

TONY EVANS



Pathways

From Providence to Purpose

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PROLOGUE

Setting the Stage



Everybody loves a story.

A good story. A grand story. A spectacular story.

A story of mystery, intrigue, suspense, and surprise with, of course, some sparkle spread within.

Such is the story of Esther.

Such is the story of Gideon.

Such is the story of Cinderella.

Such is the story of Pederson.

Now, stick with me—even if you've never heard of the name Pederson. I realize this name may have thrown you a bit. And while you might not recognize who he is, I would wager that you will recognize what he did.

But let's start with someone else first. Let's start with someone we all know.

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Cue Cinderella.

Cinderella is a fictional character who somehow comes across as more real than many people we know. Maybe it's because we can identify with the hope of her story. We long for her trajectory to be our own. Cinderella started out living with a wicked stepmother and two equally wicked stepsisters. Essentially, she was made to live as a slave. The problem with Cinderella was that she got stuck there. She became locked in a situation which she had no control to change.

But you know how the story turns, twists, and flips for the characters involved. You know about the ball, and that through a series of miraculous interventions, she was transported to the ball in a carriage. There she met a prince. The prince saw Cinderella and loved her. But the problem in the story, as you know, is that the clock struck midnight. When the clock hit midnight, she reverted back to her old place. She became a slave again to an evil stepmother and two evil stepsisters.

The amazing part of Cinderella's story is that the prince never forgot her. Even though there had been a lot of people at the ball, there was something about her that made her stand out from the crowd. She was special. She was unique. She was rare. Everyone wanted the prince, but the prince wanted Cinderella.

All he had to work with in order to find her again, though, was a shoe that she had left behind. If he could find the foot that fit the shoe, he would have found Cinderella. So he set out going house to house in search of his princess. After a long and hard search, the

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prince finally found Cinderella. And, as the story goes, they lived happily ever after.

Hers is a rags-to-riches story whose familiarity is nearly equal to us all. Hers is a great story, which lights up the eyes of hearers from toddlers to adults. But her story is fiction. It's not true. The one I'm about to tell you is as true as they come. It's not about a prince or a princess. But it does end with a trip to a castle, if that helps. It's about Pederson, a man most of you may not know at all.

Even if you are one of those few who doesn't follow football or fancy sports, most people do know who wins the annual showdown known as the Super Bowl. Nearly half of all Americans tune in, according to Nielson. Headlines dominate friends' social media posts and the actual news alike for weeks on end. It's hard to miss who grabbed that shiny silver trophy at the end of each season. Especially when it is an upset. Especially when it is an unexpected win. Especially when an underdog comes out on top, or perhaps (in the case of Doug Pederson) we can call them an "underbird."

Pederson did coach the *Eagles*, after all. And the Eagles did pull off one of the most unexpected victories of all time in the 2017–2018 NFL season. In fact, they did it more than once; they did it thrice. Yes, three times.

The Eagles were officially the underdogs going into each of their three post-season playoff games. No one thought they could win. Each and every week, no one believed they could beat the team that had been pitted against them. No one gave them any chance at all. Except for them, that is.

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But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Why did no one give this team a chance, despite a winning record on the season and home-field advantage in two of the three games? Well, in football, you need to know that the quarterback is king. In fact, many consider him to be the most critical player on the field. That's why quarterbacks get paid the largest salaries. They can carry a team on their shoulders or toss them away for a loss simply based on how they play. Lose your star quarterback and you may just lose the entire season.

Take a look at the Green Bay Packers in the same season, as an example. Heading into week six of the NFL season, they had four wins to just one loss under the prowess of their quarterback Aaron Rodgers. Yet after Rodgers broke his collarbone in that game, the team tallied up only three wins to a whopping eight losses in the remainder of the season. Lose the king and you lose the chance at getting the victory crown.

Or so they say.

Which is exactly what they did say about Pederson's Eagles when their star quarterback, Carson Wentz, went down and out with a season-ending injury and still two games left in the year. While the Eagles had been on the pathway to the playoffs up until that time, nearly everyone—including myself—wrote them off after that. After all, how could any team make it to the Super Bowl on the arm of a backup quarterback?

Not only that, but Coach Pederson had only been a head coach in the NFL for two years. In fact, a decade earlier he was coaching

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a Christian high school team. Yes, *high school*. And a decade before coaching high school? Well, Pederson was just a backup quarterback in the same city (Philadelphia) for the same team (Eagles) he now coached in the playoffs. And sure, while most people might assume that's actually a good thing, it wasn't in Pederson's case.

