gracious God, our King, we do thank Thee that Thou didst set before us that which would pass as any mere ancient history book. We thank Thee that Thou dost send Thy Spirit to grant illumination to hearts which are slow to understand so that we might see that which is hidden from the view of the godless, from those who do not receive Thy Word, being spiritually dead, but now revealed to us, for we do delight to see Thy sovereign plans unfolding in the course of history. That when Thy people were sore oppressed by their enemies, deliverance was at hand. Before they knew it, Thy sovereign grace had disturbed the sleep of a king and brought about that which was unthinkable even a few hours before. Thou art a God good and kind. We were once Thine enemies deserving nothing, O God, before Thee except Thy condemnation, but we have been made to trust in Christ and to hold Him dearer by far than all that this world has to offer. We thank Thee that Thy grace is made known to us. That though in our hearts we would say we have done nothing to deserve Thy goodness, yet hast Thou rewarded us, not because we deserve it, but because Thou art gracious. We do thank Thee that for those who trust in Christ, we shall hear those gracious words, words which we long to hear, "Come thou blessed of my Father. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Bless Thy Word, O God. Forgive us our many sins. For these things we would ask in Jesus' name and for His sake, Amen.