

Chess, Checkers and the Game of Life

The Shadow Sovereign-Part 7

Esther 7:1-10

Yesterday, Marsha and I went to breakfast at Cracker Barrel. When we walked out I heard kids arguing, and I looked down the sidewalk where all the rocking chairs are lined up and saw a group of kids huddles over a checker board . . . I immediately understood what was going on. The competition was hot and heavy.

It brought back fond memories of all four of my kids wanting to take their turn to try and beat their father at that oversized checker board at Cracker Barrel. One at a time, I helped them learn how to taste defeat. One time I beat them all of them except Charity – our youngest – who was around 6 years old at the time. Our twin sons had a really hard time seeing her win – and they knew I was letting her. I explained to them that if they were ever playing a cute blue eyed girl, losing was a really wise thing to do.

That same day, one of my sons almost actually beat me in our game. It was very close – in fact, he had me on the ropes and at one point, I thought, for the first I'm going to lose and I won't be doing it on purpose. So I battled back. At one strategic moment when he forced me to jump with one of my crowned pieces – which would have put me in a trap, it actually allowed me to jump backwards over another one of his men, avoiding the trap. The victory was mine.

He wanted an immediate rematch, but our food had come, there was nothing I could do. All the way over to the table he kept saying, "I almost beat you . . . I would have beat you if you hadn't gotten that double jump." I thank God for that double jump.

Since then, over the years, he has beaten me soundly at checkers so many times that whenever I win, it surprises me.

I received the same kind of education when I was his age – at the hands of my grandmother. She was a widow and served for many years as the mother to so many servicemen and women who came into the Center there in downtown Norfolk where my father was the director.

One of the many things she did was take a serviceman on in the game of chess and so soundly beat him that he was humbled and open to hear what she had to say next – and she would deliver to him the news that he would lose in the game of life unless he surrendered to Jesus Christ.

My father used a similar technique by inviting some self-assured sailor to play him a game of ping pong. Just before the game started, my father would actually pull up a chair and sit down. His opponent would laugh and respond with, "You don't think you can beat me sitting down, do you?" My father would smile and say something like, "Well, let's see." And then he would completely demolish that young man - which would lead to an excellent opportunity to share with this newly humbled young man the gospel of Christ.

My three brothers and I called our grandmother, "Granny" – in good southern fashion. It was a term of affection. But don't let her name fool you – when she took on my brothers and in a game of chess, even though she would be smiling and nodding, she was ruthless and vicious and bloodthirsty. It

wouldn't be long before the game of chess turned into a game of chase. I would be running with my king and she would be chasing me with all her pieces still intact. And sooner or later, I would hear her little voice, as she looked at me over her glasses, saying, "Checkmate." I used to hate my grandmother – and love her all at the same time.

Those games are so much like life, aren't they?

Just about the time you think you've got a plan mapped out for the next few moves, life suddenly delivers that little word, "Check" which shocks you at first – "Where . . . how?"

And the game of life becomes a game of chase.

One of the key lessons my grandmother taught us about the game was this – *always keep your eye on the queen.*

The queen was to be protected and guarded more than any other piece you had besides your king. The queen was your most powerful offensive weapon and the queen of your opponent would be your most feared enemy.

Keep your eye on the queen . . . in fact, throughout the entire match. Never ignore the movement of your opponent's queen. And never forget where your own queen is located.

If you want to summarize the downfall of Persia's Prime Minister – Haman – you could do it in one sentence – Haman failed to keep his eye on the queen.

He had no idea she was about to become his most dreaded opponent.

When we last studied this drama together, Esther had risked her life for something fairly inconsequential . . . or so it seemed. The king assumes she wants more stuff – money, clothes, perhaps her own little palace.

She invites the King and his prime minister, Haman, to dinner, in order to deliver her special request.

Instead, and to our surprise, perhaps even to the surprise of Esther herself – she merely invites the King and Haman to come back the next night for another dinner – and she promises to deliver her petition then.

None of this was a surprise to God. In fact, it will be during that intervening night, when God's hand will be most clearly seen.

God-inspired insomnia caused the King to stay awake. He had the Persian Congressional Record ordered up from the Palace Library and a servant

ends up reading, of all places, where Mordecai uncovered a plot to kill the king a few years earlier. The king realizes that he's done nothing to reward Mordecai – to make him a King's Benefactor – the select few loyal citizens who were rewarded for special service to the king.

And just across town, that very same night, Haman is preparing a gallows upon which to hang Mordecai the following day – before eating dinner with the King and Queen that night.

