

“Preserved by Providence”

Introduction to Esther

September 24, 2023

This morning we are beginning a new series in the book of Esther. I’ve entitled this series, “Preserved by Providence.” Esther is one of the most cinematic and most loved stories in the Bible, no doubt a favorite for many of you. Over the next ten weeks or so, we are going to be working our way through book of Esther chapter by chapter. But today I’m going to be presenting a big picture introduction to Esther. So rather than preaching a particular text from Esther, I will be preaching more like Stephen in Acts 7 where he traced the big picture of what God was doing through the ages.

It’s the story of a beautiful young woman whose beauty paves the way for her to become the queen of one of the most powerful kings of the earth. And there she is uniquely positioned to oppose an evil villain, Haman, who is determined to destroy God’s people. With the help of her cousin Mordecai, Esther courageously risks her own life to foil the evil plans of Haman. It’s a story not only full of suspense, and dramatic irony, and surprising turns of events, but also a story of great triumph and justice. In the end the villain receives the very deadly fate that he had sought for God’s people, Mordecai along with Esther is honored with the very honor Haman sought for himself, and the Jewish people are saved. (If not familiar with Esther, read through it this week--with kids)

On the one hand it is the perfect story, as stories go. Yet on the other hand it is a strange book, as books of the Bible go. It is the story about the deliverance of God’s people who are in danger of being exterminated. Yet the story contains no mention of God *at all*. There are no specific prayers recorded in Esther, no reference to God’s law or sacrifices. No priesthood, no temple, no worship. So what are we to gain from a book that seems almost secular in nature? How are we to see God when He is unseen.

What we will discover is that the seeming absence of God in the book of Esther reveals an aspect of God’s superintendence of this world that is foundational to any believer’s hope. And that foundation of hope is what we call *God’s providence*.

God’s providence has to do with His work of not only preserving and providing for His creation but also directing the course of history to His intended end. If all of creation through all of time and history is the orchestra, God is the conductor. And providence is the directing of His hands, conducting the very symphony that He Himself has composed.

A simple definition of Providence as we will see it in Esther:

Providence: God’s unseen hand directing the course of history through the normal actions of people in the normal course of life.

This is the primary way in which we are going to see God’s providence in the book of Esther. God working behind the scenes through the normal actions of people and the normal course of life to bring about His intended purpose. Yet there is much more to the doctrine of Providence. For example, it also includes God’s work of providing for and preserving His creation.

For example, yesterday we all observed God’s providence, though we may not have called it that. We simply said, “It rained!” because it appeared to be natural to us. But Job 37:5-6 says it this way: ***“God thunders with His voice wondrously, doing great things which we cannot comprehend. For to the snow He says, ‘Fall on the earth,’ And to the downpour and the rain, ‘Be strong!’”*** (Job 37:5-6). Weather is one of the anonymous ways God works in this world. It appears to be natural and yet it is by the unseen hand of God.

Job 37 goes on to say: *“He seals the hand of every man, that all men may know His work. Then the beast goes into its lair, and remains in its den. Out of the south comes the storm, and out of the north the cold. From the breath of God ice is made, and the expanse of the waters is frozen. Also with moisture He loads the thick cloud; He disperses the cloud of His lightning. And it changes direction, turning around by His guidance, that it may do whatever He commands it on the face of the inhabited earth. Whether for correction, or for His world, or for lovingkindness, **He causes it to happen.**”*

Wind, hail, snow, rain, hurricanes, tsunamis—all by the hand of God. Behold His providence! Yet even more spectacular is how God providentially directs the course of human history by superintending, not just inanimate things

like weather, but the conscious free choices and actions of people such that they contribute to God's ultimate purposes. This is what theologians call concurrence. God in some mysterious way interacts with and superintends human beings in such a way that while they make genuine conscious choices according to their own desires, in doing them, they unwittingly carry out the greater purposes of God.

Because there is mystery involved, theologians have differing perspectives regarding the degree and the extent to which God superintends our actions. But no serious student of the Bible can deny that God acts in this way. Even when man makes sinful choices, God can (with no evil of His own) cause those sinful choices to serve His greater and holy purposes.

The most significant example of this is the cross of Christ. Evil men, according to their own malicious desires, crucified the Son of God on a Roman cross. Yet this was not apart from God's hand. In fact, it was the fulfillment of God's plan. Consider how Acts 2:23 gives us two answers to the question of who is responsible for Jesus' death: "**This Man [Jesus], delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death**" (Acts 2:23). The Jews to whom Peter is preaching are responsible for Jesus' death—they did it according to their own malicious desires. And yet in the same breath Peter says it was according to God's predetermined plan, worked out by His providence.

