



*“Thou Art Come ... for Such a Time as This”*

## **Show Notes & Transcripts**

### **Podcast General Description:**

Follow Him: A *Come, Follow Me* Podcast with Hank Smith & John Bytheway

Do you ever feel that preparing for your weekly *Come, Follow Me* lesson falls short? Join hosts Hank Smith and John Bytheway as they interview experts to make your study for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' *Come, Follow Me* course not only enjoyable but original and educational. If you are looking for resources to make your study fresh, faithful, and fun--no matter your age--then join us every Friday and Saturday.

### **Podcast Episode Descriptions:**

#### **Part 1:**

Can one person change the world? Dr. Ariel Silver explores the importance of the story of Esther, exile, and the Gathering of Israel, temporally and spiritually.

#### **Part 2:**

Dr. Ariel Silver continues and explores how God sometimes seems hidden, yet helps us act in seemingly impossible times where action is required.

# Timecodes:

## Part 1

- 00:00 Part 1–Dr. Ariel Silver
- 01:18 Introduction of Dr. Ariel Silver
- 04:39 Orientation for the Book of Esther
- 08:41 Esther as canon and exile
- 11:54 Esther as a type of Christ
- 16:20 The Jewish holiday Purim
- 18:29 Esther helps understand female power in scripture
- 19:25 Precariousness of Esther’s position
- 22:20 Mordecai the Jew
- 25:24 The Plan of Salvation in Esther
- 31:14 Vashti’s reception
- 34:02 Four main characters
- 37:04 The veiled Jew and the unveiled Jew
- 40:28 Mordecai pleads with Esther
- 43:00 Esther and her handmaidens fast
- 46:34 Jews experienced the Book of Esther as play, read aloud
- 49:25 Esther teaches how to endure faith-expanding moments
- 50:00 Dr. Silver shares a personal story of her missionary son
- 54:56 Esther teaches how to face the unknown
- 58:52 End of Part I–Dr. Ariel Silver

## Part 2

- 00:00 Part II– Dr. Ariel Silver
- 00:07 The golden scepter and Esther’s bravery
- 05:08 Haman wants Mordecai hanged
- 09:17 The power of remembering
- 14:19 Tender Mercies
- 16:48 Haman and the second banquet
- 22:49 Elder Uchtdorf’s talk about pride
- 24:43 Dr. Silver shares a personal story about being missionary in France
- 26:24 Mordecai takes Haman’s place
- 28:49 Purim is to remember being preserved
- 31:36 Dr. Silver shares a personal story of enduring a trial with faith
- 35:48 Esther is a rare story about a woman redeeming Israel (without being about motherhood)
- 42:09 Esther is a powerful example of how God works through women

- 43:06 Dr. Silver shares her journey of faith and scholarship
- 53:13 End of Part II–Dr. Ariel Silver

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## **Biographical Information:**



Ariel Silver grew up in Northern Virginia and served in the France Bordeaux Mission. She was an undergraduate at Smith College, where she studied Religion & Biblical Literature. At the University of Chicago, she received an MA in Biblical Literature. She taught literature courses at the Waterford School for several years, and then completed her PHD in English (American Literature) at Claremont Graduate University. She works on the typology of female figures in the Bible and the ways in which they are deployed in American literary texts. She is the author of *The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) and a contributor to the volume it inspired, *Esther in America* (Maggid, 2020). She serves as President-elect of the Hawthorne Society, and has presented and published on numerous nineteenth-century American authors. Recent grants and fellowships to support her work have come from The Center for Mark Twain Studies, The National Endowment for the Humanities, MWHIT, and The Maxwell Institute, funding her completion of *The Mercy Seat*, a memoir at the intersection of motherhood, medicine, and missionary work. She has designed and taught Institute classes for many years and is now an Assistant Professor of English at Southern Virginia University. She and her husband have one son and five daughters.

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Hank Smith:	00:01	Welcome to followHIM. A weekly podcast dedicated to helping individuals and families with their Come Follow Me study. I'm Hank Smith.
John Bytheway:	00:09	And I'm John Bytheway.
Hank Smith:	00:10	We love to learn.
John Bytheway:	00:11	We love to laugh.
Hank Smith:	00:13	We want to learn and laugh with you.
John Bytheway:	00:15	As together, we follow him.
Hank Smith:	00:19	Hello everyone. Welcome to another episode of followHIM. My name is Hank Smith, and I am here with my unperishable cohost John Bytheway.
John Bytheway:	00:30	I beg to differ. I have a freshness date, which is long expired. My kids check those all the time.
Hank Smith:	00:36	Use by dates. You are unperishable. We talk about, if I perish, I perish in the book of Esther. So, I looked up what is unperishable? And this is you John, not subject to significant deterioration or loss of quality over time. That is true about you. You have not suffered any sort of deterioration or loss of quality over time, John, you're pretty incredible that way.
John Bytheway:	01:02	My doctor is shaking his head right now. But I'll take it.
Hank Smith:	01:06	John, we are studying the book of Esther today, a famous book, a famous story. And so, we needed to bring in a mind in the church who could help us understand this book like never before, who is joining us?
John Bytheway:	01:18	Yes, and we did. We are so happy to welcome Ariel Clark Silver. She is a scholar of 19th century, American literature and culture. She has written and published on writers such as

Angela Grimke, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Lydia Maria Child, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sojourner Truth, Julia Ward Howe, Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Caroline Healy Dall, Mark Twain, Henry Adams and Willa Cather. She has a particular interest in the female protagonist, female education, female rhetorics and female agency. And Ariel has been supported by grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Dana Foundation, the Parsons Memorial Foundation, Smith College, the University of Chicago, Claremont Graduate University, and the Maxwell Institute. I love that we found her. I love that you're here. Thank you, Ariel, for joining us today.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 02:20 My pleasure.
- Hank Smith: 02:21 Dr. Silver, I think this is just a wonderful crossroads for us. You have been so delightful in preparing for our episode today, so I'm really glad this happened.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 02:33 Very happy to be here. I guess I would want to add just a little bit to that biography so that people understand that I do have a background in scriptural study as well. I did my undergraduate work at Smith College where I studied religion and biblical literature and my master's degree at the University of Chicago, which was also in biblical literature before going and getting a PhD in English at Claremont Graduate University. The subject of my dissertation and my first book was a reception history of the Book of Esther, which essentially means how the book of Esther was received and written about by American writers, particularly in the 19th century.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 03:14 So my work really bridges both fields. Next week, I'll be going to upstate New York where I'll be in residence with a fellowship at the Center for Mark Twain Studies, because I'll be writing on Mark Twain's treatment of the figure of Eve. And then I go to a conference in Paris where I'll be looking at the ways that Herman Melville writes on the figure of Hagar also from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. So, my work is really seeped in this intersection between scripture and particularly these female figures from the Hebrew Bible and the way American writers looked at, investigated, and in some ways expanded the understanding about these female figures.
- Hank Smith: 03:59 Awesome.
- John Bytheway: 03:59 Oh, thank you for adding that. Almost every week, Hank, I'm sure it's the same for you people, will say, I like your podcast. Where do you find these wonderful people?

Hank Smith: 04:10 Yeah.

John Bytheway: 04:11 And I'm usually Hank does it. And so, we're thrilled to have you and that added to what we know. So, at Claremont and at Smith, also in biblical studies and you're putting these both together. So, this is great today,

Hank Smith: 04:27 Ariel, we're in the book of Esther this week, you've written on it, you've spoken about it, you've taught about it. What do you think we need to do before we jump in? How should we come at this book?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 04:39 There are a number of things that I would like to offer as an orientation to the book before we begin looking at the 10 chapters that compose this incredibly interesting and valuable text. What I'd like to do is start with you at the destruction of the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, because that is really where the story begins. The book of Esther is set in exile, once any number of Jews have been taken away to Persia. But the background of that exile is that their home, their temporal and spiritual home has been decimated. And deconsecrated, if you will, they find themselves now in a situation of exile and there is a Jewish mystic scholar, Friedrich Weinreb, who speaks about the book of Esther as the amazing scroll of Esther. And I hope that by the time we are done together today, that many of you will also come away feeling that it is unique and incredibly valuable to you in your larger study of scripture, because this book is not just a story written in exile about the experience of the Jews in exile.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 06:04 It's really the story of exile in an existential sense, even in the sense of our mortal lives as being an experience in exile, where we are separated from our spiritual home, and we are left to find our way. In the process of that exile, we have been pulled apart from the things that most deeply identify us as divine beings. We're now living in an experience of duality of opposition in all things, think of second Nephi chapter two, where Nephi describes our mortal probation as an experience of opposition, and an opposition in everything. And the only way for that exile to end is for a return to the presence of God, and a reconciliation with God, a unity, this experience that in the mortal realm feels dualistic, complex, multifaceted, that eventually it should result in a reunification. And this book is so important because it lays out that entire movement from separation and life in exile to a story of redemption.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 07:39 That is what this book charts, because the Jews living in exile, live in a very precarious position. One scholar described it as

whether they are powerless or whether they are in power, their situation is terribly fraught. If they have no power, then they are left open to oppression. If they have power, people are jealous of their power and are seeking to repress it. It's sort of an existentially difficult situation that they find themselves in. But what we see here is not just the experience of a group of Jews living in the Persian empire, faced with the threat of genocide. And we'll talk about that more as we get into the story, but also the plan of salvation writ large in this one book, where these Jews go from their land of promise, their Garden of Eden to a position where they are completely apart from God so much so that God is hidden in the text of Esther.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 08:41 This is a real issue in the book of Esther because it has its own experience, in the canon is one of exile. The book of Esther was not always included, in Jewish canons, in Catholic canons, in Orthodox canons, in Protestant canons, in great measure because they couldn't figure out if this was a book of scripture, whether or not it was a sacred book because it doesn't mention the name of God, but God is hidden in this book in the same way that God is veiled from us during our mortal experience, my position is that it's a tremendously spiritual book, and it offers us incredible lessons. And I'm grateful that it is included in the LDS canon. And I think one of the things that's really so interesting about this book is that there are other records of the exilic experience. Jeremiah writes about it.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 09:35 Isaiah writes about it. Others write about it as well. They mostly perceive exile as something to be endured, something to be survived, something for which we hope for a resolution. We don't really want this to endure longer than it has to. In the book of Esther, she sees it as an opportunity, even in the face of a really severe life-threatening situation where a decree against their lives has been placed, but she sees exile as an opportunity to develop capacities, to grow. And this is the other really interesting, one of the many other interesting things about this text is that the female character of Esther across the span of these 10 chapters changes, she evolves, she develops, she progresses. It's a heroine story. What they call a Bildungsroman, coming of age story. She comes into her own and as her purpose becomes more clear, her power and her knowledge and her understanding also grows, her capacity to act and to do things that are going to work toward her salvation personally, and toward the salvation of her people.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 10:51 All of those things increase as the book goes along, the male characters are a little more static. They're a little bit more

typological. They fit a type and they remain that way throughout the text. It's an exile story, that's a little different than the other exile stories that we get. Even the book of Daniel, where it's really about surviving the challenges of exile. In the book of Esther, those challenges are transformed into a story of redemption and salvation at both a personal and a political level.

