

God's Providence Working Through Flawed People

Let's turn together to the OT book of Esther. If you go to the book of Psalms and go left you'll find Job and then you'll come to Esther. At GCC we often will do topical messages on some particular subject. We just got done with a topical series called Living Generously. But we are committed to preaching through entire books of the Bible because it helps us to know what the entirety of a book is saying, it helps us read the Bible, not as a collection of verses that we can pull out to encourage our souls, but as a great story of God's redeeming plan climaxing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and now carried on through His church. It helps us put those verses in their context. And it forces us to wrestle with the hard-to-understand parts of the Bible. And Esther is a book that has a lot that can be difficult to understand.

Esther is different than most books in the Bible and it has some really awkward issues that need to be dealt with. Here are just a couple of those issues we will need to deal with:

- God is never mentioned once in the entire book. The king is mentioned over 100 times in this short book but talk of God, prayer, and faith are conspicuous by their absence.
- As much as we'd like to paint Esther as a spiritual heroine, the fact is that she is a flawed heroine at best. She seems to enthusiastically commit some morally questionable acts, and keeps her faith hidden in the process. One commentary calls Esther a "hot mess". That's probably not far off. She's not the poised, got-it-all-together woman that we might like to think of her as.
- Then we have to deal with the fact that the end of the book is more violent than a Mel Gibson movie. The Jews are massacring tens of thousands of people one minute, and raising a glass in celebration the next.
- All of this led Martin Luther to write of Esther, "I am so hostile to it that I wish it did not exist for it Judaizes too much and displays too much pagan behavior".

With all due respect to Martin Luther, I disagree. I am glad that Esther exists and I think we're going to have a lot of fun and learn a lot as we go through this book. And even though it's a book that never mentions God once, I think we're going to encounter God many times throughout this fascinating book. In fact, there are two overarching themes in Esther that we will see over and over again. The first overarching theme is God's providence at work in the affairs of men. Someone might ask how could God's providence be the theme of a book when God is never mentioned once?

When I was about 8 or 9 years old I remember there was a solar eclipse during a school day and we all went outside to look at the eclipse. But the teacher warned us of the dangers of looking directly at the sun, so she had us poke a pin hole in a piece of paper and then by holding it over another piece of paper we could watch the shadow of the eclipse move across the paper. In the book of Esther we don't see God directly but we constantly see the shadow of His providential hand moving across the page of history, working through random occurrences and unlikely coincidences, setting all the pieces where they need to be when they need to be there. God's not mentioned directly, but His providential work is the major theme of this book.

The other theme that we will see in this great book is that God works through flawed people. This isn't a story about spiritual giants accomplishing the stuff spiritual giants accomplish. This is a story of people, like Esther, who are flawed, who are hot messes, but God uses them in incredible ways. Ultimately God

chooses to use flawed people to do His work cause that's all He's got. So this should be very encouraging to the flawed people among us - which is all of us!

So let's jump in as chapter one sets the stage for what's going to happen in the rest of the book.

Esther 1:1-9

Let's take a minute to consider the historical setting of Esther. Whoever the author was, even though he was precise in detailing minute historical details, he does not so much as allude to himself anywhere in the book so we have no idea who wrote the book of Esther. The story takes place in Persia sometime around 473BC during what's called the diaspora - a time when the Jews have been taken into exile and dispersed throughout the lands. There is the beginning of a spiritual renewal going on in Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra around this time, but for the most part it is a spiritually dark time for the Jewish people and they aren't very connected to their biblical heritage or God.

King Ahasuerus, also known by the Greek name Xerxes is king of Persia and Persia is the undisputed world power at this time, ruling over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. Ahasuerus is very powerful and not surprisingly he 's pretty impressed with himself. The story opens up with Ahasuerus throwing a six month long party to celebrate his greatness and he invites all the nobles and governors of the provinces. Then at the end of the six months they threw a 7 day feast with all the stops pulled. Food and wine was flowing generously, but just as we have laws governing the use of alcohol today, they needed laws to govern the drinking of alcohol then too. Verse 8 describes what the law of the land was: *And drinking was according to this edict: "there is no compulsion."* That was the law! No one had to drink. You don't want a glass of wine? Hey, it's a free country...well, actually, it's not. But there's a law that allows you to pass on getting plastered. This was a nation where people were more likely to get pulled over for driving while *not* intoxicated. It's funny, but it reveals that when one man the raw power to make laws just by speaking that there's a real chance it's going to go to his head. Ahasuerus felt he needed to regulate everyone's actions with laws - even allowing the freedom for people to make their own choice about drinking alcohol.

While all this partying with the men was going on, Queen Vashti was throwing a feast for the women in a different palace. So this is the unlikely context for a series of events that will have nation-shaking consequences. Let's read vv. 10-12.

