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The End of God's Providence, 3

Esther 7-9:15

In 2008 I suffered a herniated disc, 95% prolapsed and that meant surgery. That also meant great apprehension, for I just do not like needles. Yet I had a wonderful surgeon. Not only was his competency beyond question (having done thousands of discectomies), he also was incredibly compassionate. Prior to the surgery he explained in detail what he was going to do, the jabs, shots, cuts, the stitches he would use, the size of the incision, and what would be the expected result. And having this knowledge — of what he was going to do — took most if not all my apprehension away! It enabled me to approach the surgery with a calm confidence.

And this reflects the incredible, comforting power of understanding the elements of a future event, operation, or procedure- which no doubt is why throughout Redemptive History God gave explanation after explanation as to what He was doing now and would do in the future. For example, Christ told His disciples:

John 14:27b-28a, 29, “...Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’... And now I have told you before it comes to pass, that when it comes to pass, you may believe.”

One of the many passages in which God gives us detailed explanation of what He is doing and going to do is the book of Esther. The overriding theme of the is book is God’s Providence and it was given to instruct His people that they might live in a world without prophets (think of the intertestamental period) and so without the ability to ask God directly, “*Why are you doing what you are doing?*”

A Shocking and Unbelievably Wise Solution, vv. 3-14.

Esther 8:3, “Then [as we’ll see, 2 months later] Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept, and implored him¹ to avert the evil *scheme* of Haman the Agagite² and his plot which he had devised against the Jews.”

This is a most understandable response. Once again, Esther has come before Ahasuerus unbidden. And so, once again Esther is putting her life on the line.³ Yet, in light of the previous graces granted both to Esther and Mordecai (vv. 1-2), the risk was nominal — which no doubt is why the text does NOT read like it did the first time Esther approached Ahasuerus unbidden (cf. Esther 4:11, 16; 5:1). Accordingly, the focus of this text is on Esther’s desperation by which she endeavored to move the king to pity.⁴

Now for all sakes and purposes, the lives of Esther and Mordecai have been spared (cf. Esther 7). Why then is Esther so burdened here? It is because of the solidarity Esther felt with her people. For, in salvation, God creates a family whose members are mysteriously linked to one another.

1 Corinthians 12:12, 26a, “For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ... And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it...”

Though the lives of Mordecai and Esther were safe, what good would it have been if the rest of God’s people were wiped out?⁵ Accordingly, we read that Esther, “...fell at his feet, wept, and implored [Ahasuerus]...”- which brings us to the basis of her appeal.

Esther 8:4-6, “And the king extended the golden scepter to Esther. So Esther

arose and stood before the king. Then she said, 'If it pleases the king and if I have found favor before him and the matter *seems* proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces. For how can I endure to see the calamity which shall befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?'"

One of Esther's talents was that of persuasion. And it is in full view here! Notice the basis upon which she made her appeal; it is threefold.

The Pleasure the King Found in Esther, v. 5a.

Esther 8:5a, "Then she said, 'If it pleases the king and if I have found favor before him and the matter *seems* proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight'..."

Yes, this includes the formal language which was appropriate in addressing the king. It is similar to what we've seen twice before in Esther 5:7-8a & 7:3a. From these passages you will note that:

- The statements "if I have found favor" AND "if it please the king" constituted the formal protocol when someone entered into the king's presence.
- Yet Esther went beyond protocol here. She added, "[if]... the matter *seems* proper to the king and I am pleasing in his sight."

Clearly the foundation of Esther's appeal was her worthiness — the approval that Esther had gained in the eyes of the king. That brings us to the second basis, the hostile intentions of Haman.

The Hostile Intention of Haman ("the enemy of the Jews"), vv. 5b, 3b.

Esther 8:5b, "...let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces."

Upon a first reading you might think that this is NOT emphasizing the wicked intention of Haman, BUT simply stating a fact. Yet this verse, coupled with v. 3, clearly demonstrates the second basis of Esther's appeal.

Esther 8:3b, "Then Esther spoke again to the king, fell at his feet, wept, and implored him to avert the evil *scheme* of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had devised against the Jews."

From this we see the second basis upon which Esther made her appeal for the life of her

countrymen. It was the evil intention of Haman which was the genesis of the decree against God's people!⁶ That brings us to the third basis, the grief that such an action would mean to Esther.

The Grief that Such an Action would Mean to Esther, v. 6.

