

A Providence to lead you

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th' encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on;
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.*

So wrote a man who felt the darkness surrounding him, but who was earnest to walk in the ways of God. Have you ever prayed such a prayer to God, to be so led? Is it in fact true, that there is a God who cares enough for us, to so direct our paths, and take us by the arm, and walk with us step by step throughout life's journey?

The notion that there is some 'higher power' operative in the universe is one of life's ultimate questions. The philosophers to whom Paul spoke in Athens had various views. The Epicureans were polytheists, but believed that the gods had no substantial influence in this world. The Stoics were fatalists, and believed that our duty is to submit to our destiny. The general 'hoi polloi' believed that the gods were either for them or against them, and were constantly entreating and placating them.

One of the blessed revelations of the Bible is the news that God actively governs His world. And not by proxy, but personally. And not in broad principle, but in such a way that 'not a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from the Father's will'. This active, intelligent, and personal governance of God is called divine providence.

Icebreaker



Often when something turns in our favour, we say that we've had a "lucky break"? (eg Averting a car accident, timing a purchase, avoiding a serious injury, etc.) As a group, share your best lucky-break stories, and then pause to reflect on the idea of providence.

Read: Esther 6

¹ That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. ² It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. ³ "What honour and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered.

⁴ The king said, “Who is in the court?” Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him. ⁵ His attendants answered, “Haman is standing in the court.” “Bring him in,” the king ordered.

⁶ When Haman entered, the king asked him, “What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?” Now Haman thought to himself, “Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?” ⁷ So he answered the king, “For the man the king delights to honour, ⁸ have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. ⁹ Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king’s most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honour, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!”

¹⁰ “Go at once,” the king commanded Haman. “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended.”

¹¹ So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!”

¹² Afterward Mordecai returned to the king’s gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, ¹³ and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, “Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!” ¹⁴ While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.

Introduction

The Book of Esther takes place during the fifth century BC, when many Jews still lived in the land of their exile, and when the Persians dominated the Middle East. Esther, a Jewish orphan, and known also as Hadassah, was being raised by her cousin Mordecai (pronounced *more-da-kai*, with the emphasis on the first syllable). The story opens with the King of Persia being so offended by the behaviour of his wife, Vashti, that he decides to banish her and find a replacement queen. To that end, all of the eligible young ladies are summoned to the palace to be tested and considered; and one of those young ladies is Esther. The story continues that the Prime Minister, Haman, in response to being slighted by Mordecai, plots to annihilate all the Jews on a particular day. But before the plot can be enacted, Esther is “providentially” put in a unique position to thwart the plot and rescue her people.



Question 1

Count up the number of so-called ‘coincidences’ in Esther 6. How many did you find? Which is the one that impresses you most?

Question 2

One of the challenges in studying the Bible is determining whether a particular story is unique and unrepeatable, or whether it serves as a precedent and principle for all Christians. For example, many of the Samson stories (in the Book of Judges) are of the first category, and we ought not to expect to operate in this world with superhuman strength, nor to dabble in immorality as he did.

With regard to the divine supervision of the king in the story of Esther, is this a moment in time that is absolutely unique, or is there some general application of divine providence that can be expected by all Christians? (Work through the following verses before you frame your answer).

Proverbs 21:1

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

Proverbs 16:9

In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.

Matthew 10:29

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny. Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.

Ephesians 1:11

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

Question 3

Balancing the will and sovereignty of God, with the will and responsibility of man, has always been one of those genuine complexities of the Christian Faith, and grave errors can be made when we tip the balance in either direction. For example, if we think that we have no responsibility, we stray into fatalism, but if we think that God plays no role in our lives, we stray into humanism.

Both divine providence and human responsibility are evident in this Book of Esther. Quickly read over Esther 4:10-17 & 5:1-8, and list some of the things that you think fall into the category of human responsibility.

Case Study 1

Lucy always had ambitions to be a doctor. But in her final year of high school, she formed the opinion, that if God wanted her to be a doctor, He would bring it to pass, without Lucy's help. He would make her pass the exams, and would send her the right university offer, and would provide all the finances for her course fees, and make her graduate with honours, and obtain a position in a private practice. So Lucy didn't study and Lucy didn't worry, until her exam results came back. Do you think Lucy missed something along the way?



Case Study 2

Roger is due to fly out of Australia in a month's time for his first missionary posting overseas, but is still waiting for his visa to be approved. He submitted the application on time, and checked that his paperwork had been received and was sitting on the right person's desk, and that no submission fees were still outstanding. And Roger continues to pray, and so do his friends, that the visa might be approved and received in time for his departure. How do you think this story will end?



William Cowper's Famous Hymn

1. God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform;
he plants his footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.
2. Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill
he treasures up his bright designs,
and works his sov'reign will.
3. Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break
in blessings on your head.
4. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence
he hides a smiling face.
5. His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding ev'ry hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flow'r.
6. Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
and he will make it plain.

Question 4

Reading over Cowper's (pronounced *Cooper*) hymn, what theological truths about the providence of God has he captured well? What is encouraging about his fifth stanza? Is there something in your present journey to which you could apply this hope?

Prayer

Mindful that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose", give thanks for those divine providences in your life that are sweet, and ask for more patience to bear those providences that cause you to worry and wonder. To close, quietly read together the words of this old hymn:

1. My times are in Thy hand;
my God, I wish them there;
my life, my friends, my soul, I leave
entirely to Thy care.
2. My times are in Thy hand,
whatever they may be;
pleasing or painful, dark or bright,
as best may seem to Thee.
3. My times are in Thy hand;
why should I doubt or fear?
My Father's hand will never cause
his child a needless tear.
4. My times are in Thy hand,
Jesus the Crucified;
Those hands my cruel sins had pierced
are now my guard and guide.