- Hank Smith: 11:22 What a great setup. I'd never thought of that idea of the book being about the exile, but the book itself has been exiled at times, saying, oh, we don't know if this is actually part of this. What an interesting way to look at that, here they are in exile and the book itself gets sometimes pushed aside. And then the second thing you mentioned, I want to talk a little bit more about, and that is God isn't mentioned in the book, but he's all throughout. And that's so much like our lives that sometimes we don't see him, but he's there.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 11:54 It's true. It's very interesting because the name of Esther in Hebrew means, I hide myself. So embedded in the very name of the book is the place in which God resides in this text. In Deuteronomy chapter 31, verse 18, God declares, "I shall hide my face." There are times when he will be hidden from us, times where he will be revealed. A parallel is set up. We're going to see the ways in which Esther functions as a type of God, and also as a type of Christ. And their tropes have veiled in this and unveiling that go on throughout the entire text. So there's really a play between whether God is present, whether he's absent, whether he's asking us to act of our own accord, to be anxiously engaged in good causes and not waiting for God's prompt for every worthy thing we are to do, or whether we are at times two, in a position of advent to wait for his direction.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 13:03 One of the reasons in my own research and writing that I found myself gravitating toward the Old Testament, toward the Hebrew Bible and toward the female figures there, is because it's about the only place where you find significant female figures. In some ways, most significant of all is a figure like Esther, who has her own book, and who, as I mentioned earlier, evolves over the course of the text, really comes into her own, really comes to understand her own purpose and mission. And it's not a small mission. Her work is a work that parallels the work of God as he declares it in the book of Moses, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. That she's working on those terms, she's working as an agent of salvation. There's just one other book that bears a female name, Ruth, there's a little bit of a shift.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 14:02 We see her loyalty and devotion demonstrated to a meaningful degree. She's important in the larger history of salvation because she is an ancestor of Jesus Christ, but we don't see a tremendous amount of development in her. Whereas in Esther almost entirely unique, in the whole cannon of scripture, we see a woman who changes. We see a woman who progresses spiritually and who takes upon herself a pretty serious mantle and is willing to risk her life.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 14:38 And this is a place where she does become a type of Christ because like the way the prophet Isaiah describes Christ as descending below all things and bearing the stripes of others and the scorn of others. Esther also has to play a very submissive role, which we will see from the very beginning. And I'm going to outline how that happens in the first couple of chapters, but she has to follow her people into a symbolic humiliation and even violation in order to then rise again in the same way that the savior descends below all things so that he can overcome both physical and spiritual death and make immortality and eternal life possible for us.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 15:25 So she's really unique and she's worth becoming deeply acquainted with, but I'm thinking about something that a Jewish scholar said in the Middle Ages, Maimonides is his name. He was a Torah scholar in the medieval period, and he said, "All of the books of the prophets and all of the writings will no longer be valid in the days of the Messiah, except for the scroll of Esther." It will remain together with the Pentateuch, which are the first five books of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. The books ascribed to Moses, it will remain together with the Pentateuch, which will never lose their validity. Even though all memory of troubles will be forgotten, the days of Purim, which is the celebration of the story Esther, which is reenacted on an annual basis, that will remain. And it is for Jews, a very living text.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 16:20 They have a holiday that is specifically set aside to commemorate the deliverance of the Persian Jews from the threat of genocide. They reread the book of Esther every single time, and they act out, they cheer for the heroes and they boo for the villains and they dress up and they wear costumes. They celebrate and they give alms and they do all manner of charitable acts. And they say, we will drop everything to go and recite the scroll of Esther. It has a living remembrance for them of the power of salvation, even though in this case, that salvation comes about because of this female character, it has that power for them. It's a book of tremendous hope against impossible odds. These Jews succeed, and they overcome the

oppression that they face, and they become victorious. I mean, it's almost an exaggerated text, right?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 17:23 Where the villains are really bad and the heroes are really good. Some people think of comedy and some people think it's tragedy, but finally, it's really a story of tremendous joy and of tremendous hope because this period was not the last period where the Jews faced threats of exile, or threats of extinction. It's something that they face to this day. And so in part, they need to read this story to remind themselves of the condition of exile in which they live, again, applicable to us all in that larger sense of, we are all in spiritual exile from our heavenly home, we are all searching to achieve that reunification, even though it may apply with an extra measure of force to Jews and to the Jewish condition, it's also applicable to us. We also live in the face of challenges, of threats, of difficulties, and we all need to know, God can deliver us.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 18:29 We can be redeemed. We can overcome the difficulties that we face. And so I think that they read the story every year and they celebrate it with a tremendous joy to remind themselves of that real spiritual promise in their lives that God won't go away, whether or not he appears to be there or appears to be hidden. And so, as we look for that in the book, we are going to see God revealed, and we're also going to see women and their interactions with the divine revealed. I think quite a bit more acutely. It certainly has transformed my understanding of scripture and my recognition of where to find female influence, female agency, female power in the scriptures.

Hank Smith: 19:24 Awesome. I wanted to ask you something really quick before we jumped into chapter one, you said, try to understand the precariousness of their position. We might come in and say, well, this is what they should have done. This is what Esther should have done. I've heard that before, this pretty harsh judgment of Esther in what I would do if I was in that position. And I liked how you said, be delicate. I got that sense from you at least of be delicate the way you look at their position in exile, they don't have power, they could be annihilated. If they do have power, they're going to face fierce position. So is that something you intended?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 20:00 Oh yes. I have a lot more to say on a meta level, but let me give you an example from the very beginning of the text, how does it start? We haven't yet heard about Esther. In the beginning of her book, we hear about another queen. Her name is Vashti and the king is feeling pretty happy with himself, pretty content with the range of his extensive empire and a little bit like we may

have seen in England with a great jubilee celebration. He wants to throw a huge party, drinks and food and costumes and parades. And on top of it all, he thinks it would be really lovely for his queen Vashti to come and parade herself in all of her glory before his court.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 20:46 And she refuses to do so because this would be an immodest display, that is being asked of her. And so she says, no. Well, you don't say no to a Persian king without severe consequence. He draws his advisors together and he says, well, what should we do given that my queen Vashti has said, no? One of his counselors Malukan suggests that this is not just a threat to the king. This is not just insubordination on the part of his wife. This is a threat to all men in Persia, because if word gets out that the queen refused the request of her husband and king, then-
- Hank Smith: 21:28 All women will think...
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 21:30 Yeah, that they have a little leverage, that they would not otherwise have. They might not be as obedient as they should be. And so he suggests that a decree go out to all the provinces in the kingdom, explaining that Vashti will be deposed, that her consequence will be swift and severe, that she'll be released from her reign and that all women should be subordinate to their husbands and obedient in every way. So this happens, Vashti is in fact, let go. And this means that the king now has a chance to choose a new wife, a new queen. He does this methodically. He goes throughout the kingdom, has virgins from across his domain gathered. He's going to spend time with all of them. Choose one as a queen. In the midst of this, there is a man named Mordecai, who is a Jew, he lives in Shushan.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 22:34 He lives just at the gate of the palace. He sees an opportunity and he has a niece/daughter/cousin named Esther. And he says, Esther, you go and you let the King's chamberlains take you and prepare you. And you can be one of these women to be brought before the king. He knows exactly what he's doing. He's trying to put Jewish power inside the palace rather than outside of it. But he warns her. He says, do not reveal your identity. Don't say anything about it. And so she follows his request and his advice, and she in fact becomes one of these virgins. And in the end, she finds favor with the king and is made queen. But if you want to talk about process of submission, a process of violation, in order to come to that place where you might have a small measure of influence that's Esther, and she does it willingly.
- Hank Smith: 23:44 We could come at this with such a judgmental attitude. And I've heard people do that before of both Mordecai and Esther. But I

like what you're saying is try to recognize they're not in the same position you and I are.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 23:57 Not only does she know she's going to have to submit to all of this. She also knows what happened to the last queen. So that is in the background as well. It's not just, I've got to do everything just right now. I can never make a misstep or else I would be thrown out or killed or something of similarly severe consequence.
- Hank Smith: 24:19 He just seems cruel.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 24:21 Well, he's a king, and he has tremendous wealth and power. He hasn't had to be anything else. Remember though, that the book of Esther, we haven't talked about this yet, but one level, it functions as a book of fantasy. We talked about it as a story of great hope, a story that needed to be retold so that Jews could be reminded of the hope that was available to them. So it's also a story where, this is the ideal ending. You face the threat of genocide, existential extermination, you not just stave off your oppressors and those who are planning to murder you, you murder them and-
- Hank Smith: 25:00 Yeah, you conquer.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 25:01 Yes. Esther goes to the king and asks for another day of defending themselves. It's granted to them as a way of making it known, not only are you not going to get the better of us, but we will ensure to the degree that we can end the oppression that we face. So it's the bad characters are really bad, the good characters are really good. There's not a tremendous amount of nuance in the story. I would say, except in the character of Esther where we do see a lot of growth and change over the course of the text.
- Hank Smith: 25:34 Awesome.
- John Bytheway: 25:34 I love what you've said about the idea of seeing the plan of salvation in the story. In the manual, it starts out by saying many events in the book of Esther might seem like luck or coincidence. How else would you explain how an orphan Jewish girl became the queen of Persia at just the right time to save her people from being slaughtered? What are the chances that Esther's cousin Mordecai would just happen to overhear a plot to assassinate the king? Were these coincidences, or were they part of a divine plan? So I think that's nice the way we set this

