



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1233-3

Esther 5:1-8:2

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June 9, 2002

When God Seems Absent

SERIES: *For Such a Time as This: Study of the Book of Esther*

What do you do when God is absent? A teacher walks into a classroom and takes roll. "John," she calls out.

"Here," says John.

"Lisa."

"Here"

"Bobby."

"Here."

But what do you do when you call out God's name and no one answers? You look up to see if he's in his seat but he's gone.

Isn't it true that life is filled with periods of silence when we wonder where God is? We can't hear his voice. We look toward the places where we've normally seen him, but he's not there.

Why don't we talk about this more? Think about it. I've heard some great sermons on how God spoke to Noah and told him to build an ark. And I've heard some great sermons on how the rains and floods came and Noah floated around for 40 days. But I can't remember a sermon on the 100-plus years in between. In those years, as day after day Noah sweat to build the ark, it doesn't appear God said anything.

I've heard some great sermons on Joseph. I've also heard some great sermons on Moses. But I've never heard a sermon on the 400-plus years, silent years of bitter bondage, that separated Joseph and Moses. And what about those years between the prophet Malachi, who closed out the NT, and the birth of Jesus Christ. Another four centuries where God was silent. No prophet spoke; no Scripture was written; just absolute, stark silence.

To be a believer in those days must have been like swimming in a huge lake and getting a ways off shore when suddenly this thick fog rolls in and envelops you. You're trapped in a tiny circle of diffused light. You can hardly see your hands in front of your face. You begin to swim towards the shore, at least you hope it's the shore, but you're not sure. You've completely lost your sense of direction. You begin to panic. Your heart begins to pound. You decide to float for a moment and rest, conserving strength, hoping that maybe in the silence you'll hear a voice from the shore, something to swim towards, but there's nothing.

It was that sense of panic and lostness that must have swept over Mordecai and Esther as they pondered the edict that had been sent out by the King through his wicked servant, Haman. This edict sanctioned the slaughter of all Jews in the Persian Empire on a set day in the not too distant future. These had to be days when God seemed absent. And yet, we who read the story of Esther years later know better. We know this is a book in which the name of God is never even mentioned. We know that there were times when Esther and Mordecai and their fellow Jews couldn't see God through the fog. And yet, we read this story and we see God's fingerprints all over it. The

message comes through, at least to us if not to them: When God seems absent, even when his name is not mentioned, he's present. When the fog rolls in and we can't see the shore, it's still there. No where is the invisible hand of God more evident than in chapters 5-7.

I. When God seems absent, he gives courage and guidance.

When we last saw Esther in chapter four she was at a defining moment in her life. Her cousin, Mordecai, had challenged her to intercede on behalf of her people, the Jews. He challenged her to see that this might have been the very purpose for which she had become Queen in the first place. Despite the risk, Esther decided she was willing to act. But first she called her people to engage in a three day fast. This would be a time of humbling themselves before God and crying out to him. So often we want to act first and pray later. But we learn from Esther how important it is for us to wait and pray. Isaiah wrote that "**those who wait upon the Lord will gain new strength**" (Is. 40:31).

When we come to chapter five we see Esther's strength and resolve. The moment of truth has come. "**Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance to the palace**" (v.1). Remember this was a very risky thing to do. Anyone who came to the inner court without being summoned would be killed, unless the king held out his golden scepter. Esther had not been summoned for thirty days! Imagine Esther - knees shaking, hands sweating, heart pounding out of her chest!

What will happen to Esther? "**And it happened when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his sight; and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which was in his hand. So Esther came near and touched the top of the scepter**" (v.2). We don't know exactly why, but she "obtains favor." The king knows that she wouldn't have taken such a risk without being desperate, and so he offers to give her whatever she wants. "**Then the king said to her, 'What is troubling you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it will be given to you'**" (v.3).

Now if I were Esther, I would jump on this! I would take this opportunity to bring the roof down on Haman. But when you've waited on God, you're not in a hurry. You're not rushing ahead. You have a sense of timing. Look what Esther says, "**And Esther said, 'If it please the king, may the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him'**" (v.4).

Isn't that something? It appears that Esther has a plan. She's thought this thing through. She knows the king likes to

party. So she invites him and Haman to a banquet. The king says, "Awesome idea, Esther! Banquets are my thing." **"Then the king said, 'Bring Haman quickly that we may do as Esther desires.' So the king and Haman came to the banquet which Esther had prepared. And, as they drank their wine at the banquet, the king said to Esther, 'What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done'"** (vv.5-6).

