

Message 1: The Invisible Hand

SUGGESTED PASSAGE: ESTHER 1:1—2:23

Esther is unique in all the Bible because it is the only book in Scripture that does not mention the name of God directly. This is because Esther is a book God wanted to use to show how His providence, His invisible hand, works behind the scene to bring about His purposes in history. So even though God is not on the front page of Esther, His fingerprints are all through the book.

So even though God is not named in the book of Esther, look for His covert hand at work. This book wants us to know that God is in control, but His methods vary.

MESSAGE GOAL:

The goal of this message is to help people discern the invisible hand of God's providence at work in their circumstances—even when they cannot detect His presence—to bring about His sovereign, perfect plan in their lives.

INTRODUCTION:

One day, a very lonely frog went to a fortune-teller to see what his fortune would be. The fortune-teller told the frog, "Don't worry because soon you're going to meet a girl who will want to know everything about you."

The frog was understandably excited, so he asked the fortune-teller, "When will I meet this girl?"

"Oh, you're going to meet her next semester in biology class!"

Sometimes, things look good one minute, but then go south very fast. Sometimes, if the truth be told, dreams take place in one moment, and disaster seems to come the next. Sometimes, it even looks like God doesn't know what He is doing.

The biblical book of Esther is a lot like that. It's actually a Cinderella story—and much like Cinderella, before Esther becomes "the belle of the ball," things become very dark and seemingly hopeless for her and her people. This plot alone makes Esther unique in Scripture.

Esther is also unique among the sixty-six books of the Bible because it is the only book in God's Word that does not contain the name of God. God's presence is on every page of Esther, but His name is nowhere to be found, which raises the question of why God would include in His Word a book that never mentions His name.

The reason is that God wanted to use this "Cinderella story" to teach us something about Himself that is critical for your life and mine, which is this: there are many times in our lives when God is nowhere to be found. There are many times in our circumstances when we look for God, but He cannot be located. There are many times when it seems that God is letting things happen to us that He wouldn't allow if He loved us and cared about us. And He doesn't seem to be present when these painful circumstances are happening to us.

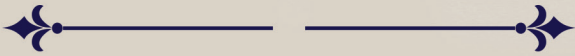
But there is a term for God's invisibility, when He cannot be located. It is referred to in biblical theology as the doctrine of His *providence*: God's unseen hand at work. Esther is probably the classic example of God's unseen hand at work as He providentially rules and overrules when circumstances seem to be taking shape that would result in the destruction of His people, the Jews.

In fact, Esther is so permeated with God's providence that without knowing the reason it was included in the canon, the book makes no sense, other than it being a great story. But Esther was put in the Bible to teach you and me something about God that all of us face at one time or another, which is that He is present and at work even when our circumstances are falling apart and God seems nowhere to be found.

But when you understand the truth that God is providentially at work, you're able to move through life even when it's quiet spiritually in your life because you know even though you can't see, feel or hear God, He is pulling the strings behind the scenes as the great puppet-master.

The providence of God is a subset of another doctrine, His sovereignty, which refers to God's absolute power and rule over all of His creation. The sovereign God whose name does not appear in the book of Esther is present and working on every page. So, we must get our theology straight first before we can appreciate the message of Esther.





SERMON POINTS:

1. GOD WANTS US TO KNOW THAT HE IS FIRMLY AND SOVEREIGNLY IN CONTROL OF ALL OUR CIRCUMSTANCES.

- Sovereignty is one of God's chief attributes, stated clearly by Paul in Ephesians 1:11.
- Nothing that happens to us escapes God's careful attention because He is shaping our lives to bring Him glory (Romans 11:36).

2. PROVIDENCE IS GOD AT WORK BEHIND THE SCENES TO CONTROL SITUATIONS.

- God's providence is the miraculous and often mysterious way He intersects and interconnects people and events to bring about His sovereign will and purposes—what He wants to happen.
- The Scriptures abound with the truth of God's providence, even though the word is not used: Psalm 33:10-11; Proverbs 16:9; 19:21; 21:30; Isaiah 45:15. God grants human beings freedom, but He will not allow that freedom to thwart His sovereignty.
- Providence is often mysterious. We may not see God's hand at work, but He is the puppet-master, pulling the strings and controlling the action by either causing or allowing things to happen.

3. GOD ARRANGES CIRCUMSTANCES AND PEOPLE TO ACCOMPLISH HIS SOVEREIGN WILL.

- Esther's story reveals that God will providentially either cause or allow things to happen that may be in

contradiction to what He wants in order to achieve His ultimate, sovereign plan.

- When these things happen, God overrules even the evil that people do to accomplish His goal.
- When you begin to understand God's sovereignty and His providential ways of achieving His will, you can be conscious of God's fingerprints even when He seems absent. Because of this, we can trust God even when we cannot trace His hand at work in our lives.

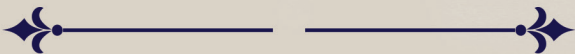
4. WHEN WE CAN'T SEE GOD IN OUR CIRCUMSTANCES, WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT THERE IS FAR MORE HAPPENING THAN WHAT WE CAN SEE.

- God recorded the story of Esther so you can apply its truths to your circumstances as you grow to understand and appreciate God's sovereignty and respond correctly to it.
- Look at God's providence at work in Esther: a family conflict, a cultural battle between the sexes, a law in a secular culture that can't be changed, and a beauty contest—none of which has anything to do with God's will being accomplished—or does it?
- God uses Esther's circumstances to achieve His greater purpose. He is the puppet-master, pulling the strings behind the scenes to work all things according to "the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11).