up, that this can be seen as a plan of salvation, and we can draw from it seeing an overall plan, and put ourselves in it that way.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 26:16 Yes. I think this text operates both in a larger sense. It speaks to the plan of salvation, also in very personal and detailed ways, as we work through the text as Esther gains the insight that she needs for the next move she's going to make to realize that plan, to accomplish the reversal of fortune that will lead to the salvation of her people. It's not just that we see, oh, here is a people that through the set of what seemed like incredible circumstances, God was able to save and deliver through Esther. It's also like a blueprint or a roadmap about how each of us individually go about working through the things which feel in the words of President Nelson, like mountains in our lives, that seem to be immovable. How do we go about moving our way through those so that we can build a tunnel through the mountain, find a road that goes around the mountain, shift the mountain just enough that we can get by it, find a way to hike up the mountain and down the other side, it's not often not easy.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 27:38 And it often takes tremendous courage and perseverance and willpower and leaning on the Lord. But Esther provides a pretty interesting outline of how we go about doing that. To me it's right up there with the brother of Jared in the Book of Ether and how he's trying to find a way to make this passage. Every piece of it is like the touchstones, I need light. Where do I go to find light? All right, let me think about stones. Could these be illuminated? Could I ask for God's help in this? All of these small moments come together and culminate in a deliverance for the brother of Jared in the same way that we see Esther having to work very carefully all along the way. And so for me, it's a book, tremendous book about inspiration and revelation, a book about courage in the face of impossible odds, a book about reliance on God for detailed guidance to make it through the quagmires of our life.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 28:50 A book about, and spiritual creativity in developing very carefully inspired solutions, a book about transforming complex situations into opportunities to exercise greater faith and greater resolve, a book about ways to engage with threats and injustices that we face and ways to turn from anger and bitterness and revenge, and a desire to take the spoils of the other. I mean, this is one of the things that goes back and forth in this text, the king, when he gives the decree through Haman to exterminate the Jews, the decree also says, and you can take their spoils. When Esther finally requests the opportunity to either have that edict reversed or to defend themselves, they

make very clear that though they will defend themselves. And that may involve taking the lives of those who are trying to kill them, they will not take the spoils of their enemies. And so there is a measure of restraint, right?

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 29:51 We don't go after retribution. It's not an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. There is a higher law that is already at work in this text. And we see it in the restraint that is exercised both as she approaches this problem and finds solutions. And even once they're on the cusp of victory, she makes clear to send forth the very clear direction, not to lay waste to their enemies, not to take their spoils. It really is tremendously interesting in its details. And I'm looking forward to getting into those. I think there's one point in the text, maybe it's chapter seven, where Esther says to the king, it'd be just much smarter of you to tax us than to kill us.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 30:37 Even if you take our spoils, you're going to make a lot more money if you just keep us alive and tax us. And he's not a man of high thinking, he can't quite see, he just defaults to I've sent forth this decree, I'm the king, I can't reverse it, it stands, you can defend yourselves, but the decree stands. She's thinking creatively all along the way, she's using spiritual arguments, she's using political arguments, she is using economic arguments. She's using social arguments. She's very alive to every possibility and it's tremendously resourceful in the way that she goes about it.
- Hank Smith: 31:14 Okay, let's do this. How is Vashti received in the text, usually among Jews as a heroine or just someone to show you what happens when someone disobeys the king?
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 31:25 It's a good question. I don't know if I have a really authoritative answer about it. I know that there's an increasing interest in scholarship on Vashti. A lot of particularly African American writers in the 19th century wrote about Vashti because they saw themselves in her and in the fate that she suffered.
- Hank Smith: 31:48 Let me ask you another question. What happens do you think if Mordecai never puts forth Esther for this? Because sometimes when I read chapter two, I think just don't get involved. Don't put your niece or your cousin out there, but maybe he's seeing on the horizon, we've got to have some power inside that palace or everyone's in trouble.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 32:08 This is a tremendously good question, because some could reasonably argue, looking at the text that Mordecai, he sets up all the problems that are then left to Esther to solve. And I am

not joking about that, because he's at the gate, the moment comes where there's this opportunity to get someone, not just from his own people inside the court, but also from his own family inside the court, giving him some personal leverage. But he is the one who provokes the decree of genocide against the Jewish people. Because the King's right-hand man, his most elevated counselor, Haman is full of himself. And he wants Mordecai to bow to him when he walks about the streets. And Mordecai is unwilling to do that because you only bow before God, you worship no other figures, no other idols, no other political forces.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 33:09 And so he won't bow. And it's that really gets under Haman's skin and decides that he's got a personal vendetta against Mordecai, but why not take that to another level and see if he can get the king to get rid of them all, not just the one who's causing him some grief. So Mordecai sets up the situation to save the Jews in case they face that threat. And it wouldn't be the first time and it won't be the last time, that they face that threat, but he is also the one who provokes the very threat that they do then face.
- Hank Smith: 33:49 Interesting.
- John Bytheway: 33:50 I love just going through this cast of characters and seeing, and how this is all going to work and how Esther gets put in this place where she can do so much good. Yeah, I just want to keep going.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 34:02 We have four main characters, right? We have Esther, we have Mordecai, those are the two principle Jewish figures in the story. And then we have King Ahasuerus and we have his right hand man, his grand-vizier Haman, or Haman. There are a few other characters that come up that we'll touch on, including Haman's wife. Zeresh I think is.
- John Bytheway: 34:25 Zeresh.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 34:25 Zeresh.
- John Bytheway: 34:28 Z-E-R-E-S-H.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 34:29 Yeah. Who prods Haman along, interestingly enough.
- Hank Smith: 34:33 It seems like the king is really taken with Esther.
- John Bytheway: 34:36 Oh yeah.

Hank Smith: 34:37 This is chapter two, verse 17. "The king loved Esther above all the women and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins so that he set the royal crown upon her head." So whatever the kind of contest this is, she wins.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 34:51 She definitely did win, and we're going to see even clearer evidence of that as we go along, she really has his trust and confidence. And maybe we see that, particularly in chapter four, we've talked about chapter one where Vashti is deposed. We've talked a bit about chapter two, where, there's a call out for all the eligible virgins who might fill the role of the next queen, and Mordecai shuffles Esther into the mix. Esther is successful in that contest. There's something else really important that happens in chapter two that we shouldn't overlook. And that is Mordecai sitting at the gate hears about a plot against the king. There are two advisors, maybe minor advisors, Bigtan and Teresh are their names.

Hank Smith: 35:46 Yeah, this is verse 21.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 35:48 Yeah. They've got a plot against the king and Mordecai here's about it and tells Esther to tell the king about this threat.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 35:58 And Esther conveys that information and explains where she got the information and then the king takes it into his own hands. And those two minor advisors are promptly disposed of. That's really important because it sets up the trajectory of Mordecai's experience and the rest of the text. So we just need to keep that in mind, that Mordecai already in chapter two has demonstrated his value to the king by exposing this plot against him. And I think I mentioned already, but it's also important to note that when Mordecai sends Esther to the King's chamber and sets her to be a part of this beauty pageant, beauty competition, call what you will, that he's very explicit, don't tell them you are Jewish, hide your identity. And in some ways in the text Mordecai functions, as the known Jew, the person whose Jewish identity is revealed, and this is part of, sort of allows Haman to take issue with him and to pin his faults on his Jewishness.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 37:04 He is the unveiled Jew, and Esther is the veiled Jew or the hidden Jew in this text. And in some ways, has even more power because of that position that she fills. But already by the second chapter, we're seeing the ways in which those dynamics are playing themselves out. And the difference between being recognized and identified as being a Jew and not being recognized or identified as a Jew and the positions that can put you in.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 37:36 And when we get to chapter three, we talked a little bit about Mordecai refusing to bow before Hamman and Hamman deciding he's going to have it out, not just with Mordecai, but with his people. And this is when the decree against all of the Jews goes out and it's sent throughout all the provinces. And it is said on this one specific day, that it will be decreed, you are to kill every Jew in sight in every province. And he's basically allowing all the citizens to arm themselves and to have at it with the Jews and go ahead and take their spoils as well. That's really where we find ourselves when we get to chapter four, which is probably the most well-known of the chapters.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 38:16 It's the one in our own tradition and experience that is most often referred to and quoted because it speaks to Esther's growing awareness of her own personal mission. And in many ways, ties to our understanding that we get from the book of Abraham, of people having callings and missions and work, sometimes uniquely for them to fulfill, works that maybe only they can accomplish, missions that the Lord would have them perform. And so, I think we really identify with that experience in the book of Esther. We see ourselves in that, just even this one chapter, we've talked already now a little bit about the ways in which Esther grows and evolves and comes into an understanding of who she is and what role she is to fulfill.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 39:12 We really see that in chapter four, because now this decree has gone out and Mordecai must realize he had something to do with it. He doesn't acknowledge that per se, but he goes and pleads with Esther to ask the king, knowing that she is a Jew and that she is now his queen, please stop this decree of genocide against us. Please do that. And she went through her messenger.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 39:38 She sends a letter right back to Mordecai, and she says, "Do you know the situation that I am in? The king has not called for me in 30 days. And if I go into him without him having called to me, without him having extended the golden scepter to me, I face the consequence of death. If I am not summoned, I am not allowed to present myself before him. What you are asking of me is a suicide mission. You're asking me to go and have myself hung. How can I possibly do that? And so, I'd really like to pick it up in chapter four. Maybe you want to read those verses for us. I'm particularly looking at versus 13 through 17, which are the heart.
- John Bytheway: 40:28 Okay, so I'm in Esther four, starting in verse 13, "Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther. Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the King's house, more than all the Jews. For if

thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall their enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place. But thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

- John Bytheway: 40:57 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. So, Mordecai went his way and did, according to all that, Esther had commanded him."
- Hank Smith: 41:23 This is dramatic.
- John Bytheway: 41:24 Yeah. I mean, that is the heart of the story. Maybe you've come for such a time as this, who know if, whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this, which is verse 14.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 41:35 It's a very powerful declaration of those moments when we find ourselves in the right place at the right time. Yeah. To have influence that is righteous to shift the narrative in such a way that it brings blessings to ourselves, to those in our care to those for whom we have a stewardship, it really is very evocative. But if you look at the verses preceding that, they're almost equally important. Remember that Mordecai has sort of set this situation up and we could say he's responsible for the very situation in which Esther finds herself. But he says, look, you're thinking about your own preservation here. You have to think about the larger picture. If you don't act, you will be destroyed, one way or another. You might die by going into the king now. But if you don't go into him, you're going to die anyway, this extermination order will find you.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 42:37 So maybe you don't die tomorrow, but you're going to die when this decree is enacted, you choose your poison. Act now, take the risk, or realize there's no way out of this for you if you wait. In addition to that, he says, this is something we should, I think, really connect to theologically as well. We're fond of saying, if you don't follow the promptings of the holy ghost, the Lord will inspire somebody else. The work he needs accomplished will be accomplished by someone else. God would like to give that opportunity to you, but it's your choice to respond or not respond to it. But whatever decision you make, the work of God will not be thwarted. And this is exactly what Mordecai is saying. Take this opportunity it's given to you.

