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Rick Myatt

THE CASE OF THE FIRST BACHELOR Esther 4:6-17

In late 1864 President Lincoln's son Robert Todd Lincoln, who would later serve as an officer on the staff of General Ulysses Grant, traveled by train from New York to Washington D.C. During a stop in Jersey City while on a crowded platform he stepped back to let others pass him, but as he did he slipped and fell onto the tracks below. A train was approaching but a stranger reached down to grab him and hauled him back to safety, thus saving him from serious injury or even death. The stranger did not learn until later the identity of the young officer he had saved. However, young Lincoln immediately recognized the man who had rescued him and thanked him. His rescuer was famous. He was an actor named Edwin Booth. His brother was also an actor. His name was John Wilkes Booth.

What a strange coincidence. I have no idea why that odd coincidence happened, if there is any reason. However, I know that coincidences happen in our lives, but they may not be the result of random chance. There may well be something much more cool at work. Or someone.

Today I am going to start a brief series of sermons I call Game Changers. We know about game changers in sports, those players or events that alter the outcome of the game. There are game changers in life who alter how things go in this world. We will be looking at a few people in the Bible who were some of the lesser known game changers. Since it is Mothers Day I thought it appropriate to start with the story of a woman who was one of the heroes of the Bible. Today we will consider the story of Esther.

There are 4 main characters in this drama. In order of appearance they are Xerxes, the king of Persia, Mordecai, a highly influential and successful Jewish man who lived in Susa, capital of the Persian Empire, Hadassah, also known as Esther, Mordecai's niece who was a stunningly beautiful young woman, and Haman, the most powerful member of Xerxes' court who is the villain of the piece. If I were making a movie of this story I would cast Christian Bale as Xerxes, Kevin Pollack as Mordecai, maybe Lily Collins as Esther, and Gary Oldman as the villain, Haman.

ESTHER WINS THE ROSE

God's people, Israel, had experienced judgment for their disobedience by being conquered and devastated by Babylon. Many of them spent 70 years in exile. Babylon was conquered by the Persians. The Persian emperor Cyrus, as prophesied, ordered that the Jews be allowed to return to their homeland. Many of them did go back, but not all of them. After living for decades in Babylon many considered it their home. They had no desire to go back to the rubble of Jerusalem. They had a very comfortable lifestyle among the Persians. Many of them were quite successful and highly placed. They were a bit like Jewish people who live in America. Yes, they are Jewish, but they are also Americans. This is their home. They support Israel, but this is where they belong and they choose to live here. So it was with many of the Jewish people in Persia in that day.

It is during this period in the 5th century B.C. that the events of the book of Esther took place. The story occurs in the Persian capital of Susa during the reign of Xerxes, who ruled from 486 to 465 B.C. At one point he threw a huge bash that lasted 6 months. At the end of it he had a week long feast that included an open bar. They had a different idea about parties back then, for the men all had their party in one room and the women had a separate event in a different location. At the end of the week, in his inebriated state Xerxes decided he wanted to show off his hot wife, whose name was Vashti. According to 1:11 he wanted to "display her beauty." I think it was sort of a way of boasting. "Hey, suckers, look how lucky I am to be king. Look at my smokin' hot wife. Don't you wish you were me?" He sent for her to but she refused to come. My suspicion is that Xerxes intended for her to do more than just say hello. I think he wanted her to sort of put on a show for the boys, one in which she would reveal a lot more of herself than she might like, if you catch my drift, and she wanted part of it. However, saying no to the king was a big time no-no. The king's word was law. No one said no to the king. The king's advisors were aghast. They feared if Vashti got away with this it might spread and all their wives might start saying no to them too. They had to put a stop to that. Vashti was informed that she was banished, that she would never enter the king's presence again, thus she was no longer queen.

When my son, Toby, was in junior high one day he got into an altercation with a friend at school. The principal informed us that while he liked Toby he was going to have to suspend him for a day. We realized that was not going to be an effective consequence. Not having to go to school for a day would not be a negative consequence for Toby. It would be a reward. He would love it. We realized he was going to get the wrong message from that. Get into trouble and you don't have to go to school. This is great. So he suggested another consequence might be wise. I

thought of this when I read this story because I wondered if Vashti kind of had Toby's reaction to being suspended. "Oh poor me. I don't have to go be around that knuckle dragging, boozed up Neanderthal ever again? Oh how shall I ever survive?" Some of the stories about Xerxes from secular history portray him as more than a little...mercurial.

