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The Subtlety of God's Providence

Esther 6:1-3

I doubt there are any here who are NOT familiar with Paul's affirmation in Romans 8.

Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose."

We tend to read this verse thinking of the big things of life, like these:

- Natural disasters.
- Tragedies.
- Health issues.
- And the like.

And while these things most certainly would be included, the passage does NOT say “ALL [the massive things in life] work together for good” BUT “ALL things”- which would also include insignificant things, like these:

- Missing a stop light.
- Making the wrong turn on a road.
- Being pestered by an insect.

For example, consider the testimony of Corrie and Betsie ten Boon. They were Dutch Christians who during World War II hid Jews from the Germans. Well, on February 28, 1944, their family was arrested. The two sisters were sent to a concentration camp in Ravensbrück, Germany. The conditions were horrible, so much so that Corrie many times found herself on the verge of giving up. Yet Betsie always encouraged her.

One such time came when Corrie discovered soon after arriving that their barrack was infested with fleas. When she complained to Betsie, her sister quoted this Scripture:

1 Thessalonians 5:18, “In everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Yet, Corrie’s responded, “*Betsie, there’s no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.*” (Boom, 2006, p. 198)

Sometime later, they had started a Bible study (with the Bible Betsie smuggled into the camp) in their barrack, yet there was always the fear that they be discovered by the guard . . . until the day came when a German supervisor refused to enter their barrack...

Corrie would later tell the story, speaking of Betsie “That afternoon, she said, there’d been confusion in her knitting group about sock sizes and they’d asked the supervisor to come and settle it.

[Betsie speaking,] ‘But she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t step through the door and neither would the guards. And you know why?’

Betsie could not keep the triumph from her voice: ‘Because of the fleas! That’s what she said, “That place is crawling with fleas!”’” (Boom, 2006, p. 209)

In the wise and powerful Providence of the Lord, God ordained that Corrie and Betsie’s

barrack would be infested with fleas. *And it was because of this that Corrie and Betsie were able to conduct Bible studies without fear of the guards!*

Christian, it is NOT just the big things, BUT “ALL THINGS work together for good to those who love God...”

We see this in Esther 6 where “The Subtlety of God’s Providence” as it details the means by which God brought about the salvation of His people in Esther’s day. Yet, as we’ll see, it wasn’t through an important act, a great event, or even the main characters of the book, Mordecai or Esther that God saved His people.

The Providential Background, Esther 2

For this, we go back to chapter 2 where the mystery of God’s providence gives us a glimpse into the possible, yet unlikely avenues God might use to deliver His people from Haman. We saw the horrible process by which a successor was chosen in place of the Persian Queen Vashti. And subsequently, we were introduced to Esther and Mordecai. We noted that in this chapter both are NOT presented in the best of light. They come across as compromised, compromised Jews.

Furthermore, we then witnessed the ascension of Esther as the queen in Persia — a process which involved even more compromise. And then the chapter ended with an innocuous account in which Mordecai, while on the job as a Persian judge, overheard and revealed a plot to assassinate Ahasuerus. And then we are told this:

Esther 2:23, “Now when the plot was investigated and found *to be so*, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king’s presence.”

With each person, scene, and detail of chapter 2, we the audience are left to ask the question, *“Is this how God is going to deliver His people?”*

To be sure, all of the characters and events referenced in chapter 2 would play a part (to use Aristotle, they were *Material Causes*). Yet as we saw, the key to God’s providential deliverance — what eventually would lead to *the Efficient Cause* — was NOT Mordecai, Esther, concubines, weddings, Ahasuerus, Hegai, assassins, and the like! RATHER, it was the recording of an event by an unnamed scribe about a forgettable attempt on the life of the king.

Now lest you think this is just my opinion, the structure of this book lays emphasis on this. As we have seen, Esther was written in the form of a chiasm.

