

Just Above the Royal Throne

The Shadow Sovereign-Part One

Esther 1:1-4

A well-known apologist once remarked that in all of his lectures and debates in universities around the world like Princeton and Oxford – he said that he has never once defended the existence of God without being asked about the question of evil in the world.

You have probably had the same kind of question posed to you by both unbeliever and believers – especially in light of the anniversary of 9/11.

The difference is – the unbeliever uses an outbreak of evil to prove there is no relevant, involved, powerful, caring God while the believer asks the question usually to try and make sense of suffering and sovereignty.

Theologians call this issue “theodicy” – theo – which is Greek for God and dicy – or dike (δικη) in the Greek language – which is the word for justice.

In other words, theodicy grapples with the question of how a sovereign, just God can allow injustice to go seemingly unchecked.

The secular argument goes like this – along 4 points.

- **Point #1:** evil and suffering exist in the world
- **Point #2:** if God were all powerful He could prevent evil and suffering
- **Point #3:** if God were all loving, He would certainly want to prevent evil and suffering from taking place
- **Therefore – Point #4:** since evil and suffering do exist in the world, God is either not all-powerful, or all-loving or – He doesn’t even exist.

This argument and logic seem to be watertight – especially when you read passages in the Bible that tell us that God is the God of gods and Lord of lords – mighty and awesome (Deuteronomy 10:17) and that He works all things to the conformity of His will (Ephesians 1:11) – and then in Psalm 103:8 which describes God as compassionate and gracious ... abounding in love.¹

The Bible unapologetically describes God as both all-powerful and all-loving.

How then do you reconcile those Biblical descriptions with the newspaper?

Our world is filled with evil.

There is moral evil – such as murder, rape, stealing, political oppression, physical abuse, sex trafficking, terrorist attacks like 9/11, genocide, poverty due to corruption, and that’s just for starters.

There is not only moral evil, but there is what theologians call **natural evil** – brutality in the animal kingdom and the world of nature, diseases which kill millions; tsunamis and tornadoes which cause untold death, starvation; add to that, drought and famine.

We are literally spinning around the sun on a planet that is drenched in moral and natural evil.

One author wrote that if we could see just a fraction of the evil and suffering of the world going on at any given moment, we would collapse under the horror of it all.

Another author said that the history of the human race is nothing less than the history of evil and suffering.

And at every major explosion of evil, millions of people stop and ask – “Where was God – why didn’t He do something about it?”

After the tsunami of 2004 where hundreds of thousands of people died – entire cities washed off the map. A United Nations spokesman said that in terms of the areas affected – from Indonesia to Kenya – this was the greatest natural catastrophe in the world’s history. The carnage was inconceivable.

One English newspaper said it all when an editorial declared – and I quote, “Those with religious beliefs are right to consider this national disaster a test of their faith. Does it not seem that if there is a God, [he] is now malicious or mad or dead?”ⁱⁱ

For many Americans, they can remember where they were on September 11, 2001 when America was startled awake with the unsettling knowledge that we were no longer outside the reach of this kind of act.

I was in Chennai, India – teaching Bible college and seminary students when the news came to us that we needed to watch the news on television. I will never forget sitting in the home of the college president, along with his wife, watching the news footage of two airplanes flying into the twin towers. Office equipment, paper and body parts rained down on the surrounding streets, as one author put it, “like a ticker tape parade.”

Ninety minutes later the towers collapsed, causing the death of nearly 3,000 men, women and children. It would be the bloodiest day in our nation’s history since the Civil War, which ended in 1865.

In a very real way, one newspaper account was definitely true when headlines read, “History will never be the same again.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And the bigger question was this – Did God care, or was He powerless to intervene?

He must be malicious, insane or dead. Evil and suffering must certainly mean that the God of the Bible does not exist. Now before you reach that conclusion – you ought to ask a few questions.

First of all, why does human suffering bother any of us at all?

If the British philosopher and evolutionist Bertrand Russell was right to dismiss man as, quote, “a curious accident in a backwater” why should it matter in the least whether or not people die slowly or suddenly, peacefully or painfully?

If the Oxford Professor Peter Atkins is right to call mankind just “a bit of slime on a planet,” why should we be remotely concerned about anybody?

In fact, where did we come up with the concept of evil to begin with?

The distinctive difference in the human consciousness that causes us to care for one another and try to feed the hungry and declare the injustice and unfairness of something or someone does not point away from the existence of God, but toward Him.

Moral evil doesn’t rule out God – the very fact that we can identify something as morally wrong points to a moral law giver who created our conscious.

Our dog Pixie is a classic example that the moral will of human beings is uniquely created above all other creatures to exercise a moral standard – which can produce wonderful actions and decisions or evil actions and decisions.

