

The Plot Thickens

Esther 2:19–3:15

By [David Strain](#)

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Now if you would please turn with me to the book of Esther, chapter 2 - Esther chapter 2. We're going to be reading from verse 19 to the end of chapter 3. Before we do that, let me highlight a couple of themes that I want you to be looking out for. One of the major thematic emphases of the book of Esther really throughout the book is the providence of God, and that is particularly to the fore in this portion of the story. But we'll also see that the providence of God provides the context and becomes the theatre within which a conflict, an age-old conflict continues to be expressed between the people of God and the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, the kingdom of Satan. So we're going to turn our attention now to the reading of God's Word. Before we do that, would you bow your heads with me as we pray?

Our Lord, spread before us now is Your holy and inerrant Word. Give to all of us ears to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to His church. In Jesus' name, amen.

Esther chapter 2 at verse 19. This is God's own Word:

Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay

homage. Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, 'Why do you transgress the king's command?' And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries.' So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, 'The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.'

Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Amen, and we bless God that He has spoken to us in His holy and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

“God’s works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving and governing, all His creatures and all their actions.” That is the helpful definition of the doctrine of providence provided by the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Defining providence, however, is one thing; discerning providence at work, understanding the design of providence in our lives, that is another thing entirely. Most of us have come to the oftentimes perplexing realization. Frequently in the midst of very painful life events, the tracing out the complex web of design intentionality, governing every event and every consequence of every event, that is simply beyond us and we are left, at times, scratching our heads wondering what in the world the Lord may be doing in this hard providence. As we saw when we looked at Esther chapter 1, in the words of the puritan John Flavel, “Providence is like a Hebrew word; it is only understood when read backwards.” And even then, even with hindsight, providence is only ever understood by us partially and imperfectly.

Let me give you an example. When Michael Riley, when his aunt was shot and killed by an unstable young man wielding a gun, everyone connected to his family must have wondered what God might have been doing in this terrible tragedy. With the life insurance money, his grandmother built for Michael a basketball court and then he learned to shoot hoops. Four years ago, when Alabama was playing Mississippi State in an SEC basketball game in Atlanta, Georgia, State was in the lead, Alabama had the ball with a chance to tie the game, and it was Michael Riley who took a shot from about twenty-eight feet. Now just as an aside, I know nothing about American sports so this is a risky, risky illustration! Okay, so twenty-eight feet, he takes a shot, and even I can experience the excitement of this moment. You can picture the scene, can’t you? Everyone is on the edge of their seats, Riley takes the shot, the ball sails through the air and hits the rim, bounces off the backboard, bounces around a little, 14,825 hearts are now pounding in their throats wondering what’s going to happen. The ball goes in to tie the game and sends the game into overtime. Eight minutes later, a tornado came roaring past the Georgia Dome and 14,825 people who would have otherwise been outside directly in its path, every one of them were safe inside. It was literally a life saving shot. What was God doing that day when Michael Riley’s aunt was shot and killed? Well we can’t possibly know all of the ways He works in and through it in His wisdom and for His glory. But one of the things we can now say for sure He was doing was beginning to shape and mold a young man, directing his steps, so that one day he might throw a ball that would save many lives. When the bullet left the gunman’s weapon, no one could have foreseen that among the various consequences for good and ill, such an outcome was part of God’s master plan. But it was. Such is the mystery of God’s providence.

And just as we can read from this vantage point four years later a portion of God’s purpose in Michael Riley’s life and just as we’ve been able to do that in our own with retrospect, so also now in the book of Esther, as we turn our attention to the end of chapter 2 and actually all of chapter 3, we are at last in a position to

begin to trace out something of what God was doing when Esther was taken from her home and forced into the life of a concubine in the harem of Ahasuerus, King of Persia. Last week, Hadassah, the pretty Jewish girl, the peasant girl, was swept up we saw into the maelstrom of public life and crowned Esther, Queen of Persia. Today, we are about to move into the next major section of the book, which really begins in chapter 3. Before we do that, nestled between the account of Esther's coronation and the introduction of Haman in chapter 3, we have a little vignette in chapter 2:19-23. It is a snapshot of court life that reveals for us something of the Machiavellian cutthroat character of the political scene in the citadel of Susa, that is going to unfold for us in much greater detail in the remainder of the story. Would you look at it with me please? Chapter 2:19 and following.