5. GOD CAN EVEN ORCHESTRATE A COMPLETELY SEPARATE "SUBPLOT" BEHIND THE MAIN SCENES OF THE STORY TO LINE UP CIRCUMSTANCES FOR THE BLESSING AND DELIVERANCE OF HIS PEOPLE.

- Esther relays the plot to the king in Mordecai's name.
- Ahasuerus is going to be very grateful to Mordecai the Jew.





SERMON ILLUSTRATIONS:

COOKING UP A GREAT RECIPE

The story in the book of Esther is put together in much the same way a cake is baked. The baker takes butter, eggs, perhaps nutmeg, flour and sugar—ingredients that by themselves are not very enjoyable. You do not put a tablespoon of flour or nutmeg or even sugar in your mouth by themselves. But when the baker blends these ingredients together, pours the mix into a cake pan, and puts the fire of an oven underneath it—umm, umm good! You wind up with a cake, something delightful. That's because what is produced is bigger and better than the individual ingredients that make it up. What this means for your life is that God in His providence can take the nutmeg of your situation, the butter of your circumstances, the flour of your failure and the sugar of your successes, mix them together in His sovereign blender, and come out with a "cake" that tastes great, because His sovereignty is achieved through His providence.

BACKGROUND BIBLICAL HISTORY AND CULTURE:

The Medo-Persian empire forms the backdrop for the unfolding of God's providential salvation of His people from annihilation. One feature of this empire is that any law the king made could never be reversed, which seemed to seal the Jews' fate. But the decree by which King Ahasuerus made provision for the Jews' slaughter was just another string in the Puppet-Master's hands.

QUOTES BY DR. TONY EVANS:

"There are many times in our lives when God is nowhere to be found. There are many times when we look for God, but He cannot be located. There are many times when it seems like God is letting things happen to you and me that He wouldn't allow if He loved us and cared about us. But there is a term for God's invisibility, when He cannot be located. That term is His providence, His unseen hand at work."

"When you know the truth of God's sovereign control, and how He providentially works in history, you'll be able to move through life successfully even when it's quiet spiritually. That's because you know even though you don't see, feel, or hear from God, you know He is pulling the strings behind the scenes."

"Because God is the Puppet-Master, from now on you should no longer say the devil is in the details. Once you know about the providence of God, you need to now say God is in the details."



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Message 2: How to Know When It's Your Time

SUGGESTED PASSAGE: ESTHER 3:1-4:17

MESSAGE GOAL:

The goal of this message is to help you know when your time has come for an effective impact for the kingdom purposes and plan of God and how to know when He has prepared you for the moment.

INTRODUCTION:

Many people, and even many Christians, will have spent a large part of their lives climbing the ladder of success, only to discover at the end that it was leaning against the wrong wall. In an effort to meet the standards of our world's system, and what it calls success, many people will have missed the purposes of God. They will have, perhaps, been very great in their careers, in their education, and with their resources, but they will stand before God never having finished the work that He had called them to do.

They are like the man who said, "I was dying to finish high school so I could go to college. I was dying to finish college so I could start my career. I was dying to get married so I could start a family. Then I was dying for my kids to reach eighteen so they would leave home. I was dying to retire, only to discover now that I'm just dying!" The sense of purpose is gone.

That purpose for us as believers is our divinely designed reason for being once we become Christians. The reason we not raptured to heaven at the moment of our conversion is that God has left us here to accomplish a kingdom purpose. Unfortunately, today, it's easy to get caught up in the wrong purposes—the purposes of people, possessions, paychecks, power and popularity. We might sprinkle a little piety in to make us feel a little better, but it is easy to live life without the right endgame in mind.

God's endgame is revealed in the nature and working of His providence—the way God connects circumstances and people

to accomplish His Kingdom program. Even when the devil is doing his worst evil, he is still God's devil. So unbeknownst to Satan, he is helping to complete the program of God, because God providentially knows how to put the pieces of our life's puzzle together so that things that do not look like they belong wind up fitting together to make the picture of His purposes manifest.

No part of the Bible brings that out more clearly than the book of Esther. God's name and His Law are not mentioned in Esther, because God wanted a book in the Bible to show us how, when He is not overtly seen, He is still busy. Esther's time to have an impact for God's kingdom had come. We can learn from her story how to know when it's our time to be effective for the kingdom.

SERMON POINTS:

1. YOUR TIME TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM MAY BEGIN WITH A PROBLEM (3:1-6).

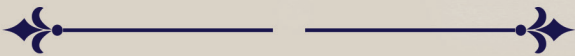
- Your problem may be relatively small, or it may be king-sized as it was for Esther, Mordecai and the Jews in Persia.
- Your problem may also involve the need to stand against the ruling authorities for the sake of obedience to God (Romans 13:1-7; Acts 4:19-20).

2. YOU KNOW IT'S YOUR TIME TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM WHEN HE CONNECTS SPIRITUAL PREPARATION WITH SPIRITUAL WARFARE (3:7-15).

- Whenever God gets ready to use you, you will have a spiritual battle to overcome.
- Spiritual battle is always a prerequisite to discovering your spiritual purpose.
- God wants to know before He gives you spiritual responsibility that He can trust you to use spiritual preparation when the going gets tough.



