

WELCOME 7th August 2022 – 9 Pentecost '22 C

Esther 1 & 2

Welcome! It's great to be together again today! Today we wrap up our journey through the book of Romans as a family of disciples... **Bible Study Qs** are there to equip you so God can lead you deeper into His word/work in your life, & so you can share that w/ someone else. We also use them for our **Zoom Bible Study Catch-ups on Friday @ 1p.m.**

As we move into this week... "The good old days" I'm not sure what that **really** means, but we all have them. An idyllic childhood memory. A recollection of the time life seemed simpler... pre-kids, 1st adult job, early years of marriage... ¼ the pandemic? Felt like we had the world at our feet, God was w/ us & he was smiling.

Where'd they **go**? These days we're not always sure. Hair turns gray then turns loose. Heart attacks, family rifts, funerals, 4th, 5th, 11th boosters? Where's God now?

The Jewish people living in the time of Esther had seen what they thought were the last of their "good old days." Generations of living in exile & being a minority took their toll. Acclimatized to fitting into pagan culture, they no longer can see nor trust God's presence at work in the world or their lives. God seems... absent.

But things are not always as they seem. The book of Esther reveals God powerfully & lovingly present; working for the good of his people to accomplish his awesome & beautiful purpose. It's a promise you can count on, even when God is hidden or seems absent.

Mordecai's family had been among those who,
with King Jehoiachin of Judah,

had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

Against the backdrop of God's eternal plan to reclaim his rebellious people for himself revealing his redeeming purpose to all the world... Esther encourages us:

Don't mistake God's silence for his absence.

God is present & working in the world through the lives of his faithful people.

We'll explore & experience that together... Let's pray...

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God, help us to see you in what might seem like the monotony of our days & the small things. Help us to know that you are working in all these small things to lead ultimately to the accomplishment of your great purpose. In the midst of each moment, lead us in faithfulness. Teach us to hear your spirit speaking to & guiding our hearts. Create obedience in us according to your spirit, your word, & your will. Help us to walk in step with you. When we don't know all that you are doing, remind us Father that you are at work infinitely greater than we can ask or imagine. Lead us to trust that you are using our lives to accomplish your purposes in the world. So make us responsive, moldable, humble, obedient instruments in your hands for purposes we don't even see, for things we don't even know... In Jesus' Name ...Amen.

Let's sing Only a Holy God... please stand

FAITH CHAT:

1. Share a time in your life when you felt God was missing in action or absent.
Now...turn that around...
2. Share a time when you were certain God was active in the ordinary events & circumstances of your life.

9 PENTECOST '22 C – GOD’S SILENT SOVEREIGNTY: WHEN GOD SEEMS ABSENT

It's complicated...That's what folks say when they're in a situation (often of their own making) that's outside "normal"...in a relationship that's less than healthy...make choices on the line between shady & wrong...it's complicated. The "don't blame me" excuse for so many things. The Jewish people in Esther's day...it's complicated

Some history...722 BC Nth Kingdom, Israel, was crushed & scattered to the corners of the earth by Assyria. 135 years later, 587/6 BC, Sth Kingdom, Judah, was overrun & taken captive by Babylon. In accord w/ God's word, ≈70 years later, Babylon was overthrown by the Empire of the Medes/Persian: & Cyrus decreed & Darius enforced a return to Jerusalem for God's people. The Jews who went home (Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah) began a rebuilding campaign. The Temple & city wall around Jerusalem were re-constructed. Still the Israelites remained a subject people...a **remnant** nation (compared to what they were ^{b/4}) under the rule of Medes/Persian...**BUT** they were home... At least some were.

It's complicated...not all the Jews left captivity when they had the chance. A great many stayed behind in the lives they made for themselves among the pagans. Babylonians, Medes & Persians. At the outset of their captivity, false prophets arose & proclaimed a brief/short exile. Jeremiah spoke for God saying: **This** is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: "Build homes, & plan to stay. Plant gardens, & eat the food they produce. Marry, have children & find spouses for them so you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! Work for the peace & prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare." – Jer 29:4-7 God told them their captivity would last 70 years...But in those years he wanted them to flourish among their pagan neighbours as a sign of God's presence protection & provision for them even in exile...to bring him glory among the nations.

They lived out the 1st ½ of Jeremiah's command but neglected the 2nd: **You** will be in Babylon 70 years. Then I will come & do for you all the good things I have promised. I will bring you home again...I will end your captivity & restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you & bring you home again to your own land" – Jer 29:10 & 14

Esther emerges in this complicated time after the Jews were to have left captivity to reground themselves in the land God promised them, to rekindle in themselves a devotion to God & God's word & to renew his covenant w/ them. Many stayed behind. Unaccustomed to & unfamiliar w/ their ancestral homeland or the promises & responsibilities attached to living there. Acclimatized to fitting into pagan culture, they can no longer see/trust God's hand at work in them/world. *God seems...absent.*

What's happened? They allowed their captivity to determine their identity. The Jews scattered throughout the Empire of Medes/Persian may live in ethnic enclaves/ghettos, they may marry w/in clan & they may even stand apart from the worship of the pagan gods...Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego certainly did... but it seems they surrender/submit to every whim of their pagan rulers/neighbours. This is a critical issue for God's people...In. Every. Generation. They're almost invisible in their wider culture...indistinguishable from their neighbours. "Go along to get along" is the worldview that seems to operate among them. When captivity determines identity...**this**...becomes possible. When you make a lifestyle of fitting in & not causing waves & not holding your ground & not living out the covenant of God that has claimed you & set you apart as his in this world...Push comes to shove & someone has to be **Esther**.

