

The challenge of Divine providence

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 00] Would you turn with me now for a little time as we meditate together in a portion we have read from God's word, the book of Esther, and the fourth chapter, and the reading again at verse 13.

Then Merdicaï commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in a king's house more than all the Jews, for if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there the enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed, and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Particularly these words at the end of verse 14, Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this? The story of Esther, my friends, is almost like a fairy tale. Overnight, as we read in the earlier part of the book, She was raised from complete obscurity to a foremost place in the nation and among the people.

When we say that, however, we are also bound to say that the matter which gave cause to her elevation is quite nauseating, and it is to Queen Vashti's honour that she refused to submit to the degrading, drunk-and-demand-made honour.

[1 : 51] You will read this yourselves in the earlier chapters of the book. The theme of the plot is the Persean court, and it obviously happened during the time of the captivity of the Jews, in all probability close to the time when many of the Jewish exiles were returning to Israel and engaging themselves in the rebuilding of their ruined land.

Some imagine that Mordecai and Esther were contemporaries with Nehemiah and Ezra, and this may well be so, may be quite true, although there is no reference whatever to them in the writings of these two men.

This perhaps is not, however, surprising, because Nehemiah and Ezra were dealing with a completely different matter.

They were dealing with returning exiles, and with the rebuilding of the temple and the city of the walls of the city of Jerusalem. Mordecai, on the other hand, was an official at the Persean court, and he and Esther were dealing with a purely domestic issue at this time, although it certainly had serious possible repercussions for the Jews as a people.

Now, the principal lesson, which we believe these incidents are intended to convey to us, is the personal responsibility which devolves on every single individual within the sphere in which God has placed them in his providence.

[3 : 45] No one of God's creatures is irrelevant in his sight. Every single individual is a distinct entity, a distinct individual in the view of God, and is obligated to recognize this and to search around in order that he may discover who he is and why he is where he is.

Man as man has its chief end in glorifying God, and that without exception. God doesn't create a soul without having any purpose in view for that soul.

But the awesome thing is that we may receive, in a general sense, the grace of God in vain by failing to measure up to our obligations in this respect.

And I suggest that this is perhaps the main lesson that we have in these words. Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

There is then a challenge with which these words are accompanied. It would appear that Esther may have been thinking along very different lines to Mordecai.

[5 : 09] She may have been thinking of trying to ignore this situation, or that she herself had any obligation, or that she herself had any obligation to get involved in what was happening around her.

And it is at this point that Mordecai cautions her in these words, and says to her, in effect, two things.

He says to her, first of all, don't think that you will secure your own interests by washing your hands of this whole sad business that is now happening, and imagining that you have no responsibility in such a matter.

Think not with thyself, he says, that thou shalt escape in the king's house more than all the Jews.

And then at verse 14, but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed.

Esther might well have argued with herself, well, I am secure and nothing can happen to me. In any case, there is nothing that I can do.

[6 : 25] Even if I had a certain obligation, a certain responsibility, there is nothing that I can do.

Because, as she herself says here in verse 11, there is a law forbidding anyone to come into the king's presence without being called and commanded, and I have not been called, he says, to come in unto the king these 30 days.

And so, where are my obligations? Where are my responsibilities? The door is shut. So far as I am concerned, she imagined that she had a copper-bottomed alibi for inaction, for doing nothing.

Here was an argument which couldn't be answered. She could, as she felt now, sit back quietly and let others take whatever action they deemed necessary in this matter.

And so she would not get herself involved in anything that was happening, or happening to her people. It was too dangerous and unpopular. And so she would remain at a distance, she would remain neutral, and she would stand back from the unfolding drama and watch it from afar.

And perhaps not a few among the children of men adopt this attitude with respect to the gospel of the grace of God and the interest of the truth of God in the world.

[7 : 59] They don't want to get involved. They have no wish to become committed. To these things.

They want to remain on the perimeter of the gospel because they do not want to let the world out of their grasp.