John Bytheway:	43:26	To be part of the Lord's work.
Dr. Ariel Silver:	43:27	Right? It's yours to have, if you want it, if you're willing to do it. But if you don't deliverance will come from another place, the Lord will save us. We will be redeemed. When he says, this is your moment, Esther, this is your mission. This is the thing you've come to do. And I implore you to take it up. And I think his words are distilling in her soul. She's beginning to realize the existential situation in which she finds herself personally, in which her people are now found. And so, then she begins to set some spiritual wheels in motion. And what is the very first thing that she does? She says, I will fast. And I'm going to ask you to fast with me. And I want you to ask all of the Jews Shushan to also fast with me.
Dr. Ariel Silver:	44:24	And I'm going to ask my hand maidens who may or may not be Jewish to also fast with me. So already we can see she is a woman of careful thinking and a woman of purpose. She's going to prepare for this experience. She's not going to wing it. She is going to get ready. Fasting is like prayer on steroids. It's what we do when our prayers feel insufficient or when we plead, and we feel that the face of God is hidden from us. And we don't have an answer. We can't see his face. We can't hear his voice. We don't know what to do. Sometimes he wants us to act of our own accord on the best inspiration we have. Sometimes he's willing to give us greater guidance, but in order to receive that, we have to supplicate with a deeper level of sincerity, conviction, maybe sacrifice in order to know just what it is we should do and how we should go about doing it. And so, she proceeds with this fast and it's not a small, fast, I think they're going to fast for three days.
Hank Smith:	45:36	Right?
Dr. Ariel Silver:	45:36	It's maybe not Jesus in the wilderness. It's not a 40 day fast, but it's still something.
John Bytheway:	45:41	Three days is a long time.
Hank Smith:	45:44	I'd be like-
John Bytheway:	45:45	Yeah, neither eat nor drink for three days. Wow!
Hank Smith:	45:49	Ariel. So, far I've got Vashti, and the king seems so... I don't know what to think of our king. Haman says, there's this people who are scattered abroad and dispersed among other people. They don't keep the laws. They're totally different than

everybody else. Let's destroy them all. And he somehow, okay. Haman just seems over the top evil. I mean, one guy doesn't bow down and you're ready to kill everyone because of this one person. I don't know, maybe it feels like this wasn't his first run in with the Jews, perhaps. I don't know. I mean, how am I supposed to take all of this so far? And then Mordecai is bold, but like you said earlier, he's causing some of these problems.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 46:34 I think one way to approach it, maybe have it make a greater degree of sense is to realize how is it that Jews experienced the book of Esther. They experience it as a play every year, read aloud. These are characters in a drama. We have a tradition in this country of mellow drama, right long before there were right movies or vaudeville and plays, where there were heroines that swooned and villains that came in with bandages over their eyes and the characters were exaggerated and they were hyperbolic and they were more or less two dimensional. It's an exercise and frustration if you're really trying to figure out deeply what motivates Haman or deeply what motivates the king, they're fairly flat as characters and much like there were passion plays, that retold the life of Christ in the middle ages, morality plays from that same era, or even later, they're almost like stock characters in a play designed to tell this story of the salvation of the Jews.
- Hank Smith: 47:39 And evoke an emotion.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 47:40 Yes. And you've got to have a villain. You've got to have the opposition. In that experience of exile, you have to have the evil characters. It's almost like a Disney movie, right? I mean, it could be a Disney movie. And it's not that everything about it is predictable because actually what's fun about the story is that there are some surprising reversals. And yet it comes to a very satisfying conclusion where the people who were oppressed come out on top, and the people who were exercising, unrighteous power are laid low. It's very much the bad guys and the good guys, and the world is turned upside down. For once justice is served, unlike in so much of our lives, where we live through injustice, after injustice, we live through people misunderstanding our intentions, or we make a mistake that's misunderstood or moments of tripping and falling. For once justice is served and the world is made right.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 48:40 And so the experience of celebrating the book of Esther every year, the experience of this holiday of poem is really, it's like this utopian moment that arrives every year where, oh yes, against all the oppression we face, we can be reminded that in the end, God will prevail and we will be saved. We will be

redeemed. It's almost like the world of poem is like the millennium in miniature. Finally, that the last are first, and the first are last. All of those who have suffered poverty and death and inadequacies and injustices of all sorts are finally restored and things are made right.

- Hank Smith: 49:25 Yeah. I can see then Ariel, how you said earlier that she can serve as a type of Christ because we do that every Easter, we celebrate the resurrection, the flipping around where everything was dark and dreary, and now we're victorious over death. So, I can see her in that way. That's awesome. So however, the conflict comes about, I'm not going to concern myself with that, but I am going to concern myself with, we've got this conflict, how do you know you weren't born for this? And you're going to have to put your life on the line to find out. So, I can feel the drama building and the suspense building.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 50:00 John touched on it earlier. It's worth really taking a moment to let that sink in and to think a little bit about what are those moments and experiences in our lives, where we really have to put it on the line. All of our faith, all of our spiritual understanding, all of the precious spiritual experiences we've had to that point in our life. We have to put them all on the line. There are a lot of experiences that I could share with you. The one that is perhaps most prevalent is a moment about eight and a half years ago when our oldest son was serving as a missionary, he was called to serve in Twin Falls, Idaho Spanish speaking. He had been in the mission field, six days, he was performing a service project. There was a micro storm that came out of nowhere that blew him and his companion off the back of a flatbed truck in the middle of sugar beet and wheat fields in Burley, Idaho, they were thrown very far into the air.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 51:09 His companion flew forward and somehow was able to, even though it was very high up and back down, it was able to roll. His injuries were minor, our son was blown the other direction. I mean, they went the same way, but he took the fall to the base of his skull, the back of his head. And he immediately went into convulsions, gratefully his companion was alert and was able to give him a blessing, which caused the convulsions to cease. And he had enough EMT training to hold his spine and head and neck in a what they call a C spine formation. He was taken to the hospital, the local hospital, which was just a mile away. They immediately life flighted him to a level two trauma center. He had suffered a subdural hematoma, a contusion and counter contusion.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 52:00 He had hemorrhaging throughout every layer of his brain. He was our first child and our only son. And he was in a coma. I was flown out the next day. He remained in a coma for almost a week. And I remember the experience of having to determine what was written in the fleshy parts of my heart. What was it that I already knew spiritually? What had I engraved on myself, in myself spiritually? What had been engraved there because my son's life was on the line. I didn't know if I could alter the outcome of that traumatic brain injury. I had no idea, the experience for everyone is going to be different, and I've had other experiences. Maybe they don't sound as dramatic, but they've also required a real reexamination of what it is that I know spiritually and what it is that I am willing to commit.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 53:00 How am I going to respond to a situation like this? Where am I going to put my confidence and my faith and my energy? For me it was interesting because it happened. I mean, within an hour of learning, what had occurred, I had a very interesting experience where I basically saw two roads and one ended almost immediately off a cliff. And the other one stretched forth with an increasing abundance, the length of which I could not see. I think even as I was just registering the reality of these two paths, processing what they represented, the one being the path of bitterness, why him, what if, who's to blame, even as I was just registering what that looked like and what it meant, and then trying to register what this other incredibly joyful, incredibly a loving, abundant path, and feeling myself feeling after that other path, but also recognizing that it meant I had to let go of all of those other options.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 54:10 I felt myself lifted up and just placed on that path. The only way I can really describe it, is as though it was an experience of being translated, unique, I was just taken up. It wasn't like I was taken up to heaven, but I was taken up and I was set on that other path, even with an experience like that, I spent most of the rest of that time while he was in a coma, literally feeling after what was inside of me spiritually, what did I know? What could I depend on? How was I going to respond if he died? How was I going to respond if he survived? But I was left caring for him the rest of his life. How was I going to respond if by some miracle he was preserved? All of those things I had to do serious spiritual self-examination.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 54:56 I don't know that Esther's moment was any less difficult. She had to decide whether she was prepared to die for the sake of a request on behalf of her people. So, we should think about those moments and what it is that Esther has to teach us about how we face them, because we will all face them. I remember

being in the hospital and this really kind nurse who himself was a return missionary, he was probably in his late 20s, early 30s. He had a young family and he sat me down late one evening. And he said, I've been watching you for the last few days. He said, I have no idea how you are handling this. He said, I could not do this. If this were my child, I could not do this. I had no idea what to say to him, but I turned to him, and the words came out of my mouth.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 55:48 And the words were, you don't know what you would do because you're not in that situation right now. But when you are, and you will be, the strength will be given to you to face it. You will be given divine guidance and support and sustaining power to help you through that experience. And it will look different. It won't be the same. You won't be lying here in an ICU with your son, tethered to every possible cord and blood draining out of his brain. It will be something different. It will be something different, but you will face it. And I'm confident that both of you and probably everyone who's listening has faced challenges, if not exactly the same, of some magnitude, where they have had to ask themselves, what am I made of spiritually? What am I willing to do in order to receive the guidance that I need to navigate my way through a situation that feels impossible?
- Hank Smith: 56:58 There's these Esther 4:16 moments that you're talking about where Esther's true character comes out. You can see it. It's how do you know you weren't born for this. And then as the pressure of that moment hits, where does she go? She goes to fasting. She goes to God, even though he's not mentioned here, that's where she's turning. She turns to the Lord, I'll admit those are scary, scary moments, but it's nice to find out that you did turn to God. When your moment is through, or you've gone through it. And you said, when it came down to it, my heart was there.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 57:36 Oh God turned to me. The farther I get from the moment of the experience itself, the more I realize it's less a story of faith and more story of mercy. It's more story of God's goodness to me, of his kindness to me, of his recognition that I might not have made it.
- John Bytheway: 57:52 Please join us for part two of this podcast.