Okay, now we're finally at the moment of truth. The king has had a great meal. He's finished his dessert. The after dinner drinks are on the table. "Esther, whatever you want, it's yours!" Now is the time to lay it all out on the table. But Esther senses the time still isn't right. **"So Esther answered and said, 'My petition and my request is: if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet which I shall prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king says'"** (vv.7-8).

It might seem like Esther is just putting off the inevitable, but this is all part of God's timing. Let me ask you, where do you see God in this first scene? Remember the bigger picture. It would seem that the fog is everywhere for Esther and the Jews, but here we're beginning to see some light. When God seems absent, he's present. We see him giving Esther courage. Remember Esther was afraid. She had told Mordecai there was no way she could approach the king (4:11). Esther experienced fear just like we do, but God gave her courage and resolve. Do you think that had anything to do with three days of fasting and praying and waiting on Him? Of course it did.

God gives us courage to do the right thing. Some of you have been in bad relationships and you knew that God wanted you out. But you couldn't imagine saying the words. You couldn't imagine risking the loneliness that might ensue. But you waited on him and he gave you the strength to say the words. Some of you have had to approach a hostile boss, or teacher, or even a spouse. You waited on him and he gave you the courage.

We also see God preparing the king's heart. The text just says, "She obtained favor in his sight..." Remember Proverbs 21:1, **"The king's heart is like channels of water in the hands of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wishes."** Is there anyone who intimidates the Lord? He can handle anyone! He can handle your boss. He can handle your kids. He can handle your pastor. He can handle your ex-mate. He can handle your rebellious son or daughter. He can prepare their hearts and change their minds.

We also see God guiding Esther. Why did Esther put off her request...twice! Was she afraid? Was she buying time? Was she trying to butter him up or even loosen him up? We don't know. What we do know is that her waiting another day was absolutely crucial. We'll see how that very night something would happen that would put in the final piece of the puzzle and set the stage for her request. I have a hunch that Esther just sensed in her spirit that she needed to wait one more day. I think it was one of those gentle nudges by the Holy Spirit that she listened to.

He does that, you know. He guides us. With experience we learn to listen to his still small voice. Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about spooky stuff; hocus pocus Christianity. I get nervous around people who are constantly saying, "God told me to do this or that." Or, "God told me to drive over there so I could get that parking space. Praise the Lord!" Sometimes instead of saying "Praise the Lord" I want to recommend a good therapist! But God does guide his people, even in the fog. Sometimes through his Word, sometimes in prayer, sometimes through the counsel of a friend, sometimes through weighing the options and doing what seems right. But he guides us.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes before things get better they get worse? That night, the plot thickens even more.

II. When God seems absent, he works quietly, behind the scenes.

A. Haman's pride: Haman, the guy you love to hate, is strutting around like he's on cloud nine. Look at vv. 9-10, **"Then Haman went out that day glad and pleased of heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand up or tremble before him, Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai. Haman controlled himself, however, went to his house, and sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh."**

I like to rate bad guys. To have a great movie or book you have to have a really good bad guy. Literature buffs call him the antagonist. Haman's on the top of my all time great bad guy list. He walks out of the place thinking, "This is my day! I get a private audience with the king and the queen. They love me!" Can you imagine Haman at the office the next day? He'll drop a few names. "Oh yeah, I was with the king and the queen last night. I'll be heading over there tonight as well..."

But as soon as he walks out of the palace he runs smack into his nemesis, Mordecai. Talk about spoiling a guy's day! By the way, what's Mordecai doing? He's sitting by the king's gate. Remember, that means he had some kind of official job. Mordecai is back at work. The last time we saw him he couldn't be at the king's gate because he was weeping and wailing and mourning. But he's stopped that and he's gone back to work. He's a picture of confidence. He's a picture of a guy who does what he's supposed to be doing even when God seems absent. Haman walks out of the palace and Mordecai isn't impressed, nor is he intimidated. So Haman goes home and invites a few friends over so he can blow his own horn. **"Then Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, and the number of his sons, and every instance where the king had magnified him, and how he had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king. Haman also said, 'Even Esther the queen let no one but me come with the king to the banquet which she had prepared; and tomorrow also I am invited by her with the king'"** (vv.11-12).

