

# A Perspective on Providence

*Esther*

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**Bible Text:** Esther 6:14-8:8; Psalm 23

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I suppose there were at least a half a dozen chapters that one could have thread in conjunction with this particular portion of God's word but time does not allow to read every portion of Scripture which would bear upon and perhaps bring a degree of light to bear that would help us understand what is happening and more than understand what is happening, be able to respond in faith to what we read and say, "These words are set down for my encouragement," and that may even seem perplexing to those who are outside the kingdom. How can you read a book that was written thousands of years ago of a situation which is so far removed from our experience in the court of the king and queen of Persia and say, "Now, this is written for my benefit, to bless me even as I reflect and meditate upon it"? I do hope that already in our study of the book of Esther, you have gleaned such blessings as you are able to say, "I have seen God's providences. I have been able to examine my own circumstances in light of the way in which God dealt with Esther and being able to say that, "God is the same yesterday, today and forever and if he protected his people in the days of Esther, he will protect his people today and I being one of God's people, God's hand is upon me to protect me even from those who might wish me harm."

We read together Psalm 23. I have to say I swithered and almost chose another portion. I almost chose Psalm 2. Psalm 2 begins, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" You might even think that Esther might have written this particular Psalm or perhaps Mordecai, it seems so fitting to what we've been reading in the story that bears her name. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." Well, that Psalm if it is familiar to you, it goes on to speak of how we should "Kiss the Son, lest his anger be kindled just a little and we perish in the way. Blessed is the man who finds his refuge in God." So even that Psalm written so long ago, we have the same sort of picture that is presented that we find so often in the pages of Scripture because the Gospel is not recorded merely in the four books which open the New Testament. The Gospel is to be found on every page of Scripture because it is the same God and it is the same Savior that is being presented. In the book of Psalms we have those who were opposed to the Lord and to his Anointed but there is this invitation, nonetheless, to kiss the Son.

I'd like us to contemplate that as we come to that towards the end of our reflection upon God's word as seen in the context of the book of Esther, to see that even though in this book as we have remarked a number of times, the name of God is never mentioned but anyone with the eyes of faith reading through this is able to see that here is God at work. I was reminded of a saying of something that Stonewall Jackson said, obviously a long time ago now, "He who does not see the providence of God in this is blind, sir, blind!" Well, I'll not go back into the history of that particular expression but if we come to the book of Esther and do not see the providence of God, you must be blind. Blind, sir blind!

We come to the book of Esther and, "Lord, open my eyes. Let me see your providence. Let me see it in ways which I have not seen it before," and so we come to reflect upon this portion that we have read together from the book of Esther and reflect upon it and I trust by the grace of God, we see some blessing that will strengthen us, give us confidence. And to help fix the themes in your mind, I would just straightway give you some headings for you to ponder. We have here set before us a request and a rope and a ring. A request. A rope. And a ring. How quickly circumstances change, do they not? When Haman had gone out on that particular morning we read last Lord's day from the immediate preceding events, when Haman got up that day, he rushed to the palace. Why? Because he wanted to bring Mordecai before the king so that he could be executed. He had already had the gallows built for him and the only thing that was standing between Haman and his idea of what would make his life fulfilled and content, the only thing that stood between him was that awful Jew, Mordecai, who refused to give the sort of respect which he felt he was due.

So Haman rushes to the palace to have Mordecai executed as he thought and ends up leading him around the city square proclaiming, "This is what the king will do for the one in whom he delights." And so he rushes back to whine and to whinge to his family how things had not worked out as he had planned and that's where we picked up the story. He is at home with his family and friends complaining to them how things have not worked out as he had intended and as we saw last week, the cold comfort he had found. "Well, if you have taken on the Jews then you're bound to fall. There is no hope for you now." "Well, you didn't say that the night before when you were telling me to build the gallows, no did you?" And it's now that conversation is going on that the eunuchs come to collect him to the feast that he had been invited to with Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus, just an intimate supper party at the palace.

