

The Unseen Hand of God: An Introduction To the Book of Esther

Notes

I. The Historical Context & Literary Features of Esther

Where do God's people find themselves in the book of Esther?

- During the time of the book of Esther, (approx. **480 B.C.**), the entire Jewish nation remained under the authority of their Persian overlords.
- Because of their repeated rebellion toward God (I-II Kings), the Jews were conquered by the Babylonians around **586 B.C.** & taken into exile. (Isa. 46:8-10)
- In **539 B.C.**, while in exile, the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians, but the Jews remained exiled under their new captors. (Daniel 5)

Shortly after the Persian takeover, in approximately **538 B.C.**, (~60 years prior to the book of Esther), something very interesting happened.

- As prophesied by Isaiah, the Persian king "Cyrus" issued a decree that allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. (See Isaiah 44:24-28; 45:1-13)
- Cyrus even allocated Persian funds to sponsor the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple! (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5)
- Now, before you get the wrong idea, let me hasten to add that Cyrus did the same thing for multiple other conquered people groups—including rebuilding the temples of many false gods. So, to be clear, Cyrus's motivations were strictly political, not spiritual.
- Nevertheless, it was a glimmer of hope for God's people. Many returned to begin rebuilding the Temple under the leadership of "Zerubbabel". (Ezra 1-6)

However, ~~for reasons unknown to us~~, when the opportunity to return came, **MANY JEWS DID NOT RETURN** to the Promised Land. In fact, **MOST** stayed.

- Some had surely grown comfortable in the allure of affluent pagan society—they had lost the faith for love of the world. (I Jn. 2:15-17; Matt. 6:24)
- But perhaps others did not want to return because they no longer believed that God was with them? **They felt abandoned and forsaken by God.**
- They were afraid to believe that the Lord could still love them after the depth of their wickedness against him. (Isaiah 5; Daniel 9)
- After all, wasn't it the fierce judgment of God that caused their ancestors to be conquered & exiled for their sins? How could God still love them?

It is also important to mention that by the time that the decree of Cyrus was given (538 B.C.), and especially by the time of Esther 60 years later (480 B.C.), **most (if not all) of the Jews who had ever even seen the Temple, or the Promised Land, or the priesthood, or the feasts of Israel, had died.**

- The Jews who were alive during the time of Cyrus—and especially Esther—were primarily those born in the days of captivity—born in a foreign land.
- They had no personal experience with the glory which God's people had formerly enjoyed in Israel and Judah—those were just old stories to them.

But whether you were among those who returned to Judah or those who remained in other parts of the Persian empire, we need to understand that:

- **In the days of Esther, ALL of God's people were living in a foreign-owned land, under foreign rule, foreign religions, and foreign laws.**
- Their entire worldview, lifestyle, culture, & beliefs as God's people had been shattered. They were in a fragile position with an uncertain future.
- **Moreover, their bold claim that Yahweh—the mighty conqueror of the Egypt of old—was the one true God and that they were his chosen people, looked utterly foolish and patently disproven to all human reason by the reality that they were, in fact, a conquered people, exiled in a foreign land.**
- **In the days of Esther, the Jews had no land, no king, and no power. To all human senses, God seemed totally silent, distant, and disinterested.**

Thus, the looming question hanging over the minds and hearts of God's people in the book of Esther is this:

Is God still with us? Does God still love us? Are his covenant promises still true? Or have we been forsaken by God because of our sins?

These fearful questions are vividly illustrated and brought right to our attention by some of the **UNIQUE LITERARY FEATURES** of the book of Esther.

1. **Neither God (generally), nor God's name (particularly) are ever mentioned in the book of Esther.** (That is quite strange for a book of the Bible!)

- This is an intentional feature designed to force the deep question of the times up to the surface: Is God still with us? Or has God forsaken us?

2. **While the book of Esther is an inspired book of holy Scripture, it is not presented as "the Word of the Lord," or as a prophetic message at all.**

- Instead, the book is simply written as human reporting of historical events—**God himself is totally silent in the book.**
- Again, this literary feature is intentional. It is meant to force the reader to ask the question: Where is God in all of this? Is he with us? Is he for us?

3. **There are no miracles or supernatural events in the book of Esther.**

- Unlike the glorious power of God displayed in the Exodus, in the days of Elijah, or even in the day of Jesus, the book of Esther is devoid of miracles.
- Instead, the book of Esther is much more like the majority of human history & like the lives that we all live each day. To all human senses Esther is just a collection of ordinary historical events, with ordinary people, and ordinary days unfolding in what seems like a random or perhaps "lucky" way.
- But just like with the other two literary features, the absence of great visible gestures of God's supernatural power is meant to raise the question:
Where is the hand of God in the unfolding events of this world? Is God with us? Is God leading us? Is God watching over us? Does God care at all?

The book of Esther not only **RAISES** these important theological questions, but it also **ANSWERS** them.

- It answers them by showing us that even when God seems silent, distant, or disinterested according to our human senses, and even when the hand of God seems totally hidden from our view, the God of the covenant is ever-faithful to his people even when they have not been faithful to him.
- The God of the covenant is **SOVEREIGNLY** working all things according to his perfect **PROVIDENCE** so that the promise of **Rom. 8:28** is always true:

Our God is always working all things together for the good of his chosen people, those who have been called according to his purpose.

- We are going to see these things worked out in the coming weeks as we journey through the book of Esther. But with our remaining time today I want to endeavor to clearly define what we mean when we say that **God is SOVEREIGN**, and what we mean when we talk about **God's PROVIDENCE**.