When the Bible was written, Hebrew and Greek did NOT have punctuation marks. NEITHER was there the ability to bold a word or line or write in italics. And so, to

emphasize a point, biblical writers utilized such things as word placement, repetition, or sentence structure. For example, when Paul wanted to emphasize something, he often placed it in what we call, “*The Emphatic Position.*” That means he placed whatever he wanted to emphasize first in the sentence, as in Ephesians 2:4, “But God...”

Or, when Christ wanted to emphasize a truth, often He’d use repetition, as in John 5:24, “Truly, truly I say to you...”

Another means of emphasis was through the use of a literary tool called a Chiasm — a name which comes from the Greek letter Chi (X). If you look at the first half of the letter from the side, you will note that it looks like a sideways V. It was this pattern which scholars often times observed in Hebrew prose and poetry. And so, by labeling the lines of a passage with A, B, C and those lines which appear to be a repetition as A¹, B¹, and C¹, they observed a pattern which served to emphasize a central point. Consider the example:

A: God is great!
 B: God takes care of the earth.
 C: Let all the nations praise Him!
 B¹: God upholds His people.
A¹: Awesome is His name!



The clear focus and so the emphasis of this poem is the center line labeled “C” — the praise and so the worship of God. If we came upon a passage like this in the Psalms, we would conclude that the author wanted to emphasize the fact that God ought to be praised! The book of Esther was written as one large Chiasm.

Chapter 1: The Opening

 Chapters 2-3: The Kings First Decree

 Chapters 4-5: The Clash Between Haman and Mordecai

 Chapter 6:1-3: The Crises, “During that night the king could not sleep...”

 Chapters 6:4-7:10: Mordecai’s Triumph over Haman

 Chapters 8-9: The King’s Second Decree

Chapter 10: The Epilogue

By design, the focus of this book points to and flows from chapter 6, specifically the first three verses.¹ THAT MAKES THESE VERSES THE PIVOTAL MESSAGE IN THIS BOOK. And so, with this section we have “The Subtly of God’s Providence” as it marks the beginning of God’s deliverance of His people!

The Immediate Context, Esther 4-5

Though Mordecai and Esther initially are NOT presented in the best light,

NEVERTHELESS that all changed in chapter 4 where both come to a greater realization and appreciation for WHO God is and the PROMISE He gave to His people. And it was this realization that led to a “three day fast” in which Mordecai, Esther, and many other Jews poured their hearts out to God, no doubt praying for deliverance!

We then are told that “on the third day” of the fast, when Esther would have been at her weakest point physically, she approached Ahasuerus on behalf of her people — which again is amazing. You’d think she would have approached the king at her best, when she was most beautiful. If anything would attract the King’s attention, it would have been this. Recall, this was one of the essential qualifications for the woman who would replace Vashti.

Esther 2:2-4a, “Then the king’s attendants, who served him, said, ‘Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. And let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to Susa the capital, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king’s eunuch, who was in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given *them*. Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti...”

In light of her superficial husband, humanely speaking, it would have been in Esther’s best interest to approach the king when she looked her best, most certainly NOT at the tail end of a three day fast! She would NOT have looked very healthy! Yet she did it anyway because, as we saw, her trust was NOT in Ahasuerus BUT in the One who controls the heart of the king (Proverbs 21:1)!

Furthermore, you will recall that when Ahasuerus did welcome her and asked her what she wanted, Esther did NOT blurt out her request. RATHER, she wisely approached the king in such a way that Ahasuerus would willingly give her what she wanted without argument or lengthy explanation. So, in chapter 5:1-4, after receiving permission to approach Ahasuerus she requested that the king and Haman join her at a banquet. Then in chapter 5:5-9 we read of the banquet where at the climax, the king asked a second time, “What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done?” (vv. 5-6)

What did Esther say? She requested that the king and Haman attend another banquet the next day. And with this, Haman went home BUT, on the way, he saw Mordecai which once again moved him to anger (Esther 5:9-13). When Haman arrived home, he related his struggle both to his wife and advisors. The corporate advice was that he should build a 75-foot scaffold/pole and execute Mordecai in the morning.