You heard the basics of the story. Xerxes is a drunken brute of a king. Driven by his passions & popular opinion he'd make a great 21st century head of state. His decisions are made finger in the wind...least resistance most reward. After a 6 mth party of unrestrained debauchery he commands his wife Vashti do a catwalk-parade in front of his boozy buddies & she says "No." National crisis must be averted in case other wives should say "No" to their husbands' folly.

AND a new queen must be found. We often see this as a simple beauty pageant to crown the new Miss Persia. It's not. It's *infinitely* worse. Xerxes lays claim to all the unmarried beautiful women in his realm to take them 1-x-1 to his bed. English kings in similar fashion claimed *prima nocte* (1st night) rights...call it what it is: heartless sexual slavery. It's about now when it seems right to **ask** Where's God in all this? 2 things **Don't** mistake God's silence for his absence. **God** is present & working in the world through the lives of his faithful people. We can't see the end of this story yet, but 2 of God's very own are up close & personal to the king. There're no plagues, no parted seas & no lightning strikes on the king's private chambers, but there are *NO COINCIDENCES* for the family of God. Every obstacle is an opportunity. Every threat a place for God to act...Out of all the women in an empire stretching from Africa to India, Esther, an orphan from an oppressed minority is whom the king finds most beautiful & most suitable...not just her beauty but her character is compelling. She survives the horror of a captive-1st-night w/ a pompous mule of a king to become queen. Her uncle Mordecai saves the king from an assassination plot. There are *NO COINCIDENCES* for the family of God...just the straightforward reminders...

Do not underestimate God. Do not overestimate the power of this world. Do not underestimate your kingdom significance & influence...your capacity to be Esther.

When we step back & view the Persian power-holders here...we see a hollowness, a shallowness, an emptiness. Given enormous wealth & power at their fingertips, they still live adrift, aimless & miserable. The book of Esther isn't meant to show us how to escape/ behave morally ambiguous situations. It shows how **God** behaves in the midst of them. **God** is working amid broken systems & cruel sinners. You might feel like you've been exiled in a strange land that doesn't know God's name, & you'd be right, but God does not forsake his people. To doubt that reality... To wonder... God what're ya doin'? is human...common...natural... This week my Bible reading took me to Psalm 73...part lament...part repentance...part self-reflection & then...just read

Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure.

² But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping. I was almost gone.

³ For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.

⁴ They seem to live such painless lives; their bodies are so healthy & strong.

⁵ They don't have troubles like other people; eyes bulge w/ fat
they're not plagued with problems like everyone else. ♥s overflow w/ foolish imaginings

⁶ They wear pride like a jeweled necklace & clothe themselves with cruelty.

⁷ These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for!

I saw the proud & powerful prospering & I started to fall to pieces w/ jealousy.

Look at these wicked people; enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.

¹³ Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?

¹⁴ I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain.

They have so much...I've got next to nothing. Why did I restrain myself?

So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is!

¹⁷ Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, & I finally understood the destiny of the wicked.

¹⁸ Truly, you put them on a slippery path & send them sliding over the cliff to destruction.

¹⁹ In an instant they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.

Xerxes is undone by a "no" from his queen. The advisors see national crisis in a personal affront...imagine when true trouble comes...But God gets the final word.

Then I realized that my heart was bitter, & I was all torn up inside.

²² I was so foolish & ignorant — like a senseless animal.

²³ Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny.

²⁶ My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak,
but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.

As for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter,
I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.

In my jealousy & envy I missed your hand holding mine...your presence right here...
your power at my fingertips...

And that reminded me of this Psalm: I think you'll recognize the plea against God's seeming absence...

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Why are you so far away when I groan for help?

² Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.

Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief.

That psalm ends...

Praise the LORD, all you who fear him! Honour him, all you descendants of Jacob!

Show him reverence, all you descendants of Israel!

²⁴ For he has not ignored or belittled the suffering of the needy.

He has not turned his back on them, but has listened to their cries for help.

And the one who prayed that psalm rose from the grave so we could trust at all times God's presence & promise of eternal good.

Against the backdrop of God's eternal plan to reclaim his rebellious people for himself revealing his redeeming purpose to all the world...Esther encourages **us**: Don't mistake God's silence for his absence.

God **is** present & working in the world through the lives of his faithful people.

TAKE IT HOME –

What is one thing you will do to live trusting God's presence this week?

Especially...as a faithful minority in an increasingly pagan world...

Let's pray...

Gracious Father, In the midst of circumstance we do not understand or situations when we feel cut off from your grasp...speak to our hearts to know your presence & be strengthened by your love. Grant your Spirit in measure equal to our need & abundant to share. Let our lives witness to you in all things. We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen