Westlake Church Lausanne

God in Unlikely Places
Esther 2:19-3:15

One of the remarkable things about the book of Esther, that makes it unique in the Bible, is that it doesn't mention God. In fact it seems so thoroughly secular that God seems totally absent. And that absence of God has proved so unsettling to its readers that when it got translated into Greek, people began adding bits that do mention God, but they were never there in the original.

So why did the author deliberately leave God out? Why this unsettling absence of God? Because sometimes life is like that, isn't it. Stuff happens and it leaves you wondering, God where are you in all this? Where are you in the ordinariness, the set-backs, the hard times of life. Well, that's what the next part of Esther is all about.

Esther 2:19-3:15

Present in the Ordinary
Look at v19, 'Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time.' So, last week we saw King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) rounding-up all the beautiful young virgins in his empire, so he could use them sexually and then discard them. And from among those young women, he had chosen Esther to be queen. That was the first round up. So why this second one? Why, despite the fact that he's got a new queen, and hundreds of other women in his harem, is he still rounding them up? Because, when something takes on god-like proportions in your life, when you need something so much that you think *you* can't be *you* with out it, and in his case it's sex, when there's something that you think, 'if I can only have this, I'll be happy', you'll never be happy, you'll never be satisfied, you'll never have enough.

But it's also a reminder of the world Esther has entered, a world that uses and abuses women, a world in which she's now queen. But it's not just her who has an official position: v19, 'Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.'

And the king's gate was a large administrative building, where affairs of state were conducted. And to sit at the king's gate was technical language for someone holding an official administrative position. So Mordecai's some kind of government official. But then look at v20, 'Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her.' So, as we saw last week, Mordecai has taken the deliberate decision to stay quiet about their faith. Why? We're not told, are we? And yet, when you see Mordecai in a government position, with all the status and security that brings, you begin to wonder. Is he staying quiet because he's worried that if he's open about his faith it might adversely affect his career prospects? Or that things could get uncomfortable for them?

But whatever the reason, here are our two central characters who, by their decision to stay quiet about God, by hiding their faith, are choosing to make God

absent. And so the author has hidden God in the story, because that's what they'r choosing to do. Now, do you ever face the same temptation? Because in the West here's this growing pressure to keep faith private, isn't there? And you don't want people to think you're dumb, so you don't tell your friends or colleagues. You don't want to risk your progress, so you stay quiet. And one result of that is that God can seem absent from whole areas of our lives.

And yet, it's at his place of work that Mordecai overhears this plot against the king. And we're told in v21 that these two men 'guarded the threshold', the entrance to the king's quarters. So these are his bodyguards and, v21, they want to 'lay hands on king Ahasuerus'. But Mordecai hears of it, and sends message to Esther, and Esther tells the king, making sure to mention Mordecai. And the plot's thwarted, and the two eunuchs are executed, and as v23 tells us, 'It was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.'

Now compare all that to the book of Daniel. In Daniel we saw revelations about kings' futures coming by dramatic, divine intervention: dreams, and visions, and hands writing on walls. But here, it's all very ordinary – Mordecai doesn't get a dream, he overhears some office gossip. And there's nothing supernatural about his sending the message to the king, he just wrote that on a piece of papyrus and gave it to Esther – no spectral hand writing on a wall here. And as for it being written in the court records – I mean, how much more dull can it get than the government records department?

And yet, as the story unfolds, it becomes obvious that these events that seem so ordinary, so this-worldy, are central to the plans of God to save his people. And you might think, really? I was hoping for flashes of lightning and pillars of fire and angels speaking! And instead we have an overheard conversation, and a message passed, and stuff being written in the records. And the author wants you to see that in a world where God seems absent, he's not absent at all, he's just as much at work in the ordinary, unseen and behind the scenes.

I mean think about your life. So much of it can seem like drudge, can't it? It's just normal 'unspiritual' life: you get up, you work, you eat. And where's God in all that ordinariness? Where is he when you're changing diapers, or facing another sleepless night? Where is he when you're writing up your dissertation, or applying for jobs? Where is he in the conversation at the water cooler?

