

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

PROVIDENCE—AS SEEN IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

A SERMON

DELIVERED ON LORD'S-DAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 1ST, 1874, BY

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

“Though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them.”—
Esther ix. 1.

YOU are probably aware that some persons have denied the inspiration of the Book of Esther because the name of God does not occur in it. They might with equal justice deny the inspiration of a great number of chapters in the Bible, and of a far greater number of verses. Although the name of God does not occur in the Book of Esther, the Lord himself is there most conspicuously in every incident which it relates. I have seen portraits bearing the names of persons for whom they were intended, and they certainly needed them, but we have all seen others which required no name, because they were such striking likenesses that the moment you looked upon them you knew them. In the Book of Esther, as much as in any other part of the word of God, and I had almost committed myself by saying—more than anywhere else, the hand of Providence is manifestly to be seen.

To condense the whole of the story of the Book of Esther into one sermon would be impossible, and therefore I must rely upon your previous acquaintance with it; I must also ask your patience if there should be more of history in the sermon than is usual with me. All Scripture is given by inspiration, and is profitable, whether it be history or doctrine. God never meant the Book of Esther to lie dumb, and whatever it seemed good to him to teach us by it, it ought to be our earnest endeavour to learn.

The Lord intended by the narrative of Esther's history to set before us a wonderful instance of his providence, that when we had viewed it with interest and pleasure, we might praise his name, and then go on to acquire the habit of

observing his hand in other histories, and especially in our own lives. Well does Flavel say, that he who observes providence will never be long without a providence to observe. The man who can walk through the world and see no God, is said upon inspired authority to be a fool; but the wise man's eyes are in his head, he sees with an inner sight, and discovers God everywhere at work. It is his joy to perceive that the Lord is working according to his will in heaven, and earth, and in all deep places.

It has pleased God at different times in history to startle the heathen world into a conviction of his presence. He had a chosen people, to whom he committed the true light, and to these he revealed himself continually: the rest of the world was left in darkness, but every now and then the divine glory flamed through the gloom, as the lightning pierces the blackness of tempest. Some by that sudden light were led to seek after God, and found him; others were rendered uneasy, and without excuse, though they continued in their blind idolatry. The wonderful destruction of Pharaoh and his armies at the Red Sea was a burst of light, which startled the midnight of the world by giving proof to mankind that the Lord lived, and could accomplish his purposes by suspending the laws of nature and working miracles. The marvellous drama enacted at Shushan, the capital of Persia, was intended to be another manifestation of the being and glory of God, working not as formerly, by a miracle, but in the usual methods of his providence, and yet accomplishing all his designs. It has been well said that the Book of Esther is a record of wonders without a miracle, and therefore, though equally revealing the glory of the Lord, it sets it forth in another fashion from that which is displayed in the overthrow of Pharaoh by miraculous power.

Let us come now to the story. There were two races, one of which God had blessed and promised to preserve, and another of which he had said that he would utterly put out the remembrance of it from under heaven. Israel was to be blessed and made a blessing, but of Amalek the Lord had sworn that "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." These two peoples were therefore in deadly hostility, like the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, between whom the Lord himself has put an enmity. Many years had rolled away; the chosen people were in great distress, and at this far off time there still existed upon the face of the earth some relics of the race of Amalek; among them was one descended of the royal line of Agag, whose name was Haman, and he was in supreme power at the court of Ahasuerus, the Persian monarch. Now it was God's intent that a last conflict should take place between Israel and Amalek: the conflict which began with Joshua in the desert was to be finished by Mordecai in the king's palace. This last struggle began with great disadvantage to God's people. Haman was prime minister of the far-extending empire of Persia, the favourite of a despotic monarch, who was pliant to his will. Mordecai, a Jew in the employment of the king, sat in the king's gate; and when he saw proud Haman go to and fro, he refused to pay to him the homage which

