

Coincidence, or the Hand of God?

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There is with many a Christian the habit of looking at second causes, or even at third causes, in connection with the many events which go to make up their lives, and thus they miss the joy of tracing the moving of the hand of God behind all the scenes. When this habit becomes confirmed and inveterate the whole of one's life becomes a meaningless jumble of odds and ends, and the spirit becomes sorely tried. When, on the other hand, we look away from all secondary causes to God Himself, light and order begin to appear; though doubtless the full explanation of all circumstances contrary or otherwise, awaits that day when all the hidden things shall come to light.

Of this the book of Job furnishes a striking example, as we all know. It was one of the earliest books of the Bible to be written and from this we may learn the kindness of God. Knowing the fearful perplexity that would be engendered by adverse circumstances in the minds of men, and particularly in the hearts of His saints, He caused this book to be written, which should make manifest "the end of the Lord" (James 5: 11). It is possible that never again in the history of the world has such a combination of crushing blows fallen upon any one mortal man and yet all was proved to be from the hand of God, and ordered by perfect wisdom and perfect love. And all this was put on record as soon as ever the written revelation of God began.

The book of Esther furnishes us with another example of how God moves behind the scenes of man's little world, and though the subject is approached from a different angle and many of the chief actors are godless potentates dealing with matters of high policy, yet the proof of it is not one bit the less striking. It is perhaps more striking when we remember that Esther is one of the two books in the Bible in which God is not mentioned. Just where God is not seen and events move on apparently without Him, there most clearly He is at work behind the scenes.

The story unfolded in Esther is well known to all our readers. It concerns itself with the fortunes of the Jews who remained behind in the lands of their captivity after a remnant had returned to the land of their fathers under Zerubabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. These latter were evidently the pick of the people, for the idea of returning to Jerusalem, and facing the privations and troubles and reproach which that entailed, would only appeal to those who feared the Lord and thought upon His Name and purposes. Those of a more worldly-minded type, who had comfortably settled down and acquired possessions and wealth in the lands of their dispersion during the seventy years, would be much less likely to face the sacrifices involved in such an uprooting.

Now whilst God worked openly amongst the remnant who returned, raising up His prophets, who directed them by inspired utterances, He did not manifest Himself at all amongst the mass who remained. As they had declined from His ways so did He hide Himself from their perceptions, so much so that the whole story of their wonderful deliverance from a great impending catastrophe can be related without God being mentioned at all, and Mordecai, who was chief amongst them, and personally, as far as we can judge, a pious man, could only say to Esther, "If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place." A certain measure of confidence he evidently possessed, but "another place" is a very poor substitute for GOD. The book ends with "Mordecai the Jew next unto king Ahasuerus," so that he was a kind of second Daniel, yet how greatly inferior! The one a successful viceroy, "seeking the wealth of his people and speaking peace to all his seed"; yet without any direct touch with the living God. The other

no less great and successful as a viceroy, but also a prophet of God, instructed himself in the mind of God and the communicator of it for the instruction of others.

The writer of the book of Esther tells us the story of the great deliverance granted to the Jews throughout the extensive dominions of Ahasuerus, from the spiritual standpoint of the Jews of the dispersion. He puts on record a true story which is almost stranger than fiction. The story abounds in what men would call dramatic situations and the most remarkable coincidences.

Fancifulness is a thing much to be shunned in handling the Holy Scriptures. We shall seek to avoid it by not claiming as coincidences various details which many might be disposed to regard as such. We do not think that any would be disposed to deny as remarkable coincidences! the following:

1. That, when, according to the corrupt customs of those days, large numbers of fair young maidens were assembled at Shushan for the king, Esther out of them all obtained *universal* favour. That one maiden would obtain the king's favour was pretty certain, but Esther obtained not only that but also the favour of the king's chamberlain and indeed "of all them that looked upon her." (See Esther 2: 9, 15, 17.) Thus was she lifted suddenly into a position of extraordinary influence.

2. That, when amongst the many intrigues of that Eastern court a plot was set afoot to assassinate the king, news of it leaked out to Mordecai, of all people in the world, and thus he was able to establish a claim upon the king's favour.

3. That Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the Agagite (or, the Amalekite) "after these things" (Esther 3: 1). Thus the sworn foe of the Jew did not Obtain his exalted position with its vast potentialities of mischief until after the lines were laid for checkmating his evil designs.