And yet it's here, in the very common, every day events, that God is working out his purposes – it's his providence in the ordinary. And that's that makes all of life sacred.

Present in your Disappointments

So, chapter 2 ends with the king owing Mordecai his life, and it's all recorded in the records, which is great. But normally such loyalty would be met with

immediate reward – a big pay-rise, or a new camel, or an all expenses holiday to the Red Sea. So, when you get to chapter 3v1 and read, 'After these things King Ahasuerus promoted….' you're expecting to hear, 'Mordecai!' Mordecai got promoted! Except, that's not what happens. Someone does get promoted, but it's not Mordecai. Mordecai gets overlooked.

Disappointments can be hard, can't they? That thing you really hoped would happen, didn't. And you think, 'God I really wanted that – where were you when I needed you to come through for me?'

But as we'll see, it's the fact that Mordecai's overlooked now that becomes crucial in the deliverance that's to come. And that tells you that God's at work even in those things that don't work out the way we wish. Is Mordecai forgotten? Sure he is, but not by God. Are things going the way Mordecai wants, or according to his timescale? Probably not. But you know, sometimes God knows stuff we don't.

And knowing that God's at work even in your disappointments, or when you're side-lined or forgotten, can transform your response to them. And rather than responding with bitterness or resentment, there's a gratitude that he is working out his best in your life.

And yet, it's one thing to go unrewarded, it's another when someone else get's the reward, isn't it? And here, Mordecai saves the king's life, but who gets rewarded? Haman. Now, is your work-place like that? You do all the work on that project, you bring the results in, but the praise, the reward, it goes elsewhere. And not just any old elsewhere, it goes to *him*, or *her*!

I mean, how bad must Haman have been? You see the king promotes Haman and, v1, 'advanced him and set his throne above all the officials.' So Haman's probably a colleague of Mordecai's, and he's just got the top job, whilst Mordecai's been ignored. But did you notice that despite the fact that Haman is now second only to the king, the king has to command all his servants to bow to him. Now, why does the king have to command that? You see, in eastern cultures, you don't have to command people to bow those in authority over them, do you, you just do it. Su grew up in Japan, and they were always bowing. The teacher would come into the classroom and all the kids would bow. So when she came back to the UK aged 13 and there's no bowing, she's horrified – I mean, how disrespectful can you be?!

So how unloved by his colleagues was this man Haman that the king had to send out word, 'I *order* you to bow to him'? And yet, it's him who got promoted! And when it seems like the wicked are prospering, it can leave you thinking, God, are you there? Because this just seems wrong.

But it's not just our disappointments that the Lord uses. He will also use these injustices. And that was Joseph's experience. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers, he had endured years in prison for doing the right thing, and yet years later he could turn to his brothers and say, 'what you meant for evil, God meant for good and the saving of many.'

And nowhere is this principle of God turning the designs of evil on its head more clearly displayed than in the cross of Christ. In Acts 4, the apostle Peter prays, "In this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the gentiles and the peoples of Israel, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*" (Acts 4:27-28). So right when evil seemed to be triumphing, right when satan must have been laughing, right when it seemed the powers of this world were winning, God was at work. And no doubt Mordecai went to bed aggrieved the day he was ignored and Haman was promoted, but in time he would see that this was God's hand. And when you begin to see and trust that God's working out his plan, even when evil seems to be winning the day, a settled peace can come. And it can free you from a sense of entitlement. Because when you think '*I deserve this'*, but you don't *get* it, what you do get is inner unhappiness and complaining. But when in the midst of disappointment, and even injustice, you can begin to understand that God has not abandoned you but is working out his plans for you, joy comes.