others rendered obsequiously. He would not bow his head or bend his knee to him, and this galled Haman exceedingly. It came into his mind that this Mordecai was of the seed of the Jews, and with the remembrance came the high ambition to avenge the quarrel of his race. He thought it scorn to touch one man, and resolved that in himself he would incarnate all the hate of generations, and at one blow sweep the accursed Jews, as he thought them, from off the face of the earth. He went in to the king, with whom his word was power, and told him that there was a singular people scattered up and down the Persian empire, different from all others, and opposed to the king's laws, and that it was not for the king's profit to suffer them. He asked that they might all be destroyed, and he would pay into the king's treasury an enormous sum of money to compensate for any loss of revenue by their destruction. He intended that the spoil which would be taken from the Jews should tempt their neighbours to kill them, and that the part allotted to himself should repay the amount which he advanced, thus he would make the Jews pay for their own murder. He had no sooner asked for this horrible grant than the monarch conceded it; taking his signet ring from off his finger, he bade him do with the Jews as seemed good to him. Thus the chosen seed are in the hands of the Agagite, who thirsts to annihilate them. Only one thing stands in the way, the Lord has said, "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that riseth against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn." We shall see what happens, and learn from it,

I. First, we shall learn from the narrative that GOD PLACES HIS AGENTS IN FITTING PLACES FOR DOING HIS WORK. The Lord was not taken by surprise by this plot of Haman; he had foreseen it and forestalled it. It was needful, in order to match this cunning, malicious design of Haman, that someone of Jewish race should possess great influence with the king. How was this to be effected? Should a Jewess become Queen of Persia, the power she would possess would be useful in counteracting the enemy's design. This had been all arranged years before Haman had concocted in his wicked heart the scheme of murdering the Jews. Esther, whose sweet name signifies myrtle, had been elevated to the position of Queen of Persia by a singular course of events. It happened that Ahasuerus, at a certain drinking bout, was so far gone with wine as to forget all the proprieties of eastern life, and send for his queen, Vashti, to exhibit herself to the people and the princes. No one dreamed in those days of disobeying the tyrant's word, and therefore all stood aghast when Vashti, evidently a woman of right royal spirit, refused to degrade herself by being made a spectacle before that ribald rout of drinking princes, and refused to come. For her courage Vashti was divorced, and a new queen was sought for. We cannot commend Mordecai for putting his adopted daughter in competition for the monarch's choice; it was contrary to the law of God, and dangerous to her soul in the highest degree. It would have been better for Esther to have been the wife of the poorest man of the house of Israel than to have gone into the den of the Persian despot. The

Scripture does not excuse, much less commend, the wrong doing of Esther and Mordecai in thus acting, but simply tells us how divine wisdom brought good out of evil, even as the chemist distils healing drugs from poisonous plants. The high position of Esther, though gained contrary to the wisest of laws, was overruled for the best interests of her people. Esther in the king's house was the means of defeating the malicious adversary. But Esther alone would not suffice; she is shut up in the harem, surrounded by her chamberlains and her maids of honour, but quite secluded from the outside world. A watchman is needed outside the palace to guard the people of the Lord, and to urge Esther to action when help is wanted. Mordecai, her cousin and foster-father obtained an office which placed him at the palace gate. Where could he be better posted? He is where much of the royal business will come under his eye, and he is both quick, courageous, and unflinching: never had Israel a better sentinel than Mordecai, the son of Kish, a Benjamite—a very different man from that other son of Kish, who had suffered Amalek to escape in former times. His relationship to the queen allowed him to communicate with her through Hatach, her chamberlain, and, when Haman's evil decree was published, it was not long before intelligence of it reached her ear, and she felt the danger to which Mordecai and all her people were exposed. By singular providences did the Lord place those two most efficient instruments in their places. Mordecai would have been of little use without Esther, and Esther could have rendered no aid had it not been for Mordecai. Meanwhile, there is a conspiracy hatched against the king, which Mordecai discovers, and communicates to the highest authority, and so puts the king under obligation to him, which was a needful part of the Lord's plan.

Now, brethren, whatever mischief may be brewing against the cause of God and truth, and I dare say there is very much going on at this moment, for neither the devil, nor the Jesuits, nor the atheists are long quiet, this we are sure of, the Lord knows all about it, and he has his Esther and his Mordecai ready at their posts to frustrate their designs. The Lord has his men well placed, and his ambushes hidden in their coverts, to surprise his foes. We need never be afraid but what the Lord has forestalled his enemies, and provided against their mischief.