Hank Smith:	00:02	Welcome to part two of this week's podcast.
Dr. Ariel Silver:	00:07	I want to highlight how it is that Esther will know that she's not in the end facing a death threat, but that she has been received by the king. And that's because he will extend his golden scepter. So it's his way of indicating, should someone come unannounced, unsummoned, uninvited, the king has a choice himself to make whether or not to extend that gold scepter. Whether to withhold his favor or whether to extend it. And in this case, and maybe it's not a surprise given what we've already seen about how much it is that he seems to like Esther, he extends that golden scepter.
John Bytheway:	00:53	Ariel, can I ask you a question? There's this moment in verse 16 I wanted to talk about, she says, "If I perish, I perish." She comes to this moment, what would you call this? This is like an acceptance of the Lord's will.
Dr. Ariel Silver:	01:05	That's a good question.
John Bytheway:	01:06	It doesn't sound like she's saying if we're faithful enough, I won't die. She's saying, "If I die, I die."
Hank Smith:	01:12	It's kind of like Daniel and his friends. God can save me, but if not, it's kind of that kind of Daniel and his friends moment.
John Bytheway:	01:20	But if not, yeah.
Dr. Ariel Silver:	01:21	These are both what we call exilic stories, right? Both Daniel and Esther are stories of exile. As I mentioned at the beginning, they differ a little bit because with Daniel it's mostly a survival story. Let's get through this. With Esther, she uses it as an opportunity. It is an exile story for them both. And it is existential for them both. I think they already realize that they are a people that have been enslaved. They have been oppressed. They have been left to wander. They have been taken into exile. There have been threats of extermination before.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 02:00 It responds at one level to the condition in which they find themselves. If I perish, I perish. And Mordecai says to her, "Look, if you don't do this, help will arise from another place and you're going to die anyway." So it's sort of death or death, or maybe there is this slim chance that this is going to work out, that we can be preserved. It is going to require a tremendous amount of careful thought on Esther's part.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 02:30 And this speaks to some of the things I mentioned earlier. This is a book about very creative, closely inspired solutions. And that's why the fasting is so important. I'm going to go in search of the answer. I'm not going to presume it. I'm not going to act on my own genius alone. I don't believe that that's the path to salvation, right? According to the genius of my own creation, no, she's looking for spiritual answer. She's looking for spiritual solutions.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 03:02 And when we pick it up in chapter five, the king does receive Esther. So the immediate question is, well, okay, she's made it past the very first test. She hasn't been deposed. She isn't being sent to the gallows. Is this the moment? Is she going to reveal her identity as a Jew? He doesn't know. He doesn't know that this decree impacts her. He might be mortified if he did. He doesn't know that. Is she going to reveal her Jewishness? Is she going to ask for their preservation?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 03:33 You know what she does? She invites the king to a dinner party. That's what she does. And she says, "Will you invite Haman to come with you?" She's taking this one very strategic piece at a time. She's not pouring her whole heart out to her husband all at once. And maybe there are moments when such a solution is appropriate, but she realizes she has to tread very lightly. And she's got to proceed with an immense amount of caution and insight and understanding. And so she says, "Will you come to a banquet? I'd like to make you some food. And I'd like you to invite your best friend, your advisor, Haman, to come with you."

John Bytheway: 04:20 The King's asking questions here. Why?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 04:22 The beautiful thing is that the very first thing he says to her before she even asks, "Will you come to this dinner party?" He says, "Esther, what would you like? I'm ready to give it to you-

John Bytheway: 04:35 Request whatever you want.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 04:35 ... up to half of the kingdom. You're my queen." You would think that would be an invitation for her to lay it all out. Let's take

care of this quickly. He certainly gives her an opening to do that. And he certainly responds with, I would say for an ancient king, that's a pretty generous offer. I'm prepared to give you whatever you ask for up to half of the kingdom. That's not bad for a woman who hasn't been his queen for very long and is coming to him unannounced. That's a pretty generous response.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 05:04 He offers that. She simply says, "I'd like you to come to this banquet. I'd like to make some food for you. I'd like to have a meal with you, break bread together." The other thing that's happening in chapter five that's really important is that Haman is just still bothered by Mordecai's insubordination. And he's not satisfied with his larger plan to have all of the Jews exterminated. Before that moment comes, he would like to see Mordecai himself hung. Let's get him out of my line of sight. I really don't want to have to deal with him on a daily basis anymore. I don't want to be reminded that there's one person in the kingdom who won't bow to me. So why don't I do this?
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 05:45 And I guess before he decides that he's going to develop this plot to hang Mordecai, he's bothered by it. He goes to his wife Zeresh and says, "What should I do?" And she's credited with coming up with the idea. Well, let's have some gallows built and you can request to have him hung on those gallows. That's probably the other really significant thing that happens in chapter five. We've got the stages set for a banquet. Esther, her life has been spared sort of at the first cut. And it looks like Mordecai might die a quick death.
- John Bytheway: 06:22 It's interesting. Haman thinks his luck has come in, look at him, he's like, "I've been called to dinner with the king and queen. And all I got to do is have Mordecai die, yet all this avail with me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the King's gate, I want him dead." It's fascinating in this story to see Haman kind of being set up for disaster yet he has no idea it's coming.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 06:50 No, he has no idea it's coming. And this is a tiny detail. But imagine how clever that was of Esther to invite Haman to this banquet. Did she realize that Haman would derive such pleasure from it, that this would puff him up, that this would make him feel even more special and important? I still marvel at Esther's strategy. I think she was brilliant in the way that she goes about this. And so, the first banquet is held and what happens? What does Esther do? Does she then lay out her plan? Does she then reveal her identity? Does she tell her sad tale and request a stay or a reversal of the decree? No.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 07:34 She simply asked them to come again for a second banquet. And she also says, "I will let you know why I've called you, I'll reveal my concern." But even when she prepares the first banquet, they gather. And the first thing that the king says is, he repeats his offer, "Esther, what would you like? I'll give you whatever you need. Here's the credit card. Take half the kingdom." And she restrains herself. She doesn't take half the kingdom. She just says, "Could we have dinner again? Could we have another banquet?" That's where we leave it at the end of chapter five.
- John Bytheway: 08:13 And they're making these Gallows for Mordecai, having no clue that he's making his own.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 08:20 No idea. And what happens next is this kind of lovely turn of events that you couldn't have predicted. And you wonder, did Esther know, was there any way for her to have figured this out, that at the beginning of the next chapter the king has insomnia. He cannot sleep. It's not that he dreams a dream per se, he's just thinking about things, thinking about past events. He's remembering the book of records and all of the intrigues and exploits of the court that are recorded and go on. And he goes, "Wasn't there a time in the past where someone helped foil a plan, a plot against me, I could have sworn that something like that happened."
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 08:59 And he has the record brought to him and he reads it, and he discovers that, "Oh yes, there was this guy named Mordecai who helped unveil this plan on my life by these two advisors." And so, he becomes reminded. Let's just talk again and again and again about the power of remembering. And usually in the context of the need to remember God, the need to remember all that God has done for us.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 09:30 Here we have another instance of remembering, so important. It's not specifically tied to remembering God and the salvation that he provides. It's an experience of the king remembering a way in which he was saved. The outgrowth of that remembering leads to the kind of remembering that is more essential and providential to delivering and to actual delivering. It's another really interesting instance of the power of remembering and what that can bring to our minds. The things that we become more grateful about because we have remembered them, the things that we see more clearly, because we remember them.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 10:12 And the king is brought to a moment of truth. He remembers that his life was saved and he remembers because of the record that was written, the power of writing down the record, the

reason why God's people have always been implored to keep records and to teach the things that they write in those records to their children, so that they would know to what source to look for salvation. He remembers. And there is a record there that aids his memory, and that record leads him back to Mordecai. What does he do? Haman comes in the next day and without disclosing the name of Mordecai, the king says, "Haman, what should I do for someone I would want to honor grace?"

John Bytheway: 11:07 This is such a ... Man, it's almost there to make you laugh, right?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 11:07 This is a comic story. It's on the edge of comedy and tragedy. It's just I don't know if I can even express to you the masterful quality of this text. For me it's like the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. It masterfully encapsulates the sort of the whole story, the whole schemata of deliverance. It's a different approach in the book of Hebrews. We really learn about the role of Christ as our high priest and the author of our salvation and all of these things. But the book of Esther is similarly well crafted and similarly plays on multiple, really interesting spiritual and emotional and intellectual levels and gives us a view of how it is that the divine works and how those spiritual realities can come to pass in our own lives. And the king says, Haman, what would you do? What would you do for someone who you really wanted to show favor to?

John Bytheway: 12:06 And he thinks it's him.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 12:08 He thinks it's him. He thinks that he is the guy, and he takes it to the nth degree, I would lay out all these carpets and I would dress him in this and I'd set him on a horse or a camel or whatever. And I would parade him throughout the streets.

John Bytheway: 12:23 Wonderful clothes.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 12:24 Wonderful clothes and I would have proclamations go out and bands and music and food and you name it. And he has no idea that it's not him. He thinks that finally he has hit the jackpot to end all jackpots. He thought it was pretty good that he became his right-hand man, and pretty good that he got invited to this banquet with the king and Esther, and now he goes-

John Bytheway: 12:44 Now I'm going to be honored.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 12:46 I am the man, already envisioning his reign whenever the king kicks the can. And he has no idea that this is designed for

Mordecai. The very person that he wants to hang is the person who is then honored according to the plan that Haman has set forth.

- John Bytheway: 13:02 I would love to see his face at that moment. Chapter six verse 10, the king said to Haman, "Make haste, take everything that you've just talked about and do so to Mordecai the Jew." Wait, what?
- Hank Smith: 13:15 There's a jaw drop.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 13:18 It's a huge jaw drop.
- Hank Smith: 13:19 And then it says he hastened to his house mourning, having his head covered.
- John Bytheway: 13:23 Of all the people the king would choose, right? Oh.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 13:26 No. It's really interesting, John, that you picked out that one verse because we're going to see in the next chapter the very swift demise of Haman. And we know that he is on his way out because his head is covered. That is the sign that he's being sent to the executioner. But in the chapter preceding it, he covers his own head in grief and in shame that this plot has gone awry, this is not what I planned for. This is not what I intended. This is not what I wanted to have happened. He doesn't know just yet how bad it is, in both instances there's a covering of the head. There's a masking availing and a real erasure, if you will. He anticipates it himself, even though he doesn't exactly know. So that's chapter six.
- John Bytheway: 14:19 Ariel, the timing of this really makes me think of a quote from Elder Bednar. I've quoted this talk many times on the podcast. I have to apologize, I quote it so often. It's called the tender mercies of the Lord from Elder David A. Bednar.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 14:32 It was his first address as an apostle and it is beautiful.
- John Bytheway: 14:38 The fact that the king has the memory of Mordecai saving his life. It was on a night he couldn't sleep. And he said, "Let me read." What are the odds that he's going to remember Mordecai. Elder Bednar says in this talk, "The tender mercies of the Lord, some may count this experience as simply as a nice coincidence, but I testify that the tender mercies of the Lord are real. They do not occur randomly or merely by coincidence." And then this statement, often the Lord's timing of his tender mercies helps us both to discern and acknowledge them. God

isn't listed by name in chapter six, but he surely is there in this timing of having Mordecai be remembered, at the very same time Haman is building the gallows for him. I think that's the hidden God that you talked about earlier, right?