Esther 8:6, "For how can I endure⁷ to see the calamity which shall befall my people, and how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?"

The third appeal is obvious. If the king won't be moved based on (1) how much Esther had pleased him or (2) the evil design and goal of Haman, then (3) let it be because the king can't bear to have his wife be sad!^{8,9,10}

Now as valid as each of these reasons may seem, the truth be known, they are weak arguments! For it is obvious that the King's pleasure in Esther could change quickly, remember Vashti? And Haman's hostility is irrelevant since legally the decree was not issued by Haman but by Ahasuerus! And Esther's appeal for sympathy is the only point which would have any lasting weight. It essentially was this "*Ahasuerus, you love me... so change the decree!*"

Yet unfortunately, there is a massive problem which renders all of these arguments irrelevant.¹¹ And just what is that problem? Once a royal decree was issued in Persia NOTHING could change it — NOT even the king.

Esther 8:8b, "...a decree which is written in the name of the king [which was the case with Haman's order] and sealed with the king's signet ring [which likewise was the case with Haman's order] may not be revoked."

So, do you understand the problem? No matter what Esther did, how evil was Haman's intentions, and how much Ahasuerus may have loved Esther, the law demanded the execution of God's people; and there was NO THING that could change that! Talk about a massive conundrum! As much as the king himself might have wanted to revoke the decree, such a thing could NOT be done! So, what only could be done, lawfully?

The Lawful Solution, vv. 7-10.

Esther 8:7- 8, "So King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, 'Behold, I have given the house of Haman to Esther, and him they have hanged on the gallows because he had stretched out his hands against the Jews [This is a "*part for the whole*" summary of the Reversals referenced in vv. 1-2. In essence the king here is saying, '*You both now are lawful authorities. So, in my name, fix it!*'¹² In fact, the '*you*' is in the emphatic position.¹³ But how?...] Now you write to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal *it* with the king's

signet ring; for a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked.”

Do you see the solution? It is NOT changing the law BUT adding an additional law which would address the threat contained in the first law!

Esther 8:9-10, “So the king's scribes were called at that time in the third month (that is, the month Sivan), on the twenty-third day [The calendar now has advanced 2 months and ten days from when Haman made the initial decree^{14,15}]; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded to the Jews, the satraps, the governors, and the princes of the provinces which *extended* from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to every province according to its script, and to every people according to their language, as well as to the Jews according to their script and their language.¹⁶ And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horses, riding on steeds sired by the royal stud.¹⁷”

You might think that this is a bunch of useless language which easily could be taken out of the chapter to make it more readable. Yet if we removed this from the chapter the solution would be suspect. For the language tells us that the solution that Mordecai and Esther came up with was lawful and therefore binding! To see this, we need only compare this with Esther 3:12-13.

The emphasis here is on the legality of the solution which was as binding and authoritative as any and all decrees made by the King! Mordecai and Esther were encouraged by Ahasuerus to pass another law which would address the threat contained in the first law! With that, notice the particulars of the solution.

The Particulars of the Solution, vv. 11-14.

This is the law Mordecai and Esther came up with:

Esther 8:11-12, “In them [the letters containing the decree] the king granted the Jews who were in each and every city *the right* to assemble¹⁸ and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate¹⁹ the entire army of any people or province which might attack them, including children and women, AND to plunder their spoil, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus,²⁰ the thirteenth *day* of the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar).”

It is amazing how much criticism this decree and the actual carrying out of this decree has generated in liberal commentaries. Evidently it is OK that a decree was made to wipe out God's people — few liberals have a problem with this part of the account. But how cold, evil, and heartless is the Bible for recording an event where God's people are granted the right to DEFEND THEMSELVES.

Don't miss what I just said- for so many scholars have. The decree here did NOT grant God's people the right to kill, conquer, or pillage anyone they wanted to on the day that the rest of Persia was free to attack them. That was NOT the decree that was made here. What was the decree? Simply that God's people could defend themselves AND, in their defense, do to any attacker what the attacker sought to do to them.²¹ Now if there were any doubt, the text restates the decree:

Esther 8:13-1, "A copy of the edict to be issued as law in each and every province, was published to all the peoples, so that the Jews should be ready for this day to avenge themselves on their enemies. The couriers, hastened and impelled by the king's command, went out, riding on the royal steeds; and the decree was given out in Susa the capital."