Every child of God is where God has placed him for some purpose, and the practical use of this first point is to lead you to inquire for what practical purpose has God placed each one of you where you now are? You have been wishing for another position where you could do something for Jesus: do not wish anything of the kind, but serve him where you are. If you are sitting at the King's gate there is something for you to do there, and if you were on the queen's throne, there would be something for you to do there; do not ask either to be gatekeeper or queen, but whichever you are, serve God therein. Brother, are you rich? God has made you a steward, take care that you are a good steward. Brother, are you poor? God has thrown you into a position where you will be the better able to give a word of sympathy to poor saints. Are you doing your

allotted work? Do you live in a godly family? God has a motive for placing you in so happy a position. Are you in an ungodly house? You are a lamp hung up in a dark place; mind you shine there. Esther did well, because she acted as an Esther should, and Mordecai did well, because he acted as a Mordecai should. I like to think, as I look over you all,—God has put each one of them in the right place, even as a good captain well arranges the different parts of his army, and though we do not know his plan of battle, it will be seen during the conflict that he has placed each soldier where he should be. Our wisdom is not to desire another place, nor to judge those who are in another position, but each one being redeemed with the precious blood of Jesus, should consecrate himself fully to the Lord, and say, “Lord, what would thou have me to do, for here I am, and by thy grace I am ready to do it.” Forget not then the fact that God in his providence places his servants in positions where he can make use of them.

II. Secondly, the Lord not only arranges his servants, but HE RESTRAINS HIS ENEMIES. I would call your attention particularly to the fact that Hainan, having gained a decree for the destruction of all the Jews upon a certain day, was very anxious to have his cruel work done thoroughly, and therefore, being very superstitious and believing in astrology, he bade his magicians cast lots that he might find a lucky day for his great undertaking. The lots were cast for the various months, but not a single fortunate day could be found till hard by the close of the year, and then the chosen day was the thirteenth of the twelfth month. On that day the magicians told their dupe that the heavens would be propitious, and the star of Haman would be in the ascendant. Truly the lot was cast into the lap, but the disposal of it was of the Lord. See ye not that there were eleven clear months left before the Jews would be put to death, and that would give Mordecai and Esther time to turn round, and if anything could be done to reverse the cruel decree they had space to do it in. Suppose that the lot had fallen on the second or third month, the swift dromedaries and camels and messengers would scarcely have been able to reach the extremity of the Persian dominions, certainly a second set of messengers to counteract the decree could not have done so, and, humanly speaking, the Jews must have been destroyed; but oh, in that secret council chamber where sit the sorcerers and the man who asks counsel at the hands of the infernal powers, the Lord himself is present, frustrating the tokens of the liars and making diviners mad. Vain were their enchantments and the multitude of their sorceries; the astrologers, the star-gazers, and the monthly prognosticators were all fools together, and led the superstitious Haman to destruction. “Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, nor divination against Israel.” Trust ye in the Lord ye righteous, and in patience possess your souls. Leave your adversaries in the hands of God, for he can make them fall into the snare which they have privily laid for you.

Notice attentively that Hanan selected a mode of destroying the Jews which was wonderfully overruled for their preservation. They were to be slain by any

of the people among whom they lived who chose to do so, and their plunder was to reward their slayers. Now, this was a very cunning device, for greed would naturally incite the baser sort of men to murder the thrifty Jews, and no doubt these were debtors who would also be glad to see their creditors disposed of: but see the loophole for escape which this afforded! If the decree had enacted that the Jews should be slain by the soldiery of the Persian empire it must have been done, and it is not easy to see how they could have escaped, but, the matter being left in private hands, the subsequent decree that they might defend themselves, was a sufficient counteraction of the first edict. Thus the Lord arranged that the wisdom of Haman should turn out to be folly after all.

In another point, also, we mark the restraining hand of God: namely, that Mordecai, though he had provoked Haman to the utmost, was not put to death at once. Haman “refrained himself.” Why did he do so? Proud men are usually in a mighty tiff if they consider themselves insulted, and are ready at once to take revenge; but Haman “refrained himself;” until that day in which his anger burned furiously, and he set up the gallows, he smothered his passion. I marvel at this; it shows how God makes the wrath of man to praise him, and the remainder he doth restrain. Mordecai must not die a violent death by Haman’s hand. The enemies of the church of God, and of his people, can never do more than the Lord permits; they cannot go a hair’s breadth beyond the divine license, and when they are permitted to do their worst there is always some weak point about all that they do, some extreme folly which renders their fury vain. The wicked carry about them the weapons of their own destruction, and when they rage most against the Most High, the Lord of all brings out of it good for his people and glory to himself. Judge not providence in little pieces, it is a grand mosaic, and must be seen as a whole. Say not of any one hour “This is dark,”—it may be so, but that darkness will minister to the light, even as the ebon gloom of midnight makes the stars appear the more effulgent. Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord Jehovah there is everlasting strength. His wisdom will undermine the mines of cunning, his skill will overtop the climbings of craft; “he taketh the wise in their own craftiness, and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong.”