And so they make the excuse, I have not been called. There is nothing that I can do. There is no way in which I can get involved. I have no obligation to do any more than I am doing.

But that is not how Mordecai saw the matter. And that is not how any right-thinking person will see the matter of our obligation before heaven and before men.

And so this is the first thing I suggest that he said to her. Do not think that you will secure your own interest, your own higher interest, simply by washing your hands of the whole matter and imagining that you have no obligation and no responsibility in it.

You will not. And the other thing he says almost seems to contradict this. He says, Do not think that you are in any way indispensable or that God's purposes will not be secured should you wish to remain inactive in this matter.

[9 : 23] For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall their enlargement arise from another place. God is no man's debtor.

God can work by means. God can work above means. God can work without means. If you fail and if you disobey, it will make no vital difference, says Mordecai, to the outworking of the purpose of God.

Because he will turn in some other direction. He will affect his purpose in another way. There is no one indispensable in the divine plan. And there is no one who cannot be replaced by someone else and perhaps by someone better.

And so Mordecai issues, on the one hand, a caution as to the timidity or the irresolution of Esther, and on the other hand, a caution to her pride and to her boastfulness, lest she should be puffed up, imagining that she was indispensable.

And so he says, to adhere in effect, God is not waiting with bated breath to see how you will react to this challenge and this matter and what you will do.

[10 : 50] If you fail, enlargement and deliverance will come from elsewhere. His cause will not suffer and his purpose will not be frustrated.

My friends, people who should know better sometimes speak foolishly by suggesting that God's hands are tied by men's disobedience and by men's rebellion.

That he is unable to put into effect what he has purposed because man refuses to act in a way that would fulfill this purpose.

Such a notion strikes at the very heart of his Godhood and his sovereignty. God is no man's debtor. So he seems to say, these two things to her and to us through her, do not think that you will secure your own higher interest by washing your hands of this matter.

And on the other hand, do not think that you are in any way indispensable. In this dispensation, in this business, of acting in this particular way.

[12 : 04] This is a challenge, then, with which these words are accompanied. But notice, too, in the second place, the consideration which these words demanded.

for it is such a consideration as this that Merdicaï is here pressing on this young woman, Esther. She perhaps imagined that she had spoken the last word when she intimated to him that she had not even been called into the king's presence.

She hadn't been commanded these thirty days to come before him. What therefore could she possibly affect for her people when, so long as he remained inactive, he must truly, Merdicaï must truly look around for someone else, or God must look elsewhere for someone to work that God was not yet finished with her.

By his servant, he challenged her with these words, who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

In effect, he is in these words saying to her, consider the position to which you have been elevated in the providence of God.

[13 : 25] You have been brought from obscurity to a foremost place in the nation and before the people. In all this, is all this a mere accident?

Is there not something significant in it? Can you possibly overlook this extraordinary providence in your life? Can you brush it aside as something that is quite inconsequential in your experience? And the same can be said of each one of ourselves, whoever we are, and wherever we stand before God. What about yourself, my friend? What about you?

God has greatly advanced you, has he not, in life? He has prospered you in very many directions. He has pleased, he has placed you within the environment of his gospel and of his word.

He has shown you mercy and grace and forbearance from your childhood to this very day. is there therefore not some significance in this?

[14 : 34] How have you responded to this matter? Have you considered the position to which God has elevated you, if you like, in the course of life?

And what lies behind such an elevation on the part of God? have you considered this? And in effect, he says to her also in his words, consider why God has thus advanced you, and why he has given you your portion where you are, why he has brought you into the palace, why he has elevated you above all your contemporaries, and why he has chosen you from all the others in the land to be the queen, this was her particular responsibility, why God had brought this to pass, and why it could be said to ourselves, why has he given you your portion in a gospel-proclaimed situation, and surrounded you with perhaps godly relations, and praying friends?