Xerxes now didn't have a queen. In 2:1 it says after he got over his fury he remembered Vashti. In other words, he regretted the whole incident and he missed her. So his advisors came up with a plan. They would find him a new queen. They would comb the empire, which was huge and had 127 provinces, for the most beautiful young women in each state.

My first thought was that this was a beauty pageant. They'd bring these hot women from all over to find out which one was the most beautiful. It's kind of like the Miss America pageant, except there was no talent component. So it's more like the Miss Universe contest. Forget the tap dancing and the piano playing and just focus on which woman looks the best.

However, as I reflected on this story it seemed to me that there is another modern institution which might be a closer equivalent. It is the TV show *The Bachelor*. They bring a bunch of women to the bachelor and he sorts through them until he decides who gets the rose. I think they got the idea for that show from Xerxes, because that's exactly what he did. He had the women spend an entire year getting ready for their turn, then he would have a "date" with each young lady, one at a time. The "date" would involve spending the night with him. The one he liked best would not only get the rose, but the queen's crown as well.

I think I'm onto a concept I could sell to Hollywood here. We could call it *The Royal Bachelor*. We'd have single princes or kings from various countries come and find their princess or queen on the show. Given the fascination with royals even in our country I think this idea is going to be a big winner. But I guess that's kind of off point, so never mind.

Enter Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai was a highly respected member of the Jewish community, and of the larger community as well. His niece, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah, was also called Esther. We have some neighbors who are Chinese. They call themselves Jack and Katie. But we've collected their mail for them when they've been out of town and have seen mail addressed to them by their actual names. I can tell you that their real names are not Jack and Katie. I'm not even sure how to pronounce their actual names. They use Jack and Katie to make it

easier and more familiar for us Americans to call them by name. Esther was the name Hadassah adopted that the locals would be familiar with. It was a name derived from Ishtar, one of the local goddesses. Ishtar was depicted as the goddess of love, sex, fertility and war. She was analogous to Venus. Esther's parents had died when she was young so Mordecai adopted and raised her as his own.

Esther was entered in the Royal Bachelor show, with good reason. There is a description of her in 2:7 that is a bit unusual in the Bible. It says she "had a lovely figure and was beautiful." There are a number of women in the Bible described as beautiful, but it is unusual to mention she "had a lovely figure." In other words, in addition to being drop dead gorgeous, she had a hot body. We're talking head turning, traffic stopping beautiful. The result was, according to 2:17, "the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins." Esther won the rose and became queen.

Mordecai went daily to the royal precincts to catch any news he could and to follow Esther's progress. As he did so he happened to gather some intelligence that two army officers named Bigthana and Teresh didn't like how Xerxes was running things and were planning including an assassination of the king. Mordecai passed along this intelligence to Queen Esther. She told Xerxes, who investigated and found out it was true. He had the two men executed, putting an end to the plot.

HAMAN CREATES A FINAL SOLUTION

We see in 3:1 that Xerxes elevated a man named Haman to a position that was "higher than all of the other nobles." He had the most honored place in the king's court. He was the number 2 man in the kingdom. He also had a vastly oversized ego. The king had commanded that when Haman showed up everyone should bow before him. But one person refused to do that. The one person was Mordecai. He believed he was to bow only before God, never to a human. So when Haman arrived at the court everyone would bow except for Mordecai. Haman was incensed at this affront. It didn't matter to him that Mordecai's actions had nothing to do with what he thought of Haman. This was a religious conviction so Mordecai wouldn't bow before any man, including the king. That was irrelevant to Haman. He couldn't stand the idea that someone would refuse to recognize his greatness by bowing to him. The result was that he hated Mordecai, so he cooked up a plan that would solve the Mordecai problem for good.

We are told in 3:1 that Haman was an Agagite. That is an important piece of information. Hundreds of years before this God had instructed Saul, then Israel's

king, to attack and destroy the Amalekites. That group from the beginning had fought against the people of Israel. They were implacable, vicious enemies of God's people, so in 1 Samuel 15:3 God told Saul to utterly wipe them out, not leave a man alive. He did defeat them, but he left one of them alive. Verse 8 says, "He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all of his people he totally destroyed with the sword." He left Agag alive. Samuel would later kill Agag, but evidently Saul left alive some Agag heirs who survived, because later we encounter Haman as an Agagite, one descended from Agag.