III. Next we will notice that GOD IN HIS PROVIDENCE TRIES HIS PEOPLE. You must not suppose that those who are God’s servants will be screened from trial; that is no part of the design of providence. “If ye be without chastisement,” says the apostle, “then are ye bastards and not sons.” God’s intent is to educate his people by affliction, and we must not therefore dream that an event is not providential because it is grievous, nay, ye may count it to be all the more so, for “the Lord trieth the righteous.” Observe that God tried Mordecai; he was a quiet old man, I have no doubt, and it must have been a daily trial to him to stand erect, or to sit in his place when that proud peer of the realm went strutting by.

His fellow servants told him that the King has commanded all men to pay homage to Haman, but he held his own, not, however, without knowing what it might cost him to be so sternly independent. Haman was an Amalekite, and the Jew would not bow before him. But what a trouble it must have been to the heart of Mordecai, when he saw the proclamation that all the Jews must die: the good man must have bitterly lamented his unhappy fate in being the innocent cause of the destruction of his nation. "Perhaps," he thought within himself, "I have been too obstinate. Woe is me; my whole house, and my whole people are to be slain because of what I have done." He put on sackcloth and cast ashes on his head, and was full of sorrow, a sorrow which we can hardly realise; for even if you know you have done right, yet if you bring down trouble, and especially destruction, upon the heads of others it cuts you to the quick. You could bear martyrdom for yourself, but it is sad to see others suffer through your firmness.

Esther also had to be tried. Amid the glitter of the Persian court she might have grown forgetful of her God, but the sad news comes to her, "Your cousin and your nation are to be destroyed." Sorrow and dread filled her heart. There was no hope for her people, unless she would go in unto the king—that despot from whom one angry look would be death; she must risk all, and go unbidden into his presence, and plead for her nation. Do you wonder that she trembled? Do you marvel that she asked the prayers of the faithful? Are you surprised to see both herself and her maids of honour fasting and lamenting before God? Do not think, my prosperous friend, that the Lord has given you a high place that you may escape the trials which belong to all his people: yours is no position of ease, but one of the hottest parts of the battle. Neither the lowest and most quiet position, nor the most public and exposed condition will enable you to escape the "much tribulation" through which the church militant must fight its way to glory. Why should we wish it? Should not the gold be tested in the crucible? Should not the strong pillar sustain great weights? When the Menai bridge was first flung across the straits the engineer did not stipulate that his tube should never be tried with great weights; on the contrary, I can imagine his saying, "Bring up your heaviest trains and load the bridge as much as ever you will, for it will bear every strain." The Lord trieth the righteous because he has made them of metal which will endure the test, and he knows that by the sustaining power of his Holy Spirit they will be held up and made more than conquerors; therefore is it a part of the operation of providence to try the saints. Let that comfort those of you who are in trouble at this time.

IV. But we must pass on to note, fourthly, that THE LORD'S WISDOM IS SEEN IN ARRANGING THE SMALLEST EVENTS SO AS TO PRODUCE GREAT RESULTS. We frequently hear persons say of a pleasant or a great event, "What a providence!" while they are silent as to anything which appears less important, or has an unpleasant savour. But, my brethren, the place of the gorse upon the heath is as fixed as the station of a king, and the dust which is raised by a chariot-wheel is

as surely steered by providence as the planet in its orbit. There is as much providence in the creeping of an aphid upon a rose leaf as in the marching of an army to ravage a continent. Everything, the most minute as well as the most magnificent, is ordered by the Lord who has prepared his throne in the heavens, whose kingdom ruleth over all. The history before us furnishes proof of this.