Or consider the disciple's prayer in Acts 4:27-28: "*For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.* So all of these people conspired against Jesus because they wanted to. Yet not apart from God's hand to fulfill God's plan. Behold the providence of God!

Of course, the death of Jesus is not the only example of God providentially working through the actions of others. There are countless examples throughout the Scriptures.¹ One of the most classic is the story of Joseph. His brothers sold him into slavery, yet God was providentially working in

Joseph's life through many ups and downs to bring him to a place of great leadership in Egypt where he rescued his family from famine. When Joseph finally confronted his brothers he said, "**And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive**" (Gen 50:20). God was providentially working through Joseph's suffering and in conjunction with his brothers' sinful choices so much so that Joseph could say, "**It was not you who sent me here, but God**" (Gen 45:8).

Yet of all the examples of God's providence in the Bible, the book of Esther is the most concentrated. In the words of Mark Dever, Esther is "one of the longest and most sustained meditations of the sovereignty and providence of God in the whole Bible."² Indeed, it is an extended illustration of Rom 8:28: "God causes *all things* to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God is at work in the big picture of our lives, and He is also at work in the details. Right down to things so seemingly random as the casting of lots. Prov 16:33 says, "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord."

In the words of Karen Jobes, **Providence means that "God, in some invisible and inscrutable way, governs all creatures, actions, and circumstances through the normal and the ordinary course of human life, without the intervention of miracles"** (Karen Jobes).³

That last phrase is important to the book of Esther. There are two means through which God may deliver His people. He may do so by means of the *miracles* like He did when He brought Israel out of Egypt with 10 plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. Or He may deliver His people as He did in Esther by means of His *providence*—working behind the scenes through the normal course of human life to bring events to their God-intended end.

By the way, we'd all love to see God do the miraculous, but when we learn to discern the intricacies of God's providence, we will discover that providence displays much more impressively the wisdom and power of God to accomplish His ways. It's one thing to *overpower* with a miracle. It's quite another to work with such skill and wisdom and discrete superintendence

¹ 1Kings 12:15 (2Chron 10:15); 1Kings 22:34 (2Chron 18:33); Ezra 1:1-4, etc.

² Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, pg. 454.

³ Karen Jobes, *The NIV Application Commentary: Esther*, pg. 43.

that even those who seek to oppose you will find themselves unwittingly serving its purpose.

While the mystery of divine providence often exceeds our human understanding, it is nonetheless a great source of comfort to those who fear the Lord. Millard Erickson offers these encouraging words:

“Providence in certain ways is central to the conduct of the Christian life. It means we are able to live in the assurance that God is present and active in our lives. We are in His care and can therefore face the future confidently, knowing that things are not happening merely by chance. We can pray, knowing that God hears and acts upon our prayers. We can face danger, knowing that he is not unaware [nor] uninvolved.”⁴

This is the kind of comfort and hope that Esther provides for those who have eyes to see God’s providence. And take careful note that it is not automatic for us to see God’s hand of providence in the course of life unless our eyes have been trained to see it. And the way we train our eyes to see it is by reading the Bible. There are many places in the OT that explicitly point to God’s providence working behind the scenes,⁵ so that when we come to Esther where God seems hidden or when we seek to discern God’s hand in our own lives, we can be confident that God’s hand is indeed at work. Esther is the last of the historical books, so by the time we get to Esther our eyes should be trained to see God’s hand of providence at work behind the scenes.

In fact, the hiddenness of God in Esther is rather strategic and essential to the message of the book. To understand the thrust of Esther, we need to grasp its historical setting. Back in Deut 28, the Lord warned Israel as to what would happen if they broke their covenant with God and disregarded His law: **“If you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you...The Lord will drive you and the king you**

set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers....Then the Lord will scatter you among the nations, from one end of the earth to the other” (Dt. 28:15, 36, 64).

As you know, Israel did forsake God’s covenant and law resulting in a divided kingdom (Israel in the North and Judah in the South). And true to His promise to drive them out of the land because of their sin, God raised up the Assyrians to take Israel into exile (722 BC) and later raised up the pagan Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, who conquered Jerusalem, carried the Jews off into exile in Babylon and burned the temple (586 B.C.).

Notice that it was by God’s providence that the Assyrians rose to power over Israel as an unwitting tool of God’s discipline on Israel (Dan 2:21—“It is [God] who changes the times and....He removes and establishes kings.”). It was by God’s providence that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians too Judah into exile. Not because Neb was seeking to serve the God of heaven, but because God was supernaturally working in conjunction with Nebuchadnezzar’s selfish desires to fulfill His promise. Then it was during the Babylonian exile that God raised up the prophet Jeremiah to assure God’s people that He would bring them back from captivity and restore them to their land (Jer 30:3).

