

Once Upon a Sleepless Night

The Shadow Sovereign- Part 6

Esther 5:1-6:14

Thomas Watson, the Puritan pastor of the 1600's wrote this of God's providence: There is no such thing as blind fate, but there is a Providence that guides and governs the world. Providence is God's ordering all issues and events of things, after the counsel of His will, to His own glory. The wheels of the clock seem to move contrary one to the other, but they help forward the hands of the clock.

A 17th century Puritan by the name of Henry Law wrote, No sparrow falls, no leaf decays, but in accordance with God's ordering mind. Chance is a figment of a dreaming pillow. Chance never was and it never can be. Thus, to the child of God there is no trifle or unimportant event. Momentous issues often hang on quick words, on sudden looks, on unintended steps.¹

In light of what we're about to discover, I would have to add that momentous issues often hang on unexpected invitations and a sleepless night in the King's palace.

All of it is nothing less than the work of God where He prefers to remain anonymous – in the shadows – working through events, and decisions and plans – to bring about His ultimate plan and purpose.

The moment of truth has arrived. The ink on the edict is barely dry. Esther has promised Mordecai and the Jewish people at large that she will risk her life and confront the King about the death warrant he and Haman set into motion.

She has called upon her people to fast, which implies prayer as well. The three day fast is now completed.

It's time to act. Let's go back into this drama and once try our best to keep up with some rather breathtaking twists and turns.

The Moment of Truth

Esther 5:1 begins, Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance to the palace. When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court she obtained favor in his sight.

Now that was way too easy!

In fact, going back several centuries, Bible scholars have been puzzled by such an immediate favor with a king.

There was no way that Ahasuerus would have interrupted the business of his court and violate Persian protocol and say, "C'mon in, Esther . . . so what's on your mind."

That just didn't happen.

That's exactly why Esther finished her speech 3 days earlier saying, "And if I perish I perish."

Which was much more likely to happen; you didn't walk into the King's court and effectively state that your time was more important than his!

Among those verses, added into the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and written nearly 100 years before the birth of Christ, Jewish scholars attempted to make the story just a little more "believable" by adding this paragraph; "Esther's heart was pounding with fear. When she had passed

through all the doors, she stood before the king. Raising his face, flushed with color, he looked at her in fiercest anger. The queen stumbled, turned pale and fainted. He sprang from his throne in alarm, and took her up in his arms until she revived and comforted her with reassuring words.”ⁱⁱ

Sounds more like Sleeping Beauty, doesn't it?

As Ezra writes this account, under divine inspiration, he's not nearly as colorful. All we're given, further is simply this, further on in *verse 2*, is that ***And the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which was in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter. 3. Then the king said to her, "What is troubling you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you."***

Tilting the scepter toward Esther was court protocol for acceptance before the king. So instead of dying, Esther will be able to keep on living.

But instead of being rebuked or even dismissed with irritation, the king gives her his undivided attention and the business of the court screeches to a halt.

I remember going downtown to the courthouse downtown Raleigh to pay for a ticket I'd gotten when evidently the radar gun of the state trooper wasn't working properly. A friend of mine who was a judge at the time told me to come by his courtroom and say hello whenever I came downtown. I knew all these guys by name. So after paying for my ticket, I slipped into the back of his courtroom which was in session. Sitting on the front row was a group of 6 guys in orange jumpsuits, their arms and ankles chained – all 6 of them shackled together. Evidently, this case my friend was judging had something to do with them. I was about to slip back out when the judge spotted me and motioned for me to come forward. I didn't want to come forward. I kind of waved and shook my head. He motioned even more – he's the judge. So I ended up walking down the aisle – everybody stops what they're doing – I walked through that little swinging door, past all 6 of those guys who just looked at me. What do I say to them? "How are you doing?" What I wanted to say to them was, "If that judge is harsh to you, I really don't know who he is!"

And did I ever feel conspicuous . . . everything in that courtroom just screeched to a halt.

Multiply that by a few thousand . . . in this chapter, the judge has not invited Esther to stop by and say hello.

Archeologists have confirmed that standing just below the throne of this Persian monarch would have been a man holding an axe in his hands.

Listen, apart from the providence of God, Esther will lose her head that afternoon.

But instead, and I'm convinced, to everyone's surprise, He says to her in *verse 3*, ***"What is troubling you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you."***

That phrase was an expression which meant he was willing to do anything in his power to satisfy her request.

He basically says, "I'm in the mood to do whatever I can for you – just name it."