This is because fans in Philadelphia hated him. They didn't want him on their team. In fact, fans hated Pederson so much that they would literally spit on him when he walked out of the tunnel and onto the field. Now, if you think getting spit on is bad, it only got worse as the games wore on. Eventually, the fans expressed their hatred for Pederson by throwing batteries at him, along with their beer.¹ Now, whether you follow football or not, you can probably discern that for a fan to throw the over-priced beer which is sold at the game just so he can express his emotions . . . well, that's saying a lot. They hated him.

These were fans from Philadelphia too. These were not the attendees from other cities. These were Eagles fans throwing batteries and beer at their own backup quarterback Doug Pederson. That's how much they did not want him on their team. That's how much they did not want him to play. And, well, that's not normal. It's not normal for fans to do that to one of their own players. Especially in a city whose very name—Philadelphia—means “brotherly love.” This hatred ran deep. And while I can imagine those batteries hit hard, I bet the humiliation hurt even more.

“It was those large ones . . . those ‘D’ ones,” Pederson would later say when asked to recount his previous stint in Philadelphia

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shortly after being hired to coach the team. Not such fond memories from a city with not-much-brotherly-love after all.

But despite the beer and despite the batteries (“those large ones . . . those ‘D’ ones”) thrown at him decades earlier, Pederson had made the choice to come back to Philadelphia to coach. He had come back to coach in a city that once loathed him.

And here they were now entering the playoffs with Pederson at the helm. Pederson would need courage, wisdom, restraint, and faith to lead this underdog along the pathway to victory. This was the team, after all, whom everyone had written off when they had lost their starting quarterback weeks earlier. This was also the team whose highest-paid player was on the defensive side of the ball. (That’s inside talk for no huge stars at all.) Without an offense to score points, football games are rarely won. Let alone playoff games against the best of the best. And certainly not a Super Bowl against the dynasty known and feared as the 5-time champions, the New England Patriots, whose quarterback Tom Brady goes by the name “Comeback King.” This wasn’t just a David and Goliath battle. This was David and a whole army of Goliaths.

But this also wasn’t the first time Coach Pederson had found himself on the path of what most considered to be a no-win competition. Remember when I mentioned he coached high school football years before? That history is important because it was in the context of his past that Pederson learned what he needed for his present. God’s providential placement had Pederson in the trenches of a similar battle years before he would come onto the national,

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and international, stage. It was there that he was sharpened, humbled, encouraged, led, and developed. It was there that his team, Calvary Baptist, faced their own Goliath of sorts. And it was there that Pederson learned how to lead an underdog to victory.

The opponent was known as Evangel. And despite Evangel's seventeen-year undefeated streak against district opponents, Pederson prepared his team to face them with confidence. Despite Evangel's decisive previous wins over Calvary Baptist with scores resembling credit card security codes more than football scores (55–3 and 42–6), he motivated his players to believe they could win. And despite Evangel being a nationally ranked team with nine players on the offense being named D-1 (a high honor in high school football), somehow and somehow Pederson managed to put together a team to win when winning meant the most.

It might have been the hours upon hours he required his players to spend with him watching game film before school, during lunch, and after school again. Many players later recalled how they studied more film in high school than they were ever asked to study at college or in the NFL.

It also might have been the one-on-one comradery Pederson instilled in his players by getting on their level and practicing with them while holding nothing back from his own 6 feet 3, 230 pounds strength. Even to the point that he literally broke several of his players' fingers with the power of his passes.

It could be that Pederson raised their level of confidence by speaking to them in ways reflective of how he felt about them and

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not according to what others said. He calibrated their own convictions about their skills based on what he believed and not on what the culture said concerning their capacity, or lack thereof. On a level of football where one- or two-word plays was considered the standard for what players could handle, Pederson raised that standard and gave his players much more complicated plays. For example, instead of “Spread Right” being called on its own, he had them remember things like, “Spread Right 76 Smash Minus Over Protection,” and then some.

This alone demonstrated how much Pederson believed in them. And, as a result, Pederson’s players wound up believing in themselves too.

Calvary Baptist went on to beat their Goliath, toppling that seventeen-year district win streak. A decade later, Pederson’s Eagles went on to beat their Goliath too, cutting off the head of the most dominant dynasty in this decade of football.