Well, there we find that at last Esther is in a position to bring before the king what it is that she desires. She has her request. God identifies himself with his people. Now, perhaps because we use that expression just very commonly and frequently, we don't stop to consider just how significant it is to say that we belong to God, we are God's people and he is our God. Perhaps if we spent time reflecting upon that, we would be compelled to fall upon our knees before the presence of our God and just worship and adore the God of all grace. We read in connection with last Lord's day reflection upon God's word from Matthew 25 how Jesus having the vast gamut of humanity arrayed before him, all of humanity at the end of time, and he separates the sheep and the goats. You are familiar with that. You will be familiar how Jesus addresses his people, "Whenever you fed

somebody who was hungry. Whenever you gave a glass of cold water to someone who was thirsty. Whenever you clothed the naked or visited the sick or went to see those who are held in prison." What do you mean? I don't remember doing that. What is Jesus' response at that point? "Well, inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Is that not grace? He's not saying here, "Here's the most important member of the kingdom. Here is some notable saint, some giant of the faith." No, the least. "When you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it for me." Jesus said, "I so identify with my people when you do some good for one of my saints, you're doing it for me and I'll not forget." Isn't that a wonderful thought that this day you could do something, many things, for the saints and everything that you do for the saints, Jesus says, "I take that as being done personally for me and I'll not forget. I'll not forget." Kings might forget. King Ahasuerus forgot what Mordecai did but the King of kings does not forget.

There's the other side of that point, isn't there? Paul on the road to Damascus when he is arrested in his progress by something brighter above the brightness of the noonday sun and Jesus stops him and speaks to him. Well, what are the words that Jesus says to Paul on that occasion? "Why are you persecuting me?" It's not just the good deeds that we might do, then the evil deeds that we do. The evil deeds that an unbeliever might do against God's people, God takes that personally and Jesus makes that clear to Saul as he makes his way to Damascus. Why is he going to Damascus? Because he wants to obtain letters so that having exhausted the number of people he could persecute in Jerusalem, there are a fresh bunch of people he could persecute in Damascus. But Jesus stops him when he arrests his progress on the road to Damascus, "Why are you persecuting me? You do it to them, you're doing it to me for good or for ill." Haman, in seeking to destroy God's people, is picking a fight with God himself.

Another Psalm which we could just as easily have read in conjunction with our study of the book of Esther would be Psalm 40, "I waited patiently for the LORD my God and to me he did incline to my voice and cry to hear. I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear." You see, as we're looking at the story of the book of Esther, it's more than just to show us that the providences of God are being worked out. If by the use of your imagination we place ourselves back into the time of Queen Esther, as it were, walk that same path with her, we see God is working it out and sometimes as we read it, what is revealed to us as the reader is not necessarily revealed in fullness to Esther at the time so we are able to say, "I know what's going to happen. I know that God has got his purposes. I know that it will work out for good in the end." Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, ultimately will be brought to the place where we can say, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." But in the meantime, there is that waiting patiently upon the Lord.

Surely, that's the other aspect of what the book of Esther would press upon our hearts, to trust that God knows what he is doing. How many times as we have remarked, does God in his word say, "Fear not. Trust. Be patient. I know that you're going through a difficult time but you will see that in this time you are learning to trust that the will of God is perfect for you." He's not requiring to say, "I know exactly what God is doing today and I

know exactly what God will do tomorrow." Your confession may be just the exact opposite, "I don't know what God is doing right now." It's almost by definition that providence, the providences of God, are only experienced in retrospect. We look back upon what has happened and say, "Surely, God led us along this way," but at the time, it's not so easy to see. It's only hindsight that is 20/20, it is not what is happening right here and now. "Why is God dealing with me in this way? What is happening?" Well, we look to see God's providences being unfolded before us and recognize it may have to wait until tomorrow or next week or next year before we're able to look back and say, "God was at work even though I didn't know what he was doing at the time." But the blessing for here and now even in the midst of the difficulties, you say, "I am trusting and I am learning to trust that God's purposes even when I don't understand them are right and true and he will accomplish his purposes. No one can stay his hand."

So the request is an obvious one that comes from Esther. Esther says, "Give me my life and the life of my people." Which brings us to our second point: the rope. Haman had his plan. He had built this enormous gallows, 75 feet high, from which he planned to execute Mordecai. But the plan of Haman had an implication for the queen. Unbeknownst to him, sort of the law of unforeseen consequences, he had decided that he wanted to destroy the Jews not realizing that the queen herself was a Jewess and so when he was rising up to seek to destroy God's people, he was also lifting his hand against the queen herself.

