

Sleepless in Susa: God's Spectacular in the Ordinary

Esther 6

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 9-19-2010

Introduction

During the past two days we have looked at many providential events at the history festival. And some of those are pretty exciting. This morning I want to encourage you to see God's hand of providence in every detail of your lives – yes, even the most boring of those details. One of the amazing things about the book of Esther is that God's name does not occur, except in a hidden acrostic, and yet God's hand can be seen everywhere. It can be seen in the death of Esther's parents, and her adoption by Mordecai on a visit to Israel. It can be seen in a drunken king's removal of his queen, and later regretting it, and not being able to do anything about it. It can be seen in the rise to power of an enemy of God's people. And this enemy, Haman, would be used by God to bring His people out of a backslidden condition, and into a right walk with God. Think about that: the very one who hated God's people was used by God as a tool to make His people holy! Even the wrath of man is used to praise God in this book. God's hand can be seen in the casting of the dice by Haman, when he is trying to figure out what day to kill all the Jews. There is no such thing as luck. Haman thinks the gods are indicating what will be the lucky day to kill the Jews, but God is controlling things down to the minute in order to accomplish all of his purposes. If you have never read the book of Esther, I highly encourage you to do so. It is a suspense filled story. And I hate to jump into the middle of a cool story, but that's what we are going to do today. We are going to look at the providence of God in two sleepless men – Haman and Ahasuerus. And it is my hope that as we look at these two cases of insomnia, it will help each of us to see God's spectacular in the ordinary events of life.

I. Seen in the book's structure

And God's hidden hand of sovereignty can be seen in several ways. Even the way this book was structured shows that God brings the most spectacular things out of the ordinary. If you look at page two of your sermon notes I have recorded the fantastic thematic structure of the books in two outlines. I took this from Jobe's commentary. It is called a chiasmic structure where the A at the beginning of the book is parallel to the A at the end of the book. Both of those A points are dealing with similar themes. And

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the B points are parallel to each other, etc. And you will notice that in either the short outline or the more extended outline, the heart of the book is the sleepless insomnia of two men. In Hebrew chiasms, the heart of the book is always at the point of the chiasm. In the short outline it would be the two points labeled E, and in the more extended outline, it would be the two points that are labeled as K.

Now I'm sure that some of you don't get as excited about the structure of books as I do. And you might be thinking, "So what?" Jobes' commentary explains the "so what." It says, "By making the pivot point of the peripety [and I should explain that a peripety is a sudden turn of events that reverses what was expected. So the commentary says, "By making the pivot point of the peripety"] an insignificant event rather than the point of highest dramatic tension, the author is taking the focus away from human action. Had the pivot point of the peripety been at the scene where Esther approaches the king uninvited or where Esther confronts Haman, the king and/or Esther would have been spotlighted as the actual cause of the reversal. By separating the pivot point of the peripety in Esther from the point of highest dramatic tension, the characters of the story are not spotlighted as the cause of the reversal. This reinforces the message that no one in the story, not even the most powerful person in the empire, is in control of what is about to happen. An unseen power is controlling the reversal of destiny."

So, the author is showing that even when God appears to be silent in this book, God is at the center of this story. The author of this book sees God's hands in everything. His silent providence plays the crucial role, not men and kingdoms. It is God's Sovereignty that is the foundation for providential history. Marshall Foster points out that the weakness with some providential histories is that they start with individualism (the first point of the principle approach to education) rather than starting with God's sovereignty. If we were to write the Mission Impossible of this book, we might be tempted to turn Esther and Mordecai into Tom Cruzes who dominate the plot. But the odd thing about the writer of this story is that he leaves out so many details we are dying to know about the actors, and is instead giving us focus upon God's control of mundane events. The heart of the book is God; God is at the center of this story even though He cannot be seen or heard and His name nowhere appears. And the question that I have is, "Do you recognize God as being at the center of your story?" You need to.