Mordecai, who we now discover appears to serve in some official capacity. He's some sort of civil servant; that's what it means to be sitting in the king's gate. Mordecai uncovers the plot of the two disaffected eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, who conspire to assassinate Ahasuerus. Presumably through mediators, Mordecai was able to pass word to Esther who in turn warned the king. After investigation is made, Bigthan and Teresh are caught red-handed and they are summarily executed. And through all the drama of chapter 2 as Esther is taken from the home of her adoptive father, Mordecai, and made to live in the harem and treated as a plaything of the king, through all the horror and the heartache of that perplexing situation, we have been asking, "What is God doing?" Well now we know one of the things He was doing. In His providence, upholding and governing all His creatures and all their actions, He has brought Esther and Mordecai to the very place where they are the only ones able to rescue the king.

When I was in art school as an undergraduate, in the textiles department there were a number of students learning to weave. They were weaving the most amazing, huge tapestries on massive looms. And when you look at those tapestries from the back, in reverse, they were a chaotic mass of loose, multi-colored threads, all hanging down from the various places where they'd been woven, almost impossible to make any sense out of them. Viewed from that perspective, there's no discernible design at all. But when the work is done and you see it from the other side, each thread is now seen in its relation to all the other, woven together into a coherent whole that makes perfect sense, full of beauty, leaving us to marvel at the skill of the weaver. That is the providence of God. Our view is like looking at the loom from behind. It seems to us often random and chaotic and incoherent. Viewed from the perspective of God the master weaver, each thread of each life is being woven together according to a perfect design into an amazing tapestry that will, as its completion becomes clear, will make us adore the wisdom of the heavenly artist. God works all things together, we will see one day. Every thread, every dark and sore trial as well as every bright and happy blessing, for the good of those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose. And so in verse 23, a careful record is made of Mordecai's heroic intervention on the king's behalf. It's made for posterity.

Let me help you to know that the Persian monarchs were renowned not only for their brutal and amoral use of power - we've seen some of that in evidence in the story so far, haven't we? But they were also known for the extravagant and swift generosity with which they rewarded those who serve them. But the point being made in our story is that Mordecai, who saved the king's life, goes unrewarded. That sets up a plot development that will not be resolved until chapter 6, but it also sets us up to begin to feel the biting irony in what happens next as chapter 3 begins to unfold. Would you look at chapter 3 with me, please?

Mordecai saves the king, remember. The king ensured that a permanent record of his heroic intervention is made so that no one would ever forget. And Haman, the Agagite, gets promoted. Verse 2 - everyone bows to Haman, everyone, that is, except Mordecai, whose unbent neck soon becomes the target of Haman's relentless hatred. Did you spot the same language used to describe Bigthan and Teresh and their murder plot in chapter 2 verse 21 being used again of Haman in verses 5 and 6 of chapter 3. Filled with anger, the king's eunuchs sought to lay their hands on him - full of rage. Haman has a similar design, only this time a conspiracy to kill just one man is not nearly enough to satisfy his hunger for revenge. Haman's plan becomes a final solution aimed at the genocide of the Jewish people. He wants nothing short of ethnic cleansing. Now you see the irony? Having saved Ahasuerus from the lesser evil, Mordecai and Esther themselves fall foul of the greater evil. Ahasuerus gets rescued while his rescuers fall into the very danger the king has faced only on a much larger scale. Talk about sudden reversals! It is dizzying.

And as we try to take it all in, don't we find ourselves repeating on behalf of Mordecai and Esther, a line that quite often appears on our lips, at least if you're like me it does, as we wrestle with God's providence, don't we find ourselves saying, "Well that's just not fair!" Right? It's just not fair. It's plain wrong. Our author actually wants us to begin to feel that, to begin to side with Mordecai and Esther. This is not unbiased reporting, do you see? God, speaking in His Word, has a point of view and He wants us to share it. We're being turned against Haman and being made to root for Mordecai and for Esther. Actually because the Bible wants to change the arithmetic by which we evaluate the relative importance of people and things. We're being made to cheer for Mordecai and Esther and to look in contempt at vain Ahasuerus and in horror at brutal Haman, who are being taught to stand in solidarity with the people of God than to sever our allegiances to the priorities of the world. Even the way the story of Esther is told aims to subvert the world's values and transform our lives by the renewing of our minds. We've meant to say in outrage, "God's people are being opposed and we're on their side and we stand against their enemies!" As chapter 3 develops, we watch, don't we, with fascination as Haman, cold and calculating, schemes and plots. He casts lots in a superstitious mockery of religion, not knowing the lesson we're beginning to learn through the book of Esther that neither pagan deities nor blind chants govern all things, but rather the sovereign hand of the