Life is busy.
but Bible study is still possible.



3. YOU KNOW IT'S YOUR TIME TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM WHEN HE HAS POSITIONED YOU TO LEVERAGE YOUR INFLUENCE TO ACCOMPLISH HIS KINGDOM PURPOSES (4:1-12).

- Many Christians misunderstand spiritual blessing. God always wants to know how we are going to use the gifts, talents and resources He has given us to advance His kingdom. If there is little or no concern for that, you have just cut off your blessing.
- The experiences and opportunities God gives us are not just for us; they're about His kingdom. When we lose sight of that, we've missed God's plan.

4. YOU KNOW IT'S YOUR TIME TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM WHEN YOU DISCOVER HOW HE CAN USE YOU TO BE A BLESSING (4:13-14).

- Jesus said in Luke 14:34-35 that some of His people are useless. Useless believers have no kingdom orientation and wind up saying, "I don't know what my purpose is."
- We do not exist for ourselves. We exist to make a difference—an impact.
- The great tragedy today is that if the church isn't accomplishing kingdom purposes—winning people to Christ, discipling them in the faith and improving their lives so they can be greater impact vessels for God—then we're just having a weekly party in Jesus' name.
- We need to demonstrate how the kingdom of heaven operates on the earth.

5. YOU KNOW IT'S YOUR TIME TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM WHEN HE ASKS YOU TO INTERVENE IN A SPIRITUAL CONFLICT (4:15-17).

- Once God has prepared you to be a blessing, He will ask you to take a risk of faith (2 Corinthians 5:7).
- The challenge for us today is to open our eyes to the opportunities of "such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

SERMON ILLUSTRATIONS:

MAKING THE RIGHT—AND RISKY—CHOICE

If you are a fan of the *Matrix* films, you know the name Thomas "Neo" Anderson. He is a computer programmer and part-time computer hacker who gets whisked away from a computer-generated reality known as the matrix. It is a world behind the world he knows, with powers that he is unaware of.

There is also a love interest there that he never dreamt of, a woman named Trinity, and a whole group of people in a place called Zion who are under attack by the machines. When Thomas is whisked away, he comes to Morpheus, who says to him, "Neo, we've been waiting for you. You are the sent one to bring us victory and harmony."

Then Morpheus adds, "Neo, you need to know that here is an evil being named Mr. Smith who wants to destroy you and Zion, and he will do everything he can to keep you from fulfilling your purpose as the one."

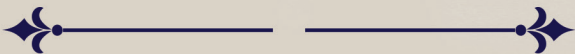
Morpheus continues, "Now if you take the risk, and come back here believing that this is your purpose and accept this assignment, I cannot promise you peace and prosperity, because Mr. Smith is going to reduplicate himself over and over again and come at you from every which way. But if accept, you can save a world in trouble behind the world that you think is the real world."

Morpheus then shows Neo his hands and says, "Neo, in this hand I have a blue pill, and in this other had I have a red pill. If you take the blue pill, you'll wake up tomorrow morning in your bed and think you were just in a dream. None of this will be real, and you'll go on with your plain old ordinary computer-programming life."

He continues, "But Neo, if you take the red pill, then you will be given powers you never dreamed of, and have experiences you never thought of because you will be in the real world—the world behind the world you think is the real world. So, take the blue pill, Neo, and go back home. Or take the red pill and see how far this rabbit hole goes."

Neo looks at both pills, reaches over and takes the red pill and





swallows it. "Neo," Morpheus says, "welcome to the real world."

So my brothers and sisters, I offer you two pills today. You can take the blue pill and go back home to your plain old ordinary life of working, raising a family, making a little money and paying a few bills.

Or, I offer you the red pill that stands for the precious blood of Jesus Christ. And with this red pill, you can say today, "I don't want an ordinary life anymore. I don't want to just go through the motions or just go to church anymore. I want my time, and I want to see all that God has for me, all that He wants from me, and all that He wants to do through me. Give me the red pill!"

NO ORDINARY SAND

We usually think of sand as one of the most common elements on earth. We get annoyed when we get sand in our shoes or our cars when we go to the beach. We don't see much use for sand. But in the Silicon Valley of California, tech experts make computer chips with sand. Not because it's different sand, but because it is used differently.

One reason God can't do much with some of His people is that they are just like sand lying around. God can't have His way because He can't find enough saints whose value is tied to their usefulness.

THE REAL TRAGEDY OF THE TITANIC

The sinking of the great ocean liner *Titanic* was a horrible loss of 1,500 lives. But did you know that many of those people didn't have to die? Most of the lifeboats leaving the ship were only half-full. But the people who were in them didn't want to risk turning back to rescue others drowning in the water for fear that they would rush the lifeboats and, in their panic to be saved, overturn them and sink everyone. So, the people were saved in the lifeboats simply kept going because

reaching back for the others might interfere with them being delivered. Hundreds of people died because those who were already saved didn't want to save others.

BACKGROUND BIBLICAL HISTORY AND CULTURE:

We're told twice in Esther 3 (vv. 1, 10; also in 8:3, 5; 9:24) that Haman was "the Agagite." That may not mean much to a lot of people today, but God doesn't waste words in His Word. There is an important history behind this mention of Haman's background.