Present in Hostility

So the king orders that everyone bow before Haman, and everyone does. Except Mordecai: v2, 'But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.' Now, this is like saluting your superior officer in the army, isn't it? You may not like the guy, you may not even respect him, but you still salute him. So why won't Mordecai bow? Is he sore that Haman got promoted and not him? Has he worked with Haman long enough to know what this man is really like, and there's no way he's paying him respect?

Well, sadly, the truth is darker. Look how Haman is described, v1, 'Haman the Agagite.' And Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time of King Saul. And the Amalakites were the first people who attempted to destroy God's people after he had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. And as a result God promised that from generation to generation, he would war against them. And one day it came to King Saul to continue that battle, but he spared the life of Agag their king. And that disobedience cost him the throne.

And Haman is a descendant of Agag. But who is Mordecai descended from? Well, we're told in chapter 2v5: 'Mordecai… son of Kish, a Benjaminite.': from the tribe of Benjamin, and the family of Kish – the same tribe and family as King Saul. So here, in the Persian court, in the story of these two men, what we are witnessing is the next instalment in the on-going battle between the Amalakites and Israel, between the anti-god forces of Agag, and the people of God they want to destroy.

And so despite having kept his faith secret, Mordecai finally tells his colleagues why he won't bow, v4, 'he had told them that he was a Jew.' And that decision to finally identify with his Jewish heritage proves costly. You see, up until now Haman hasn't noticed Mordecai refusing to bow. He's been too busy soaking up the adulation of the crowd.[1] But now it's all he sees. Verse 5, 'And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury.'

And Haman combines power, with a need, a hunger for respect. And when you combine those two, power and the need that people honour you, intolerance isn't far away. Because now, you *have* to bow, and if you don't, you will pay. But this isn't restricted to 5th Century BC Middle Eastern empires, is it? We see the same thing happening today, except, generally, it's not a command to bow to a person, but to ideas, or a world-view, or a certain philosophy – like the right to decide for myself what is right and wrong, or the deification of self, or the idol of sexual freedom. And groups who hunger for respect, and that you honour them, now have a political power that they didn't used to have, and if you refuse to bow to what they say is right, then you're in trouble.

And so whilst Mordecai finds himself in this history-long struggle between the anti-god forces of Agag, and the people of God, increasingly so to do Christians in the West. And if, like Mordecai, you refuse to bow, you'll face hostility. And when you do, you'll wonder, 'God, where are you? Because all hell has just broken loose!'

And Mordecai's conflict with Haman escalates. Verse 6, 'But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone… Haman sought to destroy *all* the Jews.' So now every Jew in this vast empire is at risk. So what is this? This is Haman's holocaust; this is Haman's Final Solution. It's what can happens when you combine pride and a hunger for honour, with power, you end up wanting to do away with those who oppose you.

Now, do you look at Haman and think, 'man, he's bad, I'm glad I'm not like him. And I'm glad I'm not like these others who are like him'? But there lies the problem, doesn't it. Because so often our identity, how we feel about ourselves, is tied up with comparing ourselves to others – and we think 'I'm better than them. I'm better than these Hamans, or these liberals, or these conservatives.' But that's exactly what Haman's doing – 'I'm better than these Jews.' And just like Haman, we too can get angry when we don't get what we want, when people don't treat us as we think we deserve to be treated. And if you add religion to the pot it multiplies the problem, because religion tells you 'you *can* be better than

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others, you *are* better than others. And if you do this or that, even God will have to honour you.'

So where is God in all this hostility? And what can save us from our pride that this hostility reveals? Well, the author gives us two hints.

First, v7: 'In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is they cast lots) before Haman day after day.' So Haman is looking for the best day, the luckiest day to execute his plan.

But who controls the lot? Is it Haman? Or the Persian gods he worships? Or is it all down to chance? Listen to Proverbs 16:33, 'The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.' And Haman casts lots in the first month of the year, but the lot comes up with the twelfth month. So your lucky day, Haman, is 11 months away - the furthest possible date. Time enough for deliverance to come.