Haman finishes up his work on the gallows, changes his work clothes, he's so excited about the greatest day of his life, that he shows up early the next morning to the King's palace and finds himself, instead of being honored by the King, ordered to honor Mordecai with gifts from the King.

He had mapped life out for the next few moves . . . but now he was completely stunned. And for Haman, the game of life has just become a game of chase.

What is he going to do now with a 75 foot high gallows – everybody in the neighborhood – and a few in the palace – knows that Haman has plans to impale Mordecai on that stake.

And Haman still doesn't know it yet, but his edict to kill the Jews will impact not only Mordecai – now one of the King's benefactors – but Esther the King's favored wife.

Haman hadn't done his homework. He'd been moving pieces around his board – all the while assuming the Queen was a non-issue.

He had failed to keep his eye on the queen.

Haman rushes home that afternoon after honoring Mordecai – tells his family the news and they immediately respond that he's in deep trouble.

They just get those words out of their mouths and chapter 6 ends and chapter 7 begins with the second banquet in the Palace.

Let's pick it up there.

7:1. Now the king and Haman came to drink wine with Esther the queen. 2. And the king said to Esther on the second day also as they drank their wink at the banquet, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done."

In other words, Esther, whaddya want – I promise I'll grant your request, no matter what the price tag!

Verse 3. Then Queen Esther, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and it please the king,

let my life be given me as my petition and my people as my request. 4. For we have been sold, I and my people – Esther now borrows language from the edict – this is actually a direct quote – *[I and my people] to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated.*”

She doesn't want trinkets or toys or property or stuff . . . she wants life – for herself and her people!ⁱ

If you missed it – you might note carefully the change in Esther. For a little more than 5 years she's kept a secret safe from her world.

Her motto has been, “I'm a Jew, but I'm keeping it a secret!”

In fact, she could have tried to maintain her secret and simply tell the king, “Listen, some of my staff are Jewish and I like Jewish people alright, but I don't think it's very nice of Haman to try and kill all of ‘em.”

Oh no . . . twice, in this courageous speech, Esther is basically declaring – the Jewish people are my people – I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated.

The king isn't quite catching on yet, although Haman's heart is really beginning to race now.

Esther goes on and creates even more suspense and tension – notice the *middle part of verse 4. Now if we had only been sold as slaves, men and women, I would have remained silent, for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king.*”

In other words, if we were only going to be sold into slavery – I wouldn't have bothered you with the news.

But we're not being sold . . . we're going to be slain!ⁱⁱ

This is altogether stunning news to both men.

The king is finding out that his wife is in danger – he really doesn't know why – Esther wisely avoids any details that would implicate the King.

Frankly, I believe the King doesn't even know the Jews have been condemned in that edict – in his callous disregard for life, he's simply allowed Haman to write the edict and attempt to get rid of some people who've evidently been causing the Kingdom some problems.

In fact, it isn't until later on, according to chapter 8 that Esther gives the king the total picture, including the fact that she and Mordecai are cousins.

But for now, Esther has wisely refrained from giving too many specifics because she wants her

husband to get this simple picture in his mind – someone wants to kill her and her extended family.

Haman, however, has just discovered to his shock that Esther is a Jewess – Haman knows exactly what Esther is saying because he wrote the edict – she won't have to say anything more for Haman to get the picture.

Haman had used those same three verbs, in his edict, to cut off any loophole for the Jews – they are to be destroyed, killed and annihilated . . . he's been licking his chops to take off their heads . . . he can't wait.

Now, to his horror, he discovers that of all the people in the kingdom, Esther the Queen is one of them!

He hasn't kept his eye on the Queen . . . he missed it.

Haman is sick with wondering what's next . . . the King is enraged . . . someone's after his wife – which also means someone is messing with his authority in the kingdom of Persia – and in his own palace – with his own wife!

Verse 5. Then King Ahasuerus asked Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who would presume to do this?” 6. Esther said, “A foe and an enemy is this wicked Haman!”

Wow . . . what a devastating opponent this queen was.

She doesn't just blurt out his name . . . she continues to raise tension and suspense with each word – a foe . . . an enemy . . . is this wicked Haman!

Haman becomes terrified – rightly so.

The King, verse 7, gets up and goes out in the garden.

He's got quite a predicament on his hands.

- How can he punish Haman for an edict stamped with his own royal seal?
- How can he deal with Haman without admitting his own role?
- How can he rescind the edict which is now the law of the Medes and Persians?
- How can he possibly soften the edict when it leaves no loophole for the total destruction of all the Jewish people?
- Can he somehow protect Esther's life while at the same time protect my own reputation?
- And if he can't, how is he going to explain her death?