And the best way of making God central is not by having His name constantly upon your lips or by seeking miracles in your life (though it is

always appropriate to seek miracles). The very best way is by recognizing that God is woven through everything that you do, and to have everything that you do centered on Him. The same author said, “Any deity worth his salt can do a miracle now and then. Our God is so great, so powerful, that he can work without miracles through the ordinary events of billions of human lives through millennia of time to accomplish his eternal purposes and ancient promises.” I think that is a cool thought. This chiasm shows that it is God’s providence that is the central theme of this book.

II. Seen in the right touch (vv. 1-3)

Let’s take a look at the amazing scope of God’s providence in this chapter. While everyone but Haman and the king are sleeping, God is silently at work. Verses 1-3 show that God knows how to give just the right touch to accomplish His purposes. Verse 1: **“That night the king could not sleep.”** Literally, it says “the king’s sleep fled away.” He was probably asleep, but was suddenly wide awake and unable to go back to sleep. One writer humorously supposed that it was all the sawing and hammering going on outside as Haman built the gallows to hang Mordecai. I doubt that, but we aren’t told. Who knows?

But ultimately, who is the giver of sleep and the taker away of sleep? God is. We have a tendency to ignore God’s role in such mundane things as sleep and insomnia. And yet it is a part of God’s providence. Certainly there are human responsibilities that we need to pursue, but we should always be prayerful even when we engage in our human responsibilities. When you cannot sleep at night, you should first of all explore whether God wants you awake for a reason. Perhaps He wants you to pray. Or perhaps He wants you to notice something. Secondly, when you can see no good reason, ask God for sleep. It’s OK to take calcium, hot showers and other things that can help with sleep, but pray to God. Scripture gives these kinds of statements, **“He gives His beloved sleep”** (Psalm 127:2). That’s a promise that I claim when I have chronic insomnia – and I do. Here’s another Scripture that shows that God is involved in even the issues of sleep. **“And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon him”** (Gen. 2:21). 1 Samuel 16 talks about David sneaking up on Saul’s garrison and it says, **“they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the LORD had fallen on them.”** So it’s not just on prefall-Adam that God produced sleep, but also on His enemies. On the night before the big battle with Absalom, David said, **“I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the LORD sustained me.”** [That explains why he could sleep and why he could wake refreshed. If you have a

hard time getting up, pray that God would wake you up. Certainly you have responsibilities such as making your alarm clock loud enough, putting it across the room and making it harder to climb back into bed, and maybe drinking a cup of coffee. But you can also ask God to help you wake up. Isaiah 50:4 says, **“He awakens Me morning by morning.”** The point of this rabbit trail is that we should see God in everything. Make use of your insomnia for prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. There was many a time when David could not sleep, and he gave himself to prayer at midnight.

Anyway, when king Ahasuerus becomes tired of tossing and turning and punching his pillow he finally decides to put himself to sleep with boring reading. I can’t think of anything more boring than to read through old minutes. But God knows just how to move the human heart to do His bidding.

Continuing on in verse 1: **“So one was commanded to bring the book of the records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.”** Think of the chances of this servant reading from the right account. They didn’t have books like we do where you could pack years worth into one book. Every page was a fat clay tablet. I’m sure there are only so many tablets that could be brought up to be read. And God has just the right touch in which tablet the servant should pull off the shelf, and in where on this tablet the servant should read. The king could have had this servant read minutes from any number of tablets over the past twelve years, but he just happens to pick up the tablets that relate to five years ago. What are the odds of that happening? Of course, our God isn’t subject to odds, is He? He makes the odds.

