Lessons from the Book of Esther

Introducing Esther:

Nowhere in the book of Esther will you find God mentioned. No one prays to Him, no one talks about Him, no one thanks Him, no one even acknowledges His existence. And that has caused not a few problems for the book. Both Jewish and Christian commentators over the years have struggled with this fact.

But for us today the lack of "God" in the story is a gracious gift. Why? Because it's easy to relate, it's easy to see ourselves in a story where God isn't calling down from heaven, or talking from a burning bush. Esther, more than any other book in the Bible reminds us of our world. A world where people go about their business without giving God a second thought. A world where Christians often have to "hope" they are making the right decision, and a world where "circumstances," rather than earth shattering miracles make the difference between success and failure.

This is the world of Esther, a world just like ours, and it is the intention of this sermon series to mine all the information we can about the people in this book and find nuggets of truth that we can apply to our lives today. In doing this I have chosen to study the book character by character not, chapter by chapter, so each message will examine a different person and glean from their story lessons for our life.

One final word about the book. Esther is considered by many to be a comedy/drama, in that the book clearly pokes fun of godless people who attempt to harm the Jews. As you read Esther, look for irony and comedic moments, they are many, and they remind us that in the end, even when others threaten to do us harm, we really have nothing to fear, for God is on our side, and He will win the day - even if he does it incognito.
The King and Queen - Fools without God

The first message examined the lives of the King and Queen of Persia, this is what we found out.

The King: He is opulent, excessive, demanding, unforgiving, easily influenced and quite vengeful - not the kind of guy you want to cross!

The Queen: She is competitive, proud, disrespectful, independent and willing to challenge power. Sound like anyone you know - besides half the population of Toronto?

King Xerxes and Queen Vashti are people who live unto themselves. They neither care about God nor call on him for help. In fact, these two people are a personification of the idea that "God is not in the book of Esther," because both of them live their lives as if He does not exist. Sadly, the queen finds out that the world she lives in is not a very gracious place and her gamble of disobedience gets her banished and out of the story before it even gets going.

The foolish King:

In the book of Esther King Xerxes holds great power - or not! Actually, he can't seem to make even the slightest decision. In what can only be seen as a moment of comedy, the king sends out a letter telling all the women in Persian to obey their husbands, the joke is, he can't get his own wife to obey. He has the appearance of power, but is clearly impotent.

In the end the king is seen over and over again deferring to others for advice on what to do, and by the final chapters of the book Esther and Mordecai, not King Xerxes are running Persia.

Lessons from the King and Queen:

For us today, we might want to think about the king as a classic example of someone who lives their life without considering God in the equation. Like the king, many people go about their business as if God doesn't exist, and this makes them the proverbial fools, for they are never really in charge of their own lives, like millions who "say" they are running their own lives, the king was swayed this way and that never taking a stand on anything, leaving the real decisions to people with real convictions.

"The fool says in his heart, "there is no God."

This is a great lesson for us today. The book that never mentions God is like the city that never seems to acknowledge His existence. But make no mistake, He exists, whether we acknowledge Him or not, and if we chose not to, we run the risk of become the fool just like King Xerxes.

Imagine if I said to you I don't believe in carrier pigeons. Wouldn't you think I was a fool, after all they are there, and they always get home. The problem is, we don't know how they get home, we don't understand how it works, or to put it more personally, I can't sense what that little bird is sensing when it figures out the way back home. But that doesn't give me the right to deny their ability or their essence. Imagine if I said that those birds were just lucky - you would think I was a fool.

But isn't that what a lot of people do with God? They don't sense Him, or see Him, or feel Him, so they decide He's not really there. They "rationalize Him away." But like the homing pigeon and a million other things we can't understand, God doesn't need our approval or acknowledgement to exist. SO don't play the fool like the king did. Know, even if you can't sense Him, know God is there.
Esther - Miss Persia Beauty Queen

In the second lesson we studied Esther, and we learned that Esther had three main parts to her life in the story:

1. **Obedient Esther: "Beauty Queen"

At first Esther submits to everyone and everything. She submits to Mordecai and enters the king's "beauty pageant," hides her identity, obeys Hegai, submits to the king, passes information from Mordecai to the king, and agrees to risk her life for her people.

2. **Audacious Esther: "Bold Advocate"

Next Esther moves from obedience to audaciousness. She approaches the king without being summoned, requests that the king and Haman come to her house for dinner. She refuses to tell the king why he has been invited and makes him wait until the next day and she reveals Haman as an evil man who wants to kill her and her people.

3. **Influential Esther: "Ruler of Persia"

Finally, Esther rises to a place of influence. It begins with Haman begging her for his life. Then the king puts Esther in charge of Haman's house. After which Esther puts Mordecai in charge of Haman's house. Next Esther is told to "Write as she pleases" about the Jews and she and Mordecai revoke the king's former command, and after the Jews defend themselves from their enemies and win the battle, the king asks Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted." Finally, Esther commands the people to celebrate with the Feast of Purim, and the command of Queen Esther confirms the practice of Purim.

