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“When God Seems Silent” Esther 1:1-22

Among the many questions in a Bible trivia game, could be these questions: “What book of the Bible never mentions God’s name?” Or, “What book in the Bible never mentions prayer?” The answer to both questions is “Esther”.

The book of Esther is one of the more unusual books in the Bible. It is unusual in that God’s name is never mentioned, not even one time. And neither is prayer, though it does speak of fasting. Because of that, some see it as a controversial book and question whether Esther belongs in the Bible.

Not only does it omit any direct reference to God, but it also has some racy content. Some people have expressed surprise that Hollywood’s version of Esther was not R rated. After all, the book opens with one of the biggest drinking feasts imaginable. Verse 7 describes it this way: *Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality.* Neither Mardi Gras nor Germany’s “Oktoberfest” could match the amount of alcohol flowing at Xerxes’ banquet! (Ahasuerus was his Persian name; Xerxes the Greek equivalent, which accounts for differences in Bible translations).

As usual, when excessive alcohol is involved, things go downhill. Vashti, the queen, an exquisitely beautiful woman, was asked to come out and display her beauty for the men present. When it says in verse 11, *“wearing her royal crown”* many believe that she was asked to come and parade her beauty wearing nothing except the crown. While we don’t know for sure if that was the case, the rest of the book reveals the sordid side of a king and his harem, a side that Hollywood could have glamorized and tantalized with much nudity.

And then, to add to the drinking and implicit nudity, there is violence. After the dramatic turn of the tables where the villain, Haman, is hanged on his own gallows, great bloodshed breaks out as the Jews put to death over 75,000 of their enemies. Afterwards, they celebrate the feast of Purim, a feast still celebrated today by the Jewish people.

Again, the book of Esther doesn’t have any reference to God, not even one reference. No reference to prayer. All this drinking, carousing around, bloodshed. Why is the book of Esther in the Bible? Some ask, “Should it be in the Bible?”

There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit inspired the book to be written. One of many reasons is recorded in the New Testament book of Romans, chapter 15, verse 4: *“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*

We can have great hope, encouragement, and strength as we are reminded from Esther that even when God’s name isn’t mentioned, or is only mentioned in vain, and even when prayer is not

evident and society wallows in drunkenness and drugs, flaunting sexual perversion and lust – even in such a society God is at work, working His sovereign will behind the scenes.

God's Rule Over All Earthly Rulers

As God works behind the scenes, whether in Old Testament Persia or in your life and mine today, we are reminded that God rules over all earthly rulers, and uses them for His own purposes, even the weakest and most foolish of political leaders.

As the chapter opens Xerxes is putting on an impressive show. In verse 3 we read about the great banquet he threw, and verse 4 describes his motive for doing so: *“For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.”* After the banquet for the nobles and officials he threw a seven day party *“for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa”* (v. 5). At that party the wine flowed freely, as verse 8 tells us, *“for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.”*

But by midway through the chapter we see that Xerxes is no great leader. He is a weak, indecisive king who gives a foolish request to his beautiful wife. He is rebuffed, humiliated, and, at wit's end, relies on the advice of others to get himself out of the mess he has made.

Why is that sad slice of history inserted in the Bible? It is a reminder to us that even when corrupt, inept people come to power, God is in control. Political corruption and ineptitude were not unique to the reign of Xerxes back in the days of the Medes and Persians. We have more than our share today. We all have been painfully reminded at many times just how corrupt, weak and inept our own government can be.

But through all the political corruption and ineptitude we can be assured that God is at work behind the scenes: As Proverbs 21:1 puts it, *“The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.”*

Daniel 4:17 teaches the same truth: *“The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.”* In fact, the theme of God's sovereign reign, even in the turbulent times Daniel lived in as a captive in Babylon, is recorded three times over in Daniel's prophecy: Daniel 4:17, 25 and 5:21. All three references point to the sovereign rule of God over the kingdoms of this fallen world.

God's sovereign rule was at work back in the days of Daniel and Xerxes. And His sovereign rule is at work today. Throughout all of history God has always been at work behind the scenes. And that's one reason why God inspired this account of Esther's life and placed it among the 66 books of the Bible. It reminds us *“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope”* (Romans 15:4).

