

Sunday, February 18, 2024 am

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD (5)
God and prayer (4)
How God Answers Prayer Today -2
(A brief study of God's Providence Continued)

As we continue our study of the subject of prayer, we have been addressing God's part where prayer is concern. WE have noted how God has graciously granted us access to Him and that He is able to answer our prayers. Last week we began to examine HOW God answers our prayers today. The answer is providentially. By that we mean, God is working within natural processes that He has put into place.

In our lesson last week we examined how we are no longer under the age of miracles (their purpose has been brought to its completion – cf. 1 Corinthians 13:8-12). We also noted a few other observations as to why we do not NEED His miraculous working today (we have His completed word, apostolic powers have ceased, the nature of so-called miracles today is different that what is described in the Bible, etc.)

But our focus to understand that even though the age of miracles is complete, God can still work just as powerfully WITHIN the laws of nature He established in the first place. There are many scriptures that imply God can providentially work today. If not, such passages have little meaning to us. Passages such as:

- 1 Corinthians 10:13 – God can make the way of escape from temptations
- Matthew 6:25-33 – do not worry – God knows what you need.
- 2 Corinthians 9:8-11 – He is able to make all grace abound toward us and supply our fruits of righteousness.
- Hebrews 12:5-8 – the chastening of God to those He loves.

Today, I would like to continue our study of providence by noting an example in scripture of God's providence – the book of Esther. We will then make some application and observations concerning prayer and God's providence.

- I. Esther – an example of God's providence.
 - a. There are several great examples of providence in scripture – Joseph (Genesis 50:20), the book of Philemon (vs. 15) and Esther. Each of these shows God accomplishing His will using natural means.
 - b. The book of Esther has a powerful observation – God is not mentioned by name anywhere in the book. BUT you cannot read its pages without seeing the hand of God clearly at work. And there are no miracles recorded in the book but you find the story of the Jew's deliverance from certain destruction.
 - c. The events of Esther occurred around 479-474 BC. Ahasuerus (aka, Xerxes 1) was king of the Persian empire. Judah was under the rule of the Persians, but their temple had been rebuilt and completed about 35 years earlier (~516 BC). Historically, it fits between Ezra & Nehemiah.
 - d. Consider the book of Esther. There are more than 20 different events recorded in sequence that unfold that will result in the Jews being delivered and gaining a place of prominence in the Persian Empire. The need for this involves a wicked advisor to the king named Haman, who devises a plot to have the Jews utterly destroyed throughout the Persian empire. His story is a sub-plot that also unfolds providentially. Consider these 23 events:

- i. King Ahasuerus, in the third year of his reign has a great feast to show his fame and wealth. It lasts for 6 months. At the conclusion, he has a banquet for all the nobles of the empire. (1:1-10)
- ii. He decides to parade his wife, Vashti, before the crowd. But she refuses. (1:11-12)
- iii. As a result, He had her removed as queen. (1:13-22)
- iv. The king is mourning (likely regretting his decision) (2:1).
- v. His advisors recommend a search was made for beautiful virgins throughout his empire to brought before him (2:2-6).
- vi. We are introduced to Mordecai (2:7). He had raised up Hadassah (Esther). He was her uncle (her parents had died).
- vii. Esther was chosen along with many other beautiful young women that had been gathered in Shushan (2:8-12) and prepared to appear before the king.
- viii. Esther did NOT reveal her Jewish heritage as told by Mordecai (2:10)
- ix. Several women went before the king at their appointed times (2:13-14). They were NOT chosen.
- x. When Esther appeared before Ahasuerus, he chose her and loved her more than all the others. He made her his queen (2:15-18). He was well pleased with her and loved her.
- xi. Next, we read that Mordecai discovers a plot against the king. He reports it and the men are executed. (2:21-23)
- xii. Mordecai's deeds were documented in the king's chronicles. (2:23).
- xiii. SUBPLOT: Following this, Haman, a chief advisor to the king, despises the Jews and convinces the king to issue a decree that on a certain day, all Jews in the empire were to be destroyed (Ch. 3). NOTE: All the events preceding this are putting circumstance in place to counteract Haman's wicked plan.
- xiv. Lots are cast to decide what day the destruction of the Jews would occur. WE are told it was in the first month (Nisan – Jewish Calendar) that the lots were cast. The lots determined it would occur in the 12th month (Adar). NOTE that this is almost a year giving enough time for the rest of the events to unfold.
- xv. Mordecai hears the decree, puts on sackcloth outside of Esther's palace until she notices he is there. When she asks why he is mourning he gives her a copy of the decree and asks her to go before the king to plead for the Jews (4:1-10). BUT, there is an issue – anyone who appeared before the king uninvited was to be put to death, UNLESS he extended his scepter to them.
- xvi. As Esther hesitates, not being invited, Mordecai encourages her – **NOTE Esther 4:13-14 – a key text to our point.**
- xvii. Esther decides to appear before King Ahasuerus and accept whatever fate comes her way (“IF I perish, I perish”) (4:15-17), but she asks that the Jews fast for her before she does this.
- xviii. Esther appears before the king and he extends her a warm welcome. In fact he offers to give her anything she wants up to half of his kingdom (5:1-3).
- xix. Esther requests a banquet with the king and Haman. (5:4-8). She asks them to come back the next day.
- xx. SUBPLOT. Meanwhile, that night, Haman in his arrogance hates Mordecai because he refuses to bow before him. His family recommends that he build a gallows and request of the king that Mordecai be hanged. (5:9-14)
- xxi. ALSO that night, the king cannot sleep and asks for the chronicles so he could read them. (6:1)