Lessons from Esther:

The most important thing we can learn from Esther actually comes from another book in the Bible. In 1 Samuel, King Saul was supposed to fight a battle with the Amalekites and destroy all the inhabitants of the city. He won the battle, but failed to carry out the orders of God. Later, Samuel finds Saul preparing a sacrifice (in our day what would amount to a worship service of thanksgiving) to thank God for the victory. Samuel shows up, rebukes Saul for not obeying God, dismisses his sacrifices and tells him he will lose his kingship over the issue. Saul is shocked, and then Samuel drops a bomb and declares in 1 Sam 15:22:

"Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."

How does this pertain to Esther? Well, for one thing Esther is not seen worshiping God in the story; she doesn't pray to him, or even obey the food laws of her people. Esther, it would seem, isn't very religious! But she is obedient. And according to Samuel, Obedience is better than worship. So Esther gives us a great example of how to serve God, namely, obey.

Now for most of us in our "non-God" world, this is not very comforting. First of all we don't like the idea of being obedient, in fact we probably think Vashti is a better role model than Esther, and we don't often know how and when to obey God. After all, He's not talking very clearly these days, and so we and many others who have read this story often miss this point: the book is not about religion and morality, the book is about obedience, and the lesson is simple. Obedience is better than religion, and those who obey God will find His blessing.

So the next question is, 'How do we obey God, or even know his voice?' for that we turn to our next lesson and examine the life of Mordecai.
Before we look at the details of Mordecai's life, I need to share some important information. **Mordecai is God.** Well...he's not "God" and yet he is. You see, the name Mordecai is the Hebrew form of the Persian name Marduku, which mean God. So Mordecai is "god," and guess what? He tends to speak for God throughout the whole story of Esther. So in examining Mordecai we need to think of him as God's spokesman in the story.

Now consider the events in Mordecai's life...

- He was carried into captivity with King Jeconiah (Jehoiachin), which means Mordecai's father was a nobleman, and palace official in Jerusalem.
- He lived in the Citadel, not the city of Susa. Before Esther became queen he was a royal adviser and court official.
- Mordecai is a descendent from the family of Saul, the first King in Israel. He has royal blood.
- Everyday Mordecai walked around the palace grounds in front of the harem to find out how Esther was doing.
- Mordecai sits at the King's Gate, where the wise elders sit.
- Mordecai "knows things". The plot against the King (2:19-23) and "all" the planning of Haman (4:1).
- Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman.
- Mordecai "commands" Esther to forfeit her life if necessary in order to save her people.
- The King remembers that Mordecai has saved his life and honours him by having Haman lead him around the city shouting the praise of Mordecai.
- Mordecai, through Esther, takes charge first of Haman's house and then of Persia.

The story concludes with these words honouring Mordecai...

*Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.*

Lessons from Mordecai:

Now that we understand a few things about Esther and Mordecai, we can put a few pieces of the puzzle together. At first glance we have a Bible book that doesn't mention God, a heroine who is not very "godly" and a hero who seems to lead from the shadows. But when we look closer we see something greater emerge. What we really have in the book of Esther is a God who speaks through His followers, a woman humble enough to listen, and a divine solution for a very human problem.

The lesson of Mordecai is a lesson in hearing the voice of God, which is more of an art than a science, in that we need to be wise and thoughtful when deciding if someone is speaking the word of God to us. To help, I offer the following list of considerations we need to think about when deciding if we should obey someone or not.

- The voice of God is honourable.
- The voice of God is wise.
- Those that speak the words of God to us will be knowledgeable. God might speak through the lowly, but he will not speak through the willingly ignorant. (Study to show yourself approved).
- His words bring peace upon the humble.
- It will be confirmed by scripture.
- It will be truthful, even if the truth is not wanted or difficult to hear.
- It will not flatter the hearer (God is no respecter of persons).
- It is not self-interested (if the speaker's personal interests are in play, it's definitely not God).
- In your life - you're not the voice of God. Your thoughts are not the same as "God's voice".
- Your conscience is not the same thing as God's voice. Your conscience is Your Conscience, God gave it to you to help you know right from wrong, but you can dull your conscience and then it will not guide you properly.
- God's voice doesn't tell you the future. It guides us in what is right, and for the most part, it does nothing more than remind us of what Jesus and the prophets have already said.
Haman - Full of Hot Air

Haman is the quintessential "bad guy." He is full of himself, hateful, and ready to destroy anyone who stands between him and greatness. His name literally means "noise", and that's about all his life adds up to - a whole lot of empty noise. But to really understand the power of this story, we have to look back into the history of Israel, back again to the story I mentioned in our study of Esther, back to King Saul and his great failure in 1 Samuel 15.

The Bible never uses words lightly, so when we see Haman introduced, not once but twice, as an Agagite, we should take notice. Now for the modern reader this is nothing more than another difficult Bible name, but for the informed reader, it is vital. You see, the day that Saul disobeyed God back in 1 Samuel he was fighting against the Amalekites, and guess what their king's name was? Agag.