- Why did I trust Haman so completely?
- And why in the world did I sign that edict?
- And why didn't I read the fine print?

One author summarized it this way: Who knows how many edicts Ahasuerus signed that day? Who knows how many pressing matters of government were on his mind? He had countless decisions to make. And Haman, who was a trusted official, had proposed it in such a way that he seemed to be solving a problem that directly affected the good of the kingdom.ⁱⁱⁱ

But none of that will matter . . . the king's own signature was effectively on that edict.

Now the king doesn't know it yet, but he's about to be immensely helped out of this mess by the foolishness of Haman.

Who, by the way, has the bigger problem on his hands, doesn't he?

Verse 7 again; The king arose in his anger from drinking wine and went into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther.

Haman makes a split second decision here. He obviously decides against following the king out into the garden – he can tell by the expression of the king's face that he's in deep trouble.

He also decides against running away – that would suggest certain guilt . . . the King would order the soldiers to catch him and kill him. He's literally trapped.^{iv}

He is being checkmated by the Providence of God – who moved a queen into position – a queen who exposed his treachery – a queen whom Haman should never have taken his eye off . . . and now he begs for his life.

But get this, he's begging for his life from someone who is already condemned to die.

She can't save his life. She can't even save her own life – according to the edict, she only has 11 months to live.

The truth is, in this scene they are both begging for their lives. And they are bound by the decision of the king.

The text tells us that in his terror – and implied anger – ***Haman was falling on the couch*** where Esther had reclined during dinner.

Persian law stated that no man was allowed within seven paces of any member of the King's harem. In fact, I discovered in my study that Persian law held that touching the king's wife was penalized by death.^v

In his anger and passion and terror, Haman actually falls on her couch – more than likely kneeling over her – perhaps even grabbing her by the shoulders – I can only guess, but this man's hatred for the Jews would have spilled out all over this scene – “Who do you think you are – I'm the Prime Minister of Persia and you're just a little common Jewess . . . you're the one who ought to die – how dare you trap me like this.”

While he's on her couch – in an evidently threatening posture – my guess having that kind of conversation – the King just so happens to walk back into the dining room and roars – the ***latter part of verse 8 – “Will he even assault the queen with me in the house?”***

In other words, is he gonna kill my wife right now in front of me?

Verse 8 – as the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

In other words, according to their custom, he's condemned to die – no longer worthy to be looked upon or to look upon another.

Why would the king move forward to execute Haman now?

According to Herodotus, Persian law required at least two serious accusations that would stand up in a court of law in order for the King to execute Haman.

And now the king had them.

Haman's plot to kill the Jews could be shown to be a direct threat against the King's own wife – Queen Esther. That would be one offense.

But then Haman approaches the queen – even to the point of falling on top of her couch – the clear implication is that there is physical contact with the queen – in a threatening manner – that would be the second offense.

And at this moment – out of nowhere – certainly beyond Esther's hopes of her carefully planned choreography of events – out of nowhere, a third offense is provided, which settles it beyond dispute and puts Haman on the fast track to his execution.

Notice verse 9. This is amazing – Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs who were before the king said, “Behold indeed, the gallows standing at Haman's house fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai – watch this – who spoke good on behalf of the king!”

In other words, King – you probably didn't know this but look – you can see it from here – a gallows

that Haman had built for Mordecai – you remember, the guy you honored yesterday for saving your life – he’s one of the King’s Benefactors – Haman wanted him dead too!

That just tips the legal scales . . . completely over!^{vi}

Where’d this guy come from? Because of his testimony, everything now turns around to smell like political intrigue . . . it sounds like disloyalty . . .

In fact, the Greek Translation of this text adds that Haman, the king’s closest advisor, will be executed in disgrace for treason.^{vii}

Talk about a double jump . . . and a checkmate at the same time.

Someone might read this account and say, “Wow, this is amazing irony!” We would look at it, I trust, and say, “Oh what amazing sovereignty . . . divine, precise, providence.”

God is the ultimate strategist . . . the game belongs to Him.

Even when He’s silent, His is present. Even when He seems removed, He remains sovereign.

Even when He seems behind schedule, His purposes are fulfilled at just the right time.

One of the men in our church sent me an email this week – Recently while we were eating lunch after church one Sunday, my youngest son asked me what was the highest number I had ever counted up to? I said I didn’t know. Then I asked him how high he’d ever counted. Immediately he responded, “5,372”. “When did you count up to that number?” He said, “Today.” Oh, I said, “Why did you stop there?” He said, “The sermon was over . . . so I stopped counting.”

Well, keep counting, I’m not quite finished.