What did the decree grant to God's people? Simply the right to do to anyone what they were attempting to do to them!²² There are two key words here:

- The first is the word "enemy" (אֹיֵב [oyeb]). What constitutes "an enemy" in this verse or this book? We've seen the word many times already. In the context of this book, "an enemy" is someone who was in the process of harming God's people. Consider that we first read of Haman in Esther. 3:1 where he is promoted to the office of Prime Minister of Persia. And that which identified him at the time simply was that he was "the son of Hammedatha the Agagite." At this point, he is NOT the enemy of anyone; he merely is a capable leader who obviously impressed Ahasuerus. It is only AFTER he passed the decree authorizing the extermination of God's people that Haman acquired the appellation used throughout this book, "the enemy of the Jews" (Esther 3:10; 8:1, 13; 9:10) Furthermore, notice that when the expression is used in Esther of ones other than Haman, it refers to those who were actively seeking the death of God's people...

Esther 9:1, "Now in the twelfth month (that is, the month Adar), on the thirteenth day when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them [that is, "over those seeking their death"- that is the nuance here!!]."

So, speaking of any who were seeking to harm God's people- those who by virtue of their hostility made themselves and enemy of God's people- Mordecai and Esther's law enabled God's people to defend themselves.

- There is a second word that is key here. That word is "avenge". In the Hebrew it is נָקַם (naqam) which speaks a punitive response for a prior wrong. In

other words, Mordecai and Esther's law gave God's people the right for one day to respond in kind to any who might seek their property, attack their family, or seek their death.

In summary, what was the solution? If you can't change the decree of the king, then add another unchangeable decree which would address the threat of death contained in the first law- which here was the right of God's people to defend themselves!²³

See, prior to this decree, if a Jew (on the day on which Haman's decree was to be fulfilled) sought to defend themselves and in the process killed someone who sought to kill them, they could be tried as a murderer in the Persian system since the edict of the king made anyone who raised their hand against a Jew on that day officials of the state for one day. Essentially, they were "deputized" for the day.

Think of it in another context. In that day if a convicted criminal on the way to prison killed one of the guards transporting them, the criminal would be charged with murder and executed. Well, Haman's decree essentially made anyone who sought to kill a Jew an official of Persia for one day! That's what makes this second decree so important. It made God's people officials of the state also for one day and so legally authorized to kill any who first attacked them! In other words, it "deputized" them as well.

That's the shocking and unbelievably wise solution. How do we apply this text to our lives?

As we've seen, Esther 7-9:16 has an eschatological element to it such that what we read here ultimately is a type/shadow of what was to come in God's redemptive program. Again, think of Haman's *Sudden* downfall (Esther 7) — is it NOT a shadow of the downfall of the wicked on the Last Day?

1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

Then there are the reversals of Esther 8:1-2. Just like with chapter 7, each are a shadow of what awaits all in Christ on the Last Day!

Esther 8 allows us to consider the glory of Christ's redemption. We begin with the vain wish of vv. 3-6. When God created the world, He entered into a special relationship with man which was based on man's conduct.

Genesis 2:16-17, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely

die.”

We call this the Covenant of Works which established the foundation upon which man would relate to God, perfect obedience! And so, if Adam disobeyed God, he and all of mankind would be condemned. And when Adam disobeyed (Genesis 3:1-6) all of mankind stands before God as guilty and therefore liable to death (cf. Romans 5:18a)!

In light of this, just like Esther, we can be found approaching God on a variety of terms or basis.

- We look to our conduct and say with Esther, “*God, aren’t I pleasing in your sight?*”
- Or as Esther did with Haman, we cry “Foul!” referencing the hostile intentions of Satan who tempted Adam to sin.
- Or like Esther, we appeal to God’s love and ask Him to overlook the penalty of our death.

Yet just like in Esther’s case we must understand that we are dealing with a decree that can NOT be changed — NOT by man and NOT by God! For God to overlook Adam’s sin might make God loving, BUT it would call into question God’s righteousness/justice!

And so, just as it was in Esther’s day, we are in a conundrum! What is the solution?

The Lawful Solution- as seen in vv. 7-10 & 11-14...

Just as in Esther’s situation where the solution came with another decree, so it is with God. God established another law! God Himself deigned to become a man and so to be born UNDER the Covenant of Works. This is the gospel! Because it was God who was born under the covenant of works, NOT only was He born without sin, BUT he was able to fulfill the requirement of the Covenant which is perfect obedience!