living God. We know that Haman does not. Proverbs 16:33 - "The lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord." Even the superstition and malice of Haman are superintended and bounded by the decree of God.

When the twelfth month arrives, Haman at last takes action. Look at what he tells Ahasuerus. First he says the Jewish people do not keep the king's laws but live by another law. He is appealing to the king's pride, implying Jewish indifference to the omnipotent might of the monarch's decrees. And then secondly in verse 8, it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. Now Haman really knows where to aim his darts, doesn't he? He draws on Ahasuerus' self interest. Everyone and everything in the empire exists for the profit and the pleasure of the king. "But that's not how these traitorous Jews see it, Ahasuerus. Don't tolerate them." You're forced to pay a hundred thousand talents of silver. That's about seven hundred fifty thousand pounds of silver. To bankroll what will be an empire-wide pogrom, the likes of which we could only compare to the Holocaust were it to be enacted. And the king, for his part, gives Haman his signet ring, vesting in him virtually limitless authority to act in his name. Everything is placed in Haman's hand. All the resources are freely given to him to do with as he sees fit. In verses 12 to 15, the administrative machinery then swings into motion as the vast bureaucracy of the empire implements Haman's plan. Messages are sent in every language to every corner of the empire and to every people group with the news that the Jews are to be - listen to the overkill - "destroyed, killed, and annihilated." Eleven months later on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, as the citadel of Susa is thrown into an uproar at the news, Haman and Ahasuerus - here's the measure of the kind of men they are - they have now casually decreed the annihilation of an entire people group and where are they as the chaos descends on the empire? They're having a few beers after a hard day's plotting.

It is a chilling story. Hard to believe were it not for Auschwitz, and Rwanda, and Kosovo, and Sudan. It's a real-world story actually, isn't it? The providence of God is very much to the fore as the history of Esther now begins to pick up pace in the retelling. And yet we are forced to see that God's providence does not cushion His people from trials or from the malice of evil men. Esther 3 does not resolve the mysteries involved in the question of how God's sovereignty and the reality of evil relate to one another, but neither will it let us ignore the fact that even the evil of Haman is bounded and superintended by God's most holy, wise, and powerful upholding and governments. In fact, Esther 3 tells us, God's sovereignty notwithstanding, actually precisely because of God's sovereignty, we live in a world of conflict. His sovereign providence becomes the theatre in which a conflict is being prosecuted, a war is being enacted, where belonging to the people of God makes one a target. But as it tell us that, I want you to notice that it gives us two resources that will help us live in a world where that is the case. Here are two principles for survival in a hostile war-zone, which is the world we inhabit.

THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

First of all, this passage teaches us to know the nature of the conflict. Did you notice that Haman is almost never simply Haman in this story; he is Haman the Agagite. In 3:10 he is Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. We're being tipped off, do you see, to what's really going on between Haman and Mordecai. Here's why Mordecai won't bow to Haman. It is not jealousy over Haman's promotion when Mordecai was overlooked. Neither is it age-old ethnic conflict. Here's why Haman wants genocide not justice. Haman is an Agagite. Agag, you may recall, was the king of the Amalekites over whom God had pronounced that Judicial sentence of destruction in 1 Samuel 15. King Saul, Israel's first king, had refused to carry out God's orders completely and comprehensively and have left King Agag alive. Eventually he was slain by the prophet, Samuel. Haman is a descendant of Agag; he is an Agagite. And Mordecai and Esther belong to the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe from which King Saul has come.