Haman probably lived his whole life in Susa, the Persian capital. He was Persian, but he was also a descendant of Agag. He was a descendent of the Amalekites, and in him burned a hatred of the Jews. They had destroyed his people and wiped them all out so that they disappeared from the world scene as a people group. The Jews had devastated his family. He had been taught from his earliest moments to keep that fierce hatred of Jewish people in his heart. And now, when he is in a position of highest honor, everyone bows before him, appropriately (in his mind) acknowledging his greatness, except for one man. And that man was a Jew!

Every time he saw Mordecai refusing to honor him that hatred grew even more intense. It became so white hot, so powerful he could hardly restrain it. But he figured out a way to finally unleash it. He came up with a plan not just to fix Mordecai's wagon, but to get rid of all those despised Jews. He would convince Xerxes that they were all dissidents, troublemakers, out to overthrow the kingdom, and that the only way to deal with them was to kill them all. They were a threat to the king himself and to the Persian way of life. They were a clear and present danger to national security.

He sold this idea to Xerxes by telling him that there was a people group in his kingdom that didn't live by Persian laws, didn't worship Persian gods, had different customs than the Persians and deigned to even disobey direct royal edicts. They were a dangerous insurgent group that needed to be eradicated for the sake of national security. Haman, a rather superstitious man, had rolled the dice, called Purim in the Persian language, to determine the right date to carry out his plan. So on December 13, 11 months after the edict was ratified by the king, all the people of the kingdom were to attack these disloyal people and in a master statement of overkill, according to Esther 3:13 the law said everyone was to "destroy, kill and annihilate" the Jews. Sounds like a law from the Department of Redundancy Department. Am I to understand you hope to eliminate these people, Captain Obvious? Then they were to steal all their earthly goods. Xerxes may well have not even known that the people in question were the Jews.

If you know any history at all that probably sounds all too familiar. Adolf Hitler identified a group in Germany, in fact in all of Europe, that were different. They had different customs and religion, and they had way too much power and wealth. They were a threat to national security and had to be dealt with. Of course the Nazis came up with what they called the Final Solution. The people group, of course, was the Jews, and the “solution” was to kill them all. He came up with the same "solution" that Haman got passed into law. So Haman was setting up the very first attempt in history at a Holocaust.

ESTHER TAKES A STAND

It didn't take long for everyone to become aware of the plight of the Jewish people. There was one person in position to do something about it, and that was Esther. Mordecai appealed to her to act on behalf of him and all of her people. However, Esther was reluctant.

There is an important piece of information revealed in 2:10. “Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.” Haman was not alone in his hatred of Jewish people. Antisemitism was rampant even back then, and Mordecai knew if Esther revealed that she was Jewish she likely would have never been allowed on the Royal Bachelor show in the first place. In fact he told her to hide her true identity as a way of protecting her from anti Semitic attacks. That's why she went by Esther rather than Hadassah.

When Mordecai appealed to her she was not anxious to help for two reasons. The first was she would have to reveal that she was, in fact, Jewish, which would certainly put her position in peril, and likely, in view of the Haman Act, put her very life in jeopardy. If she just kept her mouth shut no one would ever know she was actually Jewish and she'd be safe.

The second problem is that the king had a policy. You only got in to see the king if he asked that you be brought into his presence. In other words, you had to be invited by the king. Even his wife could not just drop in to say hello. That might sound like the king was being pompous, but it actually was a security measure. Assassinations were common in those days, and often they were perpetrated by supposed friends or family. Remember Shakespeare's "et tu, Brutei" scene in his play *Julius Caesar*. Since the only way you could kill a person back then was to physically attack them, by making sure no one came into the royal presence unbidden the king protected himself. Violating this rule made you subject to the most severe punishment, even death. Esther wanted no part of just deciding to

waltz into the royal court and telling the king his law needed to be changed immediately. But she was his wife! Yes, but he had a harem. Are you telling me that no wife who was one among a number wed to an irrational, often violent man, ever wanted to kill him? History tells us that Xerxes was violently unpredictable, so that killing or severely punishing one of his wives would not have been at all out of character. The point is Esther was painfully aware that if she took the step her uncle was asking her to take it might cost her life.

Mordecai essentially told her that God could rescue his people using someone other than Esther, if need be. But then he told her those famous words in 4:14, "who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" In other words, have you considered that God may have put you in your special position for this very moment? Just like he put Joseph in the position of power in Egypt so he could save his people, he has now made you the queen of Persia so you can be his instrument to save us all.

Esther took his words to heart. After considering them she asked him to get all the Jews in Susa to fast and pray and she would do the same. Then, she said those immortal words in verse 16, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." Esther did go to the king, and to her great relief the king allowed her to have an audience with him. He wanted to know what was on her mind, but she told him just to come to a meal she was preparing for him and to bring Haman with him.