When Pixie’s lying out in the backyard watching the hummingbirds come and drink from the feeders my wife put up this summer – Pixie is not lying there concerned about all the other hummingbirds of the world that may have nothing to drink.

She has never come up on the deck where Marsha and I are sitting and wondered if we were having a good day. She doesn’t even care if we’re getting along as a married couple – but, is there anything to eat?

When Pixie barks her head off behind the fence at the neighbor’s dog half her size that just came over to sniff around, she never thinks for a moment that that kind of behavior isn’t good for her testimony.

She doesn’t care about her testimony – trust me, she doesn’t have one.

Why would you ever go out of your way to help anybody? Why would you love someone and sacrifice for them. Why are you concerned about concepts like justice and fairness and compassion?

Listen, to ask the question, “How can God exist with all the injustice of the world” points to the fact that God exists and that there is a moral standard by which mankind the world over can say – “That’s evil . . . that’s good.”

And we know from scripture that His image has been stamped upon humanity giving us the ability to discern between good and evil, fairness and unfairness, hatred and love.

If we were slime on the planet or a curious accident in some backwater pond billions of years ago, we wouldn't care about each other's suffering and hunger and pain anymore than my dog cares about the hummingbird.

What does the Bible say about this issue of theodicy – the existence of God and evil?

The Apostle Paul made it clear in **Romans 5:12** that death and pain and disease and calamity came as a result of sin. The sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, created a stream of polluted water that infects every human being – ***for we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)***

Paul writes that the entire world system – including nature – is fallen – even the universe groans for the day of redemption (**Romans 8:22**).

The Bible also tells us that our mysterious God whose ways and thoughts are beyond our ways and thoughts is actually sovereign over evil. He is never surprised by sin. He is never thwarted by evil.

By His foreknowledge He not only saw every evil deed and plan and act from the beginning of human history to the end of human history, He providentially – even now – counterbalances and counteracts and moves and works in every detail so that although mankind may choose to do evil, He overrules evil for His own wise and holy purposes.^{iv}

Ultimately God is able to make all things – including the fruits of all the evil of all time – work out His ultimate purposes (**Romans 8:28-29 and Ephesians 1:11**)

Now wait a second; you mean to tell me that God knowingly allows – and has even planned for – the fact that someone's life will endure things like suffering and pain and hatred and cruelty and injustice and murder – that somehow those things in a person's life will be orchestrated to produce God's ultimate purpose and will?

You say, "I can't believe God would ever allow evil to vent itself against someone else." God would have to be malicious or mad or dead!

Then my friend you don't understand the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The pain and suffering and anguish and mistreatment and death were not accidents in the plan and purposes of the triune God – they were part of the plan.

That's why the prophets could describe the suffering of the Messiah centuries earlier in **Isaiah 53** and **Psalms 22** with perfect precision and detail 100's of years before they happened.

Yes, mankind made immoral and corrupt decisions as free moral agents – and God never tells us that His rule erases our responsibility.

But behind their decisions – behind their unjust treatment and crucifixion of Christ was the plan of God, determined before the universe was created (**Revelation 13:8**) that Jesus Christ the Son of God would come and be crucified.

So that when the Apostle Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he didn't say to the Jewish people – Now look what you've done! You've ruined everything. You crucified the true Messiah – what are we gonna do now?

He didn't say that. Instead he preached one of the most powerful statements related to theodicy that you will find in scripture – in **Acts 2 and verse 23**, **Peter said, "Jesus the Nazarene was delivered over to you to nail to a cross by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God."**

In other words, something bigger than you was at work. Someone greater than you was in charge.

God knew it would happen – and the predetermined plan of God was at work for the redemption of mankind and it happened to involve the suffering and mistreatment and cruelty and injustice and death of Jesus Christ.

But when Jesus Christ hung on the cross and finally said, "It is finished" – that wasn't a cry of failure, it was a cry of fulfillment.

This plan of our sovereign Lord – down the last detail – also delivered in scripture tells us of a day when God will make a universal change.

Everything has gone according to plan! And the plan of God isn't finished yet.

John Blanchard writes, "There is a coming day when "God will make a universal adjustment. Perfect justice will be dispensed. The wicked will no longer prosper and the righteous will no longer suffer and the problem of evil will be fully and finally settled, beyond all doubt and dispute."^v

When a tower in Jerusalem suddenly toppled over, crushing 18 people to death, those around Jesus asked him why innocent people died.

His response in Luke's gospel was to basically remind his audience that it was appointed unto everyone to die – some sooner than others.

And it wasn't because those 18 people were more deserving of death than those still alive. Jesus basically confronted his audience with the question

in light of that tragedy – have you repented of your sins and are you ready to meet the Judge?

Ladies and Gentlemen, the headlines today – of natural disasters and moral acts of evil are nothing less than reminders that life is brief and fragile; that death is certain but God is sovereign over all and He will one day make all things right and new.