What’s more is that the Eagles did it with that backup quarterback few people believed could, Nick Foles. This is the same backup quarterback who had doubts about himself as well, when he contemplated retiring from football altogether just a year before this game. This is also the same backup quarterback whose childhood hero played opposite him in this final Bird vs. Goliath Super Bowl. The same backup quarterback who had been cut from another team just two seasons before, with his release from that team embarrassingly captured on television for the whole world to

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see. The coach who had let him go casually dismissed him by saying, “Hey—good luck. And I hope you land on your feet.”

Yes, that backup quarterback. He did more than land on his feet, though. He flew.

This same backup quarterback flew through Super Bowl LII, throwing for nearly four hundred yards and three touchdowns. Not only that, but he also set a record with the opposing team’s quarterback, his childhood hero, for most offensive yards in the history of all Super Bowls. Oh, and yes, he did something more. He set his own record as well, becoming the first quarterback to ever catch a touchdown in a Super Bowl. You read that right—*catch*.

In a bizarre twist of fate, the guy on the team who throws the ball actually caught it for a touchdown. This remarkable play, something that had never happened before, is now known forever by fans worldwide as the “Philly Special.”

The Philly Special

It was fourth and goal from the one-yard line in the second quarter of the game. That early on in a game, most coaches would settle for kicking a field goal. Especially a coach with a backup quarterback on hand. But not Pederson. He believed in Foles. He believed in his athletic abilities. The same coach who had taught his high schoolers eight-word plays wound up boiling this next play down to just two. It was called the *Philly Special*. And, oh, was it special. So special that the team sought to keep it quiet in the

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weeks leading up to the game by rarely even practicing it during the regular workouts. It was later reported that they had practiced the “play” in the Radisson Hotel in the Mall of America to try and keep the surprise factor in place for the opponent. I can tell you that the rest of us watching were just as surprised as the Eagles hoped.

Fourth and goal is often a run-play if a play is to be run at all. But instead, Pederson and Foles talked before the call and Foles urged him to run the *Special*,² a gutsy call to say the least. To throw to your backup quarterback on fourth down when you are playing against Goliath and the Comeback King where every single point matters is not something anyone else would probably ever do.

But Pederson called the play. Foles relayed it to his teammates in the huddle, eyes widening as they heard. Then the center hiked the ball to the running back who then gave it to the tight end who then threw it to the quarterback who then hauled it in for the score.

Touchdown Eagles!

Fans went wild. Announcers hit replay again and again and again. It’s as if they couldn’t believe it unless they saw it for the third, fourth, fifth, or sixth time. The stadium shook as it would at a Gladiator event. Undecided fans started rooting for Philadelphia. After all, who doesn’t love a Cinderella story? Which is exactly what Foles, Pederson, and the rest of the Eagles lived out right before millions of our eyes. Later named the Super Bowl MVP, Foles even went to Cinderella’s castle with his wife and daughter for the obligatory Disney World parade the very next day.

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But maybe football isn't quite biblical enough for you or for setting up the subject we are about to journey into together on God's providential hand. Perhaps a Cinderella story shouldn't be where I start to set the stage. Would it help if I went straight to Scripture itself and we looked at a man named Gideon?

Or maybe I don't even need to do that myself. Another Eagles player already did. In a postgame interview on how the Eagles pulled off this victory, the tight end who made the magical pass, Trey Burton, said,

Our team? The only thing I can really compare it to is the story of Gideon. There is a story of Gideon in Judges 7 in the Bible where a bunch of people go into a battle and God tells them it's too much—too many guys, and if they go to battle with that many people, God wouldn't get the glory.

Burton then encouraged the sports reporter to go read the story of Gideon for himself, finishing up with, "It's really similar to what happened to the guys with this team."³

Likewise, the former star quarterback who had to sit the Super Bowl out due to an injury said something like this in a social media post. He had put it up the morning of the big game. Wentz posted a photo of himself sitting next to Foles, along with this:

God's writing an unbelievable story, and he's getting all the glory! Let's roll boys. #FlyEaglesFly⁴

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God's writing an unbelievable story. Which is exactly what God loves to do. Time and time again, He maneuvers, moves, tweaks, twists, turns, and flips the script of life in order to pen a story for the ages. He wrote one for the Eagles. He wrote one for Gideon. He wrote one for Pederson. He wrote one for Esther. He is writing one for you.

God writes the kinds of stories where what you wind up reading isn't what you expected to read at all. These are storybook endings to improbable, even impossible, situations.