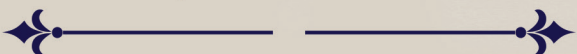
The Agagites were the descendants of Agag, whose story is told in 1 Samuel 15. Agag was the king of the Amalekites, bitter enemies of Israel who were trying to destroy the Jews many years before Esther's time when Saul was king of Israel.

God told Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:2-3), including their king, Agag. But Saul thought he was smarter than God and decided to spare Agag. So, Saul disobeyed God. Agag's posterity was not destroyed, and 400 years later, his descendant, Haman, is determined to destroy the Jews. Their plight was the fruit of a root problem that wasn't dealt with earlier. So, when the book of Esther says that Haman was an Agagite, the writer is telling us that he's part of a legacy of unaddressed sin that should have been fully eradicated long ago.

Some of us know what it is to have something we should have dealt with earlier, something we wished we had dealt with, but didn't, coming back to haunt us today. That's why we need to deal fully with sin.

The *Pur* mentioned in Esther 3:7 is the lot, an ancient version of dice used to determine a course of action or the right choice.

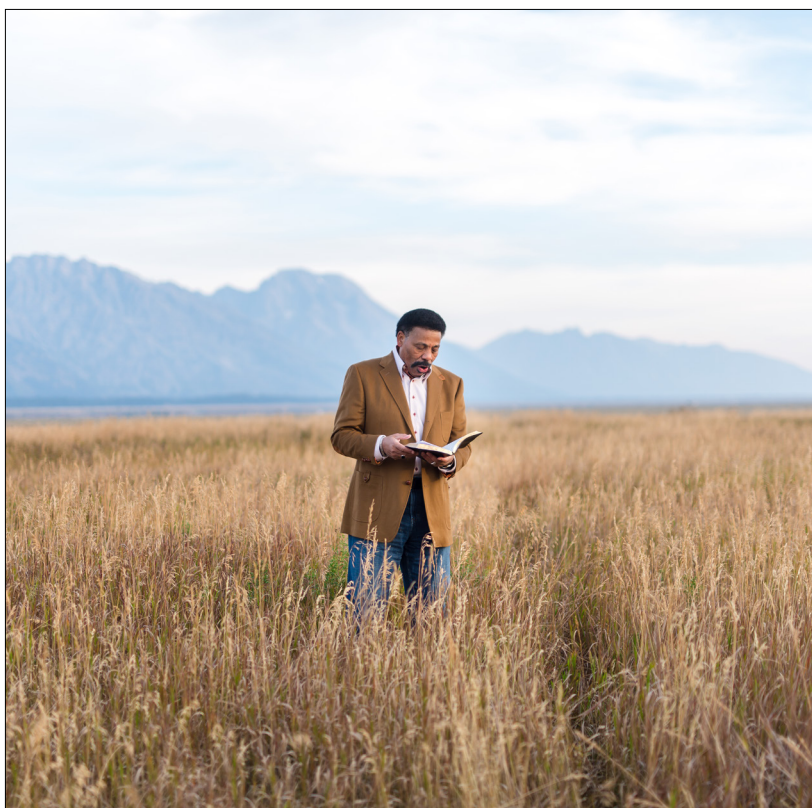




QUOTES BY DR. TONY EVANS:

"It's all about a kingdom purpose. It's fine to benefit from a kingdom blessing, as long as you don't lose the kingdom purpose in the process, because when you do that, you lose your destiny. Your destiny will always involve a test of whether you want to be a blessing, or just be blessed."

"Faith is risky business because you're dealing with something you can't see. The opposite of faith is sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The greater the uncertainty, the greater the purpose. But the greater the uncertainty, the more fearful the step of faith, as is clear in Daniel chapters 3 and 6."



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Message 3: Divine Coincidences

SUGGESTED PASSAGE: ESTHER 5:1–6:14

MESSAGE GOAL:

The goal of this message is to help you learn how to discern God's providence at work in your circumstances, which is crucial because you will never see God at work behind the scenes until and unless God sees you moving in accordance with His will.

INTRODUCTION:

The story is told of the time the police arrested a man they were pretty sure was guilty of a robbery. But they had to make absolutely sure, so they put him in a lineup because they wanted him to repeat what the victim said that the robber said. So the police told the suspect to say, "Give me your money, or I'll shoot you."

Without even thinking, the man blurted out, "That's not what I said!"

A lot of people would say that thief hit a string of very bad luck! Our world is consumed with the concept of luck, happenings that seem to randomly take place. We hear people say all the time, "Boy, you sure are lucky," or the opposite, "That was really bad luck."

But the book of Esther teaches us that there is no such thing as luck in God's creation. There is divine providence, often hidden as in Esther, that may look or feel like luck. Sometimes the outworking of God's providence gives the impression of chance events happening, as we have seen. But the reality is that the divine Puppet-Master is at work, causing or allowing events to work toward the achievement of His purposes.

This is true because if we have learned anything so far from this study of Esther, it is that God's kingdom purposes and plans cannot be thwarted. What appear to be random or "lucky" happenings are the result of God's providential movements in history. We are emphasizing providence in Esther because it

teaches probably more clearly than any other book in the Bible that providence is God's way of staying anonymous.

In those times when God doesn't want to be out front and work in spectacular, obvious ways, He will work behind the scenes to orchestrate what appear to be chance happenings, coincidences or just good or bad luck on the part of the people involved. Esther chapters 5 and 6 are loaded with these seeming coincidences, which I want to help us recognize for what they are—God's work behind the scenes.