Was all this without any rhyme, or reason, or purpose? did it just happen to happen so far as you are concerned? And did it just happen to come, and you just happen to come into the environment in which you are, for no reason whatever?

Had he not a purpose of grace in creating you, and advancing you, in such a way, so that you, in the providence of God, that you are highly privileged?

Are you given a consideration to this, that it deserves, that in effect, is what the words are saying? Why are you come to the kingdom at such a time as this?

[16 : 34] Why are you here? And what are you doing where you are? have you come into the kingdom for such a time as this?

Consider why God has advanced you to this point. He may also be saying to her in this question, consider the natural qualities with which you have been endowed, and see whether these qualities cannot be turned to the purpose for which they were intended in the first place by God.

You see, very clearly, Esther had her beauty, and we are not very sure that she had very much more apart from her courage. But she made excellent use of both her beauty and her courage, and by the grace of God, she effected what God had purposed for her and for her people.

Although she undoubtedly had initial misgivings as to the part she was going to play, the hour of testing did not find her lacking in courage.

She measured up to her obligations admirably, and displayed great courage and great presence of mind, and very considerable intelligence, in the way she acted.

[17 : 57] But you see, my friend, the question comes back to you and to me. Consider, I say, the natural qualities with which you have been endowed, and what you are making of those qualities, what you are doing with them.

In the kingdom of God, and in the place where God has put you, what response is coming from you? Consider, then, the natural qualities with which you have been endowed.

God. It may well be too, that he was in effect saying to her, consider what the pleasure and the purpose of God is in relation to what you are at present, and what you should be in the providence in which he has put you, and how you can best fulfill that pleasure and that purpose in your own way.

as we are here before him in a gospel land, we ask ourselves if it is a pleasure, if it is God's good pleasure that all men should be saved, and that all should come to repentance, then consider whether in fact such a pleasure has found fulfillment in your own life, and if not, why not?

where does the blame lie? Who is to be faulted in this matter? There are only two possible answers to that, God or yourself, and one of them is of course quite impossible.

[19 : 39] If God cannot be faulted, then, and he cannot, then you must be the person alone who is responsible for this state of affairs.

Consider them, whether you are coming into the kingdom for such a time as this. She was called to a consideration of this vital question, just as we are now, as to why we are where we are.

Now, look at the possibilities which these words set before us. Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Who knows? Esther. And she might well have said this to herself, who knows whether this is in fact true.

Nobody knows what may happen if in obedience and in faith men face their obligations in a scriptural way and take their courage, as it were, in both their hands and commit their ways to the God of all grace.

[20 : 54] I will go in unto the king and if I perish, says Esther, I perish. And who knows but that God will be gracious to me and will give me good success in this mission.

And we know the sequel. We know how King Ahasuerus, how he was disposed in heart towards Esther and granted a request far beyond her most sanguine expectations.

And so, my friends, who knows what the outcome may be for yourself if in obedience, in trustfulness and with the courage of grace, you do what you have to do and you cannot do more. You may be today standing at a crossroads, a young person standing at a crossroads in your life. You know what you should do but you hesitate in doing it.

And who knoweth whether you are come to the kingdom for just such a time as this and such a moment as this. There is a moment, there is a time in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.

[22 : 11] And if that is omitted then the consequences will be tragic. Who knoweth whether they were come to the kingdom for such a moment as this.

nobody knows what may happen if in obedience and in faith men face their obligation. Who knoweth whether thou had come to the kingdom for such a time as this nobody knows his own potential until he is tested and tried in a crucible of the gospel of God's grace.

Esther no doubt felt that she was completely out of her depth in the affairs of state and felt quite inadequate for the role which she was called on to play and being thus conscious of her own inadequacy solicited the help and the prayers of her friends and having thus committed her case to God and to his people she saw his marvellous working in herself and amongst his people.

