

That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him.² It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

³ *"What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked.*

"Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered.

⁴ *The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him.*

⁵ *His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court."*

"Bring him in," the king ordered.

⁶ *When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?"*

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

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

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

¹² *Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief,¹³ and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him.*

His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!"¹⁴ While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared. (Esther 6:1-14)

God Protects His People

A couple of years ago, we visited Yellowstone National Park. One day, we walked down a path to view the waterfall there. When we came back to the parking lot, there was a buffalo strolling past the parked cars. We watched it wander down the footpath we had just come up. Let me tell you, I was glad we had already left that path. Buffalo are dangerous animals. They're huge. They can weigh up to 2,000 pounds but they can run 35 miles an hour. The Buffalo at Yellowstone have killed and injured many people who got too close to them. As we watched that animal go down that path, I thought about what I would've done if we had reached the end of that trail two minutes later. How would I have protected my wife and children? As a husband and father, that's my job. But there are limits to what I can do. I can't stop a two thousand pound buffalo when it charges. I can't keep semis from crashing into my car. I can't defeat a mugger with a gun. Neither can you. But the word of God before us this evening tells us God can. **God protects his people.**

I.

We see that protection in action tonight in the story of Esther. But the book of Esther is unique in the Bible. It's the only book that never mentions God by name. Yet this book is all about how God works. **God protects his people. He works through ordinary means.**

Esther was Jewish, but she lived her entire life in the Persian city of Susa, the city where the Persian emperors lived. Her family had been taken into exile by the Babylonians. Through a series of unexpected circumstances, Esther had become the queen of Persia. Esther had been raised by an older cousin named Mordecai. Mordecai was the gate keeper of the palace in Susa. Our reading this evening is really about him.

Mordecai had an enemy, a powerful man named Haman. Because he hated Mordecai so much, it wasn't enough for him to plot to kill Mordecai. Haman was plotting to wipe out the Jews in the Persian Empire. Haman was one of the king's closest advisors. When the events before us took place, he had already convinced the king to order the destruction of the Jewish people and he was going to the palace early in the morning to ask

for one more favor: he had built a gallows in his front yard and he wanted to hang Mordecai on it. He was sure he could get the king to grant him permission.

But God delivered Mordecai. God saved all the Jews in the Persian Empire and he destroyed most of their enemies. Yet in this account, there are no great prophets or kings who lead God's people into battle. No one calls fire down from heaven. No one parts the Red Sea so the people can march through. God does no great miracle to awe the people and terrify his enemies. Instead, God works through very ordinary things – even through things that we might call coincidences.

The night before Haman came to ask to kill Mordecai, the king couldn't sleep. So he had his servants read to him from the annals of his reign. Now, I'm tempted to say that his plan was to read something so boring that it would put anyone to sleep, but that probably wasn't the case. The king was probably quite interested in his own accomplishments. In any event, he hoped to distract himself to the point where he could get some rest. While they were reading, they came across an entry that told how Mordecai had uncovered a plot to murder the king. That prompted the king to ask, **“What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?”**

The answer was nothing. Somehow, Mordecai's actions had been overlooked. So the king asked who was there at court at the crack of dawn. Haman had just walked in. So the king consulted with Mordecai's greatest enemy on how to honor him. That's when one more ordinary thing happened: Haman let his arrogance run away with him. He assumed the king wanted to honor him. So he thought of what he would want. He would want to be dressed in the king's own clothes and mounted on the king's horse and paraded through the city. Now, maybe that doesn't sound like a treat to you and me, but in ancient societies, the king was almost a god to the common people. Think of how people today go crazy trying to get clothes that belong to movie stars or sports heroes. To Haman, this was almost like being king himself. Of course, instead of getting that honor himself, Haman got to spend the day honoring his mortal enemy. He went home humiliated.

Where was God in all of this? God hid himself behind insomnia and coincidence. God even used the sin of an evil man to honor his child. Now, could he have done a miracle to protect Mordecai? Sure. There're many examples of that in the Scriptures. But most of the time, God works through ordinary things and ordinary people. He works through police officers and firemen. He works through smoke alarms and turn signals and sometimes he works through what looks like sheer dumb luck.

But there is no such thing as luck. God protects his people. God works behind doctors who call us in for one thing and discover something else that would've killed us if it had gone untreated. God works through traffic jams that infuriate us and slow us down because he knows that we would've died if we would've reached a specific spot on the highway fifteen minutes earlier. And we go home totally unaware of what could've happened. We go to sleep without even realizing how much danger we were in today.