This is, in other words, another round of the ancient conflict, not just between two warring ethnic groups but between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, between the reign of Christ and the reign of anti-Christ. It is the same battle that continues to rage to this day. Our adversary, ultimately, behind all those human faces that give voice and potency to his malice in our experience, behind them all, our adversary - 1 Peter 5 and verse 8 - is the devil, "who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour." "We wrestle," Ephesians 6:11 and 12, "not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and against hosts of spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places." It is against Satan's schemes - Paul calls us in that very passage to stand firm. "Friendship with the world," James 4:4, "is enmity against God." The lines have been drawn, battle has been joined, and if you name the name of Jesus, you are engaged in that conflict. But Esther chapters 2 and 3 wants us to see not just the true nature of the opposition, that it is ultimately spiritual and has been raging since our first father, Adam, was tempted in the Garden. But also let's remember we stand in a different position than Esther and Mordecai did. They were still waiting for the seed of the woman to come and to execute final victory over the great enemy of our souls. But we are not still waiting. Though we are still engaged in a conflict, the battle, brothers and sisters, has been decisively won. Jesus Christ has triumphed over principalities and powers and made public spectacle of them, having nailed them to the cross. The battle rages, so let's be prepared, having put on the full armor of God - Ephesians 6 - but let us also remember as we do that the battle has been won. Jesus reigns and Satan's power has been overthrown and so let's take courage and stand firm.

KNOW THE END FROM THE BEGINNING

And then finally Esther chapters 2 and 3 teaches us to know the end from the beginning. Not only to know the nature of the conflict but to know the end from the beginning. That is the message of the snapshot of court life that we began with in chapter 2:19-23. It tells us the whole story of Esther in microcosms, in miniature, upfront before it all begins to develop. Before the storm of chapter 3 begins to break, we get to see and advance God's final goal. Esther and Mordecai face all that they face and they are where they are in the sovereign arrangement of almighty God that they might be saviors. Here is a murder plot and only they can thwart it. That is who this unlikely pair really are, the author is saying to us. Don't forget that as the dark clouds of terrible evil begin to gather overhead. This pair, these are saviors. We get to glimpse the end of the story before the real drama gets underway.

Keep in view the bright destiny into which the Lord your God will bring you no matter what lies between now and then, Esther chapter 2:19-23 is saying. Keep before your gaze that glorious promise, future purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ as the darkness descends and opposition comes and suffering overtakes you. That's what we see our Savior Himself doing, isn't it, as He faces the horror of the cross? "It was," Hebrews 12:2, "for the joy set before Him that He endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God." We're taught the same principle again in Romans 8:18 and following where Paul writes, "I consider the present sufferings of this time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For we know the whole creation has been groaning together in the pangs of childbirth until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." Keep your eyes on the end and you will be able to endure the means by which God will send you there. We groan inwardly, but our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed. We can endure groaning, Paul is saying, if we keep glory in view.

Esther 2:19-23 reminds us God has already told us the whole story. We know how the story ends, right? We know how history ends. The Lamb who was slain is the Lion of the tribe of Judah who reigns over all. We who have been bought with the blood of the cross are kept by the power of God unto salvation ready to be revealed at the last time. Know the end from the beginning and you will be fortified and garrisoned as you seek to press on and persevere, even through storms that lie ahead. There is conflict, there is a clash of kingdoms, a confrontation between righteousness and wickedness, holiness and sin, truth and error, the reign of Christ and the rule of anti-Christ. We are locked in a real spiritual battle, but we know what the Haman's of this world do not know - we know the war has been won already. Christ has died and risen and one day He's going to bring the remaining conflicts we endure to their end. And a new heavens and a new earth will come and the Lamb himself will wipe away every tear from

our eyes. Keep the end in view and press on.

Will you pray with me?

Oh Lord our God, we bless You for the victory of King Jesus. We confess that there are times when the battle in our own hearts and in our lives and in our contexts have felt to us overwhelming. There have been many skirmishes that we feel we have failed in and lost. So thank You that Jesus has won the war and He will bring all of us who are His into His victory. Help us please to keep our eyes on Him, who is the author and the finisher of our faith, and enable us, though the battle rages hotly around us, to press on. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Will you stand with me please and receive God's benediction?

And now may grace, mercy, and peace from Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

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