But the key to arriving at your own storybook ending in life is what we will explore in these pages together. The key to your

*God's writing an
unbelievable story.
Which is exactly what
God loves to do.*

arrival comes in how you handle the path. It comes in whether or not you even remain on the path, as well as in how you respond when situations turn south real fast. Do you hesitate? Do you quit? Do you choose an easier, better lit path instead?

The key to your arrival at the destined purpose God has for you comes in how you navigate around the thrown beer and D-sized batteries that life has a way of throwing at you.

Who do you listen to when others say that you will never live up to your own dreams and desires?

Whose voice guides you when people say you'll never make anything of yourself?

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Or when it appears that the relationship you are struggling to keep will never be restored?

The career could never take off. The finances could never be reversed. They give up on you, with an obligatory sentiment of sympathy, “I hope you land on your feet.”

But like Cinderella, like Foles, like Pederson, like Gideon, and like Esther, the key to reaching your destiny is staying on the providential pathway God has set you on, despite your desire to quit. It’s learning how to fly despite your inability to even, at times, walk. It’s discovering the power of perspective and the fuel of faith.

It’s in understanding and embracing the doctrine of providence, even when it looks like God is nowhere to be found.

No other story in the Bible highlights this doctrine for us as clearly as the story of Esther. The story of Esther is a shocker because what you read in chapter after chapter and verse after verse is not what is supposed to happen. There are lives toppled who had once looked secure. There are twists and turns that come unexpected.

But there is something else about the story of Esther that sets it apart from all other stories in the Bible. This book is unique among the sixty-six books that comprise the Canon because it never mentions God’s name. It is the only book with no direct reference to God. Every other book mentions God over and over and over again. But in the ten chapters of Esther, you will not find the name of God at all. Which creates a question: Why would God put in His canonical writings something that never mentions Him?

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I believe it is because God wanted to use this Cinderella story to teach us something about Him. He wanted to help us see His fingerprints. To teach us how to identify them. To reveal to us what it looks like when He organizes and maneuvers things toward His providential plan. God will often stay in the background while controlling the activity of the foreground. We may not overtly see Him in the various situations of our lives, but He is the great Puppet-Master, pulling the strings by either causing or allowing things to happen toward His intended end.

He makes this point crystal clear to us in this Cinderella story of sorts. He gives us a peek behind the curtain, equipping us with the tools we need to discern when He is working and how best to follow His lead. And He does it all through a story. It's true that our minds and hearts love the art of a good story, thus Esther has been scripted in story form. It's a motion picture, if you will, displayed on the screens of our souls.

Thus, unlike most books I write and sermons I preach which revolve around a topic or principle, this one will follow the pathway of the narrative from start to finish. We'll go through each chapter of Esther's book as if we were watching it play out on the screen or on a stage. We will progress as it progresses. Walk where it takes us. Turn where it turns. Climb, or descend, as the story does. In so doing, we will gain insights as the insights are revealed, as each chapter unfolds before us.

My hope for this book is that in reading it, you will learn to discover the power of providence in the midst of your personal

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pain, fear, gain, loss, and even love. What's more, I want you to discover the very personal nature of God as He maneuvers humanity along multiple pathways, intersecting each of us in His intended aim. God is the greatest storyteller—the Puppet-Master behind the scenes. When you learn how to locate Him in the midst of what appears to be His absence, trusting Him along the dark pathways life often offers, you will be perfectly positioned on your own unique pathway of purpose. It is on that path where you will discover in what ways you, too, have been created and placed in your own spectacular story for such a time as this.

CHAPTER ONE

The Puppet-Master



Read the prologue.

Many people skip it—in fact, most people skip it. But I highly recommend you go back and read the prologue if you did skip it. It sets the stage for the story. It lays the stones toward the pathway we are about to trod on together. It gives the context for why we are here. It introduces us to the Puppet-Master.

God is the great Puppet-Master, working behind the curtains of what we can see. With a slight twitch of His hand, He can change an entire scene. With the movement of His arm, He rearranges the characters in the narrative of your day. God is constantly moving, turning, maneuvering, and establishing all things in His providence toward His intended aim. Even, and especially, when you cannot see Him at all.

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No metaphor is perfect, so it's important, before we move forward, to point out one caveat. Puppets do not have freedom. They are unable to make choices. The amazing thing about God's providence is that He is able to work all things according to His purposes *without negating human freedom and choices*. Though we cannot fully understand how this is possible, the Bible is clear on these two truths: God is sovereign, and humans really and truly choose their actions.