God’s touch can also be seen in the king’s curious question about what reward he had been given to Mordecai. As the reader droned along, he finally came to an interesting part of the reading. After all, the king had almost lost his life. So it causes the king to wrack his brain on what had happened. Verse 3: **“Then the king said, ‘What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?’”** And here is another perfect touch that comes from God’s hands: the servants that he is dealing with here have a good memory of five years before. It could have been different servants who had been on duty, but God makes sure that the right servants are on duty. **“And the king’s servants who attended to him said, ‘Nothing has been done for him.’”**

Let’s stop and think about that for a minute. Mordecai could easily have been frustrated that immediately after he rescues the king, Mordecai is

forgotten and Haman is advanced. Mordecai has done a wonderful thing, and nobody even recognizes it. Sometimes life does not appear to be just, does it? Perhaps you have been ignored and someone else less worthy has been advanced to a high position. It may appear as if God is not prospering the work of your hands and He's not noticing your work. In fact, it may seem as if God is ignoring your prayers altogether. One of the themes of this book is the illusion that God is silent and is absent from life when in reality He is orchestrating the tiniest details. It was ultimately in Mordecai's best interests that he was overlooked five years before, so that he could be elevated at just the right time. And you need to have a confidence that God is using just the right touch when it comes to your own frustrations.

Before we move on to point III, it is worth noting that Haman had insomnia too. It's not just the king who is sleepless in Susa. Haman is so consumed with getting back at Mordecai that he probably can't sleep either. This is nighttime. The king is trying to sleep. What's Haman doing standing out there in the lobby of the palace? He probably has been tossing and turning as well, and finally decides that he needs to go ahead and get ready to talk to the king as soon as he gets up. If you know the story, you know that Haman has built a gallows for Mordecai, and he has just come to ask the king if it would be OK to hang Mordecai on this gallows. So in verse 4 it isn't just the right timing that God controls, but He controls the sleep of both the king and Haman. Can God turn the hearts of pagans to suit His kingdom purposes? Absolutely yes. Three times in Exodus it says that the Lord God gave the Israelites favor in the sight of the Egyptians. God turned the hearts of an entire nation to give gold, silver and other articles to the Jews as they left Egypt. God hardened the heart of Pharaoh. Proverbs says that the king's heart is like rivers of water and the Lord turns it whatever way He wants. We need to have confidence that God can have the right touch even with your adversaries. We serve an awesome God. Amen?

III. Seen in the perfect timing (vv. 4-6)

But God's strategy involves timing as well. The moment the king has finished saying these words, who does he hear coming into the foyer but Haman. He hears footsteps outside. Verse 4: **"So the king said, 'Who is in the court?' Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to suggest that the king hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him."** Talk about incredible timing! Haman just happens to be present at just the moment that this discussion is taking place. And sometimes we can see this marvelous timing of God in our own lives in such

an obvious way. Several of you have told stories that make your mouth drop open. But the point of this timing is that it is dependent on a pile of other timing issues that are not so obvious. And in fact, it was dependent on the apparently bad timing of God in chapter 2 where Mordecai does his good deed at a time when the king is so preoccupied that he forgets to reward Mordecai. There is no such thing as bad timing in God's plan. The king was noted for always rewarding people handsomely. This was too bizarre that the one who saved the king's life is forgotten?!? That just never happens. Some would say, "What bad luck!" But in hindsight we realize that NO, chapter 2 was awesome timing. And confidence in this ought to make us not get frustrated at our detours but to say instead, "Lord. You have stopped me here. I don't know why you have done so, but I'm excited to see what neat thing you will eventually bring out of it." When you get a flat tire, instead of getting angry because you are late for work, look at the flat tire as a gift wrapped up in special paper, and tell the Lord, "Thank you. I don't know what is wrapped up in this present, but I thank you that it is working together for my good."

Verse 5: **"The king's servants said to him, 'Haman is there, standing in the court.' And the king said, 'Let him come in.'"** Even the invitation to come into his bedroom chamber is remarkable, because that is not normal protocol. He could have made Haman wait until he had gotten up and had brushed his teeth. God could have had Mordecai rewarded without conferring with Haman at all. But No, Haman has to be a part of it for God to be most glorified.