The king and his friends are drunk and he decides to show off his trophy wife Vashti to the men. But Vashti doesn't want to be a rude hostess and leave her own party and she has no desire to be gawked at by a bunch of her drunken husband's drunken friends, so she refuses the king's command. Verse 12 ends with these ominous words:

At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

The first seriously flawed person we see in Esther is King Ahasuerus. He is the ruler over the most powerful nation in the world at that time, his word is law, and yet the picture that emerges in Esther is of a man who cannot rule himself. Outwardly he was a powerful man but inwardly he was a weak man, and his passions had a way of running away with him.

A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. Prov. 25:28

Ahasuerus is a man without self control and anger and rage burns within him, and he can't control where it goes. That's flaw #1 and it leads to flaw #2: Ahasuerus is a man easily influenced by others. We will see this as we go through the book, people suggest things to him and he has little or no filter, he just accepts their counsel without thinking it through. Anger courses through him and he really wants to punish his wife, but how does he do that? He turns to his advisors for counsel. Let's keep reading.

Esther 1:13-2:1

I was reading through the Leader a week or two ago, and in the police blotter they reported getting a call from a house on a certain street in Corning. A mom called because her daughter got a text from a man she didn't know. OK. I can understand a little concern there. But as I read on, about 3 hours later on that same night another call came in from the same street, a mom (and I suspect it was the same mom) called in to say that her daughters wouldn't give their cell phones to their dad. Now I don't know all the details, but on the face of it, it seems like something became a police matter (and made the 2nd page of the newspaper) when it could have been handled quietly in house.

This conflict between Ahasuerus and Vashti was a domestic conflict that could have been handled quietly between them but his advisors counsel him to make a national case out of it. Literally. They escalate his anger by stoking his fears that the entire kingdom is going to fall apart and every wife will disrespect her husband if this disobedience is allowed to stand. They advise that he issue a royal order - a law - that Vashti never appears before him again. Ever. Now, many scholars believe that Vashti might well have been pregnant at the time with their son, Artaxerses, who would become the next ruler of Persia. This order was to punish Vashti by taking away her crown, her position, and her marriage to the king. It was a harsh punishment, but Ahasuerus, still in the flush of anger, listens to his advisors and decrees that law. And laws decreed by the Persian king can never be repealed or revoked. This law will burn a bridge forever that can never be rebuilt.

Anger has a way of making foolish and rash and harsh decisions look wise...for a time. Anger rises up and says, "yeah, permanently burning this bridge and severely hurting that person is exactly the right thing to do for what they did to me!" But once the bridge is burned, once the anger is given its head, it will inevitably cool down and then you're left with the consequences of that anger. And that's what happened to King Ahasuerus. He was pleased with this law...until his anger cooled off. Look with me at chapter 2, verse 1:

After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Esther 2:1

You can't help hear the sadness and regret in that verse. His anger now gone, Ahasuerus is left with the scorched earth that his anger, bad counsel, and poor decisions left.

Most of us know what it's like to lash out in anger, even if only with our words. There's a kind of insane foolishness to anger that blows things out of proportion, corrupts good judgment, and makes things seem right to say and do in the moment that we later regret saying and doing. We listen to bad advisors when we listen to our anger. Now imagine if anything you said were law and could never repealed. You had to live with the burnt bridges, damaged relationships, and heartbreaking consequences of your angry words

and actions forever - no possibility of reversing or healing them.

The fact is there are some for whom what they say in anger might as well be a law that can never be repealed or revoked because their pride never allows them to repeal or revoke what they say or do in anger. Like King Ahasuerus, they may feel regret over the damage their anger has done, but not enough to swallow their pride and apologize. Not enough to ask forgiveness. So they try to just move on, act like it never happened, maybe buy some flowers or try to be extra nice, as if those things are enough to heal the damage done in their anger.

Whatever regret he might have felt, King Ahasuerus burned the bridge between him and Vashti forever. Thankfully, we don't serve a king like Ahasuerus, we serve a King who specializes in forgiveness. The Bible tells us that God has intense hatred of sin - more intense than anything we can imagine. And in his wrath against sin the king of the universe could have rightfully banished sinful men away from his presence forever but His anger against sin, while perfect, didn't overrule His compassion or His love. The King of Glory gave his life on the cross so that our sins could be forgiven and our relationship with God could be restored. When we come to Christ in faith, not only are we saved from God's wrath, but God gives us the Holy Spirit who begins to work on us from the inside out. In the gospel there's real hope for flawed people who struggle with stuff like anger and even rage. Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit - God wants to give us the power to hold our tongue when anger distorts our judgment and makes saying stupid stuff seem wise.

But we all know what it's like to blow it and say those dumb and hurtful things in anger that we shouldn't have said. We all know the regret of making decisions when we're really mad, and the damage in our relationships. Jesus gives us a pathway for restoration then too but it costs us our pride. We need to humble ourselves and ask for forgiveness from the person that we hurt. If this is an issue for you and you feel this hopelessness like this will never change or you can never make it right, there is hope. But this is an important point: if you try to approach the issue like Ahasuerus, as if what you've said is now written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes and can never be repealed, then you'll never know the freedom and healing that the Lord wants to bring to those relationships. The gospel of Jesus Christ gives us hope no matter what the sin is that we struggle with, hope to be forgiven and power to change. But we won't experience God's power to change through pride we'll experience it through humility. God gives grace to the humble.