Well, there's an implication for Queen Esther and there is also an implication for King Ahasuerus because if the queen were to be taken by this law, this destruction of the Jews, that would hardly look well for the king that his own queen in his own palace would be snatched away from him. It would make him look like an utter fool. No wonder King Ahasuerus rushes out in a rage when he discovers what Haman has been plotting. Now perhaps in the English it does convey something of what Esther is saying, there's sort of a repetition of a single theme. There is a plot to destroy, to kill, to annihilate and the way in which it is expressed in the original is to use the intensive form: it's to wipe off the face of the earth. This is ethnic cleansing with a vengeance, the total annihilation of the people of God.

The king was not slow to see the implications of the very thing which he had agreed to, which he had been bribed to undertake, receiving a colossal sum in silver. Well, go back for just a moment to chapter 6, verse 13. Let me read that for you. It's where we concluded our reading last Lord's day, "Then Haman's 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, the way in which it is translated in our English versions, it misses out a word or at least translates it as a different word because that's how we would say it in English but the word "to fall" is actually found 3 times in that one verse. The way in which the Hebrew uses it, he'd say, "in falling you will fall," which is translated, "you will surely fall." Three times that one word is used in one sentence: if you have begun to fall, then falling you will fall. Not very attractive English but that's what it says.

The next time that we encounter that same word is when Haman is falling on the couch of Queen Esther. Now, tell me that the writer did not intend for us to make that connection? Isn't there a great irony that that prophetic word from Zeresh and the wise men comes through so quickly that he falls upon the couch to beg for his life. Here is Haman who that morning rose in order to begin his pogrom against the Jewish people with the death of Mordecai, now himself falling down upon his knees, falling before Queen Esther, not just a Jew, dare I say, but a Jewish woman and begging for his life. Surely, as we begin to ponder these things, it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God. We take on God, we'll never win and the very rope that he had prepared for the neck of Mordecai is placed around his own neck.

Could there have been any more public demonstration that Haman was undone? Haman wanted to make as public a spectacle as he possibly could. Who needs a scaffold that is 75 feet high? He wanted to make it as public as possible. Mordecai dangling at the end of a rope in a public place so that everyone should see that this is what happens to Jews but it is Haman himself who is left dangling at the end of a rope. And everything that he had is now handed over to Esther who then gives it in charge of Mordecai. If we're thinking about Haman and the wonderful house that he had no doubt built for himself with all that a wealthy man and almost limitless wealth available to him, who can afford to give a bribe of \$200 million or thereabouts? We could anticipate that his property was an extensive one and it was filled with all manner of luxuries. He leaves his house in the morning, the master of many possessions, and by the evening he is dangling at the end of a rope and everything that he has is given over to the very people that he had wanted to persecute to death. No wonder we read in Psalm 2, "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh." God's purposes are being worked out. If you take on God, you will surely fall. In falling, before whom you have begun to fall, falling you will fall. Haman's end is complete. Just as he had perpetrated to destroy, kill, annihilate, he'll wipe off the face of the earth God's chosen people, everything that he had perpetrated against God's people now is turned back on him. What a change a day can bring.

But there's a third element to which I would bring to your attention and that is a ring. The wicked Haman is disposed of but the plot to destroy God's people is still in force and here Ahasuerus shows us his character once again. I'm afraid Ahasuerus does not come off well in the pages of Scripture. Ahasuerus basically wants to wash his hands of the whole affair. We see him in previous chapters as being impetuous. He summons Vashti, his queen, in the first chapter and wants to make a spectacle of her and then ends up without a queen. He takes advice from folk who really aren't qualified to give advice and just make matters worse; he has a poor choice of counselors. And now he has gotten himself into this mess. Why do I say that he has gotten himself into this mess? Well, of course, it wasn't Haman himself who had the direct authority. He brings this with a bribe of about \$200 million worth of silver to the king and the king says, "That's very nice. I'll have that, thank you very much. Go off and do whatever you like for \$200 million."

