

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MESSAGE OF ESTHER

A. THE PERMANENT VALUE

God acting in Providence.

I. The Method

- i. Hidden but Active.
 - a. Ruling to Issues (10:3.)
 - b. Using the Trivialities.
 - 1 Before the Peril.
 2. In the midst of the Peril.
- ii. Inclusive. An all-pervading Atmosphere.
 - a. The Individuals.
 - b. The Events.

II. The Principles

- i. Perfect Knowledge.
- ii. Undeviating Righteousness.
- iii. Absolute Power.

III. The Issues

- i. To those recognizing. Confidence and Courage.
- ii. To those in Rebellion, Panic and Punishment.
- iii. Historic. Progress.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. The Truth

- i. God is.
- ii. God acts in Providence.
- iii. God is touching Life at every Point.

II. The Application

- i. Reckon with Him.
 - ii. Trust Him.
- iii. Act with Him.

THE events recorded in the book of Esther took place in the sixty years between the work of Zerubbabel and that of Ezra, of which we have no account save that thus supplied. We can only speculate as to the condition of affairs in Jerusalem. The reformation under Ezra, particulars of which are given in the second part of the book bearing his name, show how far the people had wandered from allegiance to the Lord in that period. During those years there was no king, and no prophet.

The story told in Esther, however, has nothing to do with Jerusalem, or with those who had returned there under Zerubbabel and Joshua, but with those who had refused to return. The name Mordecai occurs in the lists given in the book of Ezra, but it is not possible that this should be the man bearing that name whose story is told in the present book.

Among the great visions of Zechariah, the first was that of the myrtle trees in the shady place.

It symbolized the condition into which the chosen people were about to come. Israel in the period of her degeneracy was foreshadowed in that first vision of Zechariah. Believing that Israel is still there, I nevertheless quite clearly see that the description was partially fulfilled in that period of sixty years.

The symbolism of the myrtle tree in Scripture is a very interesting one. Isaiah was the first one who made use of it. The probability is that the tree had never been grown in Palestine until it was brought from Babylon. Then Isaiah seized upon it as symbolic of the nation. No longer the tall cedar, but the myrtle, with its beautiful star-like flower.

It is an interesting thing, though I do not desire to base anything like a dogmatic interpretation upon it, that Esther's original name was Hadassah, which means myrtle, while Esther is a Persian name which means "star," suggestive of the form of flower that the myrtle tree bears. The beautiful daughter of the Hebrew race at the court of a Persian king, born in captivity, was called Myrtle. In all likelihood her father named her Hadassah, because the myrtle tree had become the sign and symbol of the race. The Persians called her Star, to indicate that she was the flower of the myrtle tree, full of beauty, full of grace.

There are peculiarities in this story which have raised doubts as to whether it ought to have any place in the canon of Scripture.

- The name of God is never mentioned.
- There is found no reference to the Hebrew religion.
- The temple never appears.
- No ceremonial of the Hebrew worship is referred to.
- No requirement of the law is named from beginning to end.

There is one reference to Jerusalem in the second chapter and sixth verse. That merely accounts for Mordecai, and shows whence these people had come. There is one reference to a fast, and one to a feast, showing that the religious habit of the Hebrews obtained among the Jews, but nothing else from beginning to end. Perhaps the book is a fragment of profane history captured for sacred purposes; perchance copied bodily from Persian history and incorporated in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. While there is no name of God, and no reference to the Hebrew religion anywhere, no one reads this book without being conscious of God. Its permanent value is that it is a revelation of God acting in providence.

Now providence is a sadly abused word. Christian people talk about providence, and special providences, in a way that reveals lamentable ignorance. The root meaning of providence is foresight; and the acquired meaning is activity resulting from foresight.

In Hamlet, when the King is discussing the madness of Hamlet, he says,

“Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answered?
It will be laid to us, whose providence
Should have kept short, restrained, and out of haunt,
This mad young man.”

There the meaning of the word is revealed, “whose providence,” that is our foresight, and the activity resulting from foresight, ought to have restrained this mad young man. If providence radically means foresight, and by usage, the activity resulting from foresight, it is evident that providence can never perfectly be postulated of man, but only of God. Man has no foresight. No man knows what a day will bring forth. God alone foresees, and He alone is able to act upon the basis of foreknowledge.

In the introductory section of “*Paradise Lost*,” when Milton is writing the great argument, and is attempting to prepare his own soul for the tremendous task he has set himself, he says:

“What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.”

That is a profound use of the word providence. The doctrine of Divine providence is that God both possesses and exercises absolute power over all the works of His hands.