The grace of God is an altogether radical principle as it operates in men and for men and through men it was only by the grace of God that anything was affected at this moment or at any other time so who knows when a man in obedience and in faith commits himself and commits his all to the God of all grace what may transpire nobody knows his own potential and then nobody knows what God may do when by his grace we seek to give unqualified obedience to him one can well imagine that people seeing and knowing Saul of Tarsus before his conversion would consign him to the deepest pit because of the manner in which he conducted himself but you see they were reckoning without taking account of

God and of God's work in that man and when God met him and by his grace changed him then in a sense he changed the whole course of the history of the world and the church the ancient world was never the same again after Paul the apostle became an instrument in the hand of the God of heaven and so we say who knows what God may do with you when by the grace of God when the grace of God takes hold upon you and radically changes the direction in which you are living what God is requiring of you and of me is simply obedience to his revealed will this is what was required of Esther obedience to God's command not to Mordecai's but what God was commanding her to do and when such obedience is rendered who knows what may transpire who knows what

[25 : 27] God may do he is calling now as he has been calling down through the pages and the ages of history son daughter give me thine heart and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a moment as this my dear friend permit me to ask you have you truly asked yourself why am I here what am I doing here what purpose am I serving and what am I fulfilling in the world are you just here to get a good pass grade at school or at college so that you will get a good job in due course with a good wage so that you will have a good time is that the whole breadth of your vision I ask you and having secured all this as some of you have already secured this is that all that there is to life is that all that there is to life is there nothing more to life than this is this the only reason for your existence surely not surely not but have you truly faced up to this challenge and have you truly asked yourself the question why am

I here and what am I doing what I am and have you considered my friends how great God has advanced you and that he is and that it is God alone who has brought you to this point in your life and in your experience that is God alone who has blessed you with all the blessings you have already enjoyed in the course of life and living is he who has loaded you with the benefits that you have that you have had from your earliest days and is continuing to do so so that you have lacked nothing of all the good things of his providence does he not therefore have some purpose in view for you in this is he not speaking to you and is he not challenging you by these ways and means scripture says that the goodness of

God ought to lead us to repentance it ought to lead us to a consideration to a consideration of what we are in relation to God so that we might walk before them as we should walk as those who need him and who were created in order that they might serve him sadly it frequently has the opposite effect his goodness frequently has the opposite effect upon men and women young and old the effect of hardening them in sin by continuing in sin but God intends it to be otherwise namely that it should turn their minds from a consideration of merely temporal and material things to a consideration of spiritual and eternal verities who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this who knoweth whether you art come to the kingdom for such a moment as this my friend

I ask you to ask yourself before God why you have come to the kingdom at such a time what are you doing here what is the purpose of your existence are you fulfilling that purpose by God's grace and by God's power are you God who who who knoweth that you have come to the kingdom for some great purpose that God may have a great purpose for you and through you be a means of blessing many others who would have thought that Paul the apostle to quote just but one example who would have thought that at one time such a wretch of a man could have been made a blessing to so many thousands of people afterwards but it happened by the grace of God he came to recognize why he was come to the kingdom and

God's grace wrought mightily upon him I ask you to face up to the question to this obligation who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this ask yourself why you are here what you are doing what purpose you are serving are you simply serving yourself and serving Satan and serving the world and serving today and forgetting about everything else above all forgetting about the God who created you for his own glory in order that you might enjoy him serve him and enjoy him forever who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this God grant my friends that we might face up to the question and to the challenge posed and to thou minister thy grace to us so that we might indeed look at ourselves in the light of thy word and in the light of the demand which thou art making upon us as rational and answerable men and women who must be summoned before thee at one day we pray thy blessing to accompany thy word this evening amongst us and throughout the length and breadth of the land do thou

[32 : 02] O God arise and plead the cause that is thine own make thy name great make thy name glorious throughout our borders and grant that we may see young and old alike facing up to their

responsibilities and their obligations before their God and their fellow men go with us now as we go from this place may continue to be with thy people O God as they continue in worship before thee and glorify thy name in all things for Jesus sake Amen