SERMON POINTS:

1. THE FIRST WAY TO DISCERN GOD'S PROVIDENCE IS TO SEEK DIVINE INSIGHT IN A SPECIAL WAY (5:1).

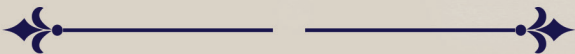
- One of the most fruitful ways to receive the added insight we need is by the spiritual discipline of fasting.
- Fasting raises our spiritual "antenna" higher to get the picture of what God wants to do and to hear what He has to say about the situation.
- Fasting married to faith allows God to reveal a plan to you.
- One reason we miss God's "coincidences" is that we do not have a raised spiritual antenna, so we don't pick up spiritual signals.

2. THE SECOND WAY TO DISCERN GOD'S PROVIDENCE IS TO TAKE A STEP OF FAITH, EVEN IF IT'S RISKY (5:2-5).

- Many of us are waiting on God to act, while God is actually waiting on us to act in faith first. The Scriptures are full of examples of this principle:
 - * Moses' mother put him in a little basket in faith that God would protect him (Exodus 2:1-10).
 - * Later, Moses had to hold out his staff and his hand over the Red Sea before God would part it to allow the Israelites to pass through on dry ground and escape the Egyptians (Exodus 14:15-22).

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- * The priests of Israel had to step into the swollen Jordan river before God would open it up and allow Israel to cross into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:1-17).
- * Ruth just happened to be gleaning in the fields of Boaz when he just happened to visit the fields at that exact time so he could protect and provide for her and Naomi (Ruth 2:1-17). And out of that came the line of King David—and the Messiah.
- * One of the most fascinating cases of this principle at work is in the early life of Saul, in relation to finding his father's lost mules (1 Samuel 9).
- * God didn't show up for the three Hebrew young men in Daniel 3 until they took their stand for Him. He didn't show up for Daniel in Daniel 6 until Daniel took his stand and got tossed into the lions' den.
- Faith is measured by footsteps. God must see faith because "without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

3. THE THIRD WAY TO DISCERN GOD'S PROVIDENCE IS TO SENSE HIS PROVIDENTIAL TIMING (5:6-14).

- God is so detailed in His coincidences (Proverbs 21:1) that He leads the servants of King Ahasuerus to the right book in his royal annals. And He makes them read the right page.
- God's providence is tied to time, even though the time may cover years. He hasn't forgotten where you are, and He is always at work in your circumstances.

4. THE FOURTH WAY TO DISCERN GOD'S PROVIDENCE IS TO SEE HIM CONTROLLING "UNCONTROLLABLE" CIRCUMSTANCES (6:1-14).

- "That night" is the key to Esther's story, and it can be the key to your story. There will be that special moment when God brings together a special set of circumstances involving a special set of people to begin putting your answer together.

- No matter how much power or position people have, there is only one God.
- We need to learn this today in the area of race, because the providence of God can address even racism.
- But we have to put up the spiritual antenna first to see God act (Matthew 6:33). If our spiritual receiver is off, we don't get the picture, even though God has His answers all over the place.

SERMON ILLUSTRATIONS:

MESSING UP GOD'S WORKINGS

The lavish tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh King Tutankhamun, better known as King Tut, was famously discovered and opened in the early 1920s. The gold-laden tomb quickly became a tourist sensation, but after years of tourists tramping through to see this amazing site, the dust they brought in, the humidity and even the carbon dioxide from their breath began to damage the wall paintings and affect other parts of the tomb. It got so bad they had to close the tomb for almost a decade to do restoration and install protections such as walkways and a ventilation system.

Sometimes, like over-eager tourists, we can become so impatient to try and figure out what God is doing that we rush into things in order to see what's going. But if the time is not right, we may be introducing corrosive elements into a situation that that can mess up the beauty of the picture God is painting. We need to wait until He has the protections we need in place before rushing in.

ROYAL AMBITION

During World War II, Alan Brooke, who was chief of the British imperial general staff, remarked to King George VI that although the British field marshal Bernard Montgomery was a good soldier, "I think he is after my job."





The king replied, "I thought he was after mine."

If Montgomery did wish he were king, he certainly would not have been the first person in a position of leadership or privilege to hold that ambition. Haman had kingly ambitions, which is why he suggested that the person the king wanted to honor should wear his ring and ride his horse. These were symbols of royalty that said to the people the man wearing them was in line for the throne of Medo-Persia, so Haman thought he was setting himself up for the future. But God had a big and nasty surprise for Haman—as He often does for us when we get puffed up and start thinking we would like to be king in our lives. But there is room for only one King on the throne of our hearts.

"Our God is a God of intersections. He connects things that don't look connectable when the timing is just right, even though everything looks wrong. God is at work when circumstances look uncontrollable, when life looks unpredictable, and when sin looks unstoppable."

QUOTES BY DR. TONY EVANS:

"Unless there's contact with God, He could be moving, and we could be missing it. When there is no contact, no dependency on God in fasting and prayer, there is no faith in action on our part. Therefore, there are no ideas coming into our minds that we have not previously considered about how to deal with a seemingly impossible situation."

"I want to challenge you to live under the providential hand of God even when it looks like it's not working out—to humbly go before Him and confess, 'I don't know what to do, and I'm afraid. But I am going to trust You.' Esther was afraid, but she acted in faith."