So the mess is because Ahasuerus has not fulfilled his office as king at all faithfully. He has not thought about the consequences, he has thought about the bribe and as far as he's concerned, it's kind of, "Well, it's a little bit late now. According to the laws of the Medes

and Persians, of course, once a law is set in place, you can't revoke it. It is impossible to do that but I'll give you my signet ring and you can do whatever you like. You can fix it but I'm walking away." Now that it all goes horribly wrong, he says, "Well, you know, I told Mordecai to fix it. It's no longer my problem." He is doing what Pontius Pilate did, walking away and saying, "It's not really my problem." He really seems quite out of his depth if we're being honest. He certainly doesn't want to take responsibility and doesn't that just point up the foolishness of the very way in which they go about writing their laws. You make a law and then later on you discover that it's not going to work out as you want it to or it should do or as you intended but it's too late, you've already made the law. You can't turn it back. What kind of folly is that to make such a commitment that you could never, never, never revoke the law? You can't do that. You'd have to have knowledge of every contingency, every possibility; you'd have to know exactly what it was that you were intending and be very precise and quite clearly, King Ahasuerus has none of these things.

Well, it's one thing to rail against a king who is long since dead for his folly, for his weakness, for his impetuosity, but how might we in examining this particular portion of God's word say, "Now, here is something that is set for a blessing and an encouragement to me"? Well, I bring you back to where we started in Psalm 2. In Psalm 2 as I read and I will remind you as Psalm 2 begins. Psalm 2 is this wonderful messianic that says, "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." That does seem to be like an excellent description of what Haman was trying to do. He had his schemes and his plans and he was seeking to destroy, to kill, to annihilate the people of God. But it's in the midst of this Psalm that we see something which we would only expect if our minds were already filled with a Gospel understanding. We are told and I'll read from verse 7, "I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me,'" here it is, "Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." Wait a moment, weren't we just told that the nations were in fierce opposition? They are raging against God but here surely if we're reading this with our Gospel understanding, you see, this is God's grace at work here. Even in those that are rebelling against him, here is a promise and this is a conversation, we're allowed to eavesdrop on a conversation between God the Father and God the Son and we are able, gently as it were, to intrude upon such an intimate conversation. The Father says to the Son, "Ask of me and I will give even the nations that are in rebellion to be your inheritance. The ends of the earth to be your possession. Ask and I will give." And the Son says, "I am asking. I am asking." In terms of what we're looking at in Esther, is that not the request?

Well, when we think about Esther making her request, she does so pleading. We can find other examples of those who pleaded on the pages of Scripture. You may be familiar with Moses. The children of Israel had rebelled against God. What does Moses do? Well, Moses pleads for the people of God, "Don't destroy them. Don't annihilate them." Or we might think about Paul who in his letter to the church in Rome says, "I would be cast away myself for the people of God, for the Jews." Or Jesus upon the cross, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they are doing." And though that wonderful

statement made from the cross excites our admiration, devotion, dare I say that there is an even more wonderful verse that speaks to the same theme in Hebrews 5:7, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence."

Oh my brethren, do you see how in this portion of Scripture though God is not mentioned, we read it with the eye of faith and we see what God does in redemption. We hear the words of Esther and hear her pleading for God's people, "My people," and by faith we are, as it were, drawn heavenward in our affections. Now hear the pleading of our great Redeemer. The Father says to the Son, "Ask and I will give those who are in rebellion against you." The Son says, "I am asking." But if there is one verse in this portion of Esther to which I would draw your attention in particular it is that, dare I say, throw away line from King Ahasuerus who had no right to make it but points us to one who did. King Ahasuerus says, "But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews. In the name of the king, seal it with a king's ring for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." Might we not we with the eye of faith see beyond the events of so long ago and say, "Now, here is what the King of kings would write and set before us." Here is what the Father might say to the Son, "But you my dear Son, write as you please concerning your people in the name of the King of kings and seal it with the King of kings ring for an edict written in the name of the King of kings and sealed with the ring of the King of kings cannot be revoked."

Why are we able to say, "Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever"? Because the King of kings has sealed my salvation and all who trust in him with an edict which cannot be revoked. We belong to our God. We are his and there is no power in heaven or earth, not things present, not things to come, night height nor depth nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Let's pray.

*Our gracious God, God who art sovereign over the nations, who will hold every rebellion in derision, we thank thee that thou art a God of such matchless grace to promise even to thy Son that thou wilt give the nations who plot against thee if he should ask. We would come with heads bowed and enter into thy presence and we would kiss the Son this day trusting indeed that those who find refuge in him are safe. Even though we may pass through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil. We bless thee our God, our God, that we are thou people. Through Jesus Christ, O Lord, alone do we pray. Amen.*