Another reason why this little book of Esther is tucked away in the Old Testament is to show us that God's plans prevail, even when human advisers give questionable advice and people take the wrong direction. From verse 13 on, Xerxes tries to get himself out of the embarrassing situation of being rejected publicly by the Queen. He calls his advisers and they give their advice. Some

commentators see it as wise advice, others as questionable. I believe it was the wrong advice. What Xerxes should have done is sobered up, made up to his wife, and sent all of his drinking buddies home!

But I also realize that to do what is right would be too embarrassing for Xerxes in his drunken state. Instead, he listened to his advisers and took a questionable path. But this, too, was from the Lord, who was working “behind the scenes” even at this drunken banquet. Even in that sordid, drunken event God was working His sovereign will to bring Esther into power as the next Queen. Through her the Lord would work to save the Jewish people from extermination by an extremely crafty and wicked foe, Haman, who was also a close friend of King Xerxes.

God is behind the scenes, even when the scenes themselves seem to have little at all to do with God. And that is always the case. Not just in Persia so long ago, but in your life and my life, and in the lives of God’s people in every age.

Do you remember when Rehoboam came to power, after the death of his father Solomon? Jeroboam and the people of Israel said to King Rehoboam, “*Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you.*”

Rehoboam asked the people to come back in three days. He wanted some time to seek advice on what to do. 2 Chronicles 10:6-17 (and also 1 Kings 12:1-19) records those events:

Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked.

They replied, "If you will be kind to these people and please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants."

But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us'?"

The young men who had grown up with him replied, "Tell the people who have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter'--tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.'"

Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, "Come back to me in three days." The king answered them harshly. Rejecting the advice of the elders, he followed the advice of the young men and said, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions."

So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from God – 2 Chronicles 10:15 tells us – to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.

That action led to the split between Israel and Judah. The 10 northern tribes of Israel broke away from Judah. It didn't seem as though God was at work when Israel and Judah split. Undoubtedly there were many who called on the Lord and wondered why He didn't seem to answer their call. Yet God was working, "behind the scenes," just as He did in the days of Xerxes. Just as He does today, in your life and mine, in our church life, and the life of our nation and the nations of the world.

Nothing Can Thwart God's Sovereign Reign

When we see that God is truly "behind the scenes" then we are also enabled to see why nothing can thwart God's plan. God's plan centers on the redemption, protection, and glorification of His people, for His own glory.

In the cast of characters recorded in the book of Esther there is a villain, the infamous Haman son Hammedatha, who is dead set on putting all the Jews to death. And yet behind the scenes, God is already at work, raising up Esther, an orphaned Jewish girl, to be the next Persian Queen, to be in that place of prominence to deliver God's people from Haman's plot.

In the book of Esther we read about this drunken banquet, the spurned king, the proud queen, the distinguished advisers. We don't see God. We don't read His name. We don't hear of people praying to him for wisdom. But He is there, behind the scenes, doing exactly what He said He would do. Psalm 33:10-11: *"The Lord foils the plans of 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."*

And what is God's grand plan? What is the plan that keeps Him working behind the scenes? What are *"the purposes of His heart through all generations"*? God's eternal plan is centered on His glory in the redemption, protection, and glorification of His people, even when it seems that He is not present. Nowhere did God seem more absent than at Mount Calvary. The agonized words of Jesus summed up what seemed like the absence of His heavenly Father. He cried out, *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* that is, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46).

And yet that agonized cry was for our sake, not for His. Christ knew from all eternity that He would bear the curse of your sin and mine. He knew from all eternity that bearing the curse of sin would require crucifixion, the shedding of His blood and being forsaken by His Father so that your sins and mine would be covered by His precious blood. In the place of our sin, now covered by the blood of Jesus Christ, is the perfect record of Jesus' righteousness. And because He was forsaken we, who by God's grace believe in Jesus with saving faith, will never be forsaken by God.

The people standing around the cross on that day of crucifixion thought God was absent. Matthew 27:39-43 describes how: *"Those who passed by hurled insults at Him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!' In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked Him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's*

the king of Israel! Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue Him now if he wants Him, for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

But our triune God was powerfully present. As Peter told the people at Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2:22-24: *"Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him. And, after Jesus rose again from the dead, before ascending into heaven, He gave us this wonderful promise: "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."* (Mathew 28:20b).

At those times when God seems absent – in the book of Esther, in the ridicule of Jesus crucified at Calvary, or at times in the struggles of your life and mine – God is yet very much present, for he has promised to be with us to the very end of the age, to never leave us nor forsake us, but to keep us in the palm of His hand with a powerful yet tender grip so that nothing and no one can snatch us away from His hand and the hand of His Father (John 10:28-30).