If I want the supreme Bible passage on providence, I find it in the eleventh Psalm. The advice given to David was, “**Flee as a bird to your mountain? For, lo, the wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string, that they may privily shoot at the upright in heart. If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?**”

To which he replied, Why do you tell me to flee? The foundations are not destroyed. The Lord is in His temple, His eyes behold, His eyelids try the children of men. He will try the righteous and He will rain brimstone upon the wicked. In effect he said, The things you call foundations are scaffolding. The foundation has never been moved. I am not going to run away. I believe in the Divine providence. Esther is the book of pictures, and the teaching of pictures is that of the Divine providence. God amid the shadows, but at work. God hidden, unrecognized by the vast majority, undetected, but at work. The book then reveals the method of Divine providence, the principles of Divine providence, and some of the issues of Divine providence.

The book reveals first, the method of providence.

It shows that God hidden is still active, and that His activity is always the ruling event towards an issue.

At the end of the book of Esther, these words are written, **“Mordecai, the Jew, was next unto the King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren; seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.”**

That is not the final issue, but the issue so far as these pictures are concerned. Notice carefully the contrast of that condition of affairs, with the condition obtaining when the book opens.

Then the head man at the court of Ahasuerus was Haman, and in the heart of Haman there was enmity against Mordecai, and against the Jews; so that the whole of these people were in peril. At the end of the book, the man in authority is Mordecai, and he is seeking the good of his people, and speaking peace to his seed.

Between the opening peril, incipient if not manifest, and the closing safety, clearly manifest, you have all the story of the book, and it is the story of “God within the shadow keeping watch above His own”; preventing and providing; taking care of His people; watching over them; moving quietly and surely on, until the peril is past and the people are brought to the place of safety and peace.

Now notice the method of His activity while hidden. He is seen using trivialities.

Before the peril becomes imminent, while it is still incipient in the heart of Haman, the king’s carousal issues in the removal of Vashti, and the introduction of Esther. Here we need to make a careful discrimination. God did not make Ahasuerus drunk, and God did not put into his heart the unholy desire that Vashti should be presented to his drunken lords; but God is in the shadow while Ahasuerus and his crowd of lords indulge in their carousal, while Vashti declines to yield to the whim of the king; and He uses Esther for the deliverance.

A little while later, the peril is not merely incipient, it is imminent. Then the sleepless king is God’s method.

The king could not sleep, and when he could not sleep, he commanded that the records should be brought and read to him, and when they were read in the loneliness of the night, an entry was found of a service which one Mordecai had rendered, which the king had forgotten, and he asked about him, and took counsel with Haman as to what should be done to any man whom the king delighted to honour. Almost immediately Mordecai, who had been in a place of peril, was raised to a place of power. Infidelity will say it happened that the king could not sleep, and it happened that he had the records read to him, and it happened that Mordecai’s name was discovered in the reading. Far simpler is the explanation, “Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.”

There was a day when the Hebrew Psalmist said, **“Thou holdest mine eyes waking.”** He charged his sleeplessness upon God, and perhaps he was right. What is certain is that through the sleeplessness of the king God moved for the safety of His people.

Once again the method of the Divine providence is all-inclusive. God is an all-pervading atmosphere.

There is no individual presented but that lives, moves, and has being in God. Ahasuerus, Vashti, Mordecai, Esther, and Haman are all in this atmosphere. The Divine presence enwrapping all their being, they are compelled to work out into manifestation the deep facts of their inward life; and all the while they are compelled as they work these things out into manifestation to cooperate in the Divine purpose and Divine intention, as it works carefully for the preservation of His people, and quietly forward to yet larger issues. Not individuals only are in this all-pervading atmosphere, but events also; royal carousals and banquets, royal proclamations; the small family interests in the life of Mordecai and Esther; personal ambitions, such as that of Haman; all these things are seen in this Divine atmosphere, in one case scorching, blasting, destruction; and in another healing, helping, deliverance.

The principles, as well as the method of the Divine providence, are clearly revealed. God proceeds upon the basis of perfect knowledge. “**His eyes behold . . . His eyelids try.**” The Hebrew Psalms are pictorial. God is spoken of under the figure of a man, “**His eyes behold.**” That is the idea of intense looking. “**His eyelids try.**” That is the idea of close scrutiny and penetration. Determination to see everything.

That is the first principle of providence. It is based upon intimate, accurate, absolute knowledge.

The second principle is that of the undeviating righteousness of God. First, loyalty to man’s free will.

One of the supreme values of this book is that the name of God is left out of it, although He is close at hand. Ahasuerus sent out his invitations and entertained the aristocracy of the nation for one hundred and eighty days, and the democracy for seven days, which is about the usual proportion. He did just as he liked about it. He was not compelled to do this, that, or the other.