There are many times in life's circumstances when you look for God and He is simply un-locatable. We all know this. We all experience this. There are many times when it seems like God is allowing things to happen to you that, if He truly cared about you, He would never allow them to happen at all. Kind of like Pederson getting the D-sized batteries and beer thrown at his head. (*It's in the prologue.*)

Then there are those times when your needs mount, your confusion culminates in chaos, and you wonder which way to go. Yet it seems like God is not there to guide you. It feels as if you are walking along a dark, scary path alone.

Like the biblical character Job, you may scratch your head and whisper quietly enough so that no one around you hears your fear. Like Job, you may wonder where God even is. Like Job, you may mumble quietly, "But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him" (Job 23:8–9 NIV).

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Job felt alone. Job felt forgotten. Job felt forsaken by God Himself.

Have you ever felt like Job? If we were to be honest, we all have. It's human to feel this way. God's seen it before. He knows our frame. He knows we are just modified dust (Ps. 103:14). It is in those times when we just want God to show up with some skin on so He can let us know He is still there. It is in those times when we reach for Him, but like the wind, He escapes our grasp. It is in those times when His invisible hand eludes us even while His words continue to urge us to keep walking the path He has called us on. But do we take the next step? Do we walk in faith? Or do we refuse to move forward, wanting instead to hear our own version of the whispered words we've read on the dusty pages of Scripture where God lets it be known He is there? Words such as:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are mine. I will be with you when you pass through the waters, and when you pass through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. You will not be scorched when you walk through the fire, and the flame will not burn you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, and your Savior.” (Isa. 43:1b–3a)

“I will be the same until your old age, and I will bear you up when you turn gray. I have made you, and I will carry you; I will bear and rescue you.” (Isa. 46:4)

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“I will go before you and level the uneven places; I will shatter the bronze doors and cut the iron bars in two. I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches from secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD. I am the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.” (Isa. 45:2–3)

“Be strong and courageous; don’t be terrified or afraid of them. For the LORD your God is the one who will go with you; he will not leave you or abandon you.” (Deut. 31:6)

“Haven’t I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” (Josh. 1:9)

We long to hear something like that. Anything, really. Assurances from God to let us know that He knows where we are and where He is taking us. Assurances that we should not be afraid, but rather have courage and rest in His presence and power. Even when it seems as if He is nowhere to be found.

If you have ever felt like that, my friend, you are not alone. In fact, it is such a common occurrence that God speaks a lot about it in His Word. There is even a theology tied to His invisibility. It is a theology known as *providence*.

The providence of God—a doctrinal subset underneath the overarching doctrine known as *sovereignty*—is such a critical spiritual truth that knowing and living by it can radically transform your life. When you are able to discern how God providentially

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works in history as well as in the present, you are able to move along the pathways of life with a purpose and intention that will propel you forward. Even in those moments, days, weeks, months, or even years when you don't seem to see God, feel God, or hear from God at all, you will know that He is pulling the strings behind the scenes. He is the Great Puppet-Master, directing your divine destiny on this stage called life. Knowing this will enable you to make choices according to His will and kingdom agenda, rather than out of your own reaction for self-preservation or control.

In fact, one of God's chief theological attributes is His sovereignty. Sovereignty simply refers to His rulership over all of His creation. According to Ephesians 1:11, He does all things after the counsel of His own will. In Romans 11:36 we read, "For from him and through him and to him are all things."

Absolutely nothing escapes His rule and influence. God is in charge of all things because He has created and sustains all things.

Thus, as we start our journey together through the depths, clefts, and mountaintops that make up God's providential terrain, understanding His kingdom gives us the markers which guide our travel. But to understand God's rule, we must first understand what He rules: His kingdom.

*Absolutely nothing
escapes His rule and
influence.*

Now, if you are an American, you are most likely an American because you were born here. If you are a part of the kingdom of

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God, it is because you have been born again into His kingdom. The reason why you do not want to miss a full comprehension of the kingdom as you seek to understand providence and sovereignty is not only because it affects your understanding of these two things, but it also is the key to understanding the entire Bible. The unifying central theme throughout the Bible is the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom. The conjoining thread from Genesis to Revelation—from beginning to end—is focused on one thing: God’s glory through advancing God’s kingdom.