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 15:30 And one or both of you made some mention of this text as being a text full of what appear to be coincidences of things happening thus in such a way by coincidence. We can also read them as moments of real mercy. And that's true too, even with miracles in our lives. We have to choose to see it as a miracle. It's not a miracle defacto, it's not a miracle-
- John Bytheway: 16:06 Biblical, right?
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 16:07 ... without dispute. We're choosing to see that experience as an experience that involved the hand of the Lord, not as something that just randomly occurred, but as something that involved his mercy for us, his great and profound love for us. The point is we choose to see it that way. To someone else it might be a coincidence.
- John Bytheway: 16:34 I see almost in Haman a type of the adversary. I think I'm going to win. I'm going to get you. And then it's all reversed in the end. Now let's keep going because I want to hear what happens.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 16:48 Okay. In chapter seven, we come to the perhaps more consequential second banquet or dinner party. It's interesting because at this point Haman already begins to see that there are problems in his paradise. He thought he was going to be honored in this grandiose way, his sworn enemy instead, the person he wants to get rid of is elevated. That's a problem for Haman.
- John Bytheway: 17:19 Things are about to get worse.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 17:22 It's about to get much worse. It's about to get much, much, much worse. I think chapter seven is really ... we should know it almost as well as we know chapter four, it's a consequential chapter. And she invites the king and Haman to this second banquet. And it is here that she does finally announce her identity, who she is. And she sort of as a corollary to that acknowledges that this plot, this decree of genocide is a decree against her and her people.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 18:01 This is really the moment where she moves from being an unknown Jew to being a known Jew, from being veiled to being unveiled. And at this moment I think Haman begins to realize,

oh, this is really not good. The king loves Esther. I plotted this decree of extinction against her people, which also involve her. This is a problem. And the king sort of begins to put all the pieces together. He begins to sort of see it finally all at once. And he's so upset and probably primarily upset with Haman that he has done this. And he has put himself, the king, in what I think the king would see as an exposed position where he has made a decree that involves his wife in a way that he would never had done if he had known that his wife was a Jew, Haman chose to keep many things from him.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 19:08 So he walks away for a minute, I think trying to collect himself, to compose himself. And while he's gone, Haman basically begs Esther for his life, pleads with her, realizing that the tables have turned entirely now. And it's not just a matter of who's being honored with great clothing and a nice horse ride out in the courtyard or in the capital city. But I'm looking at a pretty grim prospect for myself. And so, he starts to plead for his life. Well, Esther is sort of reclining on a couch, it's a banquet. And he bows before her, but it puts him in a position where he's basically on the bed with her.
- John Bytheway: 19:56 Just looks really bad.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 19:57 It looks absolutely terrible. And the king comes back into the room, and he realizes, this is not good. I was viciously upset with you when I left, when I come back, you've only added insult to injury.
- John Bytheway: 20:12 You're attacking the queen.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 20:14 That is really the moment when the king responds, has Haman's head covered. And he is escorted out of the banquet.
- John Bytheway: 20:27 Elder Bednar should give a talk on this called the bitter ironies of the Lord. Oh, everything just goes downhill for this guy. He was going to have an entire people annihilated, he built his own gallows.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 20:42 He did build his own gallows and that shouldn't be lost on any reader. And it wasn't just physically that he builds his own gallows, he was building his own gallows from the beginning of this story. It's a cautionary tale about the limits to which revenge can be taken or the great cost of pursuing a program of revenge. That things will not work out if that is your focus. You cannot be elevated on the backs or the blood of others. It's a very compensatory tale for the Jews. It's very satisfying to see

that such a malevolent character would have justice, real justice done to him and that his intricate plot to kill them all would come to not. It has a level of real-

- John Bytheway: 21:32 Irony.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 21:33 Yeah. Irony and melodramatic satisfaction that he meets it in. Even if not, everyone looks like Haman, we're far more multidimensional, but it's a cautionary tale against pursuing, we'll call it vigilant justice.
- John Bytheway: 21:51 Yeah, revenge, pride.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 21:54 Yes. There really is no good that can come from trying to take the law or the power into one's own hands. And it's not returning, it's far beyond eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth. This is not revenge on any kind of equal measure, it's not even that. He was slighted in a small way. Mordecai would not bow to him. And before we know it, he's going to personally preside over Mordecai's demise and watch the killing of all of the Jews in the eventual hopes that he becomes the king. This is a real desire to stick it. And so, it functions as a warning against pursuing that kind of course in one's life, either in large ways like here or in very small ways. I think Esther's teaching us that it's not the path of virtue.
- John Bytheway: 22:49 Elder Uchtdorf gave a talk in October of 2010 called Pride and the Priesthood. He talked about pride is the great sin of self-elevation. Similar to what you just said, he said, "Pride turns to envy. Pride looks bitterly at those who have better possessions, more talents or greater possessions than they do. They seek to hurt, diminish and tear others down in a misguided and unworthy attempt at self-elevation." That seems to be Haman's downfall is his self-elevation and his pride completely blinded him to the fact that he was building his own destruction. I mean, there's a level of irony there that's scary.
- Hank Smith: 23:32 There's a verse in first Nephi 14. So, it's Nephi seeing his own longer version of Lehi's dream where he says the great pit of destruction, which was digged for the children shall be filled by those who digged it. It's kind of like you made this gallow and you're the one who's going to get hung on it. You're thinking to damage somebody else or to kill someone else, and that's the irony you mentioned.

John Bytheway: 23:59 That's such an ironic, sad, and also I can see what you would say, Ariel, did you see in this compensatory, you got what you deserved.

Hank Smith: 24:10 You got unto others what you were trying to do to them, where you got what you were doing unto others done to you.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 24:17 It's a demonstration that that kind of approach to life won't work, it doesn't prevail. And in the process, whatever destruction you might visit on someone else, ultimately you destroy yourself. That's the real punishment. It is self-destructive to seek one's own self elevation.

John Bytheway: 24:36 You did this to yourself, Haman. Oh man, it's such a dramatic story.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 24:43 It reminds me a little bit of a experience that I had as a missionary in France. I happened to have a companion who was from Taiwan who spoke Mandarin Chinese. She had come to France to work as a nanny and she herself had encountered the missionaries. And then she decided while she was living in France to serve a mission. And she was called to the Bordeaux, France Mission where I was serving and became my companion. And she loved to tell me about this Chinese folk tale or myth of sort of the enlightened man who is climbing the mountain, sort of with each level he can see more and more, and he becomes more enlightened.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 25:22 I mean, in some ways it's maybe the reverse of the experience of Haman, but he is being elevated both geographically and spiritually. And he gets to the top of the mountain once to share with his family this great achievement that he has made. And he looks around him and he sees them nowhere to be found and he looks down and he sees them all at the base of the mountain, because in his pursuit of his own enlightenment, he never shared those insights or those experiences with others. And so he finds himself at the top of the mountain all alone.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 25:59 This is maybe a little different. In this case Haman is going into Dante's Inferno, rather than climbing a mountain. But it's a similarly lonely path that one seeks one's own advancement. Whether for ostensibly good ends or less salutary ends, the experience ends really in isolation and in destruction and in failure.

John Bytheway: 26:24 Let's do eight, nine and 10 real quick here. What ends up happening to Mordecai and Esther?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 26:30 Haman is killed and Mordecai is placed over the house of Haman. He basically takes his place and-

Hank Smith: 26:40 Takes his reign.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 26:41 Well, yeah. Esther is given the role of presiding over the house of Haman. And she gives the token of that authority to Mordecai. He sort of in every way replaces Haman. The king reaffirms that he cannot change. He's the king, he's made this decree. And so he issues another decree that the Jews can defend themselves on the day when this extermination order is to take place.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 27:10 In fact, he says, "You are permitted to defend yourselves and you can take the spoils from your enemies, from those who attack you. And you may defend yourself, including killing them if necessary. And you may take the spoils of war, the spoils of this conflict."

Dr. Ariel Silver: 27:25 In chapter nine, that's really when we sort of get to the moment of the first decree, which is the day that was set aside for this genocide. And we have a small war, which ensues on this day, the record explains in chapter nine that the Jews slay their enemies and they gave numbers in Shushan the capital and throughout the provinces. Those deaths include the deaths of Haman's 10 sons. It's a generational curse that continues. Haman's wickedness is visited upon his children as well.

John Bytheway: 28:02 His children.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 28:04 And they are not only killed in battle, but they are then also hung. I don't know if it's precisely the same gallows that Haman was hung on, but I think so. And the record was also very careful to indicate that the Jews did defend themselves and they did so vigorously, but they did not take any spoils.

John Bytheway: 28:25 That's verse 10.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 28:27 They restrained themselves and they sort of did what they had to do, but no more, they deemed that their lives were valuable, that their lives were important to the God who made them, that it was a worthy request to be allowed to defend themselves.

John Bytheway: 28:46 And then they create a holiday, right?

Dr. Ariel Silver: 28:48 They create a holiday. This is so great and so important. And it comes about through two letters. The first one's written by

Mordecai. The second one's written by Esther herself. And there's to be a feast of Purim. What is Purim? It comes from the word poor, which meant to cast a lot. And basically what had happened earlier in the text is that the lots had been cast against the Jews. They drew the short stick and they were going to be exterminated. They were deemed a nuisance, his and a byword and problematic neighbors to live amongst.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 29:19 And so they decided that we'll just take care of them and make short work of them. But that is really transformed in this text. Instead of being exterminated, they prevail in this conflict and in this threat, and the purpose of the feast of Purim is to remember that they were preserved and that they were saved and that they were redeemed from this existential threat. And that they're to read this story every year in part because it is a story that in miniature tells the plan of salvation and also anticipates the reign of the Messiah in the millennium when all things are made just, and when all loss is compensated for. And when the proud are made low and the humble are finally elevated.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 30:13 It's a very happy celebration. Like I say, they reenact the story every year. There are special desserts and foods, the hamantash and the little sort of little triangular cookies that they make and eat. They act out the story and they give gifts. They give to charity and they remember their own humility before God, by extending that charity and generosity to others. It's an important celebration for them. It's one that holds a lot of value and has cemented the place of the book of Esther as a essential part of their canon, essential text for them because of the things that it teaches.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 30:53 And the last chapter is really quite brief. It's just that we learned already in chapter eight that Mordecai sort of takes the place of Haman. And now he is sort of fully invested as the right hand man to the king is sort of accorded all of the powers and privileges of that office. But I think it's right at the very end of chapter 10 where it talks about Mordecai's speaking peace to his seed and to his people that even though it is a tale that involves a threat of destruction and self-defense and some destruction, it's also a story about beating swords into plowshares, moving away from violence and towards peace.