Can you imagine having to be around this guy? Ya-da, ya-da, ya-da. Blah, blah, blah. Me, me, me. Everybody sits around and listens because they have to, but deep down they're thinking, "How long until this guy shuts up?" He tells them his net worth. He tells them how many sons he has (a Jewish Targum says Haman had 208 other sons besides the 10 by his wife. That's another story!). He tells of his promotions and his most recent invitation. Conceit ad nauseam.

May I just say to you men - stop talking about yourself. Stop blowing your own horn. Do you know what the most frequent complaint is I hear from single women about single men? They

seem to never stop talking about themselves. They never stop and ask her good questions, drawing her out, focusing on her. Proverbs says, **“Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips”** (Prov. 27:2).

But notice Haman is not satisfied. **“Yet all of this does not satisfy me every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate”** (v.13). Guys like this are never satisfied. They’re not satisfied until everybody honors them. If one single person doesn’t get in on the act, that becomes his sole focus. Mordecai is the fly in his soup.

Finally, his wife pipes up and says, **“Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, ‘Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it, then go joyfully with the king to the banquet.’ And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made”** (v.14).

Wonderful advice, huh? Godly woman, huh? Guys like this don’t need women who will nurse their self-pity. Guys like this need women who get in their face and say, “Would you stop! Would you just get off this Haman thing!” But no, she tells him to build a gallows fifty cubits high (seven-and-a-half stories) and hang Mordecai on it. “Gee Haman, what a bummer it would be to let Mordecai ruin your big night.” This is a sick and violent home.

Now the fog thickens even more. You can see what I mean that sometimes things get worse before they get better. Where’s God at times like this?

B. The king’s insomnia: The answer to that question comes in chapter six. This is the turning point of the entire story. It highlights how when the fog around our lives begins to suffocate us, God is at work. Quietly, subtly, he works behind the scenes. Look at 6:1-3, **“During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. And it was found written what Mordecai had reported concerning Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs who were doorkeepers, that they had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And the king said, ‘What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?’ Then the king’s servants who attended him said, ‘Nothing has been done for him.’”**

Right when things seem to be about as dark as they can get, the king can’t get to sleep. So he has one of his aides begin reading to him from the official records. He probably figures, “If anything will get me to sleep it’s that!” But as he listens, his ears perk up; something about a guy names Mordecai who foiled an assassination plot. “Wait a minute. I don’t remember that? What did we do for this Mordecai? Nothing?!”

Stop here. Think about this. This is not just about Mordecai, but God’s people are on the brink of extinction. God’s promise (covenant) is about to be nullified. God had promised the Jews they would be a great nation, the whole world would be blessed through them. What could possibly save them now? Answer? Insomnia! This whole story flips because the king couldn’t get to sleep on this particular night. And he just happened to request a little nighttime read, and he just happened to read about something that took place five years earlier, and it just happened to be about a Jew named Mordecai!

We look for God in the miracles - Red Sea kind of stuff! Any God worth his salt can do miracles to save his people. But the story of Esther says it differently. The story of Esther says, “Any God can do miracles. But our God; he can work without

miracles. Our God works through the ordinary events of billions of people’s lives through the millennia of time to accomplish his good purpose. Our God delivered us because the king of Persia couldn’t sleep!”

When God seems absent, he’s at work, quietly, behind the scenes, in the ordinary, mundane events of our lives. Think of the chain of circumstances that led to you hearing the gospel for the first time. Ordinary things, yet ordered by providence. Twenty-eight years ago I just happened to walk into a meeting on my college campus and sit down next to a young lady I’d never seen before. An ordinary thing, but that same woman has been my wife for the last 24 years. Providence! You can’t possibly know or see what he’s doing at any point in time, but there are no accidents with God. So trust him. He’s not absent. He’s at work. Not always in the miracles, but in the ordinary.

C. Mordecai’s honor: The question is, what will the king do with this information? Here is where things really start to move quickly. All of a sudden the king hears someone in the outer court of the palace. It’s probably right around dawn. He asks, “Who is in the court?” It’s Haman, who couldn’t wait to let the king in on his plans for Mordecai. Haman struts in like a peacock, but before he can speak the king asks in v. 6 asks, “Haman, what is to be done for the man the king desires to honor?”