You see, there are no chance events in your life, are there? You may look at your life, and see things not working out the way you want, or you may face opposition for being a Christian, but this episode tells you, God is in control, even of the details, even when you can't see him. And just like Mordecai and Esther, you're in his hands, no one else's.

But the second hint to where God is, is the signing of this death warrant.

You see, Haman just has to persuade the king. Verse 8, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them." So Haman uses this toxic mixture of truth, half truths and untruths, which interestingly is exactly what happens today in attacks on the Christian faith, and he tells the king that it's not to his profit to let this go on any longer.

It's not to your profit. Why does he say that? Because Ahasuerus' failed invasion of Greece had a devastating impact on the empire's finances. So Haman appeals to the king's needs. You need money, Ahasuerus, well these people cost you money. Plus, v9, "I will pay 10,000 talents of silver." That's 340,000kg. Money and wealth have a powerful draw, don't they? And they offer us power and prestige and security, they offer to meet our needs, and as a result, like Ahasuerus, we can make wrong choices to get more of it or to hold on to it.

But the king doesn't see it like that, v10-11: 'So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman… And the king said to Haman… "Do with them as it seems good to you." He doesn't make any enquires as to who these people are, he simply hands over his signet ring, he abdicates power and responsibility to

the man who offers him money. And idols make you do that, don't they? You start out thinking that money, or power, or sex, or the approval of others, or career success will give you what you want, that they will serve you, but you end up serving them.

And now, Haman, the Agagite, has all the power. And an edict is written, v13, 'to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day.'

But did you notice the day on which this edict was signed? Verse 12, 'On the thirteenth day of the first month.' Why does the author tell us that? Because if you were Jewish you would know, it's the eve of Passover. So just as Jewish families were choosing the lamb that they would slaughter for Passover, Haman authorises their slaughter. But think, what does Passover recall? As they sacrificed that lamb, what were they remembering? The time when, against all the odds, God rescued his people from a power that threatened to destroy them. And here, God is never mentioned, and evil is on the ascendancy, but this order goes out on the day when God's people would remember that God is a saving, rescuing God.

But Passover doesn't just tell them that. It says the same to us – because it points to the one great saving act of God that can give you the certainty you need when life is hard and hostile.

You see, here is Haman, willing to pay 300 tons of silver for these Jewish lives, but at another Passover, 400 hundred years later, the religious leaders paid just 30 pieces of silver for the life of the Son of God. And as Jesus, *the* Passover lamb, was slaughtered, lots were cast against him. And here, the lives of God's people are at risk and God seems nowhere to be seen, but at the cross, with his life not just at risk but ebbing away, Jesus cried out 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me', as God the Father abandoned him to his fate.

Why? Why is Jesus sold for silver? Why are his possessions gambled away? Why does God abandon him?

Well, he is sold, that you might be bought, not with silver but with his life. His possessions were gambled away so that you might become God's possession, that you might know your life is not a thing of chance, a roll of the dice, but that you are a beloved child of God. And he was abandoned by God the Father because he bore your sin, so that you need never experience what it means to be truly abandoned by God. So that you might know the unshakeable security of God's love for you, whatever you're going through.

But as well as giving you unshakeable security, it also humbles you and kills the pride that tells you that you're better than others, because far from being better

than others, you know that the Son of God had to die to rescue you. And when you know that, you can handle those moments when the underserving get rewarded ahead of you – because you know that's the story of your life – 'I'm the undeserving one, the ill-deserving one, and yet I get Christ's reward!'

So Haman, and the king, send out the edict, and, v15, they 'sat down to drink.' They think it's all over. And it must have seemed like it was all over at the cross. But it's just Friday, Sunday's coming. And through Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and his ascension to the place of ultimate power, he has achieved an even greater deliverance than the first Passover from Egypt, or the one that's coming in Esther. A deliverance that tells you, you're not forgotten by God, and his plans and purposes for you in Christ will never be defeated. He's present in the ordinary. He's present in your disappointments, and he's present in the hostility and hardness of life.