

Esther 5 and 6

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[0:00] Do you ever feel like there's not much going on? Do you ever feel like there's not much happening in life? Work, leisure, family, same old, same old.

You go to church and even though going to church kind of makes you feel a little bit grounded, you have a sense it's not really taking you anywhere. Not a lot going on. There's probably a French word for it, isn't there?

Yeah. What's even worse is when you just feel that things are going downhill. Things are going downhill and you can't see anything on the horizon that's going to turn it around.

You know, the same old patterns in your family that you just don't know how to interrupt. The war in Ukraine that we used to feel so passionately about just sort of rumbles on and just seems like there's nothing that can be done about it.

It's like we're just waiting for Putin to choke on a peanut or on his vodka or something and there's nothing that can be done. The really surprising thing about the book of Esther is that in the book of Esther, God is not mentioned once.

[1:30] Not even once is the name of God used. How come there's a book in the Bible that doesn't mention God?

I mean, surely there's been some mistake, hasn't there? Well, some people have thought so. But I would suggest that the book of Esther is deliberately plugging into our lived experience.

Because that's how life often feels, doesn't it? We know in our minds and in our faith that God is active.

And we access that a little on a Sunday. But to be honest, most of the week is just ordinary. Most of the week there's nothing special going on.

And so we live in that ambiguity of what we believe to be the case. That God is active and at work. And what feels like our lived experience.

[2:34] Where it's like God isn't mentioned. Especially, I think that's the case, when we suffer. And the suffering goes on and on without relief.

And it just feels like God isn't showing up. Can you see that? I think that's why God is deliberately not mentioned in the book of Esther.

So in the first four chapters, we have found the people of God are in exile. And they've been through this process of gradual decline.

And now they face a fatal danger. A law has been passed that will lead to their extermination. And as far as they can see, they have no power.

There is no hope on the horizon. And there's no tangible sign that God is involved. And I think the people at the time must have wondered, is God done with us?

[3:49] We're in exile because we've broken God's covenant. Maybe he's just finished with us. Maybe it's all over here. But then in chapters 5 and 6, which we had read to us, things start to turn around.

And there's three ways here we see in which God works. First of all, God works when we as Christians, when we as God's people, embrace our calling.

So because God isn't mentioned in the book, it's kind of the spotlight particularly shines on the human actors. And so we see Esther here with the people of God in exile.

And of course, this is not the whole of the Jewish people. Under the previous king, King Cyrus, quite a few of the Jewish people have gone back to the land.

The ones we read about here are the ones that stayed where they were in exile. And from just watching Mordecai and Esther so far, we get the impression that the way they coped in exile was basically to keep their heads down.

[5:06] But now there is this deadly threat to their very existence. And there's only one person who is anywhere close to power in a position of influence.

And that's Esther. At the end of the previous chapter, chapter 4, Mordecai says to Esther, Esther, you're going to have to try and talk to the king about this.

But you weren't allowed just to go in and see the king. She says, if I just go in and see the king, I risk my own life. No one had permission to do that.

So she takes a bit of persuading. And Mordecai says this to her, well, who knows, but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.

Maybe that's why you're here, Esther. Maybe that's why you're queen, for this very moment. And it's a turning point in the story.

[6:18] It's a turning point as Esther decides she's going to come out as Jewish and she's going to act for the sake of God's people.

What's happening there is Esther is deciding to live out her life as the Lord's.

She's been keeping her head down, but she's deciding now that the situation demands that she live out her life as the Lord's. And she's doing that without any guarantee of success.

She does not know how this will turn out and whether the king will say, no, you can't come and see me and she will lose her life.

There is no guarantee of success, but she's deciding to live out for the Lord because it's right, because it's the right thing to do.

[7:25] She is one of God's people. She's inhabiting her identity now as God's people, as one of God's people. And things start to turn around.

She goes in her royal robes. Remember, she became queen. She had to act seductively. That's the way it was in order to become queen. Here she goes in her royal robes and goes to see the king.

Will he be in a good mood? Will he accept her? He comes into his presence and he extends the royal scepter to her and is pleased to see her and invites her in.

And he knows that in order to come and see him just off her own back, she's taken a massive risk. So there must be a good reason for it.