Verse 6: **"So Haman came in, and the king asked him, 'What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?'"** What a set up! The verse goes on: **"Now Haman thought in his heart, 'Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?'"** Why does the king leave the name of Mordecai out of his request? This almost guarantees that Haman will misinterpret his words. We aren't told why. It may have been accidental. Or the king may have been having fun with Haman's egotistical reactions. Maybe the king was pulling his chain. We aren't told, but it fits God's plan perfectly. No wonder Romans 11:36 stands in awe of how great God is and says, **"For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen."** It is my prayer that you will walk away from this weekend with a renewed confidence in your Lord and Savior.

IV. Seen in Haman's fatal flaw (7-9)

Point IV – God also takes advantage of Haman's fatal flaw. And of course, Haman's fatal flaw is his pride. God doesn't have to *make* Haman sin in order for Haman to say the right words. He knows that Haman's pride will automatically make Haman have the wrong assumptions. It will make Haman assume that the king likes him more than anyone else, and delights to honor him more than anyone else. Pride is a form of self-worship, and those who worship self can't understand why everyone else would not be similarly enamored with me, myself, and I. Pride is a form of self-worship and idolatry. And of course, our God makes war on all forms of idolatry. That was the subject matter of one of the speeches yesterday at the Providential History Festival, wasn't it? It was a marvelous Providential History of pride and its effects in the 20th century.

Let's take a look at verses 7-11. These are verses that will set up Haman for everything that he hates. **“And Haman answered the king, ‘For the man whom the king delights to honor, let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on the head. Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honor. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!””**”

If you could ask Haman to make a list of everything he would hate to do for someone else, it would be the list of things that he wants other people to do for him. Pride makes us do the exact opposite of the Golden Rule. And if you are trying to analyze the pride of your own heart, you can take a cue from this. There are many ways to conquer pride, but one way is to serve the interests of others before your own. Or another way of saying it is the Golden Rule – to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you consistently praise others, seek others' welfare, lift them up, and seek their interests, you will systematically be destroying pride. You won't need those things to be done to you. But anyway, that is why it is so easy for prideful people to fall. Their own pride sets them up for a fall.

And yet, here is the amazing thing. God's providence was working even through this pride. And you might think: “But how could that be??! God never sins; nor does He tempt anyone to sin.” I agree. James is quite clear on that. But think of it this way: was there any sin that was ever greater

than the crucifixion of Jesus? No. Yet God predestined over 100 details that had to take place in perfect sequence for Jesus to be crucified on Nisan 14. The Jewish leadership did everything they could to postpone the crucifixion until after the crowds were gone, because they feared crowds. But Jesus had to be crucified at exactly the right hour. He had to be beaten, a spear thrust through His side, his garments had to be gambled for, etc., etc. How could God work through even the wicked actions of others without being implicated in those actions Himself? How could Psalm 105:17 say that *God* sent Joseph into Egypt when it was Joseph's wicked brothers who sold him there? How could Joseph say to his brothers, **"But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive"** (Gen. 50:19)? How can man be responsible if God is sovereign?

And I think A.W. Pink's illustration is as good as any. Pink asks what keeps a book that's in your hand from falling to the ground? It is the restraining power of my hand. And Pink points out that if the restraining power of my hand is removed from holding up the book, the book will drop to the ground by its own nature because of gravity. It doesn't need to be thrown to the ground in order to fall to the ground. And in the same way all men are attracted to sin by their sin nature just as gravity pulls on this book. And God in His mercy and restraining goodness restrains men from plummeting into worse and worse sins. That is a wonderful gift. Such men are not going to be punished in hell as severely. They don't deserve such restraining providences. So when God pulls His hand away and gives them up to their sin as Romans 1 speaks about, He is not withholding anything that they deserve. He is giving them up precisely to their deserts. He doesn't force them to sin, but by the very act of giving them up to a depraved mind, He guarantees that they will fall. And according to Scripture, apart from God's restraining work, any of us would fall to the same extent in sin and rebellion. That's why it scares me to death to trifle with His grace. I cling to Him. So God can control what areas men will be given up to simply by determining when He will remove the restraint that they do not deserve anyway and that they have been spurning anyway. You could say that He allows sins, but they are predetermined just as surely, even though He is not the author of sin. So God works even the wrath of Haman to praise Him. God works even the pride of Haman together for Mordecai's good.