But we are in danger every day in this world. It would be so easy for us to step in front of bus or choke on a hotdog or finally push our neighbor over the edge so that he comes after us with a baseball bat. It would be so easy for us to do something stupid – something with consequences that we just aren't strong enough to deal with. It would be so easy for us to stumble into danger – to walk into the path of a buffalo and startle it into running us down. But day after day, God watches over us.

I teach my catechism class “the four p's” of Jesus' ascension: Jesus went into heaven to prepare a place for us. Jesus proclaims the gospel to us. Jesus pleads for us before his Father in heaven. And Jesus ascended into heaven to protect us from all harm and danger. In our reading from Ephesians, we heard that God has placed all things under Jesus' feet and he does everything for the good of his church. Jesus always does what is best for us.

II.

When Mordecai went to work that morning, he didn't expect to have his enemy, Haman, spend the day parading him through Susa shouting, **“This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!”** In truth, Mordecai didn't even realize how much danger his life was in that day. But God knows all that's going on. **God protects his people. He turns earthly dangers into eternal glory.**

I would've liked to have seen Haman's face when the king told him to do all that for Mordecai. The book of Esther makes it clear that people at court knew these men were enemies. Haman did what he was commanded and then he slunk home. He told his wife and friends what had happened and they predicted that even worse things were coming because Mordecai was Jewish. God had done amazing things for the Jewish

people in the past. Haman's wife and friends knew that. But instead of believing in the God of Israel, they adopted a superstitious fear of what was going to happen next.

Mordecai received tremendous honor that day. That was an example of God's power and grace. But, does God promise that it will always work out that way for us? Will our enemies be publicly humiliated? Should we expect the kinds of honor that Mordecai experienced? My friends, God makes no such promise in this life. In fact, Jesus warns us that when all people speak well of us, we're no longer following him. In this life, God calls us to be humble and to accept that persecution and hardship are realities we will have to face.

But how does that square with God protecting us? How does humiliation and persecution and hardship agree with God glorifying his children? To answer that question, you have to remember what faith is. The Bible says that faith is being certain of things that we can't see. God is always protecting us. God always does what is best for us. But sometimes, it's hard for us to understand what is best for us. If my house burns down and everything that I treasure is lost – if the photos of my children when they were babies are destroyed – would that be what's best for me? I might say no. But God might say yes. Sometimes, the best thing for us is to suffer. Suffering forces us to trust in God. Suffering forces us to let go of things that we want here and to put God first.

That is not an easy thing to do. But God loves us and he works for our good. God protects us from our real enemies. Pain is not the real enemy – as much as we hate it. Our real enemy is the devil who wants to ruin our lives here and who wants to drag us down to hell with him forever. He will destroy our faith if he can. Our real enemy is the unbelief all around us – it's the forces of the devil in our society. They tempt us to adopt their way of thinking instead of Jesus' way of thinking. They try to convince us that we should never have any pain, that we can keep our children safe from all harm and danger, that we can take care of ourselves. Our unbelieving society invites us to join them in worshipping ourselves as our god. If they succeed, we will be lost forever. Our real enemy is the unbeliever that lives inside of each one of us. If he gets the chance, he's going to seize control of our hearts and lead us away from God as fast as he can run.

Haman was an example of our real enemies at work. Even if we never face a man like him who wants us dead, for as long as we live in a sinful world, we will face enemies who want to kill our faith. But God protects us from those enemies, no matter what we suffer here. When we reach heaven, we will receive a measure of glory and honor that we cannot even imagine here. We will be perfectly at peace. We will live as the children of God. The Bible says that we will reign with Jesus forever. Even Mordecai didn't receive that much honor in this life.

Lest we misunderstand, often, God does let us see his protection here. Every one of us can tell a story of a time when we thought we were going off the highway, or the doctor found something that could've killed us, or we just missed meeting a buffalo walking down a narrow path in a national park. But even when we do suffer, we know that God's promises are true. He rules all things for our good. And our greatest good is reaching heaven.

How do we know this is all true? We look at the cross and the empty tomb. Our sin – the sin that still lives in us, the sin that wants to worship us – our sin nailed Jesus to the cross. He died there and paid for all that we are guilty of. He died and then he rose from the dead to tell us that all that we feared and all that we suffer here is temporary. We will live with him. Then he ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us there. He ascended into heaven where he pleads for us every time we pray about all those things that torment us here. He ascended into heaven and he sent the gospel out to you and to me to comfort us as we struggle here. He ascended into heaven, and from there he does all things for our good. Nothing will touch us without his permission. Then it will always serve our good. God tells us that if he gave his own Son to die for us and pay for us, we can be certain that he will do all things to bring us home to heaven. Trust that promise. Amen.