And he's so pleased to see her. He says, what is it you want, Esther dear? Let me know. Whatever it is you want, I will give you your request.

[8:35] First, things are starting to turn around. Esther is living out who she is as one of God's people and God is honouring it.

And as we read chapter 5, you just can't miss the change that there is in Esther. Previously, Esther was a young woman with no power, caught up in the system.

She's just done two. But now, as she starts to live out as God's people, as one of God's people, we see a completely different Esther.

It's Esther who is pulling the strings. And she acts with such incredible poise. She says to the king, come to this banquet with me and please bring along your number two Haman.

And so, Esther sets up the situation where she has the two most powerful people in the kingdom dining at her table. And she acts with incredible restraint and tact.

[9:54] Her people are facing extermination. It must have been so tempting to go into the king and collapse in a heap and say, oh dear king, Haman wants to kill us all.

We've got to do something. But she holds back her request. Even at the banquet, she, she, he asked her for a second time, what is it you want me to do for you?

And she says, well come back tomorrow and I'll let you know. Why does she string him along like that? Well, in that society, the law of the Medes and Persians was irrevocable.

You just could not change it. And a law has been passed regarding the extermination of the Jewish people. The Medes and Persians were famous for this.

So if the king suddenly does a U-turn on a law that he's passed, then she knows very well his authority is completely shot. And yet she needs him to change.

[11:04] So what's she going to do? Well, she wines and dines him. She makes sure she sees him a couple of times so that he's feeling the love again.

She doesn't ask him until the second banquet. So what happens is that he's promised to grant her request three times before he even knows what she wants.

How did this cute looking orphan kid become such a sophisticated operator all of a sudden? Well, I think it's not reading too much into it to know to say that the Lord was equipping her for what he

wanted her to do.

When you know the Lord and you walk in that identity, when you live it out large and say this is who I am, you become what God means you to be.

Yes, Esther has come to this position for such a time as this. And as she lives out who she really is as one of God's people, then God equips her for just what he needs her to be.

[12:20] And she becomes this incredibly impressive woman who effectively saves her people. God works when we embrace our calling.

I was thinking that kind of coming out definitely as the Lord. We do that right at the beginning of the Christian life, don't we?

When we get baptised. Baptism is a way of expressing our identity as Christ's and as the Lord's.

And we get baptised because Jesus commanded it, yes, but Jesus commanded it, I think, because it must be good for us. Everything God asks us to do is good for us.

And in baptism we are making that declaration that I am his and I am following him as Lord. And you see God's wisdom in getting us to start off the Christian life in that way.

[13:30] as we look at how Esther kind of came out for God, some of us are probably feeling, do you know what, I think day to day I'm more like the old Esther than the new Esther.

I'm not sure I am really living out day to day at work and in more difficult situations that I am really living out as the Lord's, as he has called me to be.

And if that's the case, what I suggest is that each week, early in the week, you spend some time thinking through the regular routine that you go through each week.

And say to yourself, what does it look like for me to live out wholeheartedly as the Lord's in these different routines and environments? What does it mean for me to live as a child of light?

What does it mean in this situation for me to make the most of every opportunity in the situations he's placed me in because the days are evil? It's a call here, isn't it, for us to live out who we are as the people of God fully and wholeheartedly.

[14:55] Don't live half-heartedly, giving your life to the things that you know are not the most important. And part of the way we do that, I think, is we live out our identity as part of the body of Christ.

Because to be a Christian is to be part of his church, part of his body. And living out wholeheartedly as part of his body. So we've seen about things that are happening over the summer, carnival, holiday Bible club, there's trails, there's men's prayer events to support each other in being missional.

New community groups starting where we're seeking to practice what the Bible says about church life. Getting involved in that, not just in the few, you know, the odd thing that really catches our fancy, but wholeheartedly is part of what it means to live out your identity as a person in Christ and to play your part in his kingdom.

And when you do that, God uses you in his kingdom. That's the first thing, but Esther's actions are not the main turning point in the story.

because Esther holds back her request and says to the king, I'm not going to tell you at this banquet, I'll tell you at the next banquet tomorrow evening.

[16:29] Tomorrow evening, she'll tell him what she wants, but tomorrow morning, Haman is going to execute Mordecai and he's going to be impaled. So the main turning point is when that turns around.