HAMAN WALKS INTO HIS OWN TRAP

Haman was certain he was being honored even more and he was boastfully proud of his great position. Emboldened by his success he determined not to wait until December, but to have Mordecai killed immediately. He built gallows 75 feet high for the purpose.

The night before the fateful meal the king couldn't sleep. He decided a little reading might help him get drowsy, so he asked an aide to read the annals of his reign, which was likely some really dull stuff, the perfect remedy for insomnia. The aide just happened to read a section that included the account of how Mordecai had foiled the Bigthana assassination attempt, thus saving the king's life. He asked what had been done to reward Mordecai and found out the answer was zero. He determined to fix that the next day.

The next day he had Haman lead Mordecai around the city on a horse wearing royal robes and had people cheer him. Haman was humiliated and infuriated.

Worse was to come. At the royal lunch that day Esther finally told the king what was bothering her. In 7:3-4 Esther said, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life--this is my petition. And spare my people, this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would be worth disturbing the king."

The king asked, "Who did this?" In verse 6 Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman." The king was enraged. Haman had plotted to kill Mordecai, the man who had saved the king's life, and Esther, his wife, the queen of Persia. He left the room to calm down, but while he was out Haman tried to plead with Esther to spare him, and according to verse 8 he fell on the couch where Esther was lying down. Just then the king came back and saw what he thought was Haman attacking Esther. That did it. He ordered Haman to be executed immediately on the gallows he had built for Mordecai.

The king couldn't reverse a law he had passed. Persian kings' edicts were forever, kind of like a temporary tax passed by our government leaders today. But he agreed to allow the Jews to arm themselves, band together and defend themselves against anyone who dared attack them. So on December 13 those who tried to carry out the anti Semitic edict and kill the Jews were wiped out. It was decreed from then on Jews were to commemorate this event on December 13. And so to this day the Jews celebrate Purim, the chosen day when they were saved through the intervention of Esther.

IMPLICATIONS

When I think about the story of Esther there are 3 words that come to mind that summarize much of the meaning of this story.

COMPROMISE

We typically think of Esther as heroic because she took a big risk to save her people. She certainly did do that. But we might fail to notice the complete picture of this wonderful young woman. Prior to taking her courageous stand there was some compromise on her part.

If you read the story, though the details are skeletal so we must be careful, it does not appear that Esther was especially religious. There is very little indication that she had any great spiritual leanings. One possible indication of this is that she had not returned to Judah but had remained in Persia because it was comfortable there. This might be unfair to her because she was a young woman, probably in her teens

when all this started. However, it is apparent that Esther and Mordecai both liked life in Persia where there are all the amenities of civilization. Comfy homes, great shopping, lots of cultural events, all of which would have been absent in Judah.

However what we do know is that she deliberately kept her nationality a secret. She did not use her Hebrew name but used one that was derived from the name of a Persian goddess, the goddess of sex and fertility no less. I don't think she worshiped that false deity, but using the name would enable her to more easily blend in to the local society. And she intentionally did not inform anyone of who she was. She did this, in accord with Mordecai's instruction, as a way of trying to protect herself and enable her to get along better in Persian culture. In other words, her own security and ability to succeed in that society was more important to her than faithfulness to her heritage as one of God's chosen people.

Then there is the problem of her participation on the Royal Bachelor show. This involved spending a night with the king. Let's be real clear that they weren't playing Monopoly or Scrabble all night. That was a big time compromise in an effort to gain a position of great prestige and power. My kids all watch The Bachelor show on TV. In fact, I was appalled to learn that they even have a fantasy Bachelor league where they pick who they think is going to win the rose. The whole thing irks me because it involves the exact kind of thing Xerxes did as a way of matching people up. Our world loves it, but it's all wrong. What really gets me is we have known people who have been on that show. Christians who are making a big compromise to be on television. Esther made that kind of compromise.

This continued when Mordecai appealed to her to intervene on behalf of the Jews. Her initial response was to want nothing to do with it because she was mostly concerned about self preservation. There is quite a contrast between Esther and the book of Daniel. Daniel was in pretty much the same situation as Esther and Mordecai, just a few decades earlier. He and his friends were offered opportunity for positions of great power in the Babylonian and later Persian kingdoms, but they chose not to compromise by eating of the king's food, even though that refusal was risky. Esther, on the other hand, spent a whole year partaking of the king's food and pampering and didn't bat an eye at it. Where Daniel's friends preferred to be thrown into a blazing furnace than compromise, and Daniel himself faced spending a night in the lion enclosure at the zoo because of his insistence on living out his faith, Esther was just looking for a way to get by and stay off the anti Semitic radar.