With that, the scaffold/pole was erected overnight (Esther 5:14b)- which meant at this point there was an imminent threat to Mordecai’s life! And so, though Esther might be successful in saving her people at the banquet the next day, at the start of chapter 6 there is little hope for Mordecai.²

As such, Mordecai is a type of the people of God. The threat that rested upon him was the same threat that rested upon the people of God. As such, God's care of Him is but a foretaste of what God will do for His people. That brings us to Esther 6:1-3.

The Beginning of the Deliverance of God's People, Esther 6:1-3.

Esther 6:1, "During that night the king could not sleep^{3,4} [lit., 'the sleep of the king fled'] so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read⁵ before the king."⁶

As this is the climax of this book, this verse is packed with implication. First, the way this book reads, these verses are written as if in slow motion. Between chapter 1 and 2 there is four years. By the time we get to Esther 3:7, we have advanced another 7 years. But then from Esther 3:8 to Esther 8 we cover only 4 days. Feel this, the author intends us to slow down and so contemplate. In the context, our text reads as if it were slow motion!

With that, let's look at the text. It is very late, most likely 2 or 3 in the morning. Yet Ahasuerus is still awake for "...the king could not sleep..."

Now, unlike other pagan kings in the Bible who had a sleepless night — like Nebuchadnezzar (who was kept awake by a dream from God, Daniel 2:1) or Darius (who was troubled by Daniel's fate, Daniel 6:18), there seemingly was NO REASON for Ahasuerus' insomnia. The implication is that the Lord was keeping him awake!

Now, just like many who cannot sleep in our day, Ahasuerus turned on the Persian form of television, with the hope that he could drift off to sleep.

Esther 6:1b, "During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king."⁷

Bryan Gregory wrote of this:

This would have been about as thrilling as reading a phone book, and having them read in the middle of the night would have been a good way to try to fall back asleep. (Gregory, 2014, p. 110)

At this point it is important to note WHAT THE TEXT DOES NOT SAY. We do NOT read "all of Susa was troubled" like we do with Herod after speaking with the Magi (Matthew 2:3). RATHER, it seems as though all was quiet and calm in the Susa, ALL WERE ASLEEP! It was only the king "that night who could not sleep."

And this brings us to the efficient cause of God's deliverance.

Esther 6:2, “And it was found written what Mordecai had reported concerning Bigthana⁸ and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs who were doorkeepers, that they had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.”

This, in fact the entire passage, shines a light on the Sovereign will of God as He directs the affairs of man...^{9,10,11,12}

- How is it that the king could NOT sleep? It was one account of the Providence of the Lord!
- How is it that the king did NOT turn to entertainment or pleasure to bide his time? It was on account of the Providence of the Lord!
- How is it that the king RATHER really wanted to sleep and so commanded a servant to read from a scroll? It was on account of the Providence of the Lord!
- How is it then that Ahasuerus’ servant turned to the section in “the King’s Chronicles” which contained this story? It was on account of the Providence of the Lord!
- How is it that the king was NOT nodding off at this point BUT awake enough to understand what was read? It was on account of the Providence of the Lord!
- How is it that years before when Mordecai saved the life of the king, no honor was given to him? It clearly was on account of the Providence of the Lord!

Iain Duguid wrote this:

God’s sovereignty didn’t end with keeping the king awake. He also directed his choice of alternative activities for the night. In the absence of late-night television, an insomniac like Ahasuerus had no lack of potential entertainments: food, drink, dancing girls... not to mention an enormous harem; all kinds of pleasures waited at his disposal. Yet he chose instead to listen to a reading from the government records, the chronicles of his reign. (Duguid, 2005, p. 75)

And that brings us to verse 3.

Esther 6:3, “And the king said, ‘What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?’ Then the king’s servants who attended him said, ‘Nothing has been done for him.’”

