

# ESTHER

Esther is a most remarkable Book. It revolves around three pivotal themes. The first and main one is “Providence.” The second one is “The World,” and the third one “The Church.”

“Providence” functions as the all-determining silent as well as eloquent backdrop of the other two. For a starter, Esther establishes once and for all that “Providence” never did, never does, and never will function in any other way, than as the all-controlling factor of all of history, any doubt or protestation to the contrary.

Further, “The World” cannot help itself in the display of all its typical features of “the ‘good,’ the ‘bad’ and the ‘ugly.’” Esther conveys once and for all that “The World” will always be “The World,” and never will or can lose its stripes.

Finally, “The Church” is caught in the middle, as it at times is shoved around, at times facilitates, at times counter-punches, and in the end can be assured of a glorious end. Esther communicates once and for all that “The Church” can count on it that this pattern ever was, ever is and ever will be repeated. But it equally communicates that “The Church” cannot and may not presume on victory, if it fails or refuses to conduct itself in a godly fashion and is unwilling “to pay the price.” This, of course, puts Volume I, 1, “The Historical Reality-Check,” with the grim picture of the Middle East, Europe and the USA in both an immensely sobering as well as challenging perspective. Now on to the details!

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Incidentally, it has not gone unnoticed that Esther never mentions the name of “God.” This has raised many an eyebrow. But it should not have. The reason for it is analogous to the reason why James refers to Jesus sparingly, and never mentions the Holy Spirit even once.

James, in fact, the Holy Spirit as the overarching author, had only one purpose, namely to convey in the clearest of ways, and to delineate in detail that “Holiness,” as the crowning piece of God’s saving activity, is what authentic and genuine Christianity is all about, reflecting the Message of God the Father in the OT from beginning to end, and of God the Son in the pivotal NT Sermon on the Mount. This “forest” should not be missed as a result of a multitude of otherwise excellent or even essential “trees.” The rest of NT Scripture would identify all of these in due time through other authors, such as Paul. From this perspective their writings function as extensive sets of “Holy Spirit Footnotes” on James.

So Esther focuses upon “Providence.” Literally everything, every spoken word, every done deed, every occurring event, every human presence, every experienced relationship, whether “good, bad or ugly,” etc., etc., is “Providence.” Of course, from a broader Biblical perspective it proves to be the Providence of God the Father. According to the NT, it takes place under the umbrella of the authority of God the Son (Mt. 28:18-20) and doubtlessly unfolds under the supervision of the Holy Spirit (Rev. 4:5b; 5:6b; 22:17). But Esther first and foremost, in fact, exclusively establishes the pivotal existence and precise location of the *forest* without any reference to the “trees,” however vital or essential they are or may

be. So no mention even of the Name of God! Of course, we better not question the wisdom of this, or doubt the need for it.

Both James and Esther seem to say, “Do not force me ‘to sidestep,’ ‘to clutter up (?),’ my explicit purpose with even the most glorious and otherwise absolutely necessary truths.” Anyone who embraces James and Esther as part of God’s “perfect” Book cannot and will not object to this by definition, in fact, will “herald” it onward throughout history. “James is perfect, as is Esther, ‘in spite of everything!’ So, there must be a perfect reason for what is included in them or left out. Therefore let us not ‘spoil’ either one of them in thought, word or deed by all too human considerations, such as voiced by Luther in the case of James!” All this will return and pay off handsomely when we now shift focus to the two other themes that are equally in evidence in Esther. They function as the “filaments” through which Providence” lights up, first “The World,” and subsequently “The Church.”

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The Book of Esther arguably has seven panels. Let’s analyze and assess their content and in the process determine how “The World” manifests itself in them, how “The Church” rises to the occasion, and how in all this “Providence” proves to have the “final word.”

Panel I is covered by Esther 1:1-22. We come face to face with (1) a display of “human pride and human benevolence on the world scene,” (2) of “domination and defiance in the marriage relationship,” and (3) of “a self-serving view and use of the “works of the law” (See Rom. 1:14-15). Xerxes puts the spotlight on his fame and fortune and have his people share in both (1:1-9), orders his wife around who promptly refuses to comply (1:10-12), and decides to cut her down to size in order to keep the fabric of smoothly running authority relationships intact (1:13-22).

Panel II is covered by Esther 2:1-23. It shows us (1) “a remedial solution” and an “oppressive determination,” (2) a “self-indulgent course of action” and “grand finale,” and (3) “a seemingly unrelated by-product.” Xerxes is persuaded to set the wheels in motion to find a replacement and rounds up every beautiful girl to pave the way for that (2:1-11), spends a night with every one of them to finalize the process (2:12-18), and escapes an assassination attempt by an unexpected coincidence (2:19-23).