II. Define Key Theological Terms: Divine Sovereignty & Divine Providence

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

- God's sovereignty is something we hear Christian's reference all the time. But what does divine sovereignty actually mean?
- When we say that God is sovereign we are saying that he alone has ultimate authority and power over all creation.**
- We are saying that Yahweh—the Triune Creator of all things—stands as *the unsurpassable Ruler over everything which has ever or shall ever exist*.
- To put it **negatively**, when we say that God is absolutely sovereign over all creation we are saying that:
There is no such thing as a demon in hell, a disaster upon the earth, a disease in the body, a grain of sand upon the shore, a termite in the forest, a comet soaring through the cosmos, an army marching upon an enemy, or a monarch perched upon his throne over which the one true God of the Bible does not have absolute and unimpeachable authority, and over which God does not irresistibly rule in perfect wisdom & inexhaustible power.

That is what we mean when we say that GOD IS SOVEREIGN. Isn't this how the Bible continually speaks of our God? (Isa. 45:7-9; Prov. 16:33; Lam. 3:37-39; Col. 1:16-17)

- The **Psalms & Prophets** repeatedly declare: *"Our God is in the heavens"*, (i.e. above all earthly powers), & that *"he does ALL that he pleases"*. (Psalm 115:3)
- In **I Timothy**, Paul specifically calls God *"the King of the ages"*, *"the blessed and only Sovereign"*, & the *"King of kings and Lord of lords"*. (I Tim. 1:17; 6:14-15)
- Jesus tells us in **Matthew 5:45** that the Sun does not simply rise, as if it were a clock wound up and left to run its course, but rather that the Sun is God's Sun, and that God himself is the one who, day by day, by his sovereign authority & power, causes it to shine upon the earth and give light & life.
- Nebuchadnezzar**, who was the most powerful ruler on earth, had his mind & throne taken away from him so that for 7 years he behaved as a beast of the field until he would humble himself before the sovereignty of God. Once his reason returned, what did Nebuchadnezzar say? (Read Dan. 4:34-35)
- Even **the worst sin ever committed in history—the murder of Jesus Christ—was under God's direct sovereign authority & will**. (Read Acts 4:27-28; Isa. 53:10)
- This is who the God of the Bible actually is. This is who he has always been. All things in all places at all times exist under his sovereign authority.**

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

(See Heidelberg Catechism Q26-28; Belgic Confession Article 13; Westminster Confession of Faith Ch. 6)

- Sometimes people **conflate** divine sovereignty and divine providence because of their close relationship. **But it is important to distinguish them.**
- Divine providence is the application of divine sovereignty to the unfolding motions of creation—from the least to the greatest—so that all things in all places at all times are so governed by God's wise & loving hand as to perfectly fulfill his holy purpose—especially for the sake of his Church.**
- To state it **negatively**: *Nothing is ever able to ultimately thwart God's will, but rather, from the least falling of a leaf to the greatest atrocity of sinful men, all things are being so governed by God's sovereign power as to be turned and worked for "good"—especially to those who love him.* (Rom. 8:28)
- We are saying that God not only has sovereign power and authority over all things, but that God exercises precise and particular care over every single detail of life—even the evils of men—in order to make all things accomplish his holy will and yield eternal blessings for his chosen people.

Does this mean that there is no such thing as evil or morality if God's will is "always being done", even in the evils of men? No. Not at all.

- God's **MORAL WILL** can be and often is broken by the free choices which sinful men make in rebellion. Yet, what we are saying is that *even in those wicked things which sinful men and fallen angels do, God is working good even through those evils according to his own SOVEREIGN WILL & power.*
- In the ultimate sense, it is IMPOSSIBLE for anything in this world to work toward anything other than your eternal good if you are a Christian. Why?**
- B/C the **SOVEREIGN GOD** who rules and reigns over all things in perfect wisdom & power is **PROVIDENTIALLY** governing the outworking of every motion of creation—from the least to the greatest—in order to make all things work for your everlasting benefit & to reveal his everlasting glory.
- Nothing can ever befall you but what must, by God's irresistible sovereign authority, work for your everlasting good if you are his beloved child.**

(Rom. 8:31-39)

Beloved, these are the promises of God for you as his beloved child! This is what Romans 8:28 & the whole book of Esther are designed to teach us.

- What peace should fill the hearts of God's children who dwell under his sovereign hand! What hope we should have at every hour & circumstance!
- What confidence should undergird us & give strength to our souls if only we would believe the truth about God as revealed & promised in his Word!
- Just think: What would be the difference in your life if you held fast to these truths which are given to us like bread for the soul in the Word of God?**
- How much needless & fruitless anxiety would be silenced & evicted from our hearts if only we learned to walk by faith in God's unfailing love?
- Moreover, consider what sort of faithful devotion to God we would have, even in the face of great difficulties, struggles, fears, & persecutions, if we truly believed that *"our God is in the heavens and does all that he pleases,"* and that he is *"working ALL THINGS together for the good"* of his people?

Esther is an unparalleled picture of God's absolute sovereignty, perfect providence, & unfailing love even when his hand is unseen & his voice unheard.

- Esther is all about showing us that these very truths—bold & audacious as they may seem to our feeble senses & weak faith—are, nevertheless, proven true by our loving Father time and time again as he faithfully cares for his people even when his people have, all but forgotten him.**
- These are the truths that the people of God desperately needed to know & believe in the days of Esther.
- And these are the truths which God used the days of Esther to teach to his people for all time. Let us believe the truth and walk in it always!

Application:

Learn to trace the hidden hand of God through the perfect providence he sends for your everlasting good and his everlasting glory.