God works as Esther embraces our identity, but also God works through providence. I'll explain what that is. This Haman guy's a piece of work, isn't he?

Haman gets invited to the banquet with the king and the queen. Is he appreciating the food? Is he admiring the king and the queen?

No. All he's thinking about is how well this reflects on him. The guy is self-obsessed.

it's all me, myself, and I. But behind Haman's lust for power and position, we see unusually, I think, in Old Testament stories, it actually shows us what's going on in his heart.

[17:42] Behind all that, what Haman really loves is the adulation of others. So even as he gets all these privileges, you see what's happening with his ego, and the endless calculations that are going on in his ego, as to how everything reflects on him.

Haman is a picture of pride. In his famous book, Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis talks about pride in terms of self-obsession.

And pride, he says, often isn't about how much you have and how much you've achieved. Pride is how much you have and how much you've achieved compared to your neighbour or compared to your sister.

Pride works on comparison with the person you compare yourself to. If I'm doing better than them, then happy days.

some of us have that self-obsession, but that self-obsession makes us feel inferior. So we're doing the same thing.

[18:52] We're constantly thinking how this reflects on us, but instead of feeling lifted up like Haman, we feel put down. But it's the same thing, it's the same ego, the same self-obsession.

And it's really stark with Haman, isn't it? Because he idolises approval, his ego is always fragile. He always needs constant and more approval. And despite being the most honoured person in the whole of the empire, which was massive, the fact there's this one guy, Mordecai, who doesn't acknowledge him almost ruins it all for him.

Because his ego is so fragile. It constantly needs stroking. Yes, Haman, you're the best. And Mordecai won't do it. And so he goes to his friends and say, what a day I've had.

Guess who? With the king and the queen. But this chap Mordecai, every time I see him, it almost ruins it all for me. And what he needs at that point is friends to say to him, look, Haman, let's have a word.

[20:13] Why are you so angry? Mate, what's going on with you? Why are you so angry about this one person when you were so honoured? Because when you feel disproportionately wound up about something, that means there's something disproportionate in your heart, yeah?

That's what he needs, friends who restore some balance to him. But they don't do that. They join in his praise and his pride and say, well, you are the most important person in the kingdom, so if you want to get rid of him, why don't you get rid of him?

And he builds this ridiculously high pole on which to impale the dead body of Mordecai, ridiculously high like his ridiculously high inflated ego.

And the next morning he gets up on a mission, he's finally, everyone's going to acknowledge him now, once he's got rid of Mordecai, so he gets up early to see the king to get permission to execute Mordecai.

And then he will have everything he wants. And you can imagine he goes into the palace early, he's whistling to himself, oh, what a beautiful morning, oh, what a beautiful day.

[21:30] I get this wonderful feeling everything's going my way, except it isn't. Because the tide has turned.

Because there are things outside of his control that have changed. Because at just the right time, as Mordecai is going to be executed the next morning, the king can't sleep.

The king can't sleep. No particular reason. He's not worried about anything. He hasn't eaten too much at the banquet. Just one of those things. The king has a restless night.

I don't know what you do when you can't sleep. I find watching telly is bad. Doesn't work. what the king decides to do is to get the records of his reign written in all the books read to him.

Now understand this was written by civil servants. Sorry, Ian. Probably not the most riveting read. Probably thinks it will send him back to sleep.

[22:44] But surprisingly, as he hears these records of meetings and things that have been signed off, read to him, there's this interesting bit about this plot on his life that was foiled.

Now he completely forgotten about that and he was so busy at the time he just moved on but he thinks, yeah, wow, that was brilliant. And what was done to reward the person who informed and foiled the plot?

The person who was Mordecai. And so the next morning, the king also gets up early because he's on a mission to see Mordecai honoured.

So both Haman and the king are in the palace early. Haman's on a mission, he has so much power, he's going to do what he likes. And the funny thing is he doesn't realise that the tide has turned against him.

The king says, who is around to advise me? There's this guy I've got to honour, I just need an advisor to tell me what I should do for the person that I want to honour.

[24:00] And there is Haman. And Haman thinks, and who would the king want to honour apart from yours truly? And so we hear Haman's fantasy.