Then through the law/decreed of substitution, Christ then exchanged His life for ours by which He received our death, and we received His life. Isaiah put it this way:

Isaiah 53:6, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

And what did this do for us? NOT ONLY did it forgive our sin, BUT it gave us life.

1 Corinthians 15:45, “So also it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul.’ The last Adam *became* a life-giving spirit.”

How did He do this?

Romans 5:18, “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.”

This speaks NOT ONLY of the forgiveness of sin BUT of a right standing before God.

So, in response to the Fall God could NOT do away with the Covenant of Works. What then did He do? Just as in Esther, He deigned to defend us from its threat (which was death) by Himself dying in our place and then giving us His life!

In other words, what we read in Esther about a second law — by which God’s people would be immune from the threat of the first law — is a glorious foretaste of what God would do in Christ! Accordingly, the confidence which Mordecai and Esther’s law would have given to any of God’s people at the time ought to be the confidence with which you and I approach the Lord. There will be “no condemnation” on that day, for God has established a second law which saves to the utmost any and all represented by Christ. So, let us be done with fear and doubt in our walks with God! In the words of the Apostle Paul:

Romans 8:3-4, “For what the Law [the first law] could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [our flesh], God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin [this is the second law, the law of substitution], He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

References

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End Note(s)

- ¹ “The similarities and differences with Haman in the previous chapter are striking: he

fell down before Esther, but his concern was simply to plead for his own life, and he was unsuccessful in his petition (see Esther 7:8). Esther fell down before King Ahasuerus to plead not for her own life, but for the lives of her people, and she was granted what she asked.” (Duguid, 2005, p. 101)

² “This is the first time since 3:10 that Haman has specifically been identified as ‘the Agagite.’ Haman is mentioned by name forty-four times in the book, but only identified as ‘the Agagite’ four times. There is surely some significance here. After the introduction of Haman in 3:1, each time Haman is called ‘the Agagite,’ it is associated with an explicit mention of Haman’s plot against the Jews: in 3:10, when he first receives approval to destroy the Jews; here in 8:3 and again in 8:5, when Esther asks the king to overturn the wicked plot of Haman; and in 9:24, which summarizes Haman’s plot. It appears that the narrator is reminding us that Haman’s hatred is not just personal, but racial.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 311)

³ “Some understand that Esther again risked her life by going into the king’s presence without being called. However, others suggest that v. 3 does not introduce a new scene; it is a continuation of the scene described in vv. 1–2.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 352)

⁴ “Her plea, accompanied this time by prostration and tears, is intended to move the king to mercy.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 94)

⁵ “But even though Esther had once concealed her identity because her only thought was to protect herself, now that she had identified with her people, she had a new perspective that stretched beyond her own narrow self-interests. Salvation for herself was not enough if it came without salvation for her people.” (Duguid, 2005, p. 102)

⁶ “She is careful to lay responsibility for the decree wholly on Haman, rather than the king (Bardtke, 365). Perhaps the king could find it acceptable to rescind the decree, if it were not actually the king’s doing?” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 312)

⁷ “How can I endure (lit. ‘how am I able to ...’)? The repetition of this verb expresses the depth of Esther’s empathy with the sufferings of others. It is very moving to see the extent to which this young girl, who has everything money can buy, identifies herself with her own kith and kin, and is prepared to risk everything in an attempt to prevent the disaster that threatens them.” (Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, TOTC, p. 95)

⁸ “All she could do was to appeal to Ahasuerus’s own self-interest, as it related to her: ‘If you really love me and want me to be happy, you have to grant my request.’ Her people’s destiny hung upon the king’s response to her personally. If watching her people and kindred being destroyed would cause her great pain, how could anyone who loved her endure that?” (Duguid, 2005, p. 101)

⁹ “‘How can I bear to see’ is repeated in the parallel, almost poetic form of Esther’s request. She adroitly used her own feelings and the king’s favorable disposition toward her (‘if he is pleased with me’) to secure his permission for her request.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 353)

¹⁰ “Should the legal appeal fail, Esther adds a personal appeal. The destruction of her people would be an unbearable tragedy for the queen herself. If the king truly loves her, would he not desire to spare her such heartache? He has already stated by his actions that she has ‘found favor in his eyes.’ Even if he cares nothing for the Jews, he cannot deny that he cares for her.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 312)

