

Just Above the Royal Throne

The Shadow Sovereign-Part One

Esther 1:1-4

Ravi Zacharias, a well-known apologist, once remarked that in all his lectures and debates at prestigious universities like Princeton and Oxford he has never once defended the existence of God without being questioned about the problem of evil.

The problem of suffering and evil are universal phenomena, and believers and unbelievers alike struggle with the question of why God allows them.

The difference, however, is that suffering takes unbelievers further from a belief in an involved, powerful, caring God, while suffering brings Christians closer to Him.

Their secular argument is often based on these four 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 want to prevent evil and suffering

Point #4: Therefore, since evil and suffering still exist in the world, either God is not powerful enough to stop it, not loving enough to stop it, or He merely doesn't exist.

This solution poses a logical and theological problem. The Bible tells us that God is both all-powerful and all-loving. He is the God of gods and Lord of lords, mighty and awesome, according to *Deuteronomy 10:17*. He works all things to the conformity of His will, according to *Ephesians 1:11*. And He is compassionate, gracious and abounding in love, according to *Psalms 103:8*.¹

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

So how do we reconcile the Bible with the newspaper? The world is full of evil... so what does that tell us about God?

Is He asleep? Is He absent? Does He not care?

Before we answer these questions, it's important to first define what we mean by "evil." When people talk about the question of "evil," they are referring to two different categories of suffering. The first can be called **moral evil**. Under this category fall things like murder, rape, theft, political oppression, physical abuse, sex trafficking, terrorist attacks, genocide, and poverty due to corruption.

That's just a few.

The second category is what theologians call **natural evil**. Under this category fall things like brutality in the animal kingdom, natural disasters, cancer, epidemics, tsunamis and tornadoes that ravish entire nations and cause drought and famine.

No one will doubt that the world is filled with both moral and natural evil.

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

We all know we're living in a messed up world. But what we can't quite figure out is why God is allowing it to stay that way. Every time disaster strikes, people stop and ask the same old question they've been asking for centuries:

"Where is God?"

After the tsunami of 2004, when hundreds of thousands of people died and entire cities were

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.

An English newspaper summed up the thinking of many when one of its journalists declared, “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

Many Americans remember where they were on September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center collapsed to the ground.

I was in Chennai, India, and I’ll never forget sitting in the home of the college president and watching along with he and his wife footage of two airplanes flying into the 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 deaths of nearly 3,000 men, women and children. It was the bloodiest day in our nation’s history since the Civil War.

“History will never be the same again,”ⁱⁱⁱ quoted one newspaper, and how true that has proved to be.

But before you reach the conclusion that God is malicious, insane or dead – which so many Americans reached on that fateful day – you should ask yourself a couple important questions. The first is a logical question; the second is a theological question.

The logical question is why human suffering bothers us anyway.

If the British philosopher and evolutionist, Bertrand Russell, was right to dismiss man as “a curious accident in a backwater,” why should it matter in the least whether 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 concern ourselves with anybody?

Come to think of it, where did we come up with the concept of evil to begin with?

There is something inherent to our human consciousness which causes us to care for loved ones and feed the hungry and declare the injustice of social classes and stand against racism. We can deny with our mouths there is such a thing as a Moral Law-Giver, but our actions give us away.

The point is moral evil doesn’t rule out God. The very fact we can identify something as morally wrong points to a Moral Law-Giver who created our conscious.

This moral compass which is inherent to all of us is also one distinctive that separates us from the animal kingdom.

My dog, Pixie, is a classic proof of this.

When Pixie’s lying out in the backyard, watching the hummingbirds drink from the feeders my wife put up this summer, she isn’t lying there thinking about all the other hummingbirds in the world that might be dying of thirst.

She never comes up on the deck where Marsha and I like to sit and wonders if we’re having a good day. She doesn’t even care if we’re getting along as a married couple. She just wants to know if there’s anything to eat!

She barks her head off at the neighbor’s dog that comes over to sniff around, never thinking for a moment that her behavior isn’t good for her testimony.

She doesn’t care about her testimony . . . she doesn’t have one!