You might still be thinking – yea, but why not in the meantime eradicate all the evil in the world?

I'll give you one good reason – for God to eradicate all the evil in the world would mean he would have to eradicate you – and me.

When would you like Him to start?

Instead, because of His grace and love – he is allowing those who believe in Him to love Him and those here today who don't believe yet one more opportunity to hear the gospel and come to the cross of Christ – the symbol of the greatest injustice of mankind ever.

And yet the cross is at the same time the scene of the greatest act of justice, where God the Father moved in holy, just wrath against His son who at that moment bore in His body the sins of the whole world. And Christ paid our penalty there.

So the cross is both the symbol of the injustice of man and the justice of God.

And it was all according to the predetermined plan of our sovereign God.

God was actually ordering the chaos and the corruption to fulfill His plan of redemption. God is in control.

That's easy to say – not so easy to understand – and really hard to live, isn't it?

It is one thing to say that God is involved in the chaos of life and it's another thing to say and believe that God is involved in the chaos of your life.

Can that be true? And what if you're not aware of it? In fact, what if it doesn't look like it? What if we don't deserve it?

There's the question for the Christian . . . is the faithfulness of God dependent upon the faithfulness of His people?

Can He be at work, even when we don't even care?

Was Paul really clued into the reality of God's providence – or was he just being optimistic when he wrote, ***“If we are faithless, God remains faithful” (2 Timothy 2:13).***

Probably the greatest illustration in book form today that answers that question is a Book called Esther.

A little Book which reveals that God is faithful, even when His people are faithless.

I invite you to open your Bibles to the opening words of Esther.

Now before the Book opens with verse 1, you need to understand that many years before Esther's story begins, because of the disobedience of the Jewish people, God's discipline had scattered them into bondage.

The Jews who lived in Jerusalem had been carried away by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar – the same King responsible for destroying the city walls and the temple and looting the treasures of Jerusalem.

Around 50 years later, Cyrus, the King of Persia diverted the river Euphrates enough to wade underneath the iron spikes of the city wall that went down into the river.

Just before they showed up, Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar was having a drunken orgy in his palace when a hand suddenly appeared and began writing letters on the palace wall. That ruined the party – but the words didn't make any sense.

So they called the prophet Daniel out of retirement and he interpreted the message to Belshazzar to mean, effectively, “You're toast.” That's in the Hebrew.

Daniel's interpretation came true; Belshazzar was killed that very night and the Persian empire conquered Babylon and Cyrus the Great, ruled that part of the known world.

But God was at work in Cyrus' heart – moving him to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem over the next few decades.

But the sad truth is that many of the Jewish people chose not to return to their land. Many of them had simply become Persianized – fully entrenched in the culture of the kingdom around them.

To many of them, the promises of God are far-fetched . . . they were the grandchildren of the exile – they've never stepped foot in Jerusalem.

To many of them, God belonged in Jerusalem – a relic of the past in a broken down city with a nation scattered long ago.

That's ancient history . . . what matters now is getting a leg up in the Kingdom of Persia.

That's why in all the Book of Esther there's not one mention of Jerusalem; there's not one reference to the Temple, to the Law of God, to the Covenant of Abraham, to the Passover, or to sacrifice and forgiveness at all. The Persian King will be mentioned 190 times in 167 verses of this little Book, and God will not be mentioned at all.^{vi}

The question isn't so much – will God be involved in the lives of the Jews who returned to their covenant land? The greater question is – will God be involved in the lives of those who did not?

The question isn't so much – is God sovereign in Jerusalem? The question will be, is God sovereign in Persia?

To those who – we might be tempted to think – didn't deserve the providence of God's hand at work in their lives.

You see, Esther is the story of Jews who had remained in Persia.

And they are about to be in greater danger than they ever imagined.

In fact, apart from the providential working of an invisible sovereign Lord, within a matter of months, all the Jews throughout the Kingdom of Persia will be dead.

But let's not get too far ahead.

The Book of Esther takes place when the grandson of Cyrus the Great is ruling the Persian Empire.

We're introduced to him in *Esther chapter 1 and verse 1. Now it took place – literally, here's what happened – in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.*

Right away the reader is impressed with the glory and power of this Persian emperor.

We're told that these events took place in the days of Ahasuerus – you might notice the author clarifies – this is the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.

The reason for that clarification is that the name Ahasuerus was a title – a throne name – like Pharaoh for the Egyptians or Caesar for the Roman emperor.

Ahasuerus means, “chief of rulers”. His Greek name was Xerxes, which means “sovereign or ruler over men”.^{vii}

Xerxes can also mean, hero of heroes.^{viii}

The point is obvious – right away you're being informed of who's in charge.

History records that Xerxes was petty, conniving, promiscuous, arrogant, brutal, rash and bold.