"Even though you think something should have happened long before now, remember that God is doing a series of things at the same time because His kingdom is bigger than just you. You are not the kingdom: you are a representative in the kingdom to be used by the King for the kingdom's advancement in His perfect timing."



Life is busy.
but Bible study is still possible.



Message 4: Divine Reversals

SUGGESTED PASSAGE: ESTHER 7:1–8:17

MESSAGE GOAL:

The goal of this message is to help you learn to believe and trust in God even when life doesn't make sense or seem to be fair, because He can reverse circumstances that seem irreversible and make sense out of life when nothing seems to add up..

INTRODUCTION:

If I were to give you a four-piece puzzle, you could put it together in no time. If I gave you a fifty-piece puzzle, it would take you a little longer to solve, but you would manage it okay. But if I gave you a five-hundred-piece puzzle, that's going to be a lot more complicated because there are so many more pieces.

However, if I handed you a five-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, you would probably refuse to tackle it because it just has too many pieces. And if puzzle were five hundred thousand, five million, or even a billion pieces, you would say, "It's way too much! I can't figure all this out."

Trying to figure out God is like trying to put together a billion-piece puzzle. There are too many pieces to His plan, and the Bible says His thoughts and ways are infinitely higher than ours anyway (Isaiah 55:8-9). So, trying to figure out infinity with our finite minds is a waste of time. To be sure, God has revealed many things about Himself in His Word. But there are also the secret things that belong to Him alone, which we will never figure out (Deuteronomy 29:29). In fact, it is going to take eternity to understand God. That's one reason we will live forever, because it's going to take us that long to make sense of the uncreated Creator and Sustainer of all things.

And our God, who doesn't miss a micro-second or syllable of any subject that has been known, is known, or will ever be known, is so brilliant in His capacity that He can take things

that look totally unrelated and disconnected, and put them together like a giant jigsaw puzzle to make sense out of them. And there is no time when we wish God would put the pieces of our life's puzzle together more than when we are going through a rough time and things don't make sense.

But before He does this, God often puts us with our backs to the wall so that we might discover He alone is God. This is what happens in the story of Esther—but it is also one of the finest biblical examples of God putting a seemingly impossible, too-big-to-solve puzzle together.

SERMON POINTS:

1. GOD CAN USE NEGATIVE, EVEN EVIL, CIRCUMSTANCES AND PEOPLE TO ACCOMPLISH HIS ULTIMATE PLAN.

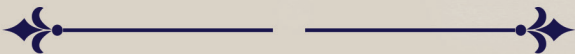
- If you don't know that, when you get hit by the devil or one of his minions, you're only going to react to what you see
- Don't miss the good that God may be doing through your bad experience.

2. WAITING ON GOD MEANS WAITING ON HIM TO PUT THINGS TOGETHER THE WAY HE WANTS THEM TO BE (ESTHER 7:1-10).

- We can't know how long it will take for God to put everything together in our situation. There are too many pieces to the puzzle—too many people and things that God needs to arrange.
- But you will know it when God shows up! It will be sudden and in so many unexpected ways.
- In the meantime, God may let things get worse before they get better. He may take you to rock bottom so you can discover that He is the rock at the bottom.

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3. WHEN GOD IS READY TO MOVE, HE CAN REVERSE THE MOST IRREVERSIBLE CIRCUMSTANCES (8:1-17).

- Thankfully, our God is a God of reversals. He can change seemingly irreversible circumstances in a moment:
 - * Economic Reversal: The Scripture says the inheritance of the wicked will be laid for the righteous (Proverbs 13:22).
 - * Political Reversal: You may think your boss, the powers that be or those unscrupulous co-workers who are plotting against you have the final say because they have the name, the money and the position. But they don't have anything unless God gives it to them, and He can take it away (Daniel 4). Nobody has the final say over a Christian living by the Spirit in the will of God.
 - * Legal Reversal: No edict or court ruling against you can stand when God decides to reverse it. He may allow it to be issued for His purposes, because His kingdom plan is bigger than one person.
 - * Emotional Reversal: When God reverses your circumstances, He can wipe away tears and turn sadness into joy.
 - * Spiritual Reversal: God may put you in a bad situation so that He can give you a supernatural deliverance that will cause other people to want to attach to the God who delivered you.

SERMON ILLUSTRATIONS:

PROPER DIVINE MOTIVATION

An Army sergeant was testing his men to see how far they had progressed in their training. He told them to run and leap over a small body of water without falling in and getting wet. Some soldiers made it halfway, others made it two-thirds of the way across, but they all fell in the water. The sergeant

told them, "This is unacceptable. We're going to do this again tomorrow, and you'd better jump all the way over!" When they came back the next day, the soldiers discovered that the sergeant had put alligators in the water. They all made it over! Sometimes God lets bad situations swim in the water of your life in order to take you to a place you would not naturally go.

GOD'S POP-TARTS

When my children were growing up, they didn't always have time for a big breakfast, so they would grab Pop-Tarts and drop them in the toaster. But sometimes, they would pop up before they were ready. They weren't crisp enough, so you had to push them back down in the toaster for more heat. Just because they popped up didn't mean they were ready. We want to pop up after a while in God's toaster and say, "We're ready!" But God looks at us and say, "No, you aren't done yet. The situation you're in isn't finished."