Let me make two observations about the strategy of God as He works the game of life through His myriad of providential ways.

1. God often uses reversals in our lives to move us forward and make us deeper.

Things had gone so well. Esther had won the crown . . . Mordecai had been promoted to the King’s personal administrative staff . . . and then – wham.

All because of one egomaniacal man who got all bent out of shape over the fact that Mordecai wouldn’t grovel at his feet.

But listen, had this edict of death not been signed – Esther would never have let her secret be known. Neither she nor Mordecai her cousin would have ever identified with the people of God.

They would have lived in hypocrisy until the day they died.

It was the danger of impending death . . . the hopelessness of this edict – the reversal of their fortune which brought them to their knees and then to their feet with courage and trust.

2. God often uses unlikely things to carry out His thoughts.

Esther had no idea that one of the king’s eunuch’s would deliver the final piece of information – what an unlikely source of support for the Jewish people. This servant provided the last nail for Haman’s coffin.

Just a eunuch among thousands of eunuchs who spent his day standing in the court, waiting on the king . . . just a little pawn on the chessboard that no one paid any attention to. But at God’s timing . . . at this moment, he steps forward and this little pawn effectively says to the mighty Prime Minister, check mate!

3. Thirdly, God often puts us through the greatest difficulty before providing deliverance.

The truth is, if God wanted to simply deliver us, He’d do it quickly . . . and painlessly. He’s not after deliverance, but development.

If our Lord only wanted to make us comfortable, He wouldn’t allow roadblocks and reversals and trials. But His goal – in making all things work together for our good – Romans 8:28 is the next verse – not to make us comfortable, but to make us conformable to the image of His son.

That’s why He isn’t as interested in delivering us *from* the challenges of life as He is in developing us *through* the challenges of life.

- God often not only puts us through great difficulty before providing deliverance;
- He not only uses unlikely things to carry out His thoughts;
- He not only uses reversals to move us forward and make us deeper, finally –

4. God offers a special partnership with those who submit to His providence.

This is the co-laboring principle which the Apostle Paul wanted to maximize with his life when he wrote to the Corinthian church these powerful words, ***“Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. (I Corinthians 3:8).***

Not that someone had a greater, more important job than another – the point is that we serve in whatever way and wherever we are placed on the chess board of our own world by the providence of God.

This was Paul’s encouragement to the Philippian church who financially supported him – and he wrote to them to thank them and inform them of this incredible principle that because of their support ***the fruit of his labor would abound to their account. (Philippians 1:22 & 4:17)***

Imagine being included in the fruit and reward of the Apostle Paul!

Ladies and Gentlemen, whether you are a servant in the king’s house or the queen . . . you stand and serve and you are fully rewarded as a co-laborer with Christ.

Submit to the providence of God – wherever He has placed you and however He has made you and whatever He has assigned you . . . today.

One author told a story that illustrates this point. He had traveled on one occasion to India and he noticed a father and his little boy weaving some of the most beautiful Indian wedding saris he had ever seen. He explains – and I’ll read – The sari is, of course, the garment worn by Indian women. It is usually six yards long. Wedding saris are a work of art; they are rich in gold and silver threads, resplendent with an array of colors. The place I was visiting was known for making the best wedding saris in the world. I expected to see some elaborate system of machines and designs that would boggle the mind. Not so! Each sari was being made individually by this father and son team. The father sat above on a platform two-to-three feet higher than his son, surrounded by several spools of thread, some dark, some shining. The son did just one thing. At a nod from his father, he would move the shuttle from one side to the other side and back again. The father would gather some threads in his fingers, no once more, and the boy would move the shuttle again. This would be repeated for days . . . for hundreds of hours . . . until you would begin to see a magnificent pattern emerging. The son had the easier task – just to move at his father’s nod. All along, the father had the design in his mind and he brought the threads together. The more I reflect on my own life and study the lives of other believers – I am fascinated to see the design God has for each of us – it is His to design . . . it is ours to respond in obedience.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/6/2011 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2011 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

-
- i A. Boyd Luter & Barry C. Davis, God Behind the Seen: Expositions of the Books of Ruth and Esther (Baker, 1995), p. 286
- ii J. Vernon McGee, Esther: The Romance of Providence (Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 112
- iii Charles R. Swindoll, Esther: A Woman of Strength & Dignity (Word Publishing, 1997), p. 132
- iv Karen H. Jobes, The NIV Application Commentary: Esther (Zondervan, 1999), p. 165
- v Anthony Tomasino, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Esther (Zondervan, 2009), p. 496
- vi Luter & Davis, p. 296
- vii Jobes, p. 166