

words of John Milton, “Remember, remember the fifth of November, the Gunpowder treason and plot, I know of no reason why the Gunpowder treason should ever be forgot.”

Historians have speculated how the world might be different today if that anonymous letter had never been sent and the plot of the Catholic conspirators had not been uncovered before it was too late. The fact is that we will never know because the letter was sent, which illustrates how history sometimes turns upon the hinge of the smallest of occurrences.

Similarly, the book of Esther hinges upon one small, seemingly insignificant sentence at the beginning of chapter 6. The book of 10 chapters can be divided right down the middle into two sections, chapters 1-5 are the set-up, and in chapters 6-10 we see everything reversed. All the plans of Haman come crashing down in a most astounding reversal.

Remember that as we come to chapter 6, the odds are seemingly stacked against Esther, Mordecai, and the nation of Israel. King Ahasuerus has promoted Haman, the enemy of the Jews, above all the other officials of the king. He has given him his signet ring and authorized him to sign into law an edict condemning every Jew in the kingdom to death. Last week, we saw Haman hatch a plot to have Mordecai impaled upon a gallows (really a pike) 75 feet high, to put on full display the ignominy and shame that comes upon anyone who dares not to bow down to Haman. From all appearances, it seems that there is not much hope for Mordecai. The king gave Haman authority to put the whole nation to death, it seems inevitable that he will also give him permission to kill one insignificant man. Neither Mordecai nor Esther knew it, but time was running out.

Which brings us to chapter 6, where we read this in verse 1,

On that night the king could not sleep.

Stop right there. This event is the hinge in the narrative, upon which the whole story turns. So what? You might say. What’s the big deal? Remember the central theme of the book of Esther. God is basically an afterthought from a human point-of-view. We’ve said it a lot, but His name is never mentioned in the text. The world had basically forgotten about God. But God had not forgotten about the world, and especially His people. Remember how we saw a couple weeks ago that God had sworn by an oath that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in the offspring of Abraham.

Now, on the very night when Haman is building a gallows for Mordecai, at just the right moment, when the clock is ticking down to zero, the king can’t sleep. Then we read this,

And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. ² And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

Wow! What are the chances? He just happened to be reminded of the good deed that Mordecai had performed five years earlier on the very night before Mordecai's execution was going to be requested. We've said it a lot through this series on Esther, but I say it again, there are no coincidences with God. It should not come as a surprise to us that God chose to use the most ordinary of means to overturn the schemes of Haman. When His truth is being suppressed in this world, He will often intervene in a way that is easily mistaken or missed by those who refuse to acknowledge Him.

Paul says this about the way God works in a wicked and adulterous generation, *"28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done."* (Romans 1:28) Do you see those words God gave them up? Those are some of the most terrible words in all the Scriptures. When men refuse to acknowledge God, God in His justice gives them exactly what they are seeking. When people decide they don't want God, God gives them what they want. It is one of the most terrible realities of our time that God has been largely forgotten and removed to the periphery of life, because one of His judgments on this generation is His apparent absence. He is not absent, but He is merely allowing men to reap what they sow. He has given us up to a debased mind.

That's why I say that it's not surprising that God worked in secret in the days of Esther. He is working undercover. The restlessness of this king on the very night before Haman was going to come to him to request the murder of Mordecai did not just happen by chance. Remember Proverbs 21:1, *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will."* This man with such great authority and power in the world was subject to the inward churning of anxiety that leads to sleeplessness. In his sleepless anxiety, his heart was turned to Mordecai.

We are confronted in the book of Esther with what I consider to be one of the lost doctrines of our time: God's Providence. It is not surprising that this doctrine is being neglected in our time because it is one of the highest and the deepest of all doctrines. We are ultimately incapable of fully understanding it. It is the truth which caused the great Apostle Paul, one of the greatest minds in history, to exclaim,

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

We don't like depth in our times. It's ironic that in an age that prides itself as being intellectually enlightened, we are living in the shallows. It is the age of the tweet, when our understandings have been so compressed and desensitized to absolute truth that we prefer to

think only 250 characters at a time. It is the age of the headline, when news organizations know people don't read entire articles, so they stuff what they really want people to think in the headline. It is an age when all reality has been contracted into the autonomous self. Because God has been removed from our thinking, we have turned inward to self to find meaning, purpose, and truth. The problem is that we are too small to bear the full weight of reality alone. So truth has been shrunk down into the idolatrous image of the self, and oddly, it is different from one self to another. "Speak your truth," we say to one another.