Panel III is covered by Esther 3:1-15. We are told of (1) “an explosive conflict situation,” (2) ”a wrathful resentment,” and (3) “a deadly solution.” Haman collides with Mordecai and targets his extinction with a vengeance (3:1-5), for good measure goes systematically after the annihilation of a whole nation (3:6-11), and passes legislation to that effect (3:15).

Panel IV is covered by Esther 4:1-5:8. It starts out with (1) “an eye-opener,” if there ever was one, (2) continues with “an even greater challenge,” and (3) concludes with someone taking “the bull by the horns.” Esther encounters a consternation of the highest order and is apprised of the situation (4:1-7), is told bluntly to put her life on the line or else (4:8-14), and resolutely leaves her comfort zone in what may seem like a “leap of awesome faith” (4:15-5:8).

Panel V is covered by Esther 5:9-7:16. It begins with (1) “the euphoria of a planned execution and the frailty of a sleepless night,” (2) followed by “a seemingly innocent leading question and a dreadfully shocking humiliation,” (3) quickly to end up with “a withering attack” and “a public hanging.” Haman cannot stand Mordecai’s refusal to obey the

King's command, takes it personal, and decides upon the harshest possible death penalty, death by hanging, while unaware that the King during a sleepless night was alerted to the fact that Mordecai saved his bacon and was never properly rewarded. The next day he asked Haman how he would define a great, if not the greatest possible reward. Convinced that he was the recipient he really pours it on, and was promptly told to hand that reward in person to ... Mordecai, of all people. In utter dismay he hastens home to report this "event" to his family and friends, is promptly told in no uncertain terms that he is now a terminal case because his enemy is a Jew, and is subsequently hurried to dinner with the King and Queen. In that scenario he is exposed as utterly wicked, squirms in an unseemly fashion, and incites the boiling rage of the King which culminates in his public hanging to be seen far and wide.

Panel VI is covered by Esther 8:1-9:19. We read of (1) "a potent counter offensive," (2) "a literally life and home saving edict," and (3) "a total and undisputed victory" that could not have been more decisive." Esther approaches the King once more who gives Mordecai permission to enact legislation that gives the Jews breathing space to defend themselves. This leads to a resounding triumph and the annihilation of the enemy.

Panel VII is covered by Esther 9:20-10:3. We witness (1) the "inauguration of an impressive feast," as (2) "a perennial memorial of what had transpired," (3) and the respect for an amazing track record. It is official! A glorious Feast (Purim) is ordered by Mordecai and Esther, and unreservedly agreed upon as an inviolable obligation by the Jews annually to commemorate the Great Deliverance. It is hardly surprising that Mordecai after his meteoric political ascendance was greatly beloved and honored as the architect of the continuing peace of his people.

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This summary of the Book of Esther calls for three sets of observations.

The first observation pertains to the bottom line. It is "Providence" all the way, from start to finish. All the event strands are so intimately interwoven and form such a progressive concatenation that no individual link can be removed or everything collapses like a house of cards! The implications in terms of universal principles that cover even the minutest details and aspects of history are momentous. Political systems of whatever kind? Providence! Marital dysfunction? Providence! All too human solution? Providence! Roughshod action? Providence! Humiliating procedure? Providence! Royal coronation? Providence! Sudden information to the rescue? Providence! Royal edict? Providence! Stubborn non-compliance? Providence! Revengeful rage? Providence! Sleepless night? Providence! Massive Miscalculation? Providence! Elitist Dinner invitation? Providence! Chickens of sin coming home to roost? Providence! Royal pleasure? Providence! Legal relief? Providence! Substantive triumph? Providence! Prime-Ministerial appointment? Providence! Festal Decree? Providence! Honor to whom honor is due? Providence! Benevolent and peace-promoting rule? Providence!

"Providence" is clearly a mixed if not seemingly chaotic bag that on the surface often does not display any rhyme or reason. Candidly, all of world history is a tapestry with two sides. The visible side displays all kinds of unrelated, loose hanging, irregular, untidy, if not messy strands. But the other, the Providence side, is impressive in its careful coordination and multi-colored beauty in all the so-called "good," "bad," and "ugly." Admittedly Esther