John Bytheway: 31:36 I knew the story somewhat, I think we have some great moments of wow, what a turnaround. And I liked what you said, that you can see her as a type of Christ for us personally to remember our redemption. I think as they have this feast, so do we every week to remember our redemption. I really liked what

you said, that we have moments in our lives where we turn to God. And like you said, God turns to us. How did you make it through that moment in your life? Just in the mission field for six days up in Idaho and he's in his assignment.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 32:13 It's impossible to describe everything that I learned. It feels like I learned a thousand things in the period of just a few days and many more in the weeks and months and years after that. You talked about finding me on the Maxwell Institute website, because I am writing a memoir about that very experience. It was a tremendous touchstone for me spiritually.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 32:41 And as I had mentioned that one night to the nurse who'd been watching me, unbeknownst to me, I don't know that I can explain entirely. I mean, I know where the strength came from, but I might not be able to describe entirely just how profound it was, just how sustaining it was, how much I learned about the power of sustaining others who are called being sustained in a moment of kind of exquisite trial, feels like there were numerous blessings. He was blessed at the site. He was blessed by his mission president when he got to the hospital. His grandfather gave him a blessing when we arrived.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 33:26 We got home from the hospital that night and I said, "I think I'm going to need a blessing to get through this." And in that blessing, I was blessed that I would be instrument of his healing, that I would be given strength to give to him. I mean, I think I just really do have a profound sense of the very significant role that women play in the salvation of others. I have experienced it in personal terms, but we see it in the Old Testament as well. It's not just Esther, there aren't too many other figures like her who play a really salvific role on behalf of others. But Jael certainly does that, Judith certainly does that.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 34:07 And in every instance, it takes tremendous courage. It takes a real stepping outside of one's self and one's own needs of the moment to be a source of strength for others. While he was in that coma, I had the chance to go and visit the site where he had been injured, which coincidentally is not too far from where they are building the temple in Burley, Idaho.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 34:32 It was interesting because I had several thoughts when I visited the site and saw the blood from his brain smeared across the road still there several days later. It wasn't just that I was going to have to tell him the story because he wasn't going to remember it. He doesn't know what happened. He doesn't have any memory. I had to be the remembrance, tell the story to

him. But even more than that was the experience of meeting incredible member who had arranged for this service project.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 34:57 And his own son had suffered a traumatic brain injury. He felt just terrible about what had happened. But he was the source of so much wisdom and insight. And I felt like I was just drawing that from him to bring to Stuart, our son, and sort of transfer that wisdom and insight, that knowledge that things would eventually, however, they worked out, they would work out, bringing that power and understanding.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 35:24 But for me he was a source of tremendous understanding and really bore me up in all kinds of ways. And then I think I too just had to be on my knees and I had to be very carefully asking, "What do I do now? What do I do? What do I ask for tomorrow? What do I need tomorrow to make it to the next day and what do I need? What does my family need? What does my son need? What do the others who've been impacted by this need?"

Dr. Ariel Silver: 35:54 And I just feel like careful solutions were provided all along the way. I had already written the sort of basic manuscript for this book. I felt like I had already crossed the planes. I mean, writing that dissertation with six children, doing a doctorate program with six children was something else. I felt like I had already walked through the great plains with rags on my feet. I couldn't imagine anything more difficult than what I had already experienced.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 36:25 And here two years later was another tremendous experience for which the other experience had prepared me. I mean, it's almost really only now that I'm making a lot of connections between that experience that I passed through and the book of Esther. But I think I just knew intuitively that this is something we don't talk about enough, we don't hear about enough, we don't see enough of in the scriptures. The spiritual lives of women, the role that they play in the sort of spiritual growth and redemption of others.

Dr. Ariel Silver: 36:58 There are so many other things I want to tell you about the book of Esther. One that is really, really crucial. And it may seem odd for me to mention this right now after just talking about my experience as a mother, with my son in the midst of this injury, it's really significant to me that in the book of Esther we have the experience of a woman who does something at a redemptive level on behalf of others that is not tied to motherhood and is not tied to the bearing of children. Just about every other example in scripture is an elevation of the

female as a mother and as a teacher, as a nurturer, someone who provides continuity, strength, wisdom, and insight from generation to generation to generation.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 37:49 And those things are all tremendously important. But it is also important to recognize that that is not the only role that women fill in life and that they have great gifts to give in other realms as well. And Esther provides us a very powerful example of a woman apart from motherhood who does tremendous work and carefully seeks out guided inspired solutions that are going to bless and benefit her people.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 38:24 It's not a pretty thing that she's really being asked to do, but she does it and she transforms her predicament and her situation into a scenario where she brings tremendous blessing and tremendous benefit to her people. It wasn't what she set out to do, but she herself evolves over time. She comes into an understanding of her capacity and of her strength and of her perception, her ability to perceive what needs to be done, what needs to be said. It's really important.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 39:06 There is another side to the story, God being hidden in this text, he is present. And I hope that our discussion has demonstrated the ways in which God was present in Esther's life, was present in Mordecai's life, was present in this text and in this story. But many people have suggested that the hiddenness of God, that figure is obscured slightly so that we can see what we might call the female divine.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 39:41 And I think our most comfortable corollary is a heavenly mother. I think it's worth mentioning that she really functions in much the way that Esther does. She's both hidden and she's revealed. There's not a lot that is said about her, her role remains a bit obscured, and yet we also affirm and reaffirm her presence. And we recognize that divinity is incomplete without her.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 40:17 We haven't really talked yet about the ways in which Esther is a book of multiplicity. We've talked about the ways which there's a hiddenness there. So from the period of judges to the period of exile which is where we find the book of Esther, Asherah, who is recognized as a female, Canaanite, mostly fertility deity was worshiped. And it's interesting because the prophets were really opposed to the worship of Baal. And they realized that the trouble that the Israelites and the children of Israel had gotten into because they worshiped Baal, but there was a greater tolerance for worship of Asherah.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 40:58 And we see it more explicitly in Jeremiah chapter 44, verse 17, where it explains that people worship the queen of heaven in the streets of Jerusalem and in the cities of Judah. But there comes a moment when prophets feel as though that worship of a female deity is a threat to prophetic Judaism. And so that worship goes underground and more specifically, it goes abroad. It goes into exile. And that's really an important piece of the book of Esther, because the Babylonian variant of Asherah is Ishtar, which is the Babylonian equivalent of the name Esther.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 41:41 When you see the book of Esther, it is the book of Ishtar. It is the book of Asherah. It is the book of Hadassah. It is the book of Esther who has these two names, her Jewish name, and her Babylonian or Persian name. By functioning in this role of redemption, she is in some ways fulfilling her divine counterpart. Esther is just another powerful example how God works that deliverance. And it means something that he works it through a woman. Talk about a good marriage, it's really a situation where working together.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 42:25 And I think that's another power of the book of Esther, God is a little hidden. They've got to find their own solution. He will inspire them. He will lead them. He will direct them, but they're going to have to do some things too. They're going to have to lay their life on the line. They're going to have to proceed carefully, strategically, cautiously, with thoughtfulness. They're not going to be able to do this just on a whim, knowing that God is going to come in from-
- John Bytheway: 42:55 Right. Save the day.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 42:56 They have to build themselves into the kind of people in concert with their God can work that, that salvation.
- John Bytheway: 43:06 Ariel, Dr. Silver, this has been just a fantastic day. I think our listeners would be interested in your story of your faith and your scholarship and how those have influenced each other. What's that story been like for you?
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 43:19 The first thing that comes to mind is the moment when I return from my mission. I was still an undergraduate. I served a mission between my junior and senior years in college. I came back to Smith College and I was studying religion and biblical literature. And I was taking a course, I think it was on the book of Romans.

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 43:40 I just remember taking notes for the class, beginning to develop what I fondly refer to as my marginalia, sort of the notes on the side of the paper. And I do this all the time. I do this in books that I read. There's a kind of a main line of notes and then there's side notes. I just remember, we're looking at a specific text in the New Testament and the marginalia is filled with references to the book of Mormon, which I had recently been spending a lot of time with as a missionary, references to the Pearl of Great Price, references to the Old Testament, references to other pieces of literature that I had read or thought about. Sometimes stories or personal experiences that I remembered that somehow connected for me to the things I was learning in the book of Romans.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 44:28 And they maybe had nothing to do per se with the book of Romans, Romans or the narrative there. I mean, I still remember of course the beautiful passage in Romans, nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing, nothing. That love is constant and unconditional, however much we feel in exile, at any point in our lives, we are never separated from the love of God.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 44:53 What it demonstrated for me was that a life lived in belief, even if I didn't have all the answers. And there are many things that I have on the back burners wanting responses for many things, even if I didn't have the answer to every question, that a life lived in hope, a life lived in belief, a life lived in the scriptures was a life that would be a constant spark and a constant inspiration for me. And that it would feed me intellectually and spiritually. The things that I was doing spiritually would also feed me intellectually and emotionally.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 45:33 I have always seen them as a marriage, to walk away from either of them would leave me less fulfilled, a much less self examined individual. And I tell my students this all the time, reading the scriptures will teach you how to think critically. Close reading of text is a wonderful spiritual exercise. It's a wonderful intellectual exercise. And sometimes you do have to read between the words and between the spaces, you have to look for the things that are not said there at all.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 46:06 My mission president Elder Anderson was a tremendous teacher for me in this regard. He said, "When you listen to general conference talks, listen to what you're hearing, but listen above all else to the spirit that's teaching you and keep a record of the things that you are being taught. They may have nothing to do with what is being said, but the experience of

being there listening to someone who is set apart to be an Oracle will be a spiritual catalyst for you."