Please don't think I'm down on Esther. I think she was just a human being trying to make her way through this world the best she knew how. We see very little indication of her spiritual state in this story. What we see is a person in an ungodly culture trying to navigate her way through and maybe not doing it perfectly. But she was doing the best she knew how to do.

Esther's story, to me, is one of great encouragement. Most of us know that we are not great heroes of the faith. We know we fall short of our own expectations of ourselves, and typically we have a nagging sense that God surely is disappointed with us. We just ought to do better. We see way too much compromise, inconsistency and failure in our efforts to follow Jesus. Satan, the accuser, shouts at us, "How can you call yourself a Christian? A follower of Jesus? Are you serious? You aren't even close." We kind of believe him. I'm not some great hero. I wish I were. But I'm not. I feel like I'm going to get into the kingdom by the skin of my teeth and will spend eternity in the coach section of the kingdom of God as a result.

In her song *Free To Be Me* Christian artist Francesca Batistelli sings, "I got a couple dents in my fender, Got a couple rips in my jeans, on my own I'm so clumsy." Can you identify with her? I think I have more than a couple dents in my fender.

Hershael York is a pastor. He tells a story of one of his more uncomfortable moments of compromise. He and his wife, Tonia, were on a cruise with some missionary friends. At one point the ship's social director invited them to have dinner at the captain's table. There were 5 couples there besides the Yorks and their friends. One woman there was a fiery redhead who was a take charge kind of person. She and her husband were from New York. After dinner they had entertainment that included playing a game called The Newlywed-Not So Newlywed game. They would take several couples, usually with a range of years married to be contestants. They asked for volunteers. The redhead New Yorker was sitting next to Pastor York and when they asked for volunteers she grabbed his arm and said, "Let's pretend we're married and volunteer." Before he could refuse she had her hand up and they were chosen! She told them they had been married 10 years. The woman whispered some quick thoughts on how to respond to questions, then they were taken into separate rooms and asked questions about each other and their marriage. To his shock, when the game was played they got them all right and were declared the winners. He felt so guilty when they congratulated them on how well they knew each other. It got worse. They then played a video of the game on the in cabin TVs for the next 24 hours. He and his

wife would get dirty looks as they walked around the ship holding hands and at one point two women pulled Tonia, his wife aside and said, "He's married you know." He says he was totally humiliated and ashamed.

It's not hard to imagine somehow getting swept into something like that by a forceful personality before you can think of a way to stop that snowball from rolling down the hill. Fortunately most of us have never compromised that publicly, but we are all much aware that we aren't what we wish we were.

The great news of this story is that this doesn't stop God from using us. He used Esther to save the lives of thousands of her people. In the crucial moment she was able to say, "If I perish, I perish," and take the plunge. As flawed as you and I are, God can still have a big role for us in his plan. We sometimes forget that there are no perfect people. If God doesn't use compromised ones, he won't be able to use anyone, because that's all there are. So take heart, because there is hope for you and me. God is working in our lives. God loves us. God can and will make something heroic out of our little efforts to serve and follow him, feeble as they may be.

One of the great examples of this is in John 21:17-18. After Peter had boasted that if everyone else in the world failed Jesus, he never would, he promptly went out and pulled an epic fail. His failure was inexcusable and egregious. But now the risen Lord asks him 3 times, the same number of times Peter failed. Then he tells him in verse 18, "Feed my sheep." The message was clear. Yes, Peter had failed and didn't deserve to be a leader in the kingdom of Christ. Yet Jesus still loved him and would use him anyway.

COURAGE

Despite her compromises Esther is a hero for at the crucial moment, when her life was on the line, she took the leap and bravely did what was necessary to save her people. That one act of courage overcame any of the compromises she had ever made.

That same Peter who quailed when accused of knowing Jesus on the night of the Lord's arrest and took the coward's way out, only a few months later was in a more intimidating situation. He and John, after healing a man were hauled before the Sanhedrin, the court of Israel, the people who were responsible for Jesus' death and were threatened. The leaders ordered them to stop talking about Jesus. Acts 4:19-20 says, "But Peter and John replied, 'Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you,

or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Peter, like Esther, had compromised, but when the chips were down he came through bravely. The movie *We Bought A Zoo*, is based on the real life story of Benjamin Mee, who bought a dilapidated and failing zoo and with his family restored it. At one crucial moment Mee tells his son one of his favorite truths. "You know, sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage. Just literally 20 seconds of just embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it."

