

ESTHER 4 WHO KNOWS?

Let's start with two ways of seeing our world. Which is right?

How about this?

"In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice.

"The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good.

"Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."

Or is it this?

"Years ago there was an elderly minister to whom God gave marvelous ability to minister to the sick and distressed of his congregation. He had an old bookmark he carried with him in his Bible. It was made of silk threads woven into a motto. The back of it, where the ends of the threads were knotted and tied, was a hopeless tangle.

"When he visited a home in which there was some great trouble - sudden sickness, sorrow, or death - and where the believers involved were puzzled by what God was doing in their lives, he would often show this bookmark, first presenting the side with the tangle of threads. (Then) the pastor would turn it over. On the front side, standing out in colored threads against a white background, was the motto: 'God is love.'"

The first words are from a famous atheist, Richard Dawkins.

The second words are from a pastor, James Boice.

Which is right?

Which is right, as you watch your radiator spit its contents all over the road, on the way to a big event?

Which is right, as you prepare for the uncertainty of tomorrow, or the next day, or the next week, in your workplace?

Which is right, as you prepare to pass from teenager to adult, and you face countless and confusing choices?

Which is right, as you shudder under the unbearable weight of caring for sick loved ones?

Which is right, as you gaze at the horror, the cruelty, and the injustice of the world around you?

As we read through the Old Testament, we reach the book of Esther.

It is the story of God's people, the Jews, living in captivity under the dictator of that generation: King Xerxes of Persia.

The king has a queen, but when the queen disobeys the king, he seeks a new queen. After a search for one who will be suitably beautiful, he crowns this young woman named Esther, who is a Jew.

Esther's relative, Mordecai, offends Haman, who is one of the king's men. In response, Haman plots the destruction of Mordecai and all the Jews.

Esther goes to the king and pleads for mercy for her people. The king grants it, and instead of the Jews being destroyed, Haman and friends are killed, the Jews are saved, and Mordecai becomes one of the king's men.

What is the book of Esther about?

Some say it simply tells us why the Jews still celebrate a festival called "Purim."

Others say it hints at the New Testament. Esther is like Mary. The death of Haman on the gallows is like the death of Jesus on the cross.

What does the book of Esther teach?

Some say it teaches that God gets sinners.

Others say it teaches that God rewards the faithful.

What is hard about the book of Esther?

Some say it is hard, because the name of God is nowhere in the book.

Others say it is hard, because the Jews seem cruel to their enemies.

I believe we only grasp the message of the book of Esther, when we view it as part of the bigger story of the Old Testament. The events of the book occur during the same time as the events of Ezra and Nehemiah, when Israel is returning from exile, yet is still being ruled by other nations.

But even in these days of trouble, God's promise remains: he will bless people of all nations, through Abraham's people.

Apart from those other questions, the book of Esther is about this: God's plan to preserve his people, through his providence, for his saving purposes!

The book of Esther is not about a world of chance, luck, and indifference. The book of Esther is about a God who is love. Through people and providence, he carries on with his plan to reunite people and himself, through the Jew who will come because the Jews are preserved: the Jew named Jesus.

Let's wrap our minds, hearts and lives around this, through two simple phrases. God uses people. God uses providence.

God has a plan to save people, and GOD USES PEOPLE in that plan.

What kinds of people does he use? He uses both foolish unbelievers, and flawed believers.

Esther is full of FOOLISH UNBELIEVERS - people who do not believe in the true God, and who walk in foolish ways.

Just think of Xerxes.

He is prideful. He holds a huge feast, so everyone will know what a great king he is. It lasts not a day or a week or a month, but six months!

He is drunken. We read of how he is in "high spirits" during his feast - and this is surely not for the first time!

He is heartless. He wants his wife to "display herself" for her friends. She is a trophy to him, not a person.

He is angry. When she does not do as he says, he becomes furious and rids himself of her.

Or think of Haman.

He is childish. One man will not bow down to him, so he pouts.

He is hateful. He will not stop, until he destroys the Jews.

Yet God is so great that despite their foolishness, and even through their foolishness, he will advance his plan to save people from all nations.

God uses foolish unbelievers, and he uses FLAWED BELIEVERS.

Mordecai believes in the true God, and he is faithful to God's people.

But let's be honest: he is stubborn. Many students of Esther believe he could have bowed down to Haman. They say it would have been only a sign of respect, not an act of worship. But he is stubborn, and it leads to trouble.

Esther also believes in the one true God, and she finally acts in faith to ask the king to stop the massacre of her people.

But some would add this: she married a non-Jew. No, she may not have had much choice in the matter. But did she resist at all?

Both do preserve their people, but don't we wonder about how they take revenge against their enemies? The final chapters are not pleasant.

We can argue about all this, but we must agree to this: God is using people who are far from perfect. As always, he is the only hero of this story.

God uses people. Foolish unbelievers, and flawed believers.

I don't know about you, but that is an encouragement to me!

When we see unbelievers acting in foolish and harmful ways, we can trust that their evil deeds will never stop God's plan. As we see evil in our lives or our world, we can be confident that God is greater than the evil of people.

This does not mean we are passive! We are right to seek to stop evil, just as Mordecai and Esther did. But we trust that God's purposes will be accomplished, no matter what evil people seek to do.

When we as believers realize how flawed we are, we are tempted to become discouraged about how God might use us.

Are you ever that way? When you are a believer in Jesus, you want Jesus to use you in his kingdom. But you sin. You fail. Again and again. Maybe you think, "The Lord has no use for me."

Yes, we are flawed, but God uses flawed believers! I am valuable to God, and I am useful to God, because of Jesus. On the cross, he has received all of God's punishment for my countless flaws. Jesus' righteousness is mine. So because I am one with him, God can use me. And you.

