

For Such a Time as This (Providence and Faith)

Series: Esther

Date: 22 June 2025

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Esther 3-5, Colossians 1:3-8

When God seems absent

Have you ever been in a situation where you've just wanted to cry out, "Where are you God?" "What's going on? Why am I here? What are you doing?" Maybe work or family are falling apart around you and you wonder "Where is God?" Or maybe life is going well but you're spiritually dry, you feel that God is absent. Maybe things are just mundane, and it feels like God couldn't possibly be in the hum drum of life.

This week we're continuing our series on Esther. Today, we're looking at that question - where is God when so often it seems he's absent. (Last week we looked at Esther as a case study for how the Bible views women. Next week, the story of the gospel in Esther, and then finally the question of violence in the OT)

One of the things the book of Esther is famous for is the fact that it doesn't mention God. At all. Not once. Hopefully you've been reading the book (it's short, it's a great read), and you may have noticed that there are points where you'd expect God to be mentioned, and yet he is absent. In our reading today (4.16) we see Esther, Mordecai and the Jews fasting in preparation for her going to see the king - and we'd expect to read, *prayer and fasting*, like pretty much everywhere else in Scripture - and yet even that backhanded spiritual reference is absent. The early Greek translators of the book were so concerned by God's absence in the text, that they added prayers and other references to God in their translation. There's been debates throughout church history as to whether Esther should even be in the Bible because it doesn't mention God.

So why? Why is God absent from the book?

Clearly it's a deliberate strategy by the author. But why? What's he (or she) doing?

I think God's absence makes us do two things when we read the book.

First, it makes us pay more attention to the story, particularly to where we might expect to find God mentioned. Second, it focuses our attention on the human characters in the story - what they say and do. These things teach us two things: On the one hand, about the hand of God at work behind the scenes. What theologians call God's providence. And on the other, How we are to live, especially when it's not clear when and where God is at work.

These two sides of the same coin come together at that crucial exchange between Mordecai and Esther, 4:12: "*Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if*

you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

And then from Esther 4:16, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

On the one side, a confidence in **God's providence**. On the other, **faith in action**. Let's look at those in turn.

Providence in creation

As the story unfolds, we run into coincidence after seeming coincidence. The king, Xerxes, throws a massive party, gets drunk and then wants to parade his wife before his guests. She refuses and is stripped of her position - creating a vacancy for another queen. There's an episode of Ancient Near Eastern *The Bachelor*, and Esther takes first prize - becoming queen. Then Xerxes' right hand man, Haman, hatches a plan to destroy the Jews, all because Mordecai refused to bow down to him. But Esther, now Xerxes queen, is a Jew, and she happens to be in just the right place to intervene to save her people. Not only that, earlier in the story Mordecai just happens to hear of a plot to assassinate the king - and so saves the king's life. Later in the story, the very night before Haman is going to have Mordecai executed, it so happens that the king can't sleep. And so, comically, to put himself to sleep, he has the record of his reign read to him, and the passage that happens to be read is the very one which records how Mordecai had exposed the assassination plot.

For the ancient Jewish readers, as for modern Christian readers, the point is that such a sequence of coincidences begins to look an awful like the coherent plan of God. And the point is that although God is never mentioned, although on the face of it it looks like he's absent, in actual fact he's ever present. His sovereignty stands behind the story. He's in control. He's working his purposes out - despite the best efforts of those who would destroy his people.

What we see here is God's providence: his **providing**, sustaining and upholding his people. This is part of the general work that God does in upholding all things. As the apostle Paul says to the people of Athens - *in him we live and move and have our being*.¹ And his care is not just for the whole of his creation - it is for humanity in particular. As Jesus himself says - *he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*.² Not a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of your Father, Jesus tells us, *So don't be afraid, you're much more valuable than they*.³ He rules over history, and nothing is outside of his care, even when we can't see it.

Providence in redemption

¹ Acts 17.28

² Matthew 5.45

³ Matthew 10.29-30

The story of Esther though is not solely one of God's general care of the world he loves. It's a particular moment in the history of his plan to redeem the world by grace. Haman's threat to the Jewish people is not just one of genocide. It is also a threat to the promises of God. Because way back in Genesis 12 God promised Abraham that it would be through his family that the world will be blessed. It's through his family that the curse of sin will be undone. Abraham's family are guardians of the "Messianic seed" from which one day will come a Saviour who will redeem the world. So this threat to the Jewish nation was an attack by the world on the promises of God to save the world. But through a series of "coincidences" the Jews are saved - and God's plan to save the world remains. God and his gracious plan of salvation cannot fail. Though he may appear absent, he is really behind everything, working out his plan.