V. Seen in the king's ironic twist (vv. 10-11)

Verses 7-11 show this ironic twist. We aren't told that the king is deliberately twisting the knife. He just took Haman's advice and applied it to the wrong person. It is God who is giving this stab and this twist. **"Then the king said to Haman, 'Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king's gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken.'"** And he is thinking, "Why did I have to open my big fat mouth!" From this point on everything unravels in very quick succession for this ungodly man. It's hard enough for Haman's pride to realize that he isn't the man to be honored, but to see that this exquisite honor which he tailor made for himself be conferred on his mortal enemy; to be forced to give the honor himself, to do it immediately, and to do it so publicly must have been shameful and mortifying in the extreme.

Now we rejoice in this when we see it happen to Haman right? We realize that he deserved his comeuppance. But let me give you a quick warning. If you are tempted to the path of pride, keep this picture in mind. Let this picture burn into your mind when you have the slightest temptation to have pride. This is guaranteed to happen to you. No, maybe not the same details. But the shame, the humiliation, the casting down. God promises that He resists and casts down the proud and exalts and gives more grace to the humble. We must see pride as being our mortal enemy. God knows just how to bring these ironic twists into life. And He will do it to you if you are not quick to bury pride, confess it and put it under the blood of Jesus Christ.

VI. Seen in his friends unwitting prophecy (vv. 12-14)

Finally, God's strategy can be seen in the fact that his loyal friends who had only days before enthusiastically encouraged him to build the gallows and who had stroked his pride, are the first to turn on him. Verse 13: **"When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, 'If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him.'"** Thanks a lot for telling me the obvious guys! Like I really needed to hear that! Thanks a lot for rubbing salt in the wound! But you know, Haman doesn't really have time to respond or even to try to hide the fact that he had tried to hang Mordecai. He doesn't even have time to take down the gallows. I'm sure that is what he is dying to do. But he is rushed by others to go to the banquet. Verse 14 **"While they were still talking with him, the king's**

eunuchs came, and hastened to bring Haman to the banquet which Esther had prepared.” What an incredible reversal. But it all came about because the king couldn't sleep and Haman couldn't sleep. The destiny of the nation was determined by two men who were sleepless in Susa. I think it is a fun story all in its own right, but I do want to end with three more applications.

Conclusion

First, this chapter reflects the story of each of our lives. The blending of our own wills with God's will is often inscrutable. In other words, it can't be fully understood. How did you get your job? It may have seemed like a long chain of random events, but you will find that God was silently at the center of your story. How did you meet your spouse? For some of you it was a coincidental meeting, for others it was carefully planned out. But no matter how silent God may have appeared to be, He was in the middle of your story. Though Kathy and I grew up in the same country in Africa, we didn't know it until after we started courting. Our paths crossed only for a short time in college in Tennessee, and I came from Canada while she came from Omaha. How in the world did we get in the right place at the right time? For me it was because it took me years to save up the money to go to College. Actually, God delayed me by six years so that I could be there when she was there. It was kind of frustrating delay that it was taking so long to get through College and to get married. But it was worth the wait.

How were you converted? For some of you it may have seemed like the end of a long series of random events. Perhaps you were flipping through the radio channels and stumbled upon a preacher preaching right to the heart of what you were going through, and you “accidentally” got converted. Or it may have been that you grew up in a Christian home. But God's finger was on the pulse of every event to make sure it worked together for your good. We need to get used to seeing the apparently silent God as being the substance of the plot of our lives. Though silent, He is the center of our story.