GETTING OUT FROM UNDER THE DIRT

A farmer's dog fell into a deep well one time, so the farmer decided just to bury him in it. He started throwing in dirt, but every time the dirt hit the dog would shake it off and stand on the new pile. This went on until the dog had been lifted high enough that he was able to climb out of the well and escape, even though the farmer kept on throwing dirt into it. God may allow the devil or other people to throw some dirt on you, but if you know Him you can shake it off and keep on climbing because God knows how to reverse the irreversible!

GOD'S SURE JUDGMENT

Thomas Nast was one of the most famous political cartoonists in American history. In the late 1860s, Nast began his famous cartoon attack on the corrupt Democratic Tammany Hall ring that ruled New York City. The head of Tammany Hall, William "Boss" Tweed, was so pressured and exposed by Nast's





powerful cartoons that he fled to Europe. But Nast's cartoon caricatures of Tweed had become so internationally famous that the former boss of New York was recognized and arrested in Spain in 1876.

This fascinating story illustrates a timeless principle that was true of Haman and remains true today. When God decides it is time for judgment, a person's position or power cannot deliver them. There is no place to run and hide from God.

QUOTES BY DR. TONY EVANS:

"When life goes left on us, when it doesn't make sense, when it seems unfair, when it's definitely wrong, we're still called to believe in this God who can make the incomprehensible make sense. But too often we try to illegitimately take matters into our own hands to control our circumstances. But we often wind up making them messier."

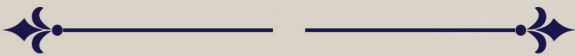
"God not only wants you to do the right thing, He wants you to do the right thing at the right time. Timing matters to God. He does things with precision, not only related to events but also related to time. In Esther's case, there were a number of other things God wanted to happen to set the stage for the good He wanted to do that had not yet happened."

"As a Christian, you only have one source. If you ever get that in your head, if it ever burns into your heart and mind that nobody, I don't care who they are, has the final say-so over a Christian living by the Spirit in the will of God, then you will understand that you never have to live a threatened life. I know things can be threatening, but you don't have to live a threatened life as though they have a final say over you, because they do not."

"God has an override button that He can push to thwart what Satan has planned against you, the people he has raised up against you, or the circumstances that look hopeless. When God pushes override, it may not stop the evil from being evil, but God gives you something to conquer it."



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but Bible study is still possible.



Message 5: A Date with Destiny

SUGGESTED PASSAGE: ESTHER 9:1-10:3

MESSAGE GOAL:

The goal of this message is to help you “connect the dots” of your circumstances, so you can see the complete picture of God’s larger kingdom purpose in your life—even when He causes or allows things to take place that are negative or evil to accomplish His will and plan.

INTRODUCTION:

In Alaska, they once put a bounty of \$5,000 on the head of every wolf that a hunter killed. Some areas had become overrun with wolves and they needed to decrease their numbers, so they instituted this generous bounty program.

A hunter named Bill called his friend John and said, “John, we can make a lot of money at \$5,000 for every wolf we kill. Are ready to go hunting with me so we can collect some of this money?”

John said, “Absolutely Bill, let’s go.” So, they got their equipment together to go to the place where they would begin their hunt the next morning.

They bunked down for the night in their tents. But in the middle of the night, Bill was awakened by the sound of growling. He turned his lantern on and looked outside to see the tent surrounded by about fifty hungry, snarling wolves, all baring their teeth with their tongues hanging out and saliva dripping from their mouths.

Bill woke up John. “John, John, get up, get up!”

John arose from his sleep and said, “What? What?!”

Bill said, “Look outside, John. We’re rich!”

It’s all about your perspective. It’s all about how you see things, because sometimes you can be surrounded by circumstances that don’t look good, that don’t appear to be in your favor—circumstances that look like they’re going to devour you. But it all depends on what you see.

SERMON POINTS:

1. IF YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL, YOU WILL LIVE WITH CONSTANT FRUSTRATION AND CONFUSION.

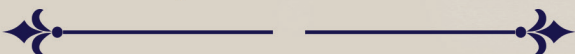
- If your God isn’t big enough to handle your circumstances, whenever things go south your mantra will always be, “Why?”
- If your God is too small, you need to expand your view of Him so you to be able to recognize His fingerprints moving in your life circumstances, even in non-obvious ways.
- We need to be able to see God at work because, as we have learned in this study, sometimes God’s providence allows for evil. God does not commit or endorse evil, but He can use it to accomplish His greater purposes.
- Our responsibility is to be aligned with God so that we are being moved as He moves us, picking up the signals He gives us.

2. GOD IS ALWAYS MOVING TO BRING HIS CONCLUSION ABOUT AT THE RIGHT TIME (ESTHER 9:1-6, 11-19).

- God is situating the evil in the right place so that while He is delivering you, He is handling the evil.
- God always has a bigger plan than you are aware of. You just haven’t gotten to the day, yet, to see it worked out.
- God is so precise in His movements that, as we are living under His rule, He will sometimes make things seem worse in order to make them better.
- The tragedy today is that far too many Christians climb the secular ladder of success and don’t make a kingdom connection to their reason for being there.
- Every time God comes through for us, you and I must ask the question of God, “What spiritual influence do you want me to wield with the opportunity you’ve given me?”
- God’s will calls for your involvement. This is spiritual warfare, which means you must be involved (Ephesians 6:10-18; 2 Corinthians 10:3-4; Exodus 17:8-16).
- Waiting on God does not mean doing nothing. It means not going outside of God to do something on your own.