But tonight, we are here to consider God's Truth, not my truth. We are confronted in the Scriptures with what Paul calls in 1 Corinthians 2 "*the deep things of God,*" and in Acts to the Ephesian elders, "*The whole counsel of God.*" These are truths that cannot fit into 250 characters or into a headline. In order to study the doctrine of God's Providence, we must study the Scriptures as a complete, united whole. We must approach the whole Bible with great awe and reverence, and with a sense of childlike wonder and deep desire to be fed by the God whose revelation it is.

David F. Wells identifies what he believes to be the fundamental problem in the evangelical world today as the fact that

"God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, His grace is too ordinary, His judgment is too benign, His gospel is too easy, and His Christ is too common." He says, "God is believed but He is not of much consequence to those who believe." He argues that "The age in which we are living is offering the church a counterfeit reality with the power to destroy what the church is. It is certainly robbing the church of its insight into the real meaning of life, a foundationally moral insight, because it is robbing the church of its ability to take its bearings from God, who is centrally holy."

As Pastor Kevin said a couple Sundays ago, "We are living in perilous times." God is on the outskirts, the periphery of life, not at the center. In many ways, that is exactly the kind of world which Esther and Mordecai inhabited. They were caught up in the midst of a pagan, idolatrous, Zoroastrian, Persian culture in which the living God was almost a distant memory of times past. Yet God remained, just as He remains today. He is the God who was, and who is, and who is to come. He remains the God of Abraham and the God of Jacob. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the offspring of Abraham and the seed of David.

So, are you ready to consider the deep things of God with me tonight? Let's open the Scriptures and hear what God has revealed about His providence. Now, God's providence does not mean that He controls His creation like a puppeteer. He has not created a robotic, mechanical world. He has created an organic, living, moving, complex, yet beautifully balanced and intricately interwoven world, which we, as human beings, inhabit as morally free agents. Therefore, the traditional, biblical understanding of God's providence is quite nuanced, and has been divided into three parts or modes:

1. Preservation

2. Governance
3. Concurrence

I'm going to quote from John Webster to help unpack each of these. Concerning preservation, he says,

"In preservation God acts upon and within created reality to hold it in being, maintaining by his power and goodness the order of nature and history that he has established at the act of creation."

This is the principle expounded by the author of Hebrews in the words, ³ *He (Jesus Christ) is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. (Hebrews 1:3a)* Paul further expounds the same truth in Colossians 1, ¹⁶ *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:16-17)* What God has created, He also sustains, or preserves. He is the Creator and the Sustainer, the one upholding the universe, keeping the laws of nature and the laws of morality in motion. The very ground upon which I am standing is made up of millions upon millions of atoms in constant motion, each being held together by God.

Webster says this about God's governance,

"In his acts of government, God directs creation to its goal, ensuring that the fulfillment he has purposed for it will be attained." This is the principle of Romans 8:28, *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."* This means that God is involved in every detail of our lives. All things means all things. We, because of our limited perspective, inevitably question this. Can tragedy be good? Can ill health be good? Can bereavement be good? But the Christian is able to answer such questions in the affirmative because we understand that the good that God has in view for us is not materialistic or temporal, but spiritual and eternal. We will not be able to fully understand why God allows certain things to happen until the end, but we do know that it will all make sense once we are there. Ultimately, God will raise us at the last day and give us glorified, resurrected bodies, and we will be with Him forevermore. This great truth is what gives us assurance for the future. Paul says, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."* (Romans 8:18) The fact of God's governance is what gives us the living hope that all things will work together for good. Even the trials—even our death!—is for our good now that we are in Christ Jesus. To die is gain.

Concerning concurrence, Webster says,

"Concurrence specifies this preserving activity by speaking of how God's providential work is not simply a force brought to bear upon creation from outside, but is integral or interior to creation: providence works through creaturely working."