But before God brought them back, he also fulfilled his promise to judge the Babylonians. So God raised up the Persian empire to conquer the Babylonians (Dan 5). Then God put it in the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to allow the Jews to return to their homeland. Of course, Cyrus had his own purpose of seeking to stabilize his kingdom, but God was working out a greater purpose to restore His people according to His promise. Notice the language of Providence in Ezra 1:1:

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, *the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia*, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom...saying, “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the

⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (unabridged, one-volume edition), pg. 387-388.

⁵ For example, 1Kings 12:15 (2Chron 10:15): “So the king did not listen to the people; for it was a *turn of events from the LORD*, that He might establish His word, which the LORD spoke through Ahijah.”

earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:1-4).

In response to Cyrus’s decree, three waves of Jews went back to Jerusalem. The first under Zerubbabel, the second under Ezra and the third under Nehemiah (Esther fits chronologically between Ezra chapters 6&7). But not all the Jews returned. Some chose to stay in Persia. And that is where Esther finds herself. Living in Persia under the reign of king Ahasuerus (better known as King Xerxes).

The big question for Jews like Esther and Mordecai still living in Persia would have been, are we still God’s people in Covenant relationship with Him? *Is God with us or is He absent?* Not only are they out of the promised land, they have no temple, or priest to offer sacrifices. How can they be restored to God? And to make matters worse, Haman has convinced king Ahasuerus to approve an edict to exterminate the Jews throughout the entire kingdom. They have no king, no army, no way to defend themselves. They appear to be just a defenseless minority.

Yet God has providentially raised up Esther and Mordecai for such as time as this to be instruments in the hand of God to deliver His people, not by some great miracle, but through His superintendence of human actions to serve His greater purpose.

Esther teaches us that “Even when God is most hidden, He is still present and working to protect and deliver His chosen people.”⁶ As Karen Jobes put it, “The book of Esther is the most true-to-life example of God’s providence precisely because God seems absent. Even in the most pagan corner of the world, God is ruling all things to the benefit of His people and to the glory of His name.”⁷

⁶ *ESV Study Bible*, pg. 851.

⁷ Karen Jobes, *The NIV Application Commentary: Esther*, pg. 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*

When put Esther in the whole context of the Bible story we discover that it is also our story. God was not only preserving the Jewish people, He was also preserving the promise of *our* hope in Christ to come.

The message of Esther: The providence of God is always working, ensuring that His promises will be fulfilled to preserve and deliver His people through whom Christ would come to bring salvation to the world.

As we work through this amazing account of God’s providence, we will see that *God’s sovereign purposes cannot be thwarted*. We will see that *human responsibility cannot be avoided*. God’s providence does not negate our responsibility to act with courageous resolve. And we will see that *the absolute absurdity of evil*. That those who oppose God’s people (and therefore oppose God Himself), will “only succeed in bringing about their own destruction.”⁸

In many ways our world today is similar to Esther’s. We live in a time when governing authority is often indifferent or even hostile to our faith and biblical values. The events of our daily lives are normally mundane with only rare occurrences of the miraculous, yet never lacking God’s providential working. And we, like Esther and Mordecai, are called to courageously engage this world, trusting in God’s providence to provide for us and protect us in the undertaking of our responsibilities as well as in our crises.⁹

Oh Church, be encouraged that “God providentially watches over His own...and no power leveled against them can ultimately prevail.”¹⁰

The great testimony of God’s providence throughout Scripture, particularly in Esther, has tremendous implications for our faith walk today:

- We can *take comfort* in our trials, knowing that God is working for good.
- We can *be courageous*, trusting God to honor our obedience and faith.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

- We can *be confident*, even in crisis because God is with us, therefore we have hope.¹¹

So let's train our eyes to see God's providential care and faithfulness working through the big picture and the details of our lives.

We might be tempted to look to a lot of places for deliverance in times of trouble. But there is only One who ultimately delivers. God may work through King Ahasuerus to reverse an edict. He may work through Mordecai to give counsel. He may work through Esther, risking her life to stand up for God's people. But in the end, there is only one deliverer: The Sovereign Lord!

What are you waiting to be delivered from today? Every situation, whether you can see evidence of God's hand in it or not, is an opportunity to experience God's intervening grace. "There are times in our lives when we do not see God...times when we do not hear God...times when we do not feel God. But He has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. Our trust in His presence is not based on our feelings but on His faithfulness."¹²

I close with this challenge from Mark Dever: "Whatever you are waiting to be delivered from will [reveal] whom you regard as your deliverer."¹³

¹¹ Adapted from Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, pg. 460-462.

¹² Landon Dowden, *Exalting Jesus in Esther* (Christ-centered Exposition), pg. 9.

¹³ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, pg. 463.