Esther's Relevance for Us

How else do we apply this unusual book of Esther to our lives?

One further application is that knowing God's faithfulness to His people in the past encourages us in the present, and gives us certain and steadfast hope for the future. We have all seen the instability of our nation and the nations of the world. Yet God is behind the scenes. We see the uncertainty in every election year. We don't know who will prevail in the electoral process, yet God will work through the electoral process according to His will. It doesn't take away our responsibilities as dual citizens – citizens in the country in which we live and citizens of heaven. But it is of great comfort.

Not only is God at work behind the scenes in the events of a nation. God is also behind the scenes in the events of your church. His Son is the head of the church, and His Son treats the church, not as a dictator, but with tender care, for He sees the church as His beloved and treasured bride.

He knows the needs of the church as a whole, and He knows each individual need within the church. And He has designed the church as a human body, with each member unique. *"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts,"* 1 Corinthians 12:12 tells us, *"and though all its parts are many, they form one body."*

And in that passage the Holy Spirit goes on to explain how each member of the body is unique, yet necessary to the body. Thus, in the body of Christ we are to use our gifts to help others and to work together in unity for the good of the body, even though each one of us is unique, at times having differing views from others, yet being essential to the body of Christ, members of the true church, His bride!

God is always at work behind the scenes, not only in the rule of nations. He is at work not only in the guidance and provision of the true church, but he is also at work behind the circumstances and events of your life and mine.

Sometimes, admittedly, it doesn't seem that way. Some of you face crucial health problems, either yourself or loved ones within your family. We all face an uncertain economic climate. We all face a variety of problems, which, when they unravel, give us no indication that God is at work. In fact, often we wonder why God seems silent when our problems seem so great.

Esther's uncle, Mordecai, who plays a leading role in the book of Esther, undoubtedly wondered why God sometimes seems absent. He may have wondered, "Why is God silent when a vain king throws a drunken party? Why is God silent when a treacherous villain plots to kill the people of God? Why is God silent when those gallows, 70 feet high are being built to hang one of God's people on?" Why is God silent? Because He is working behind the scenes, working His grand plan of salvation, protection, and glorification of His people. And He does so for His glory, that we may truly praise Him throughout all eternity.

And when God seems silent in your life and in mine, then we need to do as the Lord told the sons of Korah, in Psalm 46:10: "*Be still, and know that I am God.*" The Lord is assuring us in a book like Esther – and throughout Scripture – that He is at work even through complex and tragic situations to bring about our ultimate good – the salvation of our souls and a life of eternal glory with Him in paradise. He says, "*Be still, and know that I am God.*" He is working behind the scenes in all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

There are those who question whether the book of Esther belongs in the Canon of Holy Scripture. I have no doubt that it belongs. It reminds us that God is working behind the scenes today, just as He did so long ago in Persia.

If your faith is truly in Jesus Christ alone for salvation this morning, then you have reason to be greatly encouraged. Your sins are covered – propitiated – by His precious blood. In the place of your sins is His perfect record of obedience and righteousness. And because Jesus was forsaken on the cross, you will never be forsaken. Because of that, you and I have every reason to be filled with praise for our faithful God, who even now is at work behind the scenes in your life and mine! Amen!

...Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. – Romans 15:4

“When God Seems Silent”

Esther 1:1-22

I. Some have doubted whether the book of Esther belongs in the Bible because God’s name is never mentioned. Yet God is “behind the scenes” showing us:

- 1) He rules over even the weakest and most foolish of rulers, using them for His own purposes (1-22; Proverbs 21:1; Daniel 4:17)

- 2) God’s will prevails, even when human advisors give questionable advice and people go the wrong direction (13-21; 2 Chronicles 10:1-19)

- 3) Nothing can thwart God’s plan, which centers on His glory in the redemption of His People (Psalm 33:10-11; Romans 8:28-31), for even when God seems absent (Matthew 26:39-43, 47), He is always with His people (Isaiah 41:10, 43:2; Matt. 28:20)

II. Further applications:

- 1) Knowing God’s faithfulness in the past, encourages us in the present and gives us hope for the future (Romans 15:4)

- 2) When God seems silent we need to be still and know that He is God, (Psalm 46:10) being assured that even though we may not see His hand at work, He is working “behind the scenes” in our lives