When you do not understand that theme, then the Bible becomes disconnected stories that are great for inspiration but seem to be unrelated in purpose and direction. The Bible exists to share God’s movement in history toward the establishment and expansion of His kingdom, highlighting the connectivity throughout which is the kingdom. Understanding that increases the relevancy of this several-thousand-year-old manuscript to your day-to-day living, because the kingdom is not only then, it is now.

Throughout the Bible, the kingdom of God is His rule, His plan, His program. God’s kingdom is all-embracing. It covers everything in the universe. In fact, we can define the kingdom as God’s comprehensive rule over all creation. It is the rule of God and not the rule of man that is paramount.

Now if God’s kingdom is comprehensive, so is His kingdom agenda. The kingdom agenda, then, may be defined as *the visible manifestation of the comprehensive rule of God over every area of life*. That has serious implications for us. The reason so many of us

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believers are struggling is that we want God to bless our agenda rather than us fulfilling His. We want God to okay our plans rather than our fulfilling His. We want God to bring us glory rather than us bringing glory to Him.

But it doesn't work that way. God has only one plan—His kingdom plan. We need to find out what that is so we can make sure we're working on God's plan, not ours.

The Greek word the Bible uses for kingdom is *basileia*, which basically means a “rule” or “authority.” Included in this definition is the concept of power. So when we talk about a kingdom, we're talking first about a king or a ruler. We're talking about someone who is in charge. Now if there is a ruler, there also have to be “rulees,” or kingdom subjects. In addition, a kingdom includes a realm; that is, a domain over which the king rules. If you're going to have a ruler, rulees, and a realm, you also need kingdom regulations, guidelines that govern the relationship between the ruler and the subjects. These are necessary so that the rulees will know whether they are doing what the ruler wants done. Finally, there are also rebels. All of us begin rebelling against the rule of God; it takes His softening work in our hearts to turn us from rebels into rulees.

God's kingdom includes all of these elements. He is the absolute ruler of His domain, which encompasses all of creation. Likewise, His authority is total. Everything God rules, He runs—even when it doesn't look like He's running it. Even when life looks like it's out of control, God is running its “out-of-controlness.”

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God's kingdom also has its "rules." Colossians 1:13 says that everybody who has trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior has been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, your allegiance has been changed. You no longer align yourself with Satan but with Christ.

And just in case there's any doubt, let me say right now that there are no in-between kingdoms, no shades of gray here. There are only two realms in creation: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. We are subjects of one or the other.

The problem we have in the Christian culture today is that people misdefine God's kingdom. Some people secularize and politicize the kingdom, which means they think the solutions to

Getting into God's kingdom is through conversion, but getting God's kingdom into the manifestations of your everyday life comes through commitment and discipleship.

our problems are going to fly into town on *Air Force One*. God's kingdom agenda is much bigger than the political and social realm; neither is it limited to the walls of the church. When you were saved, the kingdom of God was set up within you so that it might be best positioned to reach outwardly while directing the circumference of your life.

Trusting Jesus Christ for your salvation will get you to heaven. But trusting Jesus Christ for your salvation doesn't automatically get heaven to come down to you.

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Getting into God's kingdom is through conversion, but getting God's kingdom into the manifestations of your everyday life comes through commitment and discipleship.

Commitment results only when the Jesus you placed your faith in is also the Jesus who rules within you—in the kingdom of which you are a part. God's kingdom goal is to manifest in history the operations of heaven in every area of your life. Therefore, when history is not reflecting heaven (Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" [Matt. 6:10]), then God's kingdom is not visible. His kingdom is only visible when history emulates heaven. His providence is only palatable when the byways and pathways of His kingdom are the ones you choose to travel.

Linking Sovereignty and Providence

Providence references how God controls the spinning wheel of history behind the scenes. As I mentioned earlier, it is a subset of sovereignty. In other words, one way that He achieves His sovereignty is by His providence. The providence of God is the miraculous and mysterious way in which He intersects and interconnects things in order to bring about His sovereignty.

God's sovereignty is what He wants to happen.

God's providence is where He sets things up and connects them so that His sovereignty does happen.