only covers a tiny sliver of world history. But the wide variety of items, events and issues that it covers conveys the reality and glory of a universal pattern that covers the waterfront of history and all that it contains. In fact, its objective is first and foremost to demonstrate that ubiquitous “Providence” lies at the root of, forms the backdrop for, positions permeates, saturates, governs and “finalizes” everything and everyone. But it does not stop there. It also calls for its recognition in everything, and requires submission to it in everything, in heart, in thought, in word as well as in deed. All this applies to *all* the “good,” (Jam. 5:1.b), *all* the “bad,” (Job 1:21b), and *all* the “ugly” (Gen. 44:5-8; 50:20; Ps. 105:16-22; 119:67, 71; Jam. 1:2). It is admittedly a tall order for everybody fully to recognize this everywhere and properly to respond to this everywhere, in all places, settings and circumstances. In concrete terms, taking the wider biblical setting into account, “See God, *see God*, SEE GOD, first and foremost, acknowledge God, *acknowledge God*, ACKNOWLEDGE GOD, first and foremost, and accordingly respond, *respond*, RESPOND to God everywhere and in everything!” We may well ask the question what percentage of even genuine believers who subscribe to the content of the Biblical Doctrine of Providence routinely fail to pursue the *practice* of the Biblical Doctrine of Providence in their everyday life that is routinely marked by irritations, aggravations, fits of anger, envies, resentments, bitterness, revenge, envies, complaints, worries, etc., etc., etc., etc.? 90%? Or would even this be too generous? Candidly, the universal biblical principles embedded in Esther warn Christians in the strongest of biblical terms not to be “kings” with Jesus (Rev. 1:6; 5:10), only to be caught flatfooted, that is, “without clothes” on. After all, according to James, consistent “hearers of the Word” still delude themselves if they are not consistent “Doers of the Word” (Jam. 1:22), also in the area of “The Practice of Providence.” Come to think about it, James’ gap between “hearing” and “doing” the Word most likely is much more immense than any of us ever has imagined. The graphic image of anyone who is so steeped in utter “stupidity” on anyone’s count that he decides to forget what he looks like when he turns his back to a mirror, may well indicate that this gap resembles the Grand Canyon. A recent publication, *The Christian Atheist* literally speaks volumes in this regard!<sup>1</sup> At any rate, we are already beginning to get an inkling that all this simply does not fit into the recently developed “two kingdom” theory. It sports a radically different “world view!”

The second observation pertains to “The World.” In the broadest biblical sense of the word, it either organizes itself “apart from God” or “against God” in heart, thought, will, emotions, word, or deed. But even in either one of these two instances it is never “without God.” After all, “moral folks” cannot help but keeping “the (sanitizing) works” of his Law (“common grace”) (Rom. 2:14-15),<sup>2</sup> while “immoral” folks cannot but (instinctively) know

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<sup>1</sup> The full title is, Craig Groeschel, *The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but Living As If He Doesn’t Exist* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). His concrete and convicting illustrations tell the story of the frequent and widespread manifestations of what he ironically identifies as “Christian Atheism.”

<sup>2</sup> Note well that in Scriptural terminology both “The Law” and “The Works of the Law” are said to be “written on the heart.” *But these expressions do not eye the same reality.* Far from it! “The Law” is written on the regenerate heart or “mission control center, and is warmly embraced in its totality as God purposes it (Ps. 40:8; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:2; Heb. 8:10). On the other hand, “The Works of the Law” are, indeed, an indelible part of the arsenal of the mission control center of the unregenerate, but inescapably so as created in the “Image of God,” and for all practical purposes willy-nilly. But at the same time, they are always partly suppressed and never function uniformly. So much for the claim of the “two-kingdom” theory that there is a “common world,” which is ruled by a *universal*, that is, a *universally agreed upon* natural law! Such “law” simply does not exist. No one has ever been able to formulate it. The “works of the law” in unbelievers are always determined or dictated by deeper lying and widely varying commitments! In a word, the notion of a uniformly governing “natural law” is a siren song, and cannot be

that they deserve the death penalty by virtue of his Law (Rom. 1:32)! All this is in copious evidence in Esther. It is, first, organized apart from God with all that this entails in politics, marriage, decision making, giving foolish stamps of approval (Panel I, 1, 2; II, 1, 2; III, 3). It is, second, organized against God in the fiercest of ways (Panel III, 2, 3; V, 1). Finally and third, it displays “the works of the law” in protecting authority and demonstrating the deserved penalty of the law (Panel I, 3; V, 3). The bottom line is again the same! Esther discloses once and for all what “The World” is all about, how it operates, and what it strives for. It may cover only a sliver of World history. But the historiographical picture of this sliver speaks volumes. There is not one scene in all of World History that in one way or another cannot be reduced to one of Esther’s three universal principles!<sup>3</sup>