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3. DON'T GET RID OF PART OF THE SIN YOU'RE DEALING WITH; GET RID OF ALL OF IT SO THE CANCER OF SIN WON'T COME BACK ON YOU LATER (ESTHER 9:7-10).

- The fate of Haman and his sons is a vivid reminder of what God's judgment looks like when people cross the red line and are unrepentant.
- The reason we're having such serious moral and spiritual issues today is because sins in the past didn't get fully dealt with, so they keep coming up again and again. We've got to cut sin short in our lives.
- If parents don't invest spiritually in their children, they are actually perpetuating sin. We're seeing this nationally and generationally. We're seeing it over and over again because people don't want to call it evil.
- When we have done what God has called us to do, and we see His kingdom program achieved, we can celebrate His power and providence (Esther 9:20-32; 10:1-3).
- Victory over evil is cause for celebration.
- We should tell the story of God's provision to everyone and pass the stories along to future generations.
- The celebration of Purim was for the Jews to remind themselves that God was a providential God.

SERMON ILLUSTRATIONS:

WINNING ON THE ENEMY'S TURF

It was 1936, and Hitler's Third Reich was ruling in Germany. The Olympics were held in Berlin that year, and out came a young man, James Cleveland Owens, better known as Jesse. Hitler said Jesse Owens wasn't human because he was black. But at those Olympics, Owen showed himself to be super-human. He won gold medals in the long jump, the one-hundred-yard dash, and the two-hundred-yard dash. Hitler got up and walked out, refusing to meet Owens and shake his hand.

But that's not all. In the four-by-one-hundred relay, there was a Jewish runner from America. The Nazis refused to let

him run, so the American team had to make a decision. They decided to pull out the Jewish runner and replace him with Jesse Owens in a race he had not run before. He was to run the first leg of the relay, which meant handing off the baton, which takes real practice and skill. But having never done that, Owens outran everyone on the first leg and did a perfect passing of the baton to the next runner. The team won, and Jesse Owens earned his fourth gold medal in the territory of an enemy kingdom. He showed what you can do when God is on your side.

VALUE HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

At a show in Tucson, Arizona featuring gems and minerals for sale, a gem dealer was strolling through the aisles when he spotted a blue-violet stone about the size of a potato lying in a bin with other stones. He offered the seller fifteen dollars for the stone, and was told he could have it for ten. The stone turned out to be a 1,905-carat natural star sapphire, with an appraised value of \$2.28 million.

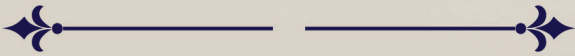
It's easy to overlook things of great value, if you don't know what to look for. We should train ourselves to look for the activity of God even in seemingly commonplace situations.

THE HIDDEN DANGERS OF UNADDRESSED SIN

In a story with a bizarre twist, some years ago, health officials in South Africa were worried about plans to build a housing complex on the site of a long-closed hospital. The facility treated people with infectious diseases, and several thousand smallpox victims were thought to be buried somewhere on the site.

Since burial records were not clear, the possibility of a bulldozer accidentally opening a smallpox victim's grave raised the disturbing question of whether the virus of the once-dread disease may still be alive inside a casket. This situation gives us a very good picture of sin. In this case, there is no question that the virus of sin is still alive and well and likely to show up anywhere to do its destructive work if we don't deal with it radically.





BACKGROUND BIBLICAL HISTORY AND CULTURE:

Purim (a Hebrew word meaning “lots”) is one of the most joyful holidays on the Jewish calendar. As we have learned, it commemorates a time when the Jews living in the Persian empire were saved from extermination by God’s working through Mordecai and Queen Esther. During *Purim*, Jews dress in festive costumes to celebrate God’s great deliverance through Esther and Mordecai. And each time the story is told, they boo at the mention of Haman!

QUOTES BY DR. TONY EVANS:

“Throughout this study on Esther, we’ve been attacking this non-existent entity called ‘luck.’ You cannot have divine providence and luck, chance, fate or happenstance because the providence of God means that God is in control by either causing or allowing all things. You cannot have a sovereign God and have Him getting caught by surprise. He’s the only person in history to whom you cannot give a surprise party, and He never says, ‘Oops!’ because His sovereignty is His rule over all.”

“When things don’t make sense, some people get mad at God and depart from Him because they can’t put their circumstances and God’s sovereignty together, so they back away from God because their God is too small and has been boxed in too tightly.”

“You may remember those old connect-the-dot pictures. The dots looked random until you followed the numbers to connect them, and then the picture emerged. If you merely looked at the numbers, you wouldn’t get the picture, which for us is God’s kingdom purpose. To fill in that picture, He may allow evil to accomplish His purpose and plan.”

“Has God ever released you only to have the problem come back at you? Has God ever set you free, only to have the thing you thought was solved come right back at you again? You thought you would never have to deal with that problem anymore, and it looks like God did a number on His blessing. But remember, sometimes when God is after

something, He will make things worse before He makes them better, for His ultimate purposes.”

“Every now and then God will let things go downhill. He will allow evil to seem like it’s achieving something so that when He gets you to that day and delivers you, He knows He’s going to get some mighty big praise out of you. He knows He’s going to get some glory out of you. He’s not going to get that trite stuff we just throw at Him because we’re supposed to do it. He’s going to get some heartfelt celebration because of what He has done, how He did it, and how we defeated our enemies.”



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