4. That, when Haman, invested with power and full of wrath at Mordecai's lack of reverence, determined to destroy, not Mordecai alone, but all his people, he resorted to the practice of casting lots to determine "the lucky day"; and further that the lots when cast in the first month of the year indicated so late a day as the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, thus allowing ample time for the various steps that brought about the downfall both of his design and of himself (3: 7 and 13).

5. That the necessary measures for the defence of the Jews having been taken by Mordecai and Esther, the success of which so largely depended upon the king being in a favourable frame of mind on the day of the second banquet, "on that night [the night before] could not the king sleep" (Esther 6: 1). Unaccountably his sleep departed from him.

6. That, having lost his sleep, the king did not, like Nebuchadnezzar, lose his temper (Dan. 2). Nor did he, as was customary in those days, send for instruments of music to while away the tedious hours (see Dan. 6: 18), but bethought himself of the book of records of the chronicles and commanded it to be read before him (Esther 6: 1).

7. That the officials who obeyed his orders lighted upon that part of the records where was related the treachery of the two chamberlains and the timely intervention of Mordecai (Esther 6: 2).

8. That the king's memory thus stirred on the point, his curiosity was awakened as to what reward had been given to Mordecai; and, learning that his notable services had so far been totally ignored, that his sense of gratitude, which had been hitherto unaccountably quiescent, sprang into ardent activity, and he determined to reward him in a handsome and striking fashion (Esther 6: 3-6).

9. That just at that early hour of the morning Haman, intoxicated with pride and full of the imagined success of his schemes, was standing in the court, seeking an audience of the king that he might get his permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared (Esther 6: 4).

10. That Ahasuerus forestalled his petition by a question as to what should be done to the man whom the king should delight to honour, and that assuming in his pride that the man to be thus honoured could be none other than himself, Haman answered suggesting that he should be elevated into almost regal dignity and that in the most public way imaginable, and that he should be thereupon deputed by the king to carry out his own suggestions in regard not to himself but to Mordecai (Esther 6: 6-11).

The rest of the story proceeds quite simply. As the fruit of this remarkable series of coincidences Haman is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai, the Jews are empowered to resist any acts of aggression against them, and consequently the thirteenth day of the twelfth month only witnessed the destruction of the enemies of the Jews, the Jews being not only preserved but prospered.

But were all these remarkable happenings just a series of coincidences? By no means: they were the movings of the hand of God, though He Himself remained hidden. God was behind the scenes of man's busy little world; but then, as has very well been observed, He moves all the scenes that He is behind. Moreover He moves them in favour of His people, if not always for their temporal preservation and advancement always for their spiritual good and the advancement of His own purposes.

Dispensations vary, but the ways of God both in providence and government do not vary, but proceed upon principles which remain the same whatever the dispensation. We are assured, therefore, that God is still at work behind the scenes in a similar way today. And our assurance of this is fortified by a further consideration: viz., that while His people are marked by faithfulness, power and brightness, He is pleased to make His presence amongst them very manifest; and on the other hand, when there is defection, weakness and failure, it suits Him to withdraw the manifestations of His presence in large measure, and perhaps altogether, as in the book of Esther. Defection, weakness and failure certainly mark the professing church today.

Are you grieved and tried in spirit by the absence of visible signs of a genuine sort in connection with the testimony of Christ, and the Church's pilgrim pathway through this world? Well, at any rate do not fail to look for these more hidden workings of His hand. They exist on all sides in abundance. Look for them also in the much smaller and humbler circumstances of your own individual pathway.

If you feel inclined to ask, But may I do so? May I look for the moving of the hand of God amidst such very insignificant affairs as mine? The answer is, that you certainly may God does not forget *one* sparrow out of the five which are sold for two farthings (see Luke 12: 6), not even the odd one unceremoniously thrown in by the seller, since two farthings and not one are spent. He bids you draw near to Him in prayer and supplication concerning simply *everything* (see Phil. 4: 6). You may be perfectly sure then that He takes the deepest interest in all your concerns and in all your pathway here. You may confidently expect His direction and control. And if perchance you feel yourself to be weak and feeble and not equal to discerning and receiving His guidance in more direct and manifest fashion, you may the more confidently rest assured that His hand is at work behind the scenes, and you may look to see it.