

Andy Chrisman, a contemporary Christian artist sings a song with these lyrics:

*I've never seen your eyes, or smile across your face, I have never held your hand or felt your warm embrace, and I live among the scoffers and the questioning. How can you trust a God that you have never seen?*¹

Then there are these familiar sayings:

- *What you see is what you get*
- *Seeing is believing*
- *I'm from Missouri, show me*

I interviewed a young man this week who desires to join the church. I asked, "How do you know there's a God when you can't see Him?" He replied, "Look around. You can see it in all creation." That's a really good answer. Evidence is indirectly displayed to those who "see" it.

So let's reverse the saying "seeing is believing" and instead say "believing is seeing," because in the Book of Esther, God remains hidden and unseen. God's name is not even mentioned, yet it is a book full of evidence of God's presence. Esther is the story of God at work caring for and protecting God's children, and defeating our (and His) enemies. Believing is seeing.

Esther's story takes place around the same time as Nehemiah, or just a little earlier, the mid 400's B.C.E. The Jews were in exile. They had lost their identity as a nation. Jerusalem was shattered; the temple destroyed, and their land occupied by others. People's names were changed. They were forced to learn a different language and assimilate into the cultures around them. It seems that the God of Israel was dead. Where was God? Why did God allow this?

The Persians, an Iranian people, rose in power seemingly out of nowhere. They conquered Babylonia, Egypt, Media, and Lydia and soon controlled all the territory from India to Ethiopia. They overcame these other nations with unprecedented power and speed. They built an advanced system of roads to unify and connect the kingdom.

Persia was a wealthy, prosperous, pleasure-seeking nation.

We begin our story near the Persian Gulf, in modern-day Iran, in Susa, a city filled with magnificent buildings, displaying the king's vast wealth. One man, King Ahasuerus controlled everything. He ruled by his own will and often by whim, therefore the assurance of justice was questionable. He was so powerful, his decrees were irreversible.

Excess was this king's middle name. He threw lavish, lengthy banquets, providing free-flowing food and wine. This king must have been very popular.

This is the world the Jews live in. It might seem innocuous enough; maybe even a pleasant, fun place. But even with all that national prosperity, a world ruled by one man who holds such unchallenged power is a dangerous world, as we shall see.

¹Andy Chrisman, *Believe*, from Believe CD

In that city lived a man named Mordecai. He wasn't identified as Mordecai, son of Jair, as belonging to a particular family, like most Jewish people in the Bible; he is called Mordecai the Jew. He's the foreigner, an outsider.

When my middle son graduated from high school we took him to Paris. The whole time we were there, he wore a Stetson, Wrangler jeans, and cowboy boots. He's 6'3" and did he stand out. He didn't have to wear a label – Lee, the Texan; Lee, the foreigner. And he complained the whole time about people staring at him.

So Mordecai and Esther, and all Jews were never quite at home, never accepted; they always remained outsiders. But Mordecai belonged to the family of Benjamin. His ancestry went back to Kish, the father of King Saul. Now remember this. You will see why next week when the villain, Haman, comes on the scene. Stay tuned. This story is to be continued.

Mordecai descended from an important family; a royal family. When the Jews were carted off, the nobility were sent to important cities and given significant jobs. For example, Daniel worked for King Nebuchadnezzar. And Nehemiah became cupbearer to the king. Likewise, Mordecai worked in the courts at Susa, most likely as a member of the king's secret police. He had direct access to the king.

That's an amazing thing. Conquered people land incredibly important positions of power while still considered marginalized foreigners. How did it happen? Only God could make that happen.

Yet God is seemingly dead. God has lost power. After all, God's nation is dispersed. The king of Persia gets drunk using gold wine goblets from Solomon's temple. How do you believe in a God who is not seen, who can be defeated? Did they have any hope of revival?

Well, life wasn't so great for all powerful King Ahasuerus either. He had a crisis at the culmination of his huge party. His queen refused him. He wanted her to come to the party but Vashti said, "No, nice queens don't go to drunken brawls."

And that was her last word.

This blustering, edict-ordering king full of self-indulgence and pride, instead of sleeping it off, got his seven officials involved and lost his queen on their advice. "Just get rid of her," they said, "and we'll be able to get rid of our wives too, if necessary."

It was a dangerous world in the hands of a man with unlimited power and no moral compass.

This is an incredibly comical story. You have this man who's more interested in wine, women, wealth, and defending his own pride than running his government. He remembered Vashti, but he can't reverse the order. So his men come up with another plan.

"Let's have a beauty contest to find you a new queen." Scripture said, "Their plan pleased the king." I bet it did.

Can you imagine God watching all this? The Bible tells the honest truth. It has the most human, real, understanding of human nature. I love it! And God moved His girl right in there, into the king's harem, the center of the most powerful nation on earth. And no one knew it.

She didn't know she was being moved there by God nor did she know the future plan. She was an orphan; very beautiful, adopted by Mordecai. Her Hebrew name had been changed to the Persian name, Esther. Because of the king's edict she was brought to the king's harem where she gained the favor of Hegai, the man in charge of the contest, and he gave her the very best advantage. Then when she went before the king, he loved her best.

It kind of sounds like God's work – like Joseph, whom God gave favor in Egypt; or Daniel, who was favored by King Nebuchadnezzar. God did the same thing for Esther and Mordecai, positioning them where God wanted them, while the king concerned himself with “the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—things that don't come from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:16).

But how do we learn to see God at work in our own everyday lives, to know that God still positions people in places where God can fulfill His purpose for them?

This week I was interviewed by the Pastor Nominating Committee for the position of pastor of this church. They asked me how I knew I was called. I told them this story.

I had left my job and was seeking what God had for me but nothing happened. One day a friend said to me, “I think I'm going to go to seminary to learn how to be a missionary.” So I said, “I'll go with you.” While there, I ran into a woman I knew and she said, “Oh, I'm teaching this course here. Even though it started last week, I'm getting you in it. So here, fill out this application.” The course was called *The Role of Women in Ministry*. Suddenly I found myself in seminary.

Then I thought I'll just take a few Bible courses and teach the women in my church. But when I visited Fuller, the Admissions Counselor said, “You need to get an MDiv to become a pastor.” I thought, *I can't do that!* But three months later I was living in California attending seminary.

In the meantime, what about you? You were without a pastor. You said, maybe we should close the doors. But you kept going. You paid the bills and got pastors in each week. But the list was short and an elder named Joan Brown went to a Presbytery meeting. She happened to sit next to a man named Brian Grassley and she asked him, “Do you know any preachers who can come to our church?” Brian said, “Yes. Call Ginger Hertenstein.”

Do you see the big picture? God is unseen, calling us and caring for us, accomplishing God's purposes. We don't know yet how it will turn out but stay tuned for the rest of the story.

Do you see God at work in the midst of scoffers who believe God simply does not exist? Andy Chrisman sings, “I still believe in something I have not seen.” How about you?

“Blessed are those who believe in the One they do not see.”

AMEN