

What to Do When God Seems Distant: A Summary of the Book of Esther

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Our Spiritual Director, Fr. Swink opened our 18th season using the book of Esther as a means to help us navigate the difficult times we are in, especially when God appears distant from us. Curiously, the only book of the Bible that contains no mention of God is the book of Esther, and yet God is ever present to Esther and the Jewish people at that time. We can look to see what Esther and this book of the Bible teach us about how to live and act when we feel God distant in our present age. God is present among us if we are willing to surrender to His will. If it were not for our faith, what would we do in times of despair? This talk consisted of a Bible study on the book of Esther interspersed with questions and insights for us in the present age.

THE SETTING — The book of Esther begins with the Persian King Ahasuerus throwing a mighty banquet. The Jews were first exiled by the Babylonians, who were then overtaken by the Persians. The Persians allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but many of them chose to stay in captivity in Babylon. In modern terms, it makes no sense to remain in captivity. Yet while everyone wants to go to heaven, no one wants to go right now. The world of the book of Esther is a very sensual world, where everything is about pleasure. The king struggles with poverty, he has no sense of detachment, he is all about material things. Money is not evil, but the Bible tells us money is the root of all evil.

DETACHMENT & MODESTY — Are we detached from this world? Are we able to pull away from material things? Do we live in a spirit of poverty? We will learn that Esther comes from an impoverished background and this is why she has such a heart. Even when she becomes the queen and is extremely wealthy, she is willing to sacrifice everything, including her life, to save her people. What is poverty for us today? St. Josemaría Escrivá says poverty consists in large measure in sacrifice, knowing how to do without the superfluous. Our inner voice can tell us when we are led by selfishness or undue love of comfort. Comfort is not a problem in itself when it is not luxury or pleasure seeking, but focuses on making life agreeable for others.

The king was also gluttonous, he was eating and drinking for days. In our culture, there is a problem with drinking, and its destructive nature. St. Thomas Aquinas said drunkenness is a mortal sin, because then a man willingly and knowingly deprives himself of the use of reason. In our culture, some drink to escape life - rather than accept God's will, they run from it. Getting back to our gluttonous king, when he was drunk he was bragging about his wife the queen and how lovely she was to look at, and wanted to parade her around the men at the party. The queen said no. She was a pagan woman, but she displayed virtue here.

We live in a culture that lacks the virtues of modesty and chastity. Modesty is a virtue necessary for purity and flows out of a virtue of temperance. A modest person dresses, speaks, and acts in a manner that supports and encourages purity and chastity. Modesty protects the mystery of the person in order to avoid exploiting the other. Do we, as women, have a firm resolution to not let men force things that are inappropriate upon women?

The queen's response enraged the king, and he divorced her because she mocked him. She was exiled and the king sought to replace her. Now God enters this sensual, hedonistic culture by way of the Jew Mordecai and his adopted daughter Esther.

GOD IS IN CONTROL — Do we ever doubt that God is still in control? God is going to use a simple girl to do great things, without Him even being noticed. God has a plan for each of us, and will use us in powerful ways, but not in the ways we think or want.

Of all the beautiful women brought before the king to replace the exiled queen, Esther was the most beautiful. One wonders why Mordecai permitted Esther to marry the king, but we know God can work all things for good, and can even bring good out of evil. Esther pleased the king, and won his favor. She had the best place in the harem. She had received her calling, unusual though it was.

HIDDEN STAR — The name Esther means "hidden star." Most saints were hidden stars, think of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a cloistered nun who lived most of her life in anonymity who has become a doctor of the church and so many people have been impacted by her holiness.

We may wonder what our holy hour does, what our rosary does, what does taking care of our grandchildren do? It does more than we think if we connect it with God's grace. Why are we on earth as Christian women at this time? Why did God place us in this world, in this country, in this state, at this time? It is good to pray about this question, especially when things do not make much sense to us, or God seems distant. God is NOT absent. He wants us to be His hands and His feet and to be Christ to others. God is moving even though we do not see it, He is present, even though we do not feel it, God is acting if we are carrying out His will. In this time, in this culture, God wants us to be hidden stars and beacons of hope. We live in a divided, lustful, gluttonous, hedonistic culture where God seems to be distant, but God is going to change it with us. And it is not up to other people to change it, it is up to us. God even uses our imperfections and sinfulness to do His will if we rely on His grace and mercy.

Esther chose not to reveal her background, her faith. Are we supposed to hide our faith? We need to be careful so as not to burn the bridge before we cross it. Are we hiding our faith out of fear or out of prudence? Prudence means the time might not be right, but there will be a time. If we fear rejection, that is a problem. Esther took her guidance from her spiritual director Mordecai not to reveal her faith too soon.