Sometimes I hear or sense this idea: God will only use me, when I do everything right. Only when I do it all right, will it all go right.

What happens when I think that way? When something goes wrong, I think God is giving up on me. "Well, you blew that. Forget about God doing anything with you - now or maybe ever."

No! We strive to do what is right, but God can and will still use us, even when we don't do it all right!

Flawed believer, you may not say all the right words to that friend who does not know Jesus, but God will still use you.

Flawed believer, you may not display perfect patience and pure kindness in front of your extended family members, but God will still use you.

Flawed believer, you may not teach that lesson perfectly, or plan that event perfectly, or serve that person perfectly, but God will still use you!

He uses people. He uses even foolish unbelievers and flawed believers.

Yet, as well, in his plan to preserve a people who will bless all the nations, GOD USES PROVIDENCE.

What is providence?

The Westminster Confession of Faith helps us here. We read,

“God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence...to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy.”

“God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet he is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.”

Providence is God’s hand upon our world. He does what he wishes, as he wishes.

Sometimes he will use “means”. Sometimes he will use certain people or specific events to do what he wishes to do.

Sometimes he won’t use “means”. Sometimes he will do what he wishes to do, without going through us, or without an event that we can see.

An easy example for us to understand is healing. If it is God’s plan to heal someone, he will do it. He may use “means” - people or medicine. Or, God may work without means. He can simply heal you.

He can do that, because he is God. In his providence, he will order all things, to accomplish his great purposes.

From the book of Esther, I offer you two examples of God’s providence.

The first: “THE KING WAS ATTRACTED.”

Xerxes rids himself of his queen, and he sets out on a search for a new queen. In Esther 2, we read that “many girls” are brought to the palace to be prepared for presentation to the king. We don’t know how many girls this was, but one ancient historian guessed it was about 400.

There are lots of young women, and they are all beautiful. But out of all of them, the king is attracted to young Esther.

Why? Is she just his type of girl? Or does God touch his eyes or heart in a way we cannot explain? We don’t know.

But we know God uses this king’s attraction to put Esther into a position where she can save the people God is using to bring a blessing to all nations.

What if that had not happened? Stubborn Mordecai would have still been a thorn in Haman’s side, and no one would have been in a position to stop their conflict. He and the Jews could have been destroyed.

Yes, God could have found another way. But he chose this way. In his great providence, he leads the king to choose a young Jewish girl, from some huge number of others, to be his queen.

Here is another example of God’s providence: “THE KING COULD NOT SLEEP.”

Haman has secured permission to destroy the Jews, and he has built the gallows where Mordecai will be hung. But that night, the king cannot sleep.

Why? Does he have heartburn from dinner? Or does God somehow yank him from bed? We don’t know.

But we do know that because he cannot sleep, he discovers that Mordecai has stopped a plot to kill him, and Mordecai has never been honored for it.

So Mordecai will not be hanged. He will be praised and promoted to a high position in the kingdom. And God’s people will be saved, so God can bring a Jew named Jesus, to save his people from their sins.

What if the king had gotten a good night’s sleep? Mordecai could have hung. The Jews could have been destroyed.

Yes, God could have found another way. But in God’s great providence, he touches even the sleep of a king, to save his people.

The book of Esther does not use the name of God. But the book of Esther displays the hand of God, as his providence shapes the events to preserve God’s people, for God’s purposes.

It was that way then, and it is that way now.

What is God’s eternal plan with people? Why is he still putting up with us? Because he is still bringing his people to faith in himself. He gives people faith in Jesus, so their sins will be forgiven, and their lives will be lived for him, and their eternity with him will be secure.

He does this, every day. He does this, in countless ways, through his providence. He will keep doing this, until Jesus returns.

Do you know that? Do you believe that? Or is your heart attracted to the idea that the universe is a place of blind, pitiless indifference?

Do you wonder if God’s hand is there, as you look at our world?

Have you seen enough pictures of burned out humvees in Iraq?

Have you seen enough stories of children abandoned, or abused, or murdered?

Have you seen enough statistics and studies about how our culture continues to crumble, and persists in running from Jesus Christ?

Do you wonder if God's hand is there, as you live in your life?

Are you still grieving a loss, that seems to make no sense?

Are you still struggling in a relationship, where you just can't seem to get anywhere?

Are you still wrestling with a problem in your family, or your workplace, or even your church, where there seem to be no answers?

Earlier this week, our mini-family of three was preparing to pray for our day. We were also planning to pray for Ruth Martinez, as she ministers with college students in Mexico.

Andrew remembered Ruth's problems last year with getting a visa to come back into the United States for further training. I told them that I had not heard anything about that lately, but as far as I know, Ruth still cannot come back into the U.S.

Emily proclaimed, "God has a reason!"

Yes. God has a reason. We do not know his reason for this, just as we do not know his reason for much in our lives, and our world.

But we know his great reason: he is reuniting people with himself, through Jesus. It was his great reason in the life of Esther, and it is still his great reason. Through foolish unbelievers and flawed believers, through great and small acts of his providence, that is his great reason. All he does, will truly contribute to that great reason.

Who knows why God ordained this or that event along that path? He knows, but we don't.

But we know this: God is love.

Unbeliever, run in faith to this God who is love, through the Jew who is also the Son of God, named Jesus.

Believer, live this week with confidence that he is carrying on with his plan, in our lives, and in our world.

Remind yourself of it, again and again, as you wander and wonder.

Remind each other of it, as we struggle and suffer together.

See his providence, where others see blind, pitiless indifference.

God has a reason.