¹¹ “It may seem to be a foregone conclusion that Esther would receive the favor she seeks, since she has found ‘favor’ (חֵן, *hēn*, from the same root, חָנַן, *hān*, as the verb used here) in the eyes of all who have seen her (Esther 2:15), and especially with the king (Esther 5:2, 8). She will need that favor now, since she is about to ask the king to do what, according to Esther 1:15, cannot be done: to “cause to pass away” (לְהַאֲבִיר, *lēha’ābîr*) a law of the Medes and Persians.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 311)

¹² “King Xerxes, as usual, is unwilling to take any action personally. The use of the personal pronoun ‘you’ (אַתָּה, *’attem*) here is redundant and certainly emphatic. The king is definitively washing his hands of the matter, delegating it to his queen and new prime minister.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 314)

¹³ “‘Now write’ is literally ‘you write.’ The ‘you’ is emphatic and includes both Esther and Mordecai.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 353)

¹⁴ “There were two months and ten days between the edict Haman made (3:7) and the new edict (8:9).” (Breneman, 1993, p. 351)

¹⁵ “As many scholars have noted, the time span could itself be significant: two months and ten days is the equivalent of seventy days. Seventy is a significant biblical number, being the product of two numbers that represent completion, seven and ten. The importance of the number is illustrated in numerous Bible passages: Jacob took seventy Israelites to Egypt (Genesis 46:27); the Egyptians mourned Jacob seventy days (Gen 50:3); seventy elders presided over Israel (Exodus 24:1; Numbers 11:16–25); seventy years was considered a full life span (Psalm 90:10). Clines (316) sees a reference here to the seventy years of the Babylonian exile: in his understanding, the time between the threat of annihilation and the issuance of reprieve represents the time between Judah’s downfall and its return.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 315)

¹⁶ “Mordecai took responsibility for drawing up the edict which the king’s secretaries had to copy and translate into the many languages of the empire, as in the case of Haman’s decree. This time, however, Hebrew was added for the copies sent to the Jews in every province.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 96)

¹⁷ “...special comment is made on the horses they were permitted to ride. They are referred to by the collective term *rekeš*, which in Micah 1:13 is the word for chariot steeds and in 1 Kings 4:28 (5:8, Heb.) for the ‘swift steeds’ specially imported by Solomon. These then were the equivalent of today’s racehorses, bred from the royal stud (lit. ‘sons of the royal mares’), though the exact meaning of the last word (Heb. *rammāk*) is dubious. Mordecai evidently went to extreme lengths to ensure the express delivery of his new edict.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 96)

¹⁸ Speaking of the decree, “Its chief provision is to give the Jews the right to ‘assemble’ (לְהִיָּקָח, *lěhiqqāhēl*). The Heb. term used here often means to muster an army (e.g., 2 Samuel 20:2; 21:5, 8; Ezekiel 16:40, and elsewhere). Without such official sanction, the process of assembling an army would have been viewed as an act of rebellion. It also appears that the Persian army will not take part in the action against the Jews, but it is not obvious that they were ever expected to participate. Perhaps the major effect of the edict is that it would provide a warning to anyone who was considering taking part in the slaughter of the Jews: the victims would not go meekly, as lambs to the slaughter.” (Tomasino, 2016, p. 317)

¹⁹ “The verbs destroy, slay, annihilate also keep strictly to the wording of the original decree which Mordecai is reversing; now it is the Jews who will be doing these things.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 97)

²⁰ “Such killing was liable to escalate into an ongoing vendetta, but by specifying the date, limits were set and the bloodshed contained.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 98)

²¹ “‘Destroy, kill and annihilate’ is the same wording as the other decree (3:13), but this time the Jews were allowed to defend themselves... Crucial at this point, however, is the fact that the Jews would act in self-defense.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 355)

²² “What Mordecai’s edict mandated was measure-for-measure retaliation by the Jews against their enemies. They could kill those who attacked them, along with their families, and then plunder them, just as their enemies had planned to kill the Jews and their families and take their plunder. This was not merely self-defense, but neither was it a license for indiscriminate slaughter...” (Duguid, 2005, p. 103)

²³ “Instead of being defenceless the Jews were permitted to organize themselves to deal with any attack upon them and so avenge themselves upon their enemies, presuming that the Jews prevailed in the battle. This was justice, not revenge.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 98)