If there's someone you're thinking of right now, some relationship that has taken the brunt of your anger, don't try to protect your pride, work to protect that relationship. Commit in your heart to go to them and, without excuses or blame shifting, own up to your anger and the damage it has done and ask them to forgive you. The Lord will give you grace as you humble yourself!

In search of God's providence

Let's close by looking for evidences of God's providence at work up to this point. I mentioned early on that God's hand of providence is seen throughout this book, so what do we see of it so far?

In the 70's there used to be a TV show called In Search Of hosted by Leonard Nimoy. I have to admit that I looked it up and the first episode that came up on Google was In Search of Bigfoot. I confess that since I was a kid I've always been fascinated with Bigfoot, so I ended up watching about 10 minutes of it.

One thing I found very interesting was to hear Leonard Nimoy say that men may well be on the verge of proving the existence of Bigfoot. 40 years later we know that hasn't been the case. At the time, the enthusiasts who were convinced of Bigfoot's existence were so excited about what the next 5 years would reveal that they could barely contain themselves. If they could've seen then what we see now their excitement would have seemed silly and groundless. Time has a way of sorting through perspective.

I don't want to look for God's providence the way I watched that segment of In Search Of - with the advantage of knowing how the story turns out years later. I don't want us to look for God's providence in chapter one by reading back into it what we know happens in the following 9 chapters. I want us to freeze ourselves in time at the point that chapter one ends, as if we were right there when this much of the story and no more had occurred. What evidences of God's providential fingerprints do we find?

The honest answer is none...yet. At this point what God is up to is hidden from view. All we see are human players making decisions and the effects of those decisions played out in the short run and we can't see some great divine tapestry being woven together. This can be encouraging to us because a lot of times because the truth is it's hard to see God's providential work in our lives in real time too.

Often when we look for evidences of God's providence in our lives at any given moment, it might be really hard to see. Why does God allow a trial in someone's life? It's one thing if that trial lasts for a week or maybe a month, we can get our heads around it but why does God allow a trial to go on and on for what seems forever in a person's life? God's providence doesn't always come wrapped up in a nice neat package with a bow on it. Sometimes, in some people's lives, God's providence is right there and so obvious that it slaps you in the face. And then, in some other people's lives, it's not nearly so obvious. In fact it can be really hard to find at all.

That's why Esther is such an encouraging book for our Christian faith. Trusting God, believing God, having faith in God, isn't a formula that is guaranteed to make life easy or make everything work out in the short run. God isn't mentioned once in Esther, but He isn't hiding, He's hidden. His work is constant but it's not obvious, especially when you freeze frame time at any given time. The honest truth is that sometimes God's providence in our lives is hidden too.

God's word takes us up to an altitude where we can see far beyond the here and now. Even beyond the horizon of this temporal life. When Asaph wrote psalm 73 he was struggling with God's hidden providence:

*But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.*

³*For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

⁴*They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.^[a]*

⁵*They are free from common human burdens;
they are not plagued by human ills.*

He goes on to question why they are proud and violent and yet they live carefree lives and keep getting richer. Meanwhile he is suffering. He writes in vs. 14: *All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.* I try to follow you, Lord, and it feels like I'm getting punished. What's up with that? He confesses that sometimes it feels like he has tried to live a pure life in vain, that following God's path has been more trouble than it's worth.

But then God lifts up his perspective to higher ground. He considers the final end of the wicked and he realizes that the good ground they seem to stand on is slippery ground and they are going down in ruin one day. And from that higher perspective he also realizes, as he says in vs. 23: *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.*

If we want to search for God's providence in history or in our lives, we can't do it with a narrow angle lens. Our lives are in God's hands, and He promises that if we trust Him, that He will guide our paths and those paths will lead to a brighter dawn of righteousness. There's an old saying that seems apropos: *when you can't see God's hand, trust His heart.* Not because that will make everything work out the way you want, but because He is good, He is faithful, He is powerful, and He is working. Even when we can't see it. Maybe you're in that place right now. A trial, a hardship, a conflict, an illness, a broken relationship, and you don't see a way out and your prayers seem to hit the ceiling and bounce off.

I can't tell you that things will work out next week, or next month, or even next year. But I can assure you based on God's word, that as you trust in Him, He will be with you always, He will hold you by your right hand, He will guide you with His counsel in His paths of righteousness, and afterward, afterward He will take you into glory. And from that vantage point, all the trials and hardships and questions will seem small and unimportant, and we'll see how it all falls together for our good in His providence. Providence that is always at work in our life, when it's obvious, and when its hidden. Take hope, take courage in that.