We have reached the point where Esther is to go in unto the king; and plead for her people. Strengthened by prayer, but doubtless trembling still, Esther entered the inner court, and the king's affection led him instantly to stretch out the golden sceptre. Being told to ask what she pleases, she invites the king to come to a banquet, and bring Haman with him. He comes, and for the second time invites her to ask what she wills to the half of his kingdom. Why, when the king was in so kind a spirit, did not Esther speak? He was charmed with her beauty, and his royal word was given to deny her nothing, why not speak out? But no, she merely asks that he and Haman will come to another banquet of wine tomorrow. O, daughter of Abraham, what an opportunity hast thou lost! Wherefore didst thou not plead for thy people! Their very existence hangs upon thy entreaty, and the king has said, "What wilt thou?" and yet thou art backward! Was it timidity? It is possible. Did she think that Haman stood too high in the king's favour for her to prevail? It would be hard to say. Some of us are very unaccountable, but on that woman's unaccountable silence far more was hanging than appears at first sight. Doubtless she longed to bring out her secret, but the words came not. God was in it; it was not the right time to speak, and therefore she was led to put off her disclosure. I dare say she regretted it, and wondered when she should be able to come to the point, but the Lord knew best. After that banquet Haman went out joyfully at the palace gate, but being mortified beyond measure by Mordecai's unbending posture, he called for his wife and his friends, and told them that his riches and honours availed him nothing so long as Mordecai, the Jew, sat in the king's gate. They might have told him, "You will destroy Mordecai and all his people in a few months, and the man is already fretting himself over the decree; let him live, and be you content to watch his miseries and gloat over his despair!" But no, they counsel speedy revenge. Let Mordecai be hanged on a gibbet on the top of the house, and let the gallows be set up at once, and let Haman early in the morning ask for the Jew's life, and let his insolence be punished. Go, call the workmen, and let the gallows be set up at a great height that very night. It seemed a small matter that Haman should be so enraged just at that hour, but it was a very important item in the whole transaction, for had he not been so hasty he would not have gone so early in the morning to the palace, and would not have been at hand when the king said, "Who is in the court?"

But what has happened? Why, that very night, when Haman was devising to hang up Mordecai, the king could not sleep. What caused the monarch's restlessness? Why happened it on that night of all others? Ahasuerus is master of

one hundred and twenty and seven provinces, but not master of ten minutes' sleep. What shall he do? Shall he call for soothing instruments of music, or beguile the hours with a tale that is told, or with a merry ballad of the minstrel? No, he calls for a book. Who would have thought that this luxurious prince must listen to a reader at dead of night. "Bring a book!" What book? A volume perfumed with roses, musical with songs, sweet as the notes of the nightingale? "No, bring the chronicles of the empire." Dull reading, that! But there are one hundred and twenty seven provinces, which volume shall the page bring from the recorder's shelves? He chose the record of Shushan the royal city. That is the centre of the empire, and its record is lengthy, in which section shall the reader make a beginning? He may begin where he pleases, but ere he closes the book the story of the discovery of a conspiracy by Mordecai has been read in the king's hearing. Was not this a singular accident? Singular if you like, but no accident. Out of ten thousand other records the reader pitches upon that one of all others. The Jews tell us that he began at another place, but that the book closed and fell open at the chapter upon Mordecai. Be that as it may, this is certain, that the Lord knew where the record was, and guided the reader to the right page. Speaking after the manner of men, there were a million chances against one that the king of Persia should, in the dead of the night, be reading the chronicle of his own kingdom, and that he should light upon this particular part of it. But that was not all, the king is interested, he had desired to go to sleep, but that wish is gone, and he is in haste to get. He says, "This man Mordecai has done me good service, has he been rewarded?" "No." Then cries the impulsive monarch, "He shall be rewarded at once. Who is in the court?" It was the most unlikely thing in the world for the luxurious Ahasuerus to be in haste to do justice, for he had done injustice thousands of times without remorse, and chiefly on that day when he wantonly signed the death warrant of that very Mordecai and his people. For once, the king is intent on being just, and at the door stands Haman,—but you know the rest of the story, and how he had to lead Mordecai in state through the streets. It seems a very small matter whether you or I shall sleep tonight or toss restlessly on our beds, but God will be in our rest or in our wakefulness; we know not what his purpose may be, but his hand will be in it, neither doth any man sleep or wake but according to the decree of the Lord.