Esther says, in *verse 4*, ***"If it pleases the king, may the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him."***

In other words, I want you to come to my quarters after work and eat supper with me – I've had your favorite meal fixed just like you like it – oh, and bring the Prime Minister with you when you come.

That was a stroke of genius, by the way. By inviting Haman, she will allow his ego to blind his eyesight – any suspicions he would have automatically entertained were completely neutralized.

He should have been thinking – why would the Queen risk her life to invite the King over for supper. Something's up with this queen . . . I better find out what it is.

Instead, he's so enamored with the invitation to join the King and Queen for dinner he never even asked the first question.

He just ran to the dry cleaners to get his get his tuxedo pressed.

Oh, and just in case you missed it – this was not what Esther had originally planned to do. Earlier, she had told Mordecai that after three days of fasting, she would go into the King's presence and if she perished, she perished. She was going to ask him then and there.

But during that three day fast, the wisdom of God was obviously at work in her mind and heart.

She formulated a plan that would get the king and the conspirator, Haman, alone with her . . . away from the court . . . away from the press . . . away from the obvious public embarrassment that will come to the King when he discovers his own hand

has signed the death warrant of his favored wife, the Queen.

This would have been two Queens in a row that he would have lost by his own foolish and rash decisions.

So the King and Haman arrive for dinner. And when the meal is over and the king and Haman are drinking their wine, he says, “Okay, Esther, out with it . . . – **verse 6** – *“What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you.”*

In other words, what was so important to you that you risked your life to ask me?

So Esther replied, verse 7, “My petition and my request is; 8. If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king says.

Where in the world did that come from? My petition and request is . . . well, I want you to come to dinner tomorrow night and I’ll tell you.

Some commentators believe Esther choked . . . she just couldn’t get it out . . . and frankly, we can understand can’t we?

There’s the king and Hitler across the table from you. Demonically inspired – terribly intimidating – the cold blooded enemy of her people.

Certainly she was terrified throughout the meal and would have struggled to appear as if everything were happy and normal.

Others point out that Esther has rather cleverly gotten her husband to agree to do whatever it is she wants him to do, before he finds out what it is.

Wives have been doing that for centuries.

The problem with that view of Esther trying to maneuver the King into promising ahead of time is that the king has already promised in verse 6 to grant her petition without knowing what it was.

Esther didn’t need a double reinforcement from the king. In fact, she ran the risk of provoking his irritation at yet another delay.

What I believe is happening is the providence of God is moving Esther to delay her request.

From her perspective, she might indeed have been too afraid . . . she might have frozen at that moment . . . she might have lost her courage.

But from God’s perspective, it was His plan that she *not* ask until the following night.

There were a lot of things that God was going to initiate and manipulate over the course of one very sleepless night.

Unknown to Esther, Haman will plan to kill Mordecai the next morning before he arrives for this second banquet.

In other words, Esther’s plan to ask the king the following night for the lives of her people would have failed to save the one man she desires to save more than any other Jew – her adopted father Mordecai.

Remember, the Book of Esther is not a revelation of how clever people are – it’s a living, dramatic demonstration of how clever God is . . . how brilliantly wise and sovereign He is in His providence.

Unless God does something that night to change the course of events, Mordecai is less than 24 hours away from hanging. Something must happen to put Mordecai in a place of great favor before the king . . . something that Esther could have never arranged.

Mordecai will be in mortal danger before Esther’s servants have a chance to wash the dishes from that evening’s banquet.

Here’s why . . . ***notice verse 9. Then Haman went out that day glad and pleased of heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate and that he did not stand up or tremble before him, Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai.***

Evidently, Mordecai knew that Esther had been welcomed by the king – Mordecai is no longer outside the administration building wearing sackcloth, he’s now inside and sitting at his desk.

And when Haman walks out through the palace office building to go home, not only does everyone bow before him, Mordecai doesn’t even get up from where he’s seated . . . in front of everybody, Mordecai brazenly insults the Prime Minister.

This is the final and ultimate insult to the egomaniac before whom everyone must grovel.

But Haman controlled himself, verse 10 informs us. In other words, no one’s going to spoil his party – he’s just been invited back to dine with the King and Queen of Persia – he’ll deal with Mordecai later, so ***verse 10*** tells us, ***he went to his house and sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh.***

“Wait ‘til they hear what’s happened to me today – this has been the best day of my life and tomorrow is going to be even better!”