Now let's make a connection: Saul was fighting Agag and instead of destroying him and all his people and property, Saul kept him alive and took the best animals. Thus Saul disobeyed God and lost his kingship. Now, hundreds of years later, who turns up to persecute the Jews? The descendant of an old enemy, the enemy that Saul didn't destroy. So in our story, Mordecai and Esther have been given the task of finishing what Saul started.

What's truly amazing is that Mordecai wasn't even sure that God was going to use them, but still he chose to be available and in the end he and Esther prevailed. We even have a completion of Saul's task in the fact that Esther commanded that all of Haman's family be destroyed, and even though it seems barbaric to us, in the context of Biblical history she is correcting Saul's mistake. Which again brings us to the centre of this book and the most important lesson we can learn: **To obey is better than sacrifice.**

Lessons from Haman:

The number one lesson we can learn from Haman is that you and I have an enemy. And while we might have people in our lives that don't like us, or attempt to thwart our plans, they are not our real enemy. Our real enemy is the enemy of our soul - Satan. And if we think about him in the same way we think about Haman and Mordecai we just might have something to cheer about.

You see, we human beings started a battle with Satan many years ago when we disobeyed God. At that time you might say, we started a battle that we could not finish. We let Satan in, and we "can't get him out". But that's only half the story.

Jesus came, and through obedience, finished what we started. Like Saul, our disobedience caused us to be separate from God, but like Mordecai and Esther, obedience won the day. In fact, the Bible credits our salvation to Jesus' obedience. Listen to how Paul explains it:

And being found in appearance as a man, Jesus humbled himself and became **obedient** to death— even death on a cross! Phil 2:8

This is amazing! Jesus finished what we started. Like Mordecai and Esther's defeat of Haman, Jesus defeated Satan for us, and because of that, we are free. Free to live, to celebrate, and to rejoice.

During this service we took the liberty to do just that. We celebrated a Baptist version of Purim and dressed up, laughed, sang and made a lot of noise. Not empty noise, rather, we made a joyful noise, so that we would never forget that God has won the victory. We are safe. And while people can cause us harm, cheat us, and even kill our bodies, no one, and nothing, can take our soul! God has us safe in his protective arms. So don't pout, don't fret, and whatever you do, don't live a defeated life. God has won the victory - your enemy is defeated - live like you believe it!
For Such a Time as This

In the last message on the book of Esther, I want to bring your attention to the most important verse in the whole story, Esther 4:13-14. At this point in the story Mordecai has asked Esther to intervene on behalf of the Jews, but Esther is afraid to speak to the king. Then Mordecai makes this statement to Esther, to us, and to all who wish to live a life with meaning.

_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, 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?_  

To put it in simple terms, here is what I think Mordecai is really saying to Esther:

**You haven't arrived yet**

*There is hard work to be done*

*Who knows*

**Maybe this is the reason you were born**

Up until this point, Esther had been obedient to Mordecai, but when it meant possible life or death, she flinched! So Mordecai challenged her, and us, with these powerful words. Now for me, the most powerful part of this whole statement is found in the two words "who knows." I love those words. I love them because they are so honest, so real, and so much like our world today. Personally, I thank God for Mordecai and Esther, two people who lived for God at a time when God wasn't very "visible". He wasn't talking from burning bushes, He wasn't parting the waters, or turning water into wine. No, in Mordecai's day, like ours, all he could do is do what was right, and hope that God would bless it. This is real faith! And it leads us back to the single most important idea in the book - obeying God is the best thing you can do. In the little things, in the big things, no matter what, if you want your life to have meaning, obey God.

Think about Esther. When she entered the beauty contest did she think that winning was her purpose in life? When she married the King did she think that that was her purpose? She might have, but she would have been wrong. Those were just "obedience" tests along the way to prepare her for something great.

Remember what Jesus said when he told the story about the faithful servants: **Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!**

**Success in life is being faithful to God - not going to church.** God doesn't want crowded churches, God wants obedient people. Too often Christians attend church but live like God doesn't exist - like the king and Queen, and sometimes Christians attend church and wilfully sin in their everyday life! This makes us like Haman who was an enemy of God, because James once said that if you are a friend to the world and to sin, then you are an enemy of God.

Let's hope, that after we have read and understood the book of Esther, we are not like the King and Queen or like Haman, let's hope we are like Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai, who was righteous and wise and willing to speak the word of God to his people, and Esther who was nothing more and nothing less than obedient, and who, in the end, saved her people and proved without a shadow of a doubt, that **to obey is better than sacrifice.**

_It's not about greatness, or bravery, or confidence,  

**It's about OBEDIENCE.**

**Ordinary people do great things when ordinary people do right things, no matter how hard the right thing is to do.**

_That's the lesson of the book of Esther._

_My God bless you as you obey his word!_