Where we often misunderstand things is in the area of providence. This is because without a full awareness of where things

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are headed (sovereignty), we might wonder about the providential choices of God along the way. There are times when God will allow or even cause things to happen that seemingly appear to be in contradiction to what He wants. For God to achieve His ultimate sovereign purposes, He will at times providentially allow things to take place that are outside of His preferences. This is because in His sovereignty, God will allow things He does not prefer in order to accomplish His ultimate plan. It is only when you understand the link between providence and sovereignty that you will become conscious of God's fingerprints in the midst of His "apparent" absence. He will often only leave behind fingerprints that show up when dusted. We don't always get to see how God weaves and twists and tweaks things to take us to our intended destination and purpose. He operates behind the scenes, pulling the strings and setting the stage in ways that sometimes confuse, frustrate, and confound us. But also in ways that produce the greatest outcome and result.

Take baking a cake, for example. If you were to consider eating butter, eggs, flour, sugar, or any other ingredient in a cake all by itself, you would wind up with a mess that tastes awful. No one puts a tablespoon of flour straight into their mouth. You just don't do that. What you do, instead, is blend them together in order to create a cake. Something delightful results out of the combination, not out of each thing examined and eaten on its own.

Similarly, your destiny results out of the combination of providential ingredients mixed together and often, like a cake baked in an oven, is sealed through the heat and fire of testing, trials, and

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challenges. When you and I look at our individual situations on their own, it's often easy to feel overwhelmed or less-than-satisfied. That's why wrapping your mind around the link between providence and sovereignty is essential in motivating your participation on this path. Otherwise, you may just want to give up instead.

Friend, God can take the flour of your failures, the sugar of your successes, the cream of your circumstances, and mix them all together in His sovereign blender to achieve His purposes through His providence. And to illustrate how this works, He placed a book called Esther within the Canon of Scripture so that we would see an entire story where His name does not even appear, and no overt references of Him are made. He did this to support His truth which says:

Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Savior of Israel. (Isa. 45:15 NIV)

A person's heart plans his way, but the LORD determines his steps. (Prov. 16:9)

Many plans are in a person's heart, but the LORD's decree will prevail. (Prov. 19:21)

No wisdom, no understanding, and no counsel will prevail against the LORD. (Prov. 21:30)

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The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.
(Ps. 33:10–11 NIV)

God *is* sovereign, yes. But because He has granted freedom to us as human beings, He has to incorporate providential involvement in order to achieve His sovereignty. He will not allow our freedom to thwart His purposes, so He must stitch the freedom of humanity into His plans in such a way as to create a tapestry called destiny. This includes even using (never condoning) sin, sinners, and Satan to accomplish His sovereign purposes.

Before we dive into the story of Esther, let's take a deeper look at these principles of sovereignty to set the stage for the saga we'll explore. Consider it the cake platter upon which the cake will one day sit. Our understanding of sovereignty is the foundation for all else to come.

God's Overarching Goal

One of the most referenced Scriptures when it comes to this truth is Romans 8:28. You may even know it by heart. It's a favorite verse of many people. It is a powerful verse because it brings to light this issue of sovereignty and also of providence. It says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (NASB).

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The key word in this passage is *causes*. God's position as supreme ruler over all that He has created gives Him the opportunity and responsibility to "cause" whatever He wants to cause. No matter how difficult the journey, no matter how challenging the trip, and no matter how precarious the pathways, providence means God caused it for a greater purpose.

Most of you have probably heard of the city Providence, Rhode Island. This city was named Providence as the colonies were being established. The pilgrims felt that God had overseen the events leading them to their safe arrival as well as the provisions that were made for them when they landed. Thus, they attached God's sovereign intervention to the name of where they chose to reside. It would serve as a constant reminder that despite how things may have once appeared, He had a destination He had been taking them to all along.

Providence is God's governance of all events, which means by exclusion that there is really no such thing as luck, chance, or happenstance. There is nothing left to fate at all. Romans 8:28 doesn't say that God causes some things to work together. Rather, it says He causes them *all*.

*There is really no such
thing as luck, chance, or
happenstance.*

And while the pilgrims may have named their town of Providence rightly, not all of our founding fathers had an accurate understanding of God's invisible hand. A good number of them

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were what is called “deists.” Deists are those who believe in a God who created everything but then left it alone to run itself. This is sort of like winding up a clock and then letting that wind work its way out on its own. In a sense, a deist believes that God has abandoned His creation to churn its way through the natural laws He established. Thus, God is a long-distance God to them. He is not eminently involved in day-to-day life.