Another Narcissus

Look at him go on and on – *verse 11, Then Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, and the number of his sons, and every instance where the king had magnified him and how he had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king . . . blah, blah-blah, blah-blah.* That’s in the Hebrew text.

Like Narcissus, the Greek legend goes, his greatest love was his own reflection. He was so enraptured by himself; he was his favorite object of devotion.

Everything revolved around him.

You work with anybody like that?

- they get invited somewhere and you have to hear all about why;
- they get a promotion from the boss and you have to hear every reason why they deserved it;
- they purchase something new and you have to see it;
- they come back from a trip and everyone in the office has to endure the endless play by play
- and all the pictures – look that’s me here – that’s me over there – that’s me standing there.

Did you ever learn that little ditty when you were a kid – I remember learning it at camp:

Oh it’s so hard to be humble,
When you’re perfect in every way;
I can’t take my eyes off the mirror,
‘Cuase I get better lookin’ each day.

Camp was such a spiritual experience for me!

That happened to be Haman’s favorite song . . . he sang it every chance he got – and to anyone he could get to listen.

Here’s Zeresh and all of Haman’s family and neighbor’s – they’ve heard it all before – his sons, his job, his money, how much the King admires him, how Persia wouldn’t be the same without him.

Haman is one gigantic hot air balloon . . . self conceited, self-promoting, self-applauding, self-absorbed.

But did you notice – even while he’s going on and on about how great his life is and how wonderful he is, at the core of his being, he is still unhappy!

Notice *verse 13. Yet all of this does not satisfy me*

every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate.

This is classic human nature! I’ve got 99 things, but I want 100.

That one thing out of reach keeps me from enjoying everything within my reach.

Like King Ahab who went to his room pouting until his wife Jezebel came and said, “What’s wrong?” And Ahab said, “I wanted Naboth’s vineyard and he wouldn’t sell it to me . . . and so I’m in here pouting.” He already had vineyards and orchards and fields and servants and properties . . . he was the king. But I want one more thing!

And that one thing obscured his sight.

I have in my hands two quarters. They are fairly small – in fact, I can hold them up and see around me just fine. But if I bring them up really close to my eyes, I can’t see anything else at all.

Imagine . . . my sight can be obscured by only 50 cents!

Is there anything blocking your vision? Is there something you don’t have that you’ve pulled up to your heart so close that you can’t see anything else?

The truth is we’re a lot more like Haman than we’d like to admit. Our favorite person to please is ourselves. Our favorite topic conversation is who we are and how we feel and what we want. The most deserving person we know to be treated rightly and kindly is ourselves. Our greatest struggle in Christian growth is me, myself and I, right?

Oh that we would long for God to remove from our eyes those things that obscure our vision – so that we can see each other . . . and see Him so that ***we might esteem one another better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3)*** so that our Lord might become the greatest and dearest object of our devotion (***Psalms 73:25***).

Haman’s craving for one more thing will be his undoing.

His wife and friends give him ungodly counsel – *verse 14* – they all said, ***“Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go joyfully with the king to the banquet.” And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.***

Esther doesn’t know about this – her second banquet the next evening will be too late. Mordecai doesn’t know about this – he’s going to be arrested the following morning, and hung from a gallows.

That word was actually, for the Persians, a sharpened pole upon which the victim was impaled and publicly displayed.ⁱⁱⁱ

There would be a raised platform or hillside which would support the pole.

Zeresh tells Haman, make sure it's at least 75 feet high – you don't want anybody to miss the public display of your power over life and death.

At this point in the drama, things have never looked worse.

Mordecai is a dead man – unless God does something during the night.

And does God ever do something – again, through his control of hearts, minds and circumstances to fulfill His perfect plan.

Inspired Insomnia

The next scene opens with a bad case of divinely ordered insomnia. ***Chapter 6 opens, 1. 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.***

I love this scene. Here's the king in his private chambers – he can't fall asleep. He's read the newspaper . . . he's tried counting sheep . . . he's thumbed through Better Homes and Gardens – that'll knock you out – but nothing works.

So he calls a servant to come in and read to him anywhere he wants to read from, literally, the “words of the days”.^{iv}

This is the Persian equivalent of the Congressional Record – that'll put anybody under.

And of all the thousands of items recorded every year in the official book of records – and the Persians were world renowned for their administrative care in record keeping – of all the places that servant could have chosen to turn and begin reading – he turned and began to read the events of a conspiracy against the King where Mordecai had learned of the plot and informed Esther who informed the King.