It is the principle of Philippians 2:12-13, *"¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* This is what I meant when I said God does not control His creation like a puppeteer. Rather, He works through creaturely working. God has granted us, as human beings, self-agency, or free will. So when we talk about God's providence, we are not talking about determinism or fatalism. God does not force us to do anything. But He does work in us to produce the love of God, which becomes the power for our obedience. God's grace working in the human soul is the power that brings the human soul into loving surrender to God's good, pleasing, and perfect will. God does not want robotic obedience. He wants loving obedience. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ which makes loving obedience possible for sinners like us.

That is how it works in believers, but God is also sovereign in ensuring that all who work against Him will not succeed in the end. The Scriptures are replete with statements to this effect. Psalm 9:15-16 says, *"¹⁵ The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid, their own foot has been caught. ¹⁶ The Lord has made himself known; he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands."*

Now, let's witness a living example of these things in Esther 6:

"³ And the king said, 'What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?' The king's young men who attended him said, 'Nothing has been done for him.'" ⁴ And the king said, 'Who is in the court?' Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. ⁵ And the king's young men told him, 'Haman is there, standing in the court.'" And the king said, "Let him come in."⁶ So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" ⁷ And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, ⁸ let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. ⁹ And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" ¹⁰ Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned."¹¹ So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

What a stunning reversal! Haman, who thought he would be the executioner of Mordecai, becomes the author and executor of his honor. Ironically, it is his own words which describe the honor that he will have to confer upon his most despised enemy. Can you imagine the moment Haman heard the king utter Mordecai's name? His heart must have nearly exploded with the terror of having to honor the man he desired to kill. All that anger and rage that he so desired

to be let loose upon Mordecai would never come to fulfillment. He would have to live, or die, forever holding on to the murderous anger and resentment that he harbored inside.

The lesson we learn from this is very simple, and it is the message that is central to the way of salvation and blessing from God:

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. (Proverbs 16:18)

Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor. (Proverbs 18:12)

A man's pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor. (Proverbs 29:23)

This is the wisdom of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments.

Young men, in the same way, submit yourselves to your elders. And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, so that in due time He may exalt you. (1 Peter 5:5-6)

Jesus taught this more clearly than anyone else,

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:1-4)

¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:11-12)

Who is the one whom God delights to honor? The one who humbles himself. It is the humble to whom God gives grace, but He is opposed to the proud. Returning to the text,

¹² Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered.

Notice how humble Mordecai responds to such honor. He simply returns to the king's gate, back to his service. He doesn't change once the king honors him. I think the only explanation for this is that Mordecai was a man of faith, who lived for the praises of God and not of man. It reminds me of Jesus' teaching to His disciples, *¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'*" (Luke 17:10)

Haman, on the other hand, the man who thought himself worthy of all the honor, went home utterly humiliated.

¹³ 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."

¹⁴ While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

We'll end on that cliffhanger for tonight. Let me leave you with a question. Have you humbled yourself before the Lord? Do you trust Him? Pastor Kevin quoted Horatio Spafford on Sunday, the author of the hymn "It Is Well With My Soul," who lost his four daughters in a tragic shipwreck in the Atlantic. In the midst of circumstances that would cause many to question God, he said this, "I want to live within His sovereign, providential will and seek to be like Him and let the things of this life and this existence be under His control and not mine. 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'"

That's what God is telling us we can do in Esther chapter 6. He's showing us that we can trust Him, even today. Do you remember when Jesus calmed the storm? Do you remember what He was doing when the storm was raging? He was sleeping in the stern of the boat. His disciples were in a state of panic. I think Jesus was showing us just how much peace we can have when we know that God is our Father. After Jesus calmed the storm with a word, he asked his disciples, *"Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40)* The storms of the world are raging around us today, and I believe Jesus is asking us the same thing tonight. His Spirit wants us to consider these questions. Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? Oswald Sanders said this, "It should be noted that God is not only a sovereign Lord who can do as He wills, but also a loving Father whose paternity will never clash with His sovereignty...The fatherhood of God is our guarantee that His sovereignty will never require of us anything that will not in the long run be in our highest interests." The God who could overturn the plans of Haman with one sleepless night can certainly protect you. God has not forgotten His people. Trust in the Lord tonight. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your path straight.