Yet the principle of providence argues that God has not abandoned the world, but rather works within His creation to *cause* everything to conform to His unchangeable will. In fact, Colossians 1:17 says clearly, “He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.” Not only does He hold everything together, He holds us together too. Acts 17 records:

The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives *everyone* life and breath and all things. (vv. 24–25, emphasis added)

Everything you and I have has been given to us as a direct result of God choosing to do so. There is nothing that you have received that was not either created by God or created by things that God created. You might want to read that sentence again, or underline it. It’s important. God produces each and every single thing. Because He does, He claims sovereignty over it all as well. He controls it. He is the consummate, and ultimate, micromanager. He is

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intricately, intimately involved in every single detail. He manages the universe and all of us in it to the highest degree possible. And if He didn't—if He just took a moment to step back and not hold the universe in place—we would all be obliterated in an instant.

From His vantage point, it all makes perfect sense. Yet from ours, time can seem marked by an endless array or series of contingencies that we may call “luck” or “chance” or even “random events.”

But that's just how it seems; that's not how it is. Because nothing is random with God. He is working out the details of everything, not just watching it transpire. What's more is that He is working out the details toward His intended goal. Once you and I come to understand His overarching goal, we can begin to understand His pathways.

God's ultimate goal always results in God's glory. Ephesians chapter 1 highlights this for us:

In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace . . . to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory . . . with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.
(vv. 4b–6a, 12, 14b NASB)

The primary reason God is working everything out toward His intended outcome is “to the praise of His glory.” God sets about

to guarantee all that He has created fulfills and satisfies its created purpose, which is to bring glory back to Himself.

Like it or not, God exists for His own glory. Now, you can fight that truth, fuss at it, argue it, not want it, reject it, accuse it, or anything else you want to do. But whatever you do about it, it's not going to change it. God exists for God. So does everything He made. He made it for Him. That's the reason it's here. That's the

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reason we're here. We are made for God. Our lives are not about us; they are about Him and His glory. If you don't care for that too much, then go and make your own universe, because He made this one, so He gets to set the rules.

Anything that competes with, negates, or downplays God's glory exists in a perpetual state of misalignment. It is out of order. God made *all* things to display His attributes, character, and power.

There is another reason, though, why God causes all things to work together. He does it for His glory, yes, but He also does it for us—for good. You'll recall Romans 8:28 says, ". . . causes all things to work together for good . . ." (NASB). Essentially, that means He is bringing about our benefit. The word *good* means "that which is beneficial." Thus, God is also seeking to bring about benefits and

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blessings in our own lives as well, in the lives of those who love Him and walk according to the paths of His purpose.

Please don't misread that verse to make it apply to everyone, everywhere. Too many people do that. It does not say that God causes all things in every single way to work out for good. No, it specifically refers to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Thus, there is bad in this world. Negative things do happen. The assumption that is often made when they do is that God must not be good Himself. But the presence of darkness doesn't negate the power of light. Light exists to drive out darkness, not to eliminate it entirely. Romans 8:28 doesn't say that God causes all things to *be* good. Rather, He integrates all things to work together *for* good in the lives of those who love Him and follow His paths. His is the invisible hand operating behind the scenes of the good, bad, and ugly in life. He manipulates and maneuvers the many circumstances toward His intended end.

One of our difficulties in remaining on the right path as we head toward our purpose is that we do not see the end. We get frustrated and feel lost when we can't see where we are headed. Have you ever felt frustrated when you were driving and you got lost? Or have you been with someone who got frustrated when they were driving and got lost? Yet when a map was found, or a GPS, or directions from a stranger that pointed the way—the frustrations fell away. This is because reaching the end came into sight.

What happens to us, though, in following God along the pathways of His providential leading is that He doesn't always give us

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the directions to the very end. He doesn't provide us with the full map view so we can see every turn we'll eventually take. He gives us a glimpse here, or a direction there, but rarely ever the entire picture. Thus, people often live in a perpetual state of frustration not knowing how each step, each day, each set of circumstances or conversations are leading to the right place. Without a full view of providence tied to a surrender to sovereignty, these frustrations can mount into an overwhelming cascade of emotions threatening you like an avalanche on a blizzard day.

Friend, nothing comes to you that doesn't pass through God's providential fingers first. You have to know that. You have to believe that. You have to trust that. You have to rest in that. That mind-set will situate you so that you can respond to life's challenges, setbacks, and apparent randomness with a spirit of intentionality and persevering faith.

When you recognize the idiosyncratic elements of the invisible hand of God, you will discover the details and direction leading you to your destiny.