Another lesson is that often God's path to joy leads through the swamps of difficulty and sorrow. Some of you are recognizing this. Dan couldn't be with us because his dad was dying. And some of you have your own swamps. You are beginning to be able to thank God for those swamps. You may not like the position God has presently placed you in. Yet this very trial may be the vehicle by which God will usher you into greater joy and fulfillment. Don't despise the trials God brings or the frustrations God

brings. Learn to change them when you are able, and to joyfully submit to them when you are not.

One last application is that history itself has a chiasm just like this book does. God has not chosen to reverse history at the end of our age like so many evangelicals believe. It's the cross of Jesus Christ that is the crucial event around which all of history revolves. God reverses His Story at the center of history. It's the cross that reverses the curse of sin. Now from a human perspective the cross was just a blip on the map. Prior to Christ and after Christ there were billions of others deaths. Many people may not have even realized that Jesus had died. It was certainly unknown in China. But the event that so many have ignored, which did not come with parades and firecrackers; the event which highlighted Christ's weakness and obscurity, is the event that God has chosen to change world history. And at the end of time when we look back on life we will see a similar pattern to what is portrayed in this book. Perhaps your eschatology is making you look to the future with hope because you think it will be spectacular with fireworks and a big show. But God wants you to look back to His victory at the cross. It is the cross that will transform nations and eventually make a new heavens and new earth. And when we get to heaven and can look back on God's history, I believe we will worship God as we see His spectacular in the ordinary. To the best of your ability, try to see that now. Amen.

Children of God, I charge you to see nothing as insignificant, but rather to be gripped by the truth of Romans 11:36 where Paul says, **For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be the glory forever. Amen.**

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Esther 6

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Introduction

I. Seen in the book's structure
(see next page)

II. Seen in the right touch (vv. 1-3)



Haman honoring Mordecai as he leads him through the city

III. Seen in the perfect timing (vv. 4-6)

IV. Seen in Haman's fatal flaw (7-9)

V. Seen in the king's ironic twist (vv. 10-11)

VI. Seen in his friends unwitting prophecy (vv. 12-14)

Conclusion

Chiasm in the Book of Esther

(Summary of Jobe's Commentary)

Banquets and Feasting in Esther

Xerxes' empire wide banquet (1:2-4)	A ¹
Xerxes' banquet for city of Susa (1:5-8)	B ¹
Esther's coronation banquet (2:18)	C ¹
Esther's first banquet for the king and Haman (5:1-8)	D ¹
Sleepless (chapter 6)	E
Esther's Second banquet for the king and Haman (7:1-9)	D ²
Mordecai's promotion banquet (8:17)	C ²
Purim feast throughout the empire (9:17,19)	A ²
Purim feast in city of Susa (9:18)	B ²

Thematic reversal

A. The king gives Haman his ring (3:10)	
B. Haman summons the king's scribe (3:12)	
C. Letters written, sealed with ring (3:12)	
D. The Jews, even women and children, to be killed on one day (3:13)	
E. Haman's decree publically displayed as law (3:14)	
F. Couriers go out in haste (3:15)	
G. The city of Susa is bewildered (3:15)	
H. Mordecai wears sackcloth and ashes (4:1)	
I. Mordecai goes through city crying in sorrow (4:1)	
J. Zeresh advises Mordecai's death (5:14)	
K. King's insomnia leads to Mordecai's honor (6:1-3)	
K. Haman's insomnia leads to his dishonor (6:4-9)	
J. Zeresh predicts Haman's ruin (6:13)	
I. Mordecai led through the city in honor (6:11)	
H. Mordecai wears royal robes (8:15)	
G. The city of Susa rejoices (8:15)	
F. Couriers go out in haste (8:14)	
E. Mordecai's decree publicly displayed as law (8:13)	
D. The enemies, even women and children, to be killed on one day (8:11)	
C. Letters written, sealed with the same ring (8:10)	
B. Mordecai summons the king's scribes (8:9)	
A. The king gives Mordecai the same ring (8:2)	