This is what he would love. And whereas Esther is so controlled and poised, Haman just splits out there in his pride. What he would love is the ultimate acknowledgement from everything.

He would like to ride in the golden carriage up the mall, maybe without the crown on his head because that would be taking it just a little too far, but he would like to be as close to being king as it's possible to be without actually being the king.

And the king says, well, well then, if that's what should be done for the man the king honours, get it done, Haman, for Mordecai, his worst enemy.

And so what happens is Haman ends up leading Mordecai, leading the horse with Mordecai on the king's horse before all the cheering crowds, saying, proclaiming in front of him, this is what the king does for the person he delights to honour.

[25 : 20] God isn't mentioned in the book of Esther, but you can't think God's not at work in timing like that, can you? Turning things around just at the right time in order to save his people.

You see, God isn't just working when the Bible says, and God did, and there was a miracle, or a breakthrough, or a remarkable answer to prayer.

God is working all the time. Actually, all the time, if we looked out there, the world is full of wonders, which children see, don't they? They're all the time surprised and excited by things they see, but as an adult, you get used to it and forget it.

The world is full of wonders because God created it, and God is also constantly working in the world, moment by moment, detail by detail, in everything that happens, God is at work.

God is at work even in apparently chance events achieving his purpose. The Bible doesn't have to say, and God said, in order for us to realise that God is doing stuff.

[26 : 38] And what God is doing in the world is he is fulfilling his promises to his people.

Haman comes back home, completely defeated, everything is going horribly wrong, and this time, his friends say, ah, didn't you mention this Mordecai chap is a Jew?

We've heard stories about the Jews mate, you're done. There's nothing you can do. And they're right, because God has committed to his people.

He has committed, even though his people are in exile and don't see him working and have been terribly unfaithful to him, he is still committed to them and he will keep them and save them from death.

And in order to do that, he can use the actions of his followers like Esther, or he can use the moves of his enemies, or he can just use ordinary events.

[27 : 47] And it doesn't need to shout and say, look, this, that's God, because he's always working. God works through providence.

do you worry about the future? Do you find yourself tempted to invest swathes of cash to future-proof for you and your families?

Is that good? hey, our father holds the future. He has the future under control.

His timing is perfect. If we experience delays that feel really difficult and test our faith, there is a purpose for those delays.

and we have to recognize that our God sees just a little bit further ahead than we do. And he knows exactly the right timing for things to happen.

[29 : 02] And when we feel it coming at us from all sides, one thing after another, it's not that God has forgotten us. sometimes we're in the thick of it, we just don't know what the answer is.

And not everything is made clear at the time. But we know from experience, don't we, that often it's when we get out the other end sometime afterwards that we're able to evaluate it and say, wow, yeah, that was right, I can see God's hand in that.

Everything, as one of his people, if you are, everything that comes to you is at some level intended by God.

And nothing that is needful for you and for your life is withheld from you. He's got it. God works when we embrace our calling, like Esther, God works through providence.

And lastly, very quickly because I've run out of time, God works through reversal. It's clear, isn't it? The one who humbles himself will be exalted and the one who exalts himself will be humbled.

[30 : 27] Jesus. And it's emphasised here in these dramatic and sudden turnarounds in the fate of Haman who is trying to achieve things for his own prestige and glory and those, the fate of those who humbly wait upon the Lord and get delivered.

God works through reversal. If you want to be part of that, then you need to come and humbly receive from God. You need to come in that spirit and attitude. The Son of God, when he came to the earth, didn't come to strut his stuff.

He came humbly as a servant and a lot of the time he looked pretty ordinary. He came humbly as a servant to save you and I from death and to bring us life.

And that produces people who are humble. people who don't think we're the ones that can fix everything and have to work everything out ourselves and get depressed when we can't.

No, we come humbly. We receive from, he's the one who can fix things. He's the one who holds the future and has committed to sort things out for us.

[32:03] We come humbly to receive from him who brings life from the jaws of death, who is achieving his purposes for us through everything that happens and who is committed to his people forever.

And to become part of that you need to come humbly and to receive his grace. And then you become part of the great turnaround That God is achieving in the world.

Thank you. Thank you.