This was a serious omission.^{13,14,15} That the king should have failed to honor one who had saved his life could have raised the charge that he was NOT just. Most certainly, the omission would NOT encourage loyalty if such a situation ever arose again.

Anthony Tomasino wrote of this:

As noted earlier, Persian kings were lavish and meticulous when it came to

rewarding their benefactors... For Xerxes to discover in such a manner that a great boon had been ignored for years would have been disturbing. Indeed, his failure to reward Mordecai could have been a source of dishonor for the king himself. (Tomasino, 2016, p. 277)

And so, Ahasuerus was moved at that moment to right this very serious wrong, AND THAT BEGAN GOD'S DELIVERANCE OF HIS PEOPLE.

Now, there is irony here. For at that moment, Haman had entered the outer court of the King's palace, hoping the king would help him right what he considered to be a serious wrong (Mordecai's refusal to show him respect).

Per the chiasm, the rest of this chapter- in fact the entire book — flows from this passage detailing the sovereign will of God as He directed the heart of the King! Like the knocking down of a single domino, the section before us details the deliverance God which brought about for His people "while they kept silent" (cf. Exodus 14:14)!

With this we see the subtlety of God's providence! What were Esther and Mordecai and all the Jews doing while Ahasuerus was having "the Chronicle of the King" read? They were sleeping!

Do you understand the significance of this? The most important moment in the deliverance of God's people did NOT come on account of Esther, Mordecai, or anyone else sympathetic to the Jewish plight. RATHER, God effected the deliverance of His people while they slept! Remember the words of Solomon.

Psalms 127:2, "It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep*."

See, while God's people slept, the Lord was actively working His will unto the protection and good of His people who were oblivious to His providential grace! In the words of the Psalmist:

Psalms 121:4, "Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

How important it is that we understand this! When we consider the world in which we live and the sovereign will of Almighty God, again we tend to think in terms of big things- like:

- Hurricane Ian.
- The war in Ukraine.
- Our current civil leaders.
- Covid 19.

All came about as a result of the sovereign will of God.

Yet, what about the choice you made this past week to turn right instead of left? To wear red instead of blue? To purchase an apple over another piece of fruit? WHAT ARE THE FLEAS THAT YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH IN YOUR LIFE? We must understand that here too God is working His will!

From Esther 6 we learn that there are NO insignificant moments in our life! Get this, because Christ “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3), every moment and thing that occurs in our life has a purpose. We must believe this! And while we most certainly cannot know how a small event or choice fits into God’s big picture, we have the confidence that it does!

Furthermore, because of the chiastic structure of this book we know that everything prior to and following Esther 6:1-3 must be interpreted in light of the text before us! With this let me remind you of what we saw in Esther 4.

- Because of God’s character and promises, the Lord is committed to blessing, caring for, and keeping His people REGARDLESS of their failure, worldliness, or sin.
- Why is that? Because God NOT ONLY is FAITHFUL; HE IS GOOD!

Now, putting the two together, God’s people in Esther’s day as well as in our own must walk away from this book with the understanding that:

- God is sovereign over all things such that His providential will determines NOT ONLY the big things of life, BUT “all things” (Romans 8:28)!
- Because of our relationship with Christ, God is committed to us and our best no matter what.
- Bitter providences occur in our lives NOT because God is punishing us for our sin BUT weaning us from our love affair with this world.
- As God neither slumbers nor sleeps, we must therefore live with the conviction that “...all things [from the most insignificant things to our sin and up through the big things of life] to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose” (Romans 8:28)!

For those in Christ who might doubt this, Octavius Winslow gave this exhortation:

It is because we have such shallow views of God’s love that we have such defective views of God’s dealings. We blindly interpret the symbols of His providence because we so imperfectly read the engravings of His heart! (Winslow, 2022)

Don’t Miss it! God’s people at the time Esther most certainly did! May we learn from this

book that we might never doubt again either God's power or His goodness!