The third observation eyes “*The Piece de Resistance!*” After all that is said and done, we arrive at the pivotal question what “The Church” is all about? How, in the Providence of God, does it interact with “The World?” How does it respond to “The World?” And how does it “cooperate” with “The World?” At times it is “victimized,” and may have no choice but to comply, while remaining personally pure (Panel II, 2). At times it stems the tide of crime (Panel II, 3). At times it either obediently stays the course, or is (too) stubborn in ignoring authority. Candidly, it is not totally clear whether the refusal to pay required governmental homage to Mr. Number II in the realm has a properly biblical or an all too human personal root (Panel III, 1). At times it finds itself under a deadly gun (Panel III, 2, 3). At times ignorance about the deadly danger stands in need of pertinent information and a non-negotiable exhortation to take decisive action in spite of all odds (Panel IV, 1, 2). At times the Church must risk death and courageously enters “the gates of hell” for the sake of the Kingdom (Panel IV, 3). At times, decisive and risk-taking actions lead to a principal victory (Panel VI, 1, 2). At times, tactical details for actual victory may have to be worked out, aided by one’s specific station or official function in life, to be unwaveringly implemented and aggressively pursued to the end (Panel VI, 3). At times victories are so awesome that they must be perennially remembered with thanksgiving and joy, while their human instruments must be loved and honored (Panel VII, 1, 2). However, the grand conclusion is and must be that literally everything, that is, every idea contemplated, every plan drawn up, every goal pursued, and every action taken, must have the well-being of Church and Kingdom as overriding rationale and focus (Panel VII, 3).

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found in any phase of World History, where “conflict” invariably trumps so-called “universality” by definition. Agreements of any kind and in any setting are only “piece-meal” in nature, and sooner or later fall apart again! Even unbelievers have called the idea of a concentration point around which everyone rallies, or a center point where everybody comes together an unrealizable pipedream! See Footnote 17, for Carl Henry’s detailed argument that persuasively and effectively debunks the idea of an existing and universally accepted so-called “natural law.”

<sup>3</sup> A student in a Christian University “confessed” to me that one of his History professors in a Course on Historiography denied that it is ever possible to trace God’s hand in the course or events of history. This was hammered home so insistently and consistently that it turned him into a practical, if not radical relativist. At the time of this confession he traced his broken marriage to this engrained relativism and subsequently testified that even after he came to his biblical senses he had to fight its influence daily. It is, of course, a truism that historical instances are not “prescriptive” in nature. However, this does not mean that *any and all* historical instances are not the visible manifestations of the “Hand of God,” which reflect the all-encompassing providential principles and patterns of God revealed in Scripture, specifically in the Book of Esther, and which must be handled with the “wisdom,” provided by God in Scripture and to be appropriated through prayer (Jam. 1:2ff).

With all this as a “given,” Esther is not just a “pleasant,” or even “splendid” past-redemptive-historical account that can be read, contemplated and enjoyed at our leisure before we turn to “business as usual” again, all too often the “business of practical atheism.” No, it is a biblical-theological Kingdom blueprint of mandated universal principles and patterns that must be understood, appropriated, and displayed by the Church throughout its history. In short, it is a call and a challenge to fall in line and to take action! Of course, at each historical occasion all details in terms of settings, people, events, etc., etc., may, in fact, will undoubtedly be different. Once again, Esther covers only a sliver of World and Church History that will never repeat itself “as-is.” But its Message is and remains the same. Providence, Providence, Providence, all of it! As the “winged word” goes, “History never repeats itself, but it invariably ‘rhymes,’” frankly for better or for worse. There is “Divine Order” in the House and History of Creation that “better” be recognized, acknowledged and absorbed by the Church as its perennial Guiding and Guarding Light. Anything less puts Esther principally out of action as a museum piece, and in the process invites the “worse.” This comes to expression in the shrill and threatening “rhyme” of another “winged word,” “If history teaches anything, it teaches that history teaches nothing.” Spine-chilling on anybody’s count!

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However, it ought to be gratefully noted that throughout Church History Esther’s Message, also laid out in Hebrews 11, is embodied again and again in “Men of God,” such as Athanasius, Luther, Calvin, etc. All this spells Biblical “Revival Culture” with its Twelve Pulsating Marks (Acts 1-12): Mighty Presence of the Holy Spirit, Mighty Prayer, Mighty Preaching, Mighty Conversions, Mighty Assemblies, Mighty Holiness, Mighty Generosity, Mighty Grassroots Evangelism, Mighty Impact upon Society, and Mighty Leadership engaged in Mighty Combat and Mighty Pursuit of the Grand Command of the Making of Disciples and their Training as Kingdom Soldiers (Mt. 28:19-20). But it also leads to the regrettable conclusion that one will be hard put to fit this Biblical Revival Blueprint in the recently advanced so-called “two-kingdom” theory. What speaks volumes is the fact that its proponents are by and large opposed to the idea of Revival as it is evidenced during times, such as “The Great Awakening.” Since “such times” are fully in line with the Pentecostal fires as described in the Book of Acts, and follow in the footsteps of the Pentecostal Church as applauded in the Book of Acts, any type of rejection of them, let alone opposition to them, is in principle “suicidal,” and sooner or later “practically” as well! To what other conclusion can one come when faced with the refusal to mirror what the God the Father promised and promulgated as the New Covenant, God the Son personified and produced in his Crucifixion and Resurrection, God the Holy Spirit transported and personalized in astounding quantity and breathtaking quality, starting at Pentecost, and the Church may embrace and enjoy as its permanent treasure and its mandated benchmark?