One of the commentators writes,

"What the writer of Esther has done is to give us a story in which the main actor is not so much as mentioned--the presence of God is implied and understood throughout the story, so that these mounting coincidences are but the by-product of his rule over history and his providential care for his people. It is an extraordinary piece of literary genius that this author wrote a book that is about the actions and rule of God from beginning to end, and yet that God is not named on a single page of the story."⁴

Faith in action - Faith, Love and Hope

One of the things I love about this aspect of the story of Esther is that Esther's situation is so much like our own. We cannot see God. His work is normally hidden. We walk by faith, not by sight, St Paul says.⁵ God may speak to us, he may guide us in a miraculous way, but that's not the norm. At least it hasn't been mine! Normally what it looks like to live the life of faith is not so much "Thus says the Lord", but what the Bible calls wisdom, us using all the gifts God has given to discern what is the best way forward, the right thing to do.

His gifts are things like the wise council of family and friends, the church, the Christlike character forged over time as you let the teaching of Scripture sink into your soul and shape your life.

And so we see the other side of the coin - the seeming absence of God focuses our attention on the actions of the human characters. This is Faith in action. The sovereignty of God is no excuse for our inaction. Sometimes we think either God is at work or we are. Either he's working and we sit back, or we're busting our guts and he's sitting on his hands. But remember Paul's words? *In him we live and move and have our being*. Without God, we would cease to exist. No, we can only act because he is at work. The truth is that it's always 100% God 100% us 100% of the time.

More often than not decision making is about discerning "who knows but that you are this or that position for such a time as this". It's seeing the need. Realising that we are in a position to make a

⁴ Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 196

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5.7

difference and then deciding to act. To act is risky. Most of us won't be in Esther's position, risking her life. But we may risk our reputation, our career, our income, a friendship. We still need courage to make that decision, rather than to retreat back to comfort and self preservation. But we can do so trust in God that he has the future, our future in his hands.

Esther is an example of those 3 Christian virtues that come up again and again in the NT - faith, hope and love. The apostle Paul says the shape of Christian life is faith, hope and love.⁶

Our **Faith** is in Jesus Christ. Faith looks back as it were - to God, and who he is, and what he has done in Christ, what continues to do by his Spirit, and in his promises. Faith is to trust in the work of his Son to redeem us, and to set us apart as his children, who have been given good works to perform.

Our **Hope** is stored for us in heaven. Hope looks forward to the future, to what is promised, to what is guaranteed by the promise keeping God. Hope is as the writer of Hebrews puts it, an anchor for the soul.⁷

And **Love?** Love is the action we are given to do in the present. It is the sum of the law - to love God, and to love our neighbours.

It is Faith in Christ and his work and Hope in God's future that release us to love in the present. We see this with Esther. Mordecai reminds her of God and his promises:

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place ..." (4.13-14) It's a call to faith - to trust herself to God and the hope of his promises, and so to act in the present. And so she does. "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

Eg. Siobhan told me about going to the funeral of her friend. Her daughter speaks of the last months of her mother's life, when she was in hospital and knew she was going to die. Her motto was, 'for such a time as this'.

She knew herself, her capacity, and the place and time she was given.

And she used the time to love, to pray, to comfort, to encourage, to be a source of joy, blessing, and not least to share her hope in Christ to all those she encountered. She knew the security of God's love for her in Christ. Her hope in Christ gave her confidence for the future. And so she was released to love.

How can you be a person of faith, trusting in the God who provides? How can you be a person of hope - looking to the God who is working out his promise of salvation? And as you trust and hope in Christ, so then you can live the life of love that God calls you to. You can pray for wisdom, for how to act to overcome evil with good in the situation you find yourself in: in your family, work, community, school or university.

⁶ Colossians 1:3-6, cf. O'Donovan, *Self, World and Time: Ethics as Theology Volume 1*, 97-124

⁷ Hebrews 6.19

Eg. Anna - on the international student committee. Seeing that all the parties were just people getting drunk, and so starting board game nights for people in the colleges who want a quieter evening.

Eg. Rusch's daughter. She went to the student Christian group at Taroona. They made cupcakes for the school, and offered people a cupcake and a prayer to students before school.

In the palace, the hospital, the university, or anywhere in between, we're called to live out that faith, hope and love. Faith, in the unseen God, who is at work in history, who cares for us, who has sent his Son for our sins. Hope, in God's future, promised and secure in Christ. And so framed by faith and hope we can discern the place where God has put us, for such a time as this, and so do that work of love, doing the good which God has given us to do.⁸

⁸ Cf. Ephesians 2.10