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End Note(s)

¹ "In earlier sections of the Esther narrative, months, years and days have passed between events. Now we are at the heart of the story, the passing of time is slowed down as every detail of the event is recalled. The slow passing of time indicates the centrality of these chapters in the overall scheme of the story." (Reid, 2008, p. 116)

² "To make matters worse, the clock was not counting down to zero hour for God's people alone. That was the problem of which Esther was aware, and which she was seeking to counter. However, in chapter 5 we discovered that a separate clock was ticking for Mordecai's own fate, a danger of which Esther was as yet totally oblivious. The edict against the Jews still had several months to run, but Haman's determination to execute Mordecai required only hours to run its course. The pole on which Mordecai's body was to be impaled had been erected (all seventy-five feet of it), and Haman was set to ask the king to hang Mordecai on it as soon as morning rolled around. It seems that even if Esther's subtlety saved the Jews, that salvation would come too late to save Mordecai." (Duguid, 2005, p. 74)

³ "lit. 'sleep fled' (cf. Genesis 31:40, where RSV keeps the Hebrew idiom)." (Baldwin, 1985, p. 89)

⁴ "The Septuagint translators of 6:1 take any guesswork out of the agency by stating, 'the Lord kept sleep away from the king.'" (Lanaik, 1995, p. 237)

- ⁵ “The use of the ptc. form of the verb here (‘and they were reading’) implies continuous reading rather than a short recitation.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 276)
- ⁶ “Even these days, with our sleeping-pills, the hypnotic effect of a droning human voice is a recognized way of inducing sleep.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 89)
- ⁷ “Those who have read the annals of ancient Near Eastern kings will know that these are not exactly riveting reading: they tend to be a stock catalog of victories won, lands conquered, and tribute imposed. It was about as compelling as reading income tax regulations. Perhaps that was the point. If anything would send Ahasuerus back to sleep, it was surely a monotone reading of his own life story!” (Duguid, 2005, p. 75)
- ⁸ “Although the identity of the first conspirator is clearly the same as that of 2:21, his name is spelt slightly differently here (‘Bigthana’ replaces ‘Bigthan’; see RSV, NRSV, NKJV, although NIV translates both references consistently as Bigthana).” (Reid, 2008, p. 117)
- ⁹ “The author intended the reader to see God’s hand in causing the king’s sleeplessness and in reading the court records at the exact spot where Mordecai was mentioned.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 344)
- ¹⁰ “The ancient translators were not shy about stating the reason for Xerxes’ sleeplessness. In their opinions, it reflected the direct intervention of God. No doubt similar statements could be made, however, about Vashti’s impertinence or Esther’s attractiveness. In each case, events that might have been normal under other circumstances (who has not had a sleepless night from time to time?) conspire to bring about the deliverance of the Jews.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 276)
- ¹¹ “The entire chapter shows how a series of seemingly trivial circumstances fit together to overrule the evil intentions of Haman (e.g., the king happened to be unable to sleep; he happened to ask that the royal annals be read to him; Haman happened to be in the palace).” (Huey, 1988, p. 4821)
- ¹² “‘That night’ certainly would suggest God’s providence in the section of the annals that was read and in the timing of the reading.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 343)
- ¹³ “The Persian kings prided themselves in rewarding well those who helped them in some significant way.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 344)
- ¹⁴ “Persian kings were famous for their diligence in rewarding those who assisted them; it was good for public relations, to say nothing of personal safety. The reply he received from his young attendants was shocking: ‘Nothing has been done for him’ (Esther 6:3). Nothing? Who would save the king’s life next time, if there were no certainty of a reward?” (Duguid, 2005, pp. 75-76)
- ¹⁵ “Herodotus indicated that it was a point of honor with Persian kings to reward promptly and generously those who had benefited them (cf. Moore, Esther, p. 64, n. 3).” (Huey, 1988, p. 4822)