Observe well how this matter prepared the way for the queen at the next banquet; for when she unfolded her sorrow and told of the threatened destruction of the Jews, and pointed to that wicked Haman; the king must have been the more interested and ready to grant her request, from the fact that the man who had saved his life was a Jew, and that he had already awarded the highest honours to a man in every way fitted to supersede his worthless favourite. All was well, the plotter was unmasked, the gibbet ready, and he who ordered it was made to try his own arrangements.

V. Our next remark is THE LORD IN HIS PROVIDENCE CALLS HIS OWN SERVANTS TO BE ACTIVE. This business was done, and well done, by divine providence, but those concerned had to pray about it. Mordecai and all the Jews outside in Shushan fasted, and cried unto the Lord. Unbelievers inquire, "What difference could prayer make?" My brethren, prayer is an essential part of the providence of God, so essential, that you will always find that when God delivers his people; his people have been praying for that deliverance. They tell us that prayer does not affect the Most High, and cannot alter his purposes. We never thought it did; but prayer is a part of the purpose and plan, and a most effective wheel in the machinery of providence. The Lord sets his people praying, and then he blesses them. Moreover, Mordecai was quite sure the Lord would deliver his people, and he expressed that confidence, but he did not therefore sit still; he stirred up Esther, and when she seemed a little slack, he put it very strongly, "If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then enlargement and deliverance will arise from another place, but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed." Nerved by this message, Esther braced herself to the effort. She did not sit still and say, "The Lord will arrange this business, there is nothing for me to do," but she both pleaded with God, and ventured her life and her all for her people's sake, and then acted very wisely and discreetly in her interviews with the king. So, my brethren, we rest confidently in providence, but we are not idle. We believe that God has an elect people, and therefore do we preach in the hope that we may be the means, in the hands of his Spirit, of bringing this elect people to Christ. We believe that God has appointed for his people both holiness here and heaven hereafter; therefore do we strive against sin, and press forward to the rest which remaineth for the people of God. Faith in God's providence, instead of repressing our energies, excites us to diligence. We labour as if all depended upon us, and then fall back upon the Lord with the calm faith which knows that all depends upon him.

VI. Now must we close our historical review with the remark that in the end THE LORD ACHIEVES THE TOTAL DEFEAT OF HIS FOES AND THE SAFETY OF HIS PEOPLE. Never was a man so utterly defeated as Haman, never was a project so altogether turned aside. He was taken in his own trap, and he and his sons were hanged up on the gibbet set up for Mordecai. As for the Jews, they were in this special danger, that they were to be destroyed on a certain day, and though Esther pleaded with the king for their lives, he was not able to alter his decree, though willing to do so, for it was a rule of the constitution that the law of the Medes and Persians altered not. The king might determine what he pleased, but when he had once decreed it he could not change it, the people feeling it better to submit to the worst established law than to be left utterly to every capricious whim of their master. Now, what was to be done? The decree was given that the Jews might be slain, and it could not be reversed. Here was the door of escape,—another decree was issued giving the Jews permission to defend themselves, and

take the property of any who dared to attack them; thus one decree effectually neutralized the other. With great haste this mandate was sent all over the kingdom, and on the appointed day the Jews stood up for themselves and slew their foes. According to their tradition nobody attempted to attack them except the Amalekites, and consequently only Amalekites were slain, and the race of Amalek was on that day swept from off the face of the earth. God thus gave to the Jews a high position in the empire and we are told that many became Jews, or were proselytes to the God of Abraham, because they saw what God had done. As I commenced by saying that God sometimes darted flashes of light through the thick darkness, you will now see what a flash this must have been. All the people were perplexed when they found that the Hebrews might be put to death, but they must have been far more astonished when the decree came that they might defend themselves. All the world enquired "Why is this?" and the answer was "The living God whom the Jews worship, has displayed his wisdom and rescued his people." All nations were compelled to feel that there was a God in Israel, and thus the divine purpose was fully accomplished, his people were secured, and his name was glorified to the world's end.

From the whole we learn the following lessons.