The reading of this five year old event did several things – it reminded the King of the loyalty of his wife Esther and a member of his office staff named Mordecai.

It also revealed something somewhat embarrassing.

The king asks the servant, in *verse 3*. ***“What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?”***

In other words, what does the record show that I did for him some 5 years ago for saving my life? And the servant scanned the next few paragraphs and then responded, ***“Nothing has been done for him.”***

This is out of character for Persian customs. He had already rewarded faithful admirals with plots of land; he had made another man the governor of Cilicia for saving the life of the King's brother,

Ahasuerus' father and grandfather had rewarded faithful citizens with jewelry and garments. He great-great grandfather, Cyrus had given a loyal general a horse with a gold bridle and a solid gold dagger and a beautiful Persian robe.^v

These recipients even had a special title – they were known as the King's Benefactors.^{vi}

The king had literally not fulfilled a royal tradition. And get this – he discovers in the reading that Mordecai is a Jew.

Now that creates quite a dilemma, doesn't it? How can he promote someone he's earlier condemned to die?

He either completely overlooked in his absentmindedness the connection between Mordecai's lineage and the edict which he'd signed a few weeks earlier; or more than likely, Haman had never identified the people he wanted to see wiped off the face of the earth.^{vii}

In fact, as I went back and scoured ***chapter 3***, it struck me that Haman had actually written the edict himself. It was Haman who used the king's ring to seal it.

In Ahasuerus' callous disregard for life, he never even cared to find out who the people were that he had given permission to Haman to destroy!

And just about the time the servant informs the king that his loyal subject Mordecai, who has never been rewarded, was Jew, guess who shows up at the King's court – Haman, the hot air balloon!

He's just finished building the gallows – he's too excited to sleep so he decides to go to work early that morning.

He's flying high too . . . he fully expects to be rid of that man who refuses to bow before him . . . he has a private dinner engagement with the King and Queen . . . this is going to be the best day of his life!

Notice ***verse 6***. ***So Haman came in and the king said to him, “What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?”***

Obviously Haman thinks the King is talking about him. So he responds, ***verse 7***. ***For the man***

whom the king desires to honor, 8. Let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed.

Now stop for a moment. Don't just give the man a horse – give him a horse on which you've ridden.

It's one thing to go and buy a plane ticket and travel somewhere; it's another thing for the President of the United States to call you up and tell you that you can use Air Force One for the afternoon.^{viii}

Haman has obviously thought about how he'd like to be honored by the King . . . he had his Christmas list already printed out!

Even though he has so much, there is one thing Haman *doesn't* have – the role of the King. He has plenty of money, power, prestige – but he's not the king . . . so basically what he's asking the king to do is to honor a man by letting him act like and be treated like a king for the afternoon.

Give him one of your own *personal* robes.

Anybody can buy a jersey from the vendor – but to have one that a major league player wore during the World Series is entirely different.

So, don't just give him a robe, Haman suggests, give him one you've worn as you sat upon your throne.

Let me add that in the Middle East, a part of their garment was considered a part of their body – a part of their being. It represented who they were.

- Aaron's priestly garments were given to his son to wear as he inherited the priestly office (Numbers 20);
- Elisha received the mantle – the cloak of Elijah – which represented that he now occupied the place of Elijah (2 Kings 2:14);
- The army commanders spread their clothes on the stairs under Jehu for him to walk on which signified he had authority over their lives – their clothing represented their lives (2 Kings 9:13);
- When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the people shouted hosanna and waved palm branches – a symbol of deference to His royalty as the son of David – Luke's gospel also tells us that the people spread out their garments on the road for Jesus to ride over. In other words, there were symbolically submitting their lives to Jesus (Luke 19).

Haman has obviously thought about this beforehand, because he is able to tell the king immediately how to pile one honor after another upon this deserving subject.

This is really going to be the best day of his life!

The Great Reversal

What happens next is what we'll simply call the great reversal.

Verse 10. Then the king said to Haman, "Take quickly the robes and the horse as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew, who is sitting at the king's gate; do not fall short in anything of all that you have said."

This is a crushing blow.

The Hebrew construction indicates that Haman himself will dress Mordecai in the King's robe and place him on the King's horse and then lead that horse through the city square declaring that Mordecai is so honored because of the King's desire. Mordecai has gone from sackcloth and grief to splendor while Haman has gone from splendor to grief.

This is the great reversal.