Haman entered into all his own intrigues, made his own arrangements, built his own gallows. No one compelled Haman to build the gallows; he wrought out of his own free will. Mordecai did his own piece of political maneuvering when he placed Esther in the Court. They all went their own way, and had their own will. They were left absolutely to work out their own purposes. Yet, while they were absolutely free to work out their own will, the sphere of the operations of will is God, and they could not escape Him.

Ahasuerus got drunk amid his lords, and followed out his drunken mania to its issue, and then at the right moment the great hand of God interfered. Haman built his gallows, but at last God hung him on it. In this tremendous revelation of providence I see the undeviating righteousness of God in His loyalty to man’s free will, and this issues in poetic justice. All the way through the punishment fits the crime.

Another principle of providence revealed is that of the absolute power of God.

Mark the marvel of these revelations of the fact that human freedom is made contributory to Divine purpose. That is a matter we can never understand entirely. Whenever we try to compress the God of the Bible into a philosophy we break down at that point.

Nevertheless, it is actually, simply, and entirely true to human experience.

It is seen not only in the book of Esther. It is equally evident in our own lives. We look back. We have wrought out our own will, yet in the larger outlook we have wrought out in perfect freedom of activity the purpose of God. There is no possibility of escape.

Finally, look at the issues of providence.

To those recognizing this providence, this overruling activity of God, there come a great confidence and a great courage. To those in rebellion against it, who do not recognize it and who deny it, there are panic and punishment. The historic issue of providence is the progress of God towards the ultimate goal. Of this the book of Esther is but one illustration in the midst of others. All the way through the Bible we see the same mighty, sure, onward movement. If this book of Esther illustrates - I have tried to use that word carefully, I do not say it declares it as a theory but it illustrates - the providence of God, what is its living message?

First, it is the illustration of a truth, demanding an application. The truth is that of the existence of God. There are many arguments for the existence of God, but the argument of providence is not the least weighty. I know it is the fashion to-day in theological circles, and in Christian evidence work, to say that the argument from design is played out. It has never been answered, and when lifted on to its highest level, and the evidence of human history, mental, moral and spiritual, is taken, one of the supremest arguments for God is the marvellous harmony of human events.

Things that seem to be far apart and even contradictory as we watch them, are yet seen to contribute to the same onward movement, to the reaching of the same great goal. I say that the supreme message of this book is that God is, and that God acts.

I have more than once quoted a couplet from James Russell Lowell. Let me now quote two verses out of the poem in the midst of which the couplet occurs:

“Careless seems the great Avenger; history’s pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness ‘twixt old systems and the word;
Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne -
Yet that scaffold sways the future and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.

“We see dimly in the present what is small and what is great,
Slow of faith how weak an arm may turn the iron helm of fate,
But the soul is still oracular; amid the market’s din,
List the ominous stern whisper from the Delphic cave within -
‘They enslave their children’s children who make compromise with sin.’”

That final word of these two verses is based upon Lowell’s tremendous conviction that God stands “within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.”

He stands there to-day just as much as He did in the olden days. The Court of Ahasuerus characterized by ostentation and voluptuousness was in the atmosphere of God. So is every Court in Europe and the world to-day. While men drink and forget Him, like an all-pervasive atmosphere He is molding, governing; burning or healing; saving or damning; according to what man is, in his attitude towards Him. **“Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?”** was the great question of Isaiah, and it was a recognition of the fiery presence of God from which men cannot escape, and of the activity of God in every human life.

Let us make this personal, pertinent, immediate - no man escapes God for half an hour. We can change our destiny, but we cannot escape God. We may make God a blasting force, or a healing one, according to our attitude towards Him. That is providence.

Providence is not a sweet sensational method, by which God juggles to take care of a few eccentric people. That is what I meant at the beginning by saying that providence is God's foresight and God's activity based upon His foresight. We are all hemmed in by it. **“In whom we live and move and have our being.”** That is providence. **“The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified.”** That is providence. I cannot escape His influence. He is touching my life at every point. The application of a story like this is not declared in its words, not even enunciated, but it glows in letters of flaming fire upon all the pages of the book.

- Reckon with God.
- Trust in God.
- Cooperate with God.

Reckon with God. I put it so. **“As a man thinketh within himself, so is he.”** At first it seems a little disappointing, but weigh it out and think out the enormous force of it, as a man reckoneth within himself, so is he. Reckon with God; take Him into account, is the message of the book of Esther to the court of the king, to the palaces of the nobles, to the assemblies of the people, to the rulers, to the nation. That is the message of Esther to every man and woman. Reckon with God, for He stands within the shadow and no man can miss His fire or escape His hand. When you have decided to reckon with Him, know this, that as Cowper declared:

“Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.”

At the back of all is the infinite love. Then trust Him, and trusting Him act with Him, and so demonstrate at last the truth of the supremest word about providence in the New Testament, **“All things work together for good to them that love God”**

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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