The king made Esther the queen, and had another great banquet. Who is Esther? A lowly virgin who came out of nowhere to become queen. Does she remind us of anyone? She is in fact a type for Mary, queen of heaven and earth. Esther interceded for her people to save them from death. Our blessed mother does the same for us! God had a plan for the lowly virgin Esther, so with Mary. Where are we in our devotion to Mary? She is a great intercessor for us.

TROUBLE BREWING — Haman was the king's second in command. He was a product of his culture and demanded that all people kneel before him. Mordecai refused because he knelt only before his God. Our culture constantly breaks the first commandment (I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me). Idolatry is so much more than worship of pagan gods: it is a constant temptation of faith. Idolatry is divinizing what is not God: power, pleasure, ancestors, the state, money, status. Every time we sin, we have put something before the worship of God.

Haman got permission from the king to kill all the Jews after Mordecai's refusal. So on the 13th day of the twelfth month, an edict was written to destroy all the Jews. The devil always fights back on Marian Feast Days because he hates her more than any other human being - he is the antithesis of everything she stands for - proud versus lowly, the devil's "I will not serve" versus Mary's "be it done to me according to thy will..." In today's culture, persecution is intensifying, particularly for Catholics, as they are seen as enemies.

SUCH A TIME AS THIS — Mordecai relayed a message to Esther to beg the king for mercy. Esther could not approach the king without being summoned, because if someone came to the king without being summoned, they could be put to death. Mordecai delivered the below key line of the entire book of Esther to Esther as she realized she would risk her life if she approached the king: **"Who knows whether you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)** The whole reason God made Esther a queen was to save His people, and if she does not speak up, she will die like the rest of the Jews, and someone else will speak up. What a tragedy if she is not the one to do God's will.

Right now, where in our lives are we refusing to do God's will or resisting it? One of the things that brings peace into our hearts is accepting life as it is, and not how we want it to be. Acceptance means what we are doing right now is God's will. Esther realized it was God's will, she knew it was a huge risk, yet she agreed to go to the king "and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). Sin is mostly about refusing a certain cross given to us, and doing things on our own terms. It is after the fact that we realize God is good, but the process to Calvary is brutal, and we are filled with fear.

MAKING SACRIFICE — Esther got all the Jews to fast and pray for three days. Fasting and prayer are a way of making sacrifice. Fasting does not feel good, but it is a way for the Jews to ask for God's intercession. St. Augustine believes prayer is most powerful when linked to fasting and alms giving. Rather than nagging others to do the right thing, the most powerful thing to do is offer prayers and sacrifice that they do not see. Let God do the work.

DOLLED UP FOR JESUS — "Who knows whether you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14) Esther got dolled up, put on her best clothes. How do we get dolled up for Jesus? Do we want to look beautiful for Christ, the King, spiritually? How do we get dolled up? The fragrance of prayer, making a good confession, receiving the Eucharist worthily, making sure we live His will are all good examples. The saints were often not physically beautiful, but they showed such a radiant beauty in their appearance because they were robed in righteousness and holiness. Ask our Lord how to make ourselves beautiful for Him. We are beautiful in our pain, our suffering, our struggles and our unrelenting faith.

Esther prayed and fasted. She won the heart of her husband by throwing him a banquet. It is always a good idea to win the heart of someone before we tell them what to do or make demands of them. We must become friends, make connections first.

Our purpose in life is to please God, to serve Him, and to praise Him, not receive what we want from Him. Praise of God eliminates a lot of sadness. We need to focus on worshiping God.

Esther prepared another meal before finally asking the king to preserve the Jews. Between the two meals, Mordecai found out about an assassination attempt on the king, and had Esther warn the king. The king asked Haman how to honor someone who does something good, and Haman thought the king was looking to reward Haman, but instead he was looking to reward Mordecai. When Haman realized this, he became angry. It is important to note that anger is a mortal sin when we desire revenge.

JESUS I TRUST IN YOU — Haman knew Mordecai was going to be honored, and when Esther asked the king to save her and her people, the king wanted to know who was trying to kill them. She told him it was Haman. Haman pleaded with Esther for mercy on the couch, and the king saw him on the couch with Esther and thought he was trying to seduce her, and had him put to death. And the Jewish religion was allowed to be made public, the Jews were set free, and Mordecai became 2nd in command. Everything was reversed because of one woman and her faithfulness.

We live in scary times, as did Esther. The book of Esther tells us, like Padre Pio says "pray, hope and don't worry." God knows what is going on in our lives so we need to trust Him. But it is so hard to trust when God seems distant. The point of the story is that He is closer to us when He seems distant. And Padre Pio used to say that God is so much closer to us when we are going through spiritual battles. So in these times, perhaps we can heed St. Faustina's words "Jesus, I trust in you." God seems absent, but God is always present in our world, using broken people to heal a wounded world to fulfill His promises.