First, it is clear that *the divine will is accomplished, and yet men are perfectly free agents*. Haman acted according to his own will, Ahasuerus did whatever he pleased, Mordecai behaved as his heart moved him, and so did Esther. We see no interference with them, no force or coercion; hence the entire sin and responsibility rest with each guilty one, yet, acting with perfect freedom, none of them acts otherwise than divine providence had foreseen. "I cannot understand it," says one. My dear friend, I am compelled to say the same,—I do not understand it either. I have known many who think they comprehend all things, but I fancy they had a higher opinion of themselves than truth would endorse. Certain of my brethren deny free agency, and so get out of the difficulty; others assert that there is no predestination, and so cut the knot. As I do not wish to get out of the difficulty, and have no wish to shut my eyes to any part of the truth, I believe both free agency and predestination to be facts. How they can be made to agree I do not know, or care to know; I am satisfied to know anything which God chooses to reveal to me, and equally content not to know what he does not reveal. There it is; man is a free agent in what he does, responsible for his actions, and verily guilty when he does wrong, and he will be justly punished too, and if he be lost the blame will rest with himself alone; but yet there is One who ruleth over all, who, without complicity in their sin, makes even the actions of wicked men to subserve his holy and righteous purposes. Believe these two truths and you will see them in practical agreement in daily life, though you will not be able to devise a theory for harmonising them on paper.

Next, we learn *what wonders can be wrought without miracles*. When God

does a wonderful thing by suspending the laws of nature men are greatly astonished and say, "This is the finger of God", but now-a-days they say to us, "Where is your God? He never suspends his laws now!" Now, I see God in the history Pharaoh, but I must confess I see him quite as clearly in the history of Haman, and I think I see him in even a grander light; for (I say it with reverence to his holy name) it is a somewhat rough method of accomplishing a purpose to stop the wheel of nature and reverse wise and admirable laws; certainly it reveals his power, but it does not so clearly display his immutability. When, however, the Lord allows everything to go on in the usual way, and gives mind and thought, ambition, and passion their full liberty, and yet achieves his purpose, it is doubly wonderful. In the miracles of Pharaoh we see the finger of God, but in the wonders of providence, without miracle, we see the hand of God. Today, whatever the event may be, whether it be the war between the Germans and the French, or the march into Coomassie, or the change of our own government, the attentive eye will as clearly see the Lord as if by miraculous power the hills had leaped from their places, or the floods had stood upright as an heap. I am sure that God is in the world, ay, and is at my own fireside, and in my chamber, and manages my affairs, and orders all things for me, and for each one of his children. We want no miracles to convince us of his working, the wonders of his providence are as great marvels as miracles themselves.

Next we learn *how safe the church of God is*. At one time the people of God seemed to be altogether in Haman's power. Nero once said that he wished his enemies had but one neck that he might destroy them all at a blow, and Haman seemed to have realised just such power. Yet the chosen nation was delivered, the Jewish people lived on until the Messiah came, and does exist, and will exist till they shall enjoy the bright future which is decreed for them. So is it with the church of God today. The foes of truth can never put out the candle which God has lit, never crush the living seed which the Lord Jesus has sown in his own blood-bought people. Brethren, be ye not afraid, but stablish your hearts in God.

Again, we see that *the wicked will surely come to an ill end*. They may be very powerful, but God will bring them down. They may be very crafty, and may plot and plan, and may think that even God himself is their accomplice, because everything goes as they desire; but they may be sure their sin will find them out. They may dig deep as hell, but God will undermine them, and they may climb as high as the stars, but God will be above them to hurl them down. Wicked man, I charge you if you be wise, turn you from your career of opposition to the Most High, you cannot stand against him, neither can you outwit him. Cease, I beseech you, from this idle opposition, and hear the voice of his gospel which says, "Confess your sin and forsake it. Believe in Jesus, the Son of God, the great atoning sacrifice, and even you shall yet be saved." If you do not so, upon your own head shall your iniquities fall.

Last of all, let each child of God rejoice that *we have a guardian so near the*

throne. Every Jew in Shushan must have felt hope when he remembered that the queen was a Jewess. Today let us be glad that Jesus is exalted.

“He is at the Father’s side,
The Man of love, the crucified.”

How safe are all his people, for “if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” There is one that lieth in the bosom of God who will plead for all those who put their trust in him. Therefore be ye not dismayed, but let your souls rest in God, and wait patiently for him, for sooner shall heaven and earth pass away than those who trust the Lord shall perish. “They shall not be ashamed nor confounded, world without end.” Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—
Esther v. 9–14; vi., vii.

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—251, 210, 207.