One inscription was discovered where Ahasuerus wrote of himself – and I quote – “I and Xerxes, the great king, the only king, the king of this entire earth, far near.”^{ix}

Herodotus, a Greek historian who lived and wrote just after the Persian empire was defeated wrote that Xerxes was the tallest and most handsome of the Persian kings – he was ambitious, ruthless and jealous.^x

When he was offered a gift of several million dollars – in our current economy – a gift from a man named Pythius to support his upcoming military expedition against Greece – he was so moved by this man's loyalty that he returned the gift and sent presents back to Pythius. However, when Pythius petitioned Xerxes to allow his oldest son to remain home from the military expedition, Xerxes was so enraged that he ordered that son to be cut into two pieces, and the army marched off to war between them.

When Xerxes marched on Athens, with an army that vastly outnumbered the Greeks, they were temporarily held up in a pass flanked by the sea on one side and the mountains on the other.

The Spartan commander named Leonidas made history when he and 300 men kept the massive Persian army of Xerxes bottled up, giving Athens time to evacuate safely.

At another point in the expedition Xerxes had attempted to cross a river and needed two bridges built for his huge army. They were built, but the night before they were to cross, a storm came up, destroying the bridges entirely, stopping Xerxes from his conquest.

He was so angry that he had a soldier beat the river with a whip 300 times while other soldiers shouted and cursed at the water. Xerxes then had the engineers who built the bridges beheaded.^{xi}

He also ordered that a pair of shackles be thrown into the river to symbolize his sovereignty over the waters – even though he had failed to cross it . . . and he and his army returned to Persia angry and frustrated at their misfortunes while trying to defeat the Greek city-states.

On his way back to Susa, he wintered in the city of Sardis where he tried to seduce his sister-in-law, but was rebuffed. He would later have that sister-in-law and her husband – his own brother – tortured to death.^{xii}

When you read in *verse 1* that Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia, what that tells you is that he was the ruler over the largest known kingdom on earth. The sun never completely set on his empire.

As the Book of Esther opens, *verse 2* informs us that King Ahasuerus was sitting on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa.

Susa was one of his palaces. Susa was the place where Daniel was buried. Susa was the place where Xerxes son would sit one day, served faithfully by a cupbearer named Nehemiah.

It's very likely that Nehemiah and Esther knew each other – as I'll show you in the days ahead.

Susa was the playground of the rich and famous. It was the place to be. If you had an invitation to live in Susa – the palace with hanging gardens and wildlife – pools, fruit trees and servants – this was the place to be. And Xerxes was the King of Kings – he thought.

His kingdom included modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, Libya and Arabia.

Herodotus the historian records that riches of Persia were legendary. In fact, the tribute he received from the subjugated nations around him totaled more than 700 tons of gold and silver annually.^{xiii}

Millions of people speaking dozens of languages all owed their allegiance to their sovereign lord and king – the king who was known as the Great King – the King of Kings, the only King over all the earth.^{xiv}

That's what he thought!

The Book of Esther intentionally opens to underscore what seemed to be important; who seemed to be the preeminent mover and shaker in the Kingdom of Persia.

Several times in these opening verses we're told that Ahasuerus reigned – he sat upon his royal throne – the people will be given a display of his royal glory and his great majesty – verse 4.

Xerxes is in the palm of an almighty invisible God.

And if you leave with anything today remember this – even when God is invisible, He is invincible.

World events both good and evil are nothing more than the choreography of our Creator God who will bring His will to perfect fulfillment.

You may not understand the choreography, but you can trust the Creator.

Right now it looks like Ahasuerus is the man with the power. He is seated on this throne in the palace at Susa over the greatest kingdom on the planet. But look closer with the eyes of faith and you'll see hovering above the throne of Xerxes the greater sovereign.

A hidden God does not mean He's an absent God.

- He may be invisible but He is infallible.
- He may be unusually quiet, but He still has undiminished control.
- He may be ignored, but His will is never frustrated.
- He may be unsuspected and unnoticed, but He remains unconquerable.
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For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation . . . He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stop His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?" (Daniel 4:34)

For whatsoever the Lord pleases, that He does in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deep places. (Psalm 135:6)

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Book of Esther has been given to us, not to enamor us with Esther, but to enamor us with God. We're given the inside story not to impress us with the clever arrangements of Esther and Mordecai but the infinite wisdom of God.

It is my prayerful intention and desire that after we have finished this little drama called Esther, that you will not love her but that you will love Him.

That you will not be amazed at them . . . you will be amazed at Him.

This infallible, invincible, invisible God who is at work behind the "seen".

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 09/11/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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- iii Ibid, p. 13
- iv Adapted from John MacArthur, "God, Sovereignty, and Evil" (blog posting/July 14, 2008)
- v Blanchard, p. 31
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- xiii Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, p. 474
- xiv Jones, p. 10