This is a great moment! The king is thinking Haman could help him out with honoring Mordecai. But fat-headed Haman thinks the king wants to honor him. Of course he thinks that! This guy carries around a personal videotape of his own accomplishments. Haman’s loving this. His hat size just grew another inch! He’s thinking, “This is great! Let’s see, I don’t need money. I’ve got plenty of that. I don’t need a promotion. I’m as high up as you can go without becoming king. I don’t need more sons! Actually, what I would really like is a little bit more recognition.” He says, **“Then Haman said to the king, ‘For the man whom the king desires to honor, let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed; and let the robe and the horse be handed over to one of the king’s most noble princes and let them array the man whom the king desires to honor and lead him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, ‘Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor’”** (v.7-9).

The king thinks, “Man, this guy has thought this thing through. He’s got quite an imagination. Sounds like a great idea! So the king says to Haman in v. 10, **“Then the king said to Haman, ‘Take quickly the robes and the horse as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew, who is sitting at the king’s gate; do not fall short in anything of all that you have said.’”**

Don’t you love the Bible? What a moment! Imagine the look on Haman’s face! And guess what Haman gets to do? He gets to be the “noble prince” who leads Mordecai around the city square, calling out, “This is the man whom the king desires to honor.” One commentator writes, “The words Haman had to proclaim must have been like gravel in his mouth.”

There is a great line in of Rudyard Kipling’s poems. It says, “If you can dream and not make dreams your master;

if you can think and not make thoughts your aim. If you can meet with triumph and disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same..."

The chapter ends by telling us what Mordecai did and what Haman did. How would Mordecai deal with this triumph? Look at v. 12a, **"Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate."** After all of that, you'd think Mordecai would be feeling pretty darn good. Finally, he gets to see his arch rival grovel. Finally, he gets the recognition he deserved for saving the king's life. You'd think he'd invite a few friends over and tell them all about it like Haman did. But he just goes back to his post. You get the feeling he could care less about the accolades. He shrugs and says, "Haman, just drop me off back at the king's gate."

Back in 1880 Alexander Raleigh wrote about this: "A proud ambitious man would have said to himself, 'No more of the king's gate for me! I shall direct myself now to the king's palace, and hold myself ready for honor...which surely must now be at hand.' Mordecai seems to have said to himself, 'If these things are designed for me in God's good providence, they will find me. But they must seek me, for I shall not seek them. Those who confer them know my address: Mordecai, at the king's gate. Let the crowd wonder and disperse. I have had enough of their incense. Let Haman go where he will. He is in the hands of the Lord. Let my friends at home wait; they will all hear in time. I can wait best at the old place and in the accustomed way - at the king's gate."

The Bible says that he who humbles himself will be exalted and he who exalts himself will be humbled. How about you? Have you been promoted? Has providence been good to you so that you are a position of honor? If so, are you still comfortable at the king's gate, or must you now hang out at the king's palace? Do you have to be treated with kid gloves and special care, not to be bothered with every day problems? Or are you like Mordecai: "Just drop me off at the king's gate where all this started." That's where he was when the chapter began and that's where he is when it ends. Like the country western song, "Look how far I had to come to get back where I started from." When the fog rolls in, and God seems absent, and we try to believe that he's at work in the ordinary, what do we do? We go back to the king's gate. We stay at our post. We let God exalt us in his time and in his way, and when he does, we don't forget where we started from.

On the other hand, for Haman this spells disaster. Look at vv. 12b-13, **"But Haman hurried home, mourning, with his head covered. And Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, 'If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him.'"**

Now Haman is the one who is mourning. He cannot "meet with triumph and disaster, and treat these two impostors just the same," because his whole life depends on who he is in the eyes of others.

Even his wife sees his folly. The Holy Spirit puts in the mouth of his wife a word of truth. "Haman, if this Mordecai is a Jew, you can forget winning this one." And that's exactly what happened. In chapter seven Haman comes to Esther's banquet. With great skill and tact, Esther reveals to the king how Haman had plotted to annihilate her people, the Jews. Haman is hanged on the gallows built for Mordecai. Mordecai is exalted to a position of prominence. Haman's wife was right this time. When God seems absent, he's at work, fulfilling his covenant promises to his people.

CONCLUSION

You see, when God seems absent, he's present. When the fog rolls in, the shore has not moved. He gives courage and guidance as we wait on him. He orders the events of ordinary lives, working quietly behind the scenes. He will not, he cannot forget his promise.

You feel alone? He says to you, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

You feel accused and condemned? He says, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

You feel beaten up by life's circumstances? He says to you, "God causes ALL things to work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his promise."

You feel discouraged? He says, "For I am confident of this very thing, that he began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ."

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