Haman returns home to change clothes and get ready for dinner back at the palace. His mood is entirely changed. His wife and friends re-gather and instead of helping him lick his wounds, they tell him instead – in ***verse 13, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him."***

They've barely gotten those words out of their mouths when the king's limousine pulled up and Haman is whisked away to the second banquet.

Only God can arrange the timing of these events. One of my friends commented to me the other day about this study; he said, "When you mentioned the other Sunday that the pieces of the chessboard belong to God, it struck me that God can move a king as easily as he can move a pawn. He can move a queen into place as easily as he can move a bishop . . . the game belongs to Him."

The pieces are being moved with divine precision.

- a king who can't sleep
- a Queen who delays in making her petition until the second banquet
- a servant who turns to the right page in the book of the chronicles

- a man who saves the king's life but isn't rewarded until the day he was unknowingly going to be executed
- a man at the top of his world who now leads a horse like a servant through the public square upon which sits his mortal enemy.

Only God can arrange all these details to come together in one sleepless night.

There are three profound insights into the providence of God to be learned from this passage we've studied.

1. First, God is at work even when circumstances are uncontrollable.

I frankly have little doubt that during this sleepless night, news was delivered to Mordecai and perhaps even to Esther about the gallows being constructed – and why.

It's possible that this news galvanized Esther to not delay any longer – to deliver the stunning news to the king the next evening of Haman's treachery.

2. Secondly, God is at work even when life is unpredictable.

Can you imagine the roller coaster Mordecai's been on.

- He's a nobody from nowhere;
- then he's promoted to work directly for the king inside the administrative wing of the palace;
- then he's sentenced to death by Haman's edict;
- then he's lamenting outside the palace in sackcloth;
- then he's rewarded by the king and dressed in the king's royal robe.

Mordecai should have motion sickness by now.

Ladies and Gentlemen, stability in life never comes from life – it comes from trust in the One who gave us life.

Count on it - God is at work even when life seems unpredictable

3. God is at work even when sin seems unstoppable.

The edict has been written into the law of the Medes and Persians – it's unchangeable. The gallows is seven stories high.

Things never looked worse . . . but God was at work.

As the Psalmist wrote, "God never slumbers or sleeps." (*Psalm 121:4*) So when you have trouble sleeping, He's awake with you. When you drift off to sleep, He doesn't – He works on.

Because is never tired, you can be. Because God never sleeps, you can. You don't have to be in control of situations or circumstances or people – God already is.

Even when the stars are visible and the sun has disappeared, His angelic messengers are doing His bidding. The events of life are His horsemen riding upon the winds of His will. His actions and counter actions; His plans and counter plans are moving about the universe with perfect precision and irresistible power.

God is at work even when circumstances are uncontrollable.

God is at work even when life is unpredictable.

God is at work even when sin seems unstoppable.

There's a gallows 75 feet high . . . but for some reason, the King can't sleep!

William Cowper was befriended by John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*. Discipled by Newton, Cowper still struggled with bouts of suicidal depression. One evening he called for a carriage and ordered the driver to take him to the Ouse River, three miles away, where he planned to throw himself in and drown. The driver, knowing the state of mind of his passenger, breathed a prayer of thanks when a thick fog suddenly moved in and enveloped the area. He purposely lost his way in the dense fog, driving up one road and down another as Cowper fell into a deep sleep. Several hours passed before the driver returned to Cowper's house. Cowper woke up and said, "How is it that we're home?" The driver explained, "We got lost in the fog, sir . . . so sorry." Cowper paid his fare, went inside and pondered how he had been spared from harming himself by the providence of God.

That same evening in 1774, he wrote what would become his most famous hymn.

God moves in mysterious way his wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm

Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.^{ix}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/30/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Illustrations taken from Robert J. Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations and Quotes, (Thomas Nelson, 2000), pp. 650-653

ⁱⁱ John C. Whitcomb, Esther: Triumph of God's Sovereignty (Moody Press, 1979), p. 83

ⁱⁱⁱ Knute Larson & Kathy Dahlen, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (Holman Publishers, 2005), p. 331

^{iv} Peter A. Steveson, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther (BJU Press, 2011), p. 250

^v Adele Berlin, The JPS Torah Commentary: Esther (The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 59

^{vi} Karen H. Jobes, The NIV Application Commentary: Esther (Zondervan, 1999), p. 153

^{vii} Colin D. Jones, Exploring Esther: Serving the Unseen God (Day One Publications, 2005), p. 86

^{viii} Jobes, p. 153

^{ix} Nelson, p. 603