Esther needed that 20 seconds of insane courage, but something great did come of it. Despite failures and compromises in our past, God doesn't give up on us. But he will give us those brief opportunities to display 20 seconds of insane courage. Something great will come of it if we respond. Amazingly, God will even supply the strength. Isaiah 40:31 says, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength." If we put our hope in him he will give us the ability to be brave for those few seconds that are necessary. Like David in Psalm 22:19 we can pray, "But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me."

COINCIDENCE

It is important that we notice all of the coincidences that occur in this story. What a coincidence that Vashti would refuse to put on a show for Xerxes and the boys and thus open a door for Esther. What a coincidence that out of the thousands of young women that lived in the Persian Empire of that day, Esther would become Miss Persia, that she would win the rose.

What a coincidence that Mordecai just happened to somehow overhear a couple of guys plotting an assassination attempt. What a coincidence that the night before the crucial meal Xerxes couldn't sleep. What a coincidence that when he asked an aide to read something about his reign, the section he read was about how Mordecai had been responsible for thwarting the conspiracy.

There is a strange fact about this book. God is never mentioned in it. You have heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Those were preserved by a sect of Jews called Essenes who lived in a place called Qumran. They were a very strict sect. They excluded the book of Esther because God is never mentioned, but also because of some of the compromises of Esther that they would have considered scandalous.

I believe that what seems to be the absence of the mention of God in this story was a deliberate choice by the writer. He did it that way because it reflects how life looks so much of the time. We don't see God acting directly in our circumstances. We don't see spectacular miracles. God almost seems invisible, not only in the literal sense, but in the allegorical sense. We wish for him to show up in some tangible, visible, spectacular way, but most of the time it doesn't happen. He is hidden, behind the scenes.

This was a depiction of what life would likely have felt like to the Jews who lived in ancient Persia. They had heard the stories about Abraham, Moses, David and the great prophets like Elijah. They had heard about the Promised Land. But they had never been there. They had never seen God do anything dramatic, and they lived in a culture that took zero notice of their supposed God. The things that were important in their human environment left this supposed God completely out of the picture. He had nothing to do with their lives.

Just because God isn't mentioned by name this story doesn't mean he's not there. What you see in this story is God moving behind the scenes. The story shouts at us that God was at work. Those coincidences were no coincidences at all. They were God moving chess pieces around on the board. In fact, God put Esther in just the right place "for such a time as this."

God seemed completely absent at the cross of Jesus Christ, so much so that Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But God was not absent that day. He was doing his most powerful work of grace and salvation in all of history. You and I may find ourselves not understanding why all this has happened to us. We long for God to "show up." What we need to remember is that while it may feel like he is hidden, he is very much at work in this world.

When I look back on my life I can see how the hidden hand of God has been at work. My first year in seminary I had a good job that didn't pay well, but there was hope for a promotion later that would provide much better income. If I could hang on I might be able to support myself all the way through grad school. But as my first year progressed I got to know a Christian guy who had his own business. He kept telling me I should come work for him, that his business would provide more flexible work hours and a pay rate more than 30% higher than what I was receiving. I had repeated problems at my current job with managers fouling up my work schedule so it conflicted with classes, so after considerable prayer I decided I would take my friend's offer and go to work for him. Within a few months I began to realize that I had made a mistake. My Christian friend proved not to be totally

honest. His claims about pay were not true. Without going into details I will just tell you that he had a way of promising things but not delivering them and giving a justification for his actions that defended them. I discovered I was making less than I had in my previous job. I had prayed about this before making this decision and I felt like I obviously must not have been listening very well, or God didn't care. I eventually quit that job because I didn't want to work for a man who presented himself as a Christian leader but wasn't real ethical. It seemed like I had really messed things up. But the result of that was that I was eventually offered a part time job at the Church I was attending. Several months later at a ministry event I helped lead I met a group of 4 people who were new to our ministry. One of them was a young woman named Laurie. I would never have imagined it at the time, but that young woman would eventually become the greatest blessing I have on this earth when she married me. Had it not been for what seemed at the time like a bad decision I would never have been in the place where I met her. In a situation where God seemed absent, he was in fact working behind the scenes to bring about what seems to me to be a miracle.

The message of Esther is trust God, even when you cannot see God's hand, when the plan seems to be no plan at all, God is still there. You never can tell when you might discover that you are in just the right place for such a time as this.