Humans, on the other hand, being made in God’s image, have an inherent sense of right and wrong.

Why do you go out of your way to help someone? Why do you love your family and make sacrifices for them. Why do you treat people with justice, fairness and compassion, and expect the same from them?

It’s because you have a moral law written on your heart. As soon as you look at something and objectively label it “evil” or “good,” you reveal there is something outside yourself – something beyond you.

That something is God.

Scripture tells us that God has stamped His image on humanity and given us the ability to discern between good and evil, fairness and unfairness, hatred and love. If we’re just slime on the planet or a curious accident in some backwater pond, we wouldn’t care about someone else’s suffering anymore than my dog cares about a hummingbird’s thirst.

So the answer to the logical question of why we have a problem with evil is that God has placed that sense of right and wrong within us.

The second question we need to ask then – the theological question – is what does the Bible say about evil and the purpose of it? In other words, how does Scripture reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil?

This reconciling of two seemingly contradicting ideas is what theologians have called, “Theodicy.” Theodicy is a compound of the Greek word, *theo* – which means, “God” – and the Greek word, *dike* – which means, “justice” – and it grapples with the question of how a sovereign, just God can allow injustice to go unchecked.

The Apostle Paul gives us some insight into that question in **Romans 5:12**, when he makes it clear that death, pain, 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 itself, is fallen. Even the universe groans for the day of redemption, according to **Romans 8:22**.

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

While He already knew every evil deed that would take place before time began, He also works in spite of them to accomplish 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 to fulfill His ultimate purposes (**Romans 8:28-29 and Ephesians 1:11**).

What does this mean?

Are we saying that God actually plans for people to endure suffering and pain and hatred and cruelty and injustice and murder? Are we saying that God is actually the One orchestrating those things in a person’s life to produce His will?

That’s exactly what we’re saying.

But that’s not *all* we’re saying. Anyone who claims that God must be a malicious God is either overlooking or simply misunderstanding the most

important aspect of the Christian message: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The spiritual, physical and emotional anguish Jesus was made to endure weren’t accidents either. They were on planned – on purpose – too.

That’s why the prophets could describe the suffering of the Messiah in **Isaiah 53** and **Psalms 22** with perfect precision centuries before He even walked the earth.

Yes, Pilate and the Jewish people made immoral and corrupt decisions on their own accord and God’s sovereignty doesn’t erase their responsibility. But behind the scenes of the Gospel story God was pulling the strings to accomplish the plan He had ordained before the world began (**Revelation 13:8**).

The Apostle Peter understood this. When he preached to the Jewish people on the day of Pentecost, he didn’t say, “Look what you’ve done! You’ve ruined everything. You crucified the true Messiah! What are we going to do now?”

Instead he preached one of the most powerful statements relating to theodicy that you will find in scripture. He said in **Acts 2:23**: **“Jesus the Nazarene was delivered over to you to nail to a cross by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.”**

In other words, Peter is telling the Jews that something bigger was at work behind their decision. Someone greater than Pilate was in charge.

God knew it would happen. He ordained it. Before time began, He decided that Jesus Christ would suffer the wrath of both man and God in order to redeem men from their sins. That’s why Jesus’ last words – “It is finished” – were not a cry of failure but a cry of fulfillment.

So evil came to the world through the fall of man, and Jesus dealt with evil at the cross. But that’s not the end of the story. Scripture also tells us of a day when God will right all the wrongs humans have done.

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.

In His response found in Luke’s gospel, Jesus shifted the focus of the question away from why

those *specific people* died and placed the emphasis on the question of why everyone dies.

Death is always tragic. The problem isn't that it touches someone suddenly; the problem is that it touches all of us inevitably. Death came about through evil – i.e. man's sin – so Jesus asks his audience whether they are ready to die and face the Judge.

When you read the headlines that speak of natural disasters and moral acts of evil, take them as reminders that life is brief and fragile. Death is certain. But God is sovereign even over death and He will one day make all things right and new.

That being said, you might still be thinking to yourself, "Okay, but why doesn't God just eradicate all the evil in the world in the meantime?"

I'll give you at least 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?

The point is God understands the problem of evil more than any of us do. If anyone knows what it means to suffer, it was Jesus. If anyone knows what it means to be forsaken and misunderstood, it was Jesus. If anyone had a right to call life "unfair," it was Jesus. That is why, though we may never get an answer to the problem of evil in this life, we serve a God who understands. And that should give us comfort.

Scripture makes it clear that God is rich in mercy. Because of His grace and love he gives mankind opportunity after opportunity to believe in Him . . . to accept Him . . . to love Him . . . to come to the cross of Christ and see the arms of Justice bearing your injustice.

The cross is the focal point of theology and theodicy.

While it marked the greatest act of human *injustice* in history, it also marked the greatest act of Divine *justice* in history.

And God had preordained everything.

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

That truth is easy to preach, but I admit it isn't easy to understand. It's even harder to live out, isn't it?

It's one thing to believe that God is sovereign over the chaos of life – which every Christian

accepts most of the time. But it's another thing to believe He's sovereign over the chaos in *my* life.

That's the most wonderful and mysterious truth about God's sovereignty. Even when it doesn't seem like He is in control, He is. Even when towers crumble to the ground and nations are left in uproar, God is on His throne. Even when tsunamis wipe out thousands of unsuspecting people, God is still merciful. Even in the drudgery of our lives, as we live from day to day, God is in control.

When you don't see His hand; when you don't hear His voice; when you can't make sense of the chaos around you . . . God is working all things out for His glory and for your good.

The Apostle Paul said in **2 Timothy 2:13**: "***If we are faithless, God remains faithful.***" And that's the truth we find profoundly displayed in the book of Esther. That's why we're going to dive into this Old Testament drama with excitement and expectation because although God's name is never mentioned throughout the entire story, we will witness His faithfulness on every page.

The book of Esther, more so than any other book in Scripture, reminds us that even when God seems absent from the drama of History, He is still the main character.

So let's shift our attention from the general questions about evil and God's providence and look now at how they play out in the real-life drama of Esther.

At the time Esther's story begins, the Jews were struggling with their own questions of evil. They had been in bondage for hundreds of years because of their lack of obedience to God. God, who had for so long spoken to His people through the kings and prophets, was now silent.

During this time of silence, the Jews were taken into captivity. They had been carried away by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar – the same king responsible for destroying the walls of Jerusalem and looting the temple. Then, fifty years later, Cyrus capture Babylon by a stroke of genius. Seeing that part of the exterior wall of Babylon had been built over the Euphrates River, diverted the course of the Euphrates and waded underneath the iron spikes of the wall on dry ground.

Just before Cyrus showed up with his army, Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar was having a drunken orgy in his palace. The Bible records that a

hand suddenly appeared out of nowhere and began writing letters on the wall that no one could understand. Needless to say, that ruined the party.

So messengers called the prophet Daniel out of retirement and he interpreted the message to Belshazzar. The message said, effectively, “You’re toast!”

And Daniel’s interpretation came true. Belshazzar was killed that very night and the Persians defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus the Great then became ruler of the known world.

God was orchestrating all of this. He moved in Cyrus’ heart to show mercy to the Jewish people and allowed them to return home for the next few decades. Sadly, many refused.

They had become *Persianized* – so fully entrenched in the pagan culture surrounding them that they no longer had any desire to return to Jerusalem.

For many of them the promises of God seemed far-fetched. They were the grandchildren of those who were exiled. Their sense of nationalism was weak because they had never once stepped foot in Jerusalem.

In their minds God belonged in Jerusalem. He was a relic of the past – as broken as the city that once bore His Name.

Persia was the “new” Jerusalem.

That’s why the book of Esther never mentions Jerusalem or the Temple or the Law or the Abrahamic Covenant or the Passover or Jehovah. The King’s name will be mentioned 190 times in 167 verses. God’s name will not be mentioned at all.^{vi}

So the question that faces us even at the outset of this story is not whether God will prove sovereign over His people in Jerusalem but whether He will prove sovereign over His people in Persia. It seems natural that God will lead and direct those who chose to return home... but will He lead and direct those who didn’t?

Yes.

We’ll be reminded throughout this story that even when God’s people forget God, God doesn’t forget them.

So with that as an introduction, let’s dive in and discover this wonderful truth for ourselves.

Look at *Esther 1:1: “Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus – the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.”*

In the opening lines of this drama, we’re introduced immediately to Cyrus’ grandson, Ahasuerus. The proper way to pronounce his name is “*uh-has-you-ear-us* (Ahazuearus)”, but that’s a bit of a tongue-twister. So I prefer to pronounce it, “*uh-haz-er-us* (Ahazerus). That way I don’t stutter every time I come to the word!

“Ahasuerus” is not the King’s proper name, however. It is just his Kingly title – like “Pharaoh” to the Egyptians or “Caesar” to the Romans. It means, “Chief of rulers.”

The King’s real name was Xerxes, which meant “Sovereign over men”^{vii} or “Hero of heroes.”^{viii} Scripture always refers to the King by his title, however, so that’s how we’ll refer to him throughout this study.

Esther 1:1: “Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus – the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.”

Even at the outset of this story we are struck by the power and influence of this King. The point is obvious . . .

Ahasuerus is in charge.

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

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

Proof of his ruthlessness is found in a few of his war-stories.

One story is of a man named Pythius who offered Ahasuerus an enormous amount of money in support of his military expedition against Greece. Ahasuerus, moved by this man’s loyalty, returned the gift and sent presents back to Pythius. However, when Pythius asked Ahasuerus to allow his oldest son to remain home from the war, the King, enraged by the request, ordered the son to be cut into two pieces and had the army march between them on their way to battle.

Another story took place during his expedition against Greece – the same expedition where he and 100,000+ soldiers were held off for seven days by Leonidas and 300 brave Spartans at the battle of Thermopylae. Ahasuerus attempted to build two bridges across a river to accommodate his huge

army. Although they were successfully built, a storm rose up and destroyed the bridges overnight.

Furious and delusional, the King had a soldier beat the river with a whip 300 times while other soldiers shouted and cursed at the water. 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. To cap things off, he then had the bridge-engineers beheaded.^{xi}

On another occasion, he travelled back to Susa and wintered in the city of Sardis where he tried to seduce his sister-in-law. She refused his advances. As a result, he later had her and her husband – who was his own brother – tortured to death.^{xii}

This is the bleak portrait of a king who will take center stage in the story of Esther. Haughty, angry, merciless . . . Xerxes wanted control over everything. And from the looks of it . . . he had it.

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

Herodotus records that Xerxes' riches 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 from diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities gave their allegiance to this king. He was known as the Great King – the King of Kings – the only King over all the earth.^{xiv}

He was seated in the great Citadel at Susa – the palace where Daniel was buried and the palace where his own son would one day be served by Nehemiah. Several times in the opening verses of Esther we're told that Ahasuerus reigned and that he was sitting on his throne.

He seemed to be the preeminent mover and shaker in the Kingdom of Persia. But behind the scenes he is just a pawn in the hands of the real Mover and Shaker. If you get nothing else out of this study, friend, get this:

Even when God is invisible, He is still invincible.

World events, whether good or 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.

In chapter 1 of Esther 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 as we look closer, we'll see the shadow of Providence hovering over that little throne.

God may remain hidden . . . but He is not absent.

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.

Daniel 4:34 says:

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?"

Psalm 135:6 says:

For whatsoever the Lord pleases, that He does in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deep places.

The Book of Esther was not given to us to enamor us with Esther; it was given to us to enamor us with God. We're given the inside story not so that we will say, "Oh, look how clever Esther and Mordecai are!" We're given the inside story so that we'll say, "Wow, look how wise God is!"

It is my prayerful intention and desire that as we move through this little drama called Esther you will not find yourself loving her more but rather you'll find yourself loving Him more.

God is the Author of this story.

He is the Hero of the drama.

He is the King . . . 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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- xiv Jones, p. 10