- xxii. As he reads, he found the recording that Mordecai had revealed the plot and saved his life. He asks his men if he had been honored. He had not (6:2-3).
- xxiii. SUBPLOT: Haman is in the halls approaching the king with his request to have Mordecai executed. INSTEAD, the king asks him for advice as to how to honor someone the king wanted to honor. Haman, in his arrogance thinks its about him and recommends that he be paraded through the streets on the kings horse and with a royal robe declaring that this is how the king will honor those whom he chooses. Ahasuerus tells Haman to do that for Mordecai (6:4-10). Haman has no choice but to comply and does. But when he goes home he KNOWS he is in trouble (11-14).
- xxiv. PLOT & SUBPLOT - The next day, Esther at her banquet reveals her Jewish heritage and exposes the plot of Haman. (7:1-6). The king is very angry and steps out. Haman pleading for his life falls on Esther. When the king sees it, his eyes are covered and he is carried out and hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. (7:7-10). Haman's house is given to Esther. (8:1)
- xxv. Mordecai is promoted (8:1-2)
- xxvi. Esther AGAIN goes before the king (same rules still in effect) and the king again extends his scepter to her (8:3-5) and requests that the order be revoked.
- xxvii. While not revoked, Ester (and likely Mordecai) drafted another decree permitting the Jews to defend themselves and destroy their enemies on that appointed day. Letters are drafted and sent to all the provinces of Persia (8:8-17).
- xxviii. As a result of these event, not only did the **Jews not perish**, but they were able to subdue many of their enemies and thus establish their heritage within the empire. (9:1-17)
- xxix. Esther 9:18-32 explains that this is the reason behind an annual feast called Purim.
- xxx. Finally, Mordecai was advanced to a great position in the Persian Empire (which likely was helpful when Nehemiah arrives on the scene about 30 years later).
- e. The POINT of telling this account is to understand that there were a number of events that unfolded, EACH of them in a specific sequence and all WITHOUT miraculous intervention, that resulted in God's people being delivered from a declared destruction and even ADVANCED to a position of prominence that would help them in God fulfilling His ultimate plan of bringing Jesus, as our Savior, to this earth.
- f. As noted at the beginning, you CANNOT read Esther and fail to see God's hand at work, even though He is not mentioned by name in the entire letter. THAT is providence. And it is my belief that God can and still DOES work providentially today.

II. Providence and our prayers

- a. God CAN answer our prayers
 - i. The fact that God can work providentially gives us reason to pray to Him. Recall 1 Peter 3:12, James 5:16, 1 John 5:14-15, Philippians 4:6. If God answers our prayers (and He does), then He can work providentially.
 - ii. All things work together for good – Romans 8:28. Properly, God is accomplishing His will.
 - iii. Spiritually – Ephesians 1:3 tells us He has provided for us “every spiritual blessing.” Salvation is made possible through His providence – Hebrews 7:25.
 - iv. James 1:5 – if anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God... If God can grant us wisdom, does it have to be miraculous? There are ways that He can helps us obtain wisdom WITHIN natural means.
 - v. “If the Lord wills” – James 4:13-17 – as we make plans, do not leave God out your plans. Implied in that is that we can trust God for what is best.

- vi. Matthew 6:11 – “give us this day our daily bread...”
 - vii. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 – Paul requested prayers “that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is in you and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men...”
 - viii. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 – we pray for all men including our leaders, “*that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.*”
 - ix. Can God cause circumstances to develop so that what is best happens (without miraculous intervention)? NOTE: E.g., I am a believer that if someone is genuinely searching for the truth, they will be presented it by someone somewhere. What they do with that is up to them.
 - x. These are a few of the passages that come to mind when I consider God’s providence and my prayers.
- b. Some observations we need to consider.
- i. IF God answers our prayers providentially, it is still His powerful workings as if He were working miraculously.
 - ii. God’s providential care does not alleviate us of our responsibility. Nor does His working remove your free-will. You pray for wisdom, you need to study your Bible (2 Timothy 2:15); You thank Him and pray for daily bread, you need to get to work (2 Thessalonians 3:10, Ephesians 4:28); You pray for open doors to share His word, are you willing to look? (Colossians 4:3); You pray for God to be with sick – you must consider good healthy habits, medications and doctors doing their work, etc. (cf. James 5:13-14 – the “oil” could have medicinal qualities); You ask God to forgive you of your sins, you need to be walking in the light (1 John 1:7-9); etc.
 - iii. Do not lose heart (Luke 18:1) – don’t give up as you pray. Learn to trust God as we pray (this is what faith is about) – cf. James 1:6-7. As we will see in another lesson, God can answer prayers with different answers.
 - iv. A characteristic of God’s providence is that we do not know whether or not He was acting. God does not micromanage our lives – we have free-will. Recall Esther 4:14, “Who knows...?” Philemon 15, “For perhaps...”, etc.
 - v. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 – in everything give thanks. Whether God moved to answer our prayers or not (in a given circumstance), give Him the glory.
 - vi. Don’t tempt God. Recall Jesus before Satan – Matthew 4:5-7. Do not ask Him for that which is contrary to His will. AND don’t expect Him to perform a miracle today. Don’t ask Him to set aside His natural laws just for you.

We have seen in this lesson that God CAN answer our prayers today. Even though we are no longer in the age of miracles, God can and does still work. Are we willing to put our trust in Him as we pray? Think about it!