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 46:43 And when we place ourselves in those kinds of waters. And I love the image in Ezekiel 37 of the waters of the temple flowing out. And at first they touch just your toes, your heels, and your ankles. And the further that chapter goes, the more we are swimming in the waters that come out of the temples and they are healing waters. They are waters that restore us. They are waters that edify us. They are waters that refine us and ennoble us. We become filled with the spirit of the temple, which is a spirit of Christ, which is a spirit of God. We are changed by that. We are baptized by that.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 47:21 I am a swimmer and I love to swim, just about every day. It's not quite the waters of the temple, but it's a daily reminder of being immersed in the things that matter most. And so I have just seen them as being invaluable to each other, a spiritual life and an intellectual life. I have seen them as being much poor without the other. And I have the confidence that God will lead me along, that I will be given the understanding that I need when I need it.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 47:51 I also believe firmly and have seen evidence of the promise that if you ask, you will receive. If you knock, it will be opened on to you. If you seek, you will find. You may be like the woman in Luke 15, you may be sweeping that house every corner until you find the lost coin. It may take many years for the lost son to return. You may not find the lost sheep at first perusal, but if you keep at it, you will learn in the process, you'll be changed in the process. You might be more ready to receive the lost son when he or she chooses to return. You may know what to do with the coin when you eventually find it. You may know how to care for the sheep if it comes back to you, we are changed in the process.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 48:37 And it's God being hidden, not having answers sometimes is an invitation to exercise greater faith. And it's an invitation to lean more heavily on the purposes and the will of the Lord. We don't know how things will end, and we have to depend on that spirit for guidance. What else is going to guide us? Where else will we find truth? I wouldn't want to separate myself from that power or source of revelation for anything, it is everything.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 49:12 I remember often feeling like I was running around my mission like a chicken whose head had been cut off, just wanting to tell people about the power of the gift of the holy ghost, if only you could have that. And I remember we had an elderly gentleman

who was a veteran of any number of French wars and who smoked multiple packs a day. And he was a hard sell, but he kept inviting us back. And every time we came back, something about him had changed and he started coming to church and months passed and he said, "I don't think I can give it up. I'm not eligible for baptism. Is there any way I could just get the gift of the holy ghost?"

- Dr. Ariel Silver: 49:52 Something in those teachings had impressed him enough to know that that was a gift worth having, it's a gift worth keeping and pursuing and seeking after, because it is the thing that will lead us to the solutions that we need in life. We can't arrive at them on our own. And the Israelites were wise enough when they were at their best to know that, that they could not arrive at those solutions on their own, they had to have a higher strength and a higher source of insight.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 50:27 I had a chance to mention a little earlier my experience with our missionary son, and I thought you might enjoy hearing how that experience was resolved. And it is an experience among other things of fasting, which is where the book of Esther really takes off. There were so many loving friends and people concerned about him. And we explained that we would be holding a fast on his behalf six days after he was injured and first put in this medically induced coma, because they were going to try to take him off of the ventilator in the midst of that fasting process, where many people who had never fasted before were fasting and on our son's behalf like the Persian handmaidens who were fasting for Esther, in the midst of that process took the tubes out and he was immediately able to breathe on his own.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 51:18 We didn't really look back. They ran a battery of tests the next day for cognitive function and he was just remarkably intact. He didn't have half his skull, so that was a process. There's a protocol normally when there's an injury of this nature, that missionaries need to wait a year before returning to the mission field. He got that clearance from his doctor about four months after the injury and ended up returning to the mission field about eight months after the initial accident. He returned to the same mission, what ended up being really a three year mission from start to finish. And I went to college and done very well. He studied biology and he's working at a research lab in Boston now and is applying to medical school.
- John Bytheway: 52:03 That is beautiful resolution for a beautiful family. It's kind of like the book of Esther.
- Dr. Ariel Silver: 52:11 It's a dramatic tale of redemption, it is.

John Bytheway: 52:14 We want to thank Dr. Ariel Silver for being with us today. What a great day from studying this book and hearing your stories. It was just a moving time to be together. Thank you. We want to thank our executive producers, Steve and Shannon Sorensen, as well as our sponsors, David and Verla Sorensen. And we hope all of you will join us next week. Come back for another episode of followHIM.

John Bytheway: 52:41 We have an amazing production crew we want you to know about, David Perry, Lisa Spice, Jamie Nelson, Will Stoughton, Krystal Roberts and Ariel Cuadra. Thank you to our amazing production team.

## WHAT DO I DO IF I HATE FASTING?



- Hank Smith: 00:05 Hello, my friends. Welcome to FollowHIM Favorites. My name is Hank Smith. I'm here with my favorite friend, John Bytheway. Hello John Bytheway.
- John Bytheway: 00:13 Thanks. Is that like a BFF or just FF, favorite friend? Yeah.
- Hank Smith: 00:17 Yeah. You're my favorite friend. Well, today, John, we are doing FollowHIM Favorites and you know how this works.
- John Bytheway: 00:24 Right.
- Hank Smith: 00:24 We take a question from this week's lesson, and we answer that question. This comes from the book of Esther. When she is in real trouble, she calls on the Jews to fast for her, and I think a common question we might get from students or our own children is, "Dad, why do I fast?" So John, when your kids come to you and they say, "Dad, why do we fast?" What do you say? What do you tell them?
- John Bytheway: 00:49 You know, fasting is one of those things where it's a good opportunity to teach we have a body and we have a spirit, and that one of the purposes of life is to get our spirit to be in charge of our body. So, Jesus said things like, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Which one is stronger, the appetites that come with having a body, or is our spirit able to govern our body? And I feel like that's one of the reasons that we have life. So usually, I try to explain it that way. Let's see if we can have our spirit be in charge of our body for a while. That will teach us something about making our spirit stronger.
- Hank Smith: 01:25 I think the Lord knows, John, that self-control is crucial to success.
- John Bytheway: 01:30 Yeah.
- Hank Smith: 01:30 If you want to have a successful life, and a happy life, and a happy marriage, and a happy being a parent, if you want to have all of those wonderful things that are given to us, you have

to have self-control. And so fasting gives us an opportunity to practice self-control, practice overcoming temptation, like a safe mode where you can practice avoiding temptation and see what works for you. Sometimes I have to just stay completely out of the kitchen. That's a good analogy for some sins, just stay away from them.

- John Bytheway: 02:02 Yeah. What does Moroni say? "Touch not the evil gift." It's not, "Well, just hold the evil gift in moderation." No, I said don't even touch it. Don't even go there. And that's a good way to look at it, because I think if things weren't tempting, they wouldn't be tempting, right? So, all of us are going through life deliberately not doing things that maybe our flesh wants, because we trust the commandments and we trust God. But that makes us stronger, I like the way you put that.
- Hank Smith: 02:31 I liked what you said with, who's in control here? Is it the spirit or the body?
- John Bytheway: 02:36 Are you the spirit or... Yeah.
- Hank Smith: 02:37 The body's not evil, but it comes with natural appetites and passions that need to be controlled. I know one of your favorite scriptures is bridle your passions.
- John Bytheway: 02:47 I love that one because it doesn't say kill your passions. They're God given, but they have to be controlled.
- Hank Smith: 02:53 Yep.
- John Bytheway: 02:54 And I know that Elder Bruce Hafen has talked about that. It's like we bridle a horse because it's so powerful, but it's really useful if it is controlled, and we learn to control our passion. Bridle all your passions comma, it's not a period, and there's a result that you may be filled with love. I mean, how positive and happy and hopeful is that? You bridle your passions so that you can be filled with love.
- Hank Smith: 03:20 The body has a desire to eat. And if you can control that, it's just practicing something that the body wants to do that you say, "No, I'm in charge here." That verse you quoted reminds me of section 59 of the Doctrine Covenants where the Lord says, "That thy fasting may be perfect," this is verse 13, "or in other words, that thy joy may be full." So he's saying that you'll have more joy if you fast.

John Bytheway: 03:45 Fasting's not easy for everybody. It's not easy for me, but there are times when I really needed help and it was so much easier to focus on. And if I felt a tinge of hunger, all I had to do is remind myself, no I'm doing this because, so and so, my friend, my family member really needs some help right now. And that made it a lot easier. And so I guess the hard part sometimes is the routine Fast Sunday. But I think if we look around, was it Elder Eyring, President Eyring that said, if you figure that most of the people that you're sitting around are going through something really difficult, you'll be right most of the time. Like Esther said, "Do this for me." We have someone that we're asking the Lord to help through our fasting.

Hank Smith: 04:30 And this is similar to what we've been talking about with the Old Testament, bringing a sacrifice to the temple means I'm giving something up. I'm giving something that I would normally keep for myself. I'm giving it up to show the Lord as a sign, right, between me and you. And you might say, why do I have to give up food to do that? Well, an ancient Israelite could say the same thing. "Why do I have to give up my best animal to show the Lord that I care?" Well, that's the way the Lord has said. That's how you can show me, bring forth this animal and I will know what's inside your heart. Well, the same way it is on Fast Sunday, bring forth your favorite, fill in the blank, your favorite food, give it away. In essence, we give it to the poor.

Hank Smith: 05:11 I have two more things, John, that I want to mention here. The Savior himself said, "Blessed are they, or happy are they, who hunger and thirst after righteousness." And sometimes we don't have the opportunity to be hungry because the moment we feel hunger, we satisfy that hunger. But for a full day, we get to feel hungry, and we know what then it needs to feel like to hunger after righteousness. To hunger after God. Sometimes I think the way I would go eat food should be the way I feel about going to read my scriptures, or going to the temple, where I really am longing for that, and I really want it. And there's a pull, there's something in me pulling me towards that. So that's one, that you can learn to hunger and thirst after righteousness through fasting.

John Bytheway: 05:59 When I teach that beatitude, I just love to say why didn't Jesus just say blessed are the righteous? And in one way, well, none of us are perfect, but I love the idea that he's talking about the desire for righteousness. And what you just said, I don't think ever in my life, Hank, I have gone, "You know, I don't think I've had a thing to eat since Thursday. I just forgot to eat."

Hank Smith: 06:22 Right.

John Bytheway: 06:23 But I think I have had times when I've forgotten to read the scriptures, when I wasn't as diligent in my prayers for something. If I just forgot to eat for four or five days, if my spirit were my body, it would be pretty weak. I'd be dragging along. It's so much healthier to give your spirit spiritual food every day. So I love the hunger and thirst angle of that. It helps me to think, I got to daily nourish my spirit, not just my body.

Hank Smith: 06:53 Very good. I think we can go through things in life sometimes and realize it's not our soul hungering for spirituality, for a connection with God. We go through and we think why do I feel so down, right? Why do I feel so upset? Among other things, it can be that your soul is longing for that connection to God again, and you just don't realize it. You don't realize those are the soul's hunger pains. Last, John, and this one's absolutely crucial, if we try to understand the Savior and His Atonement, we realize that he wanted to put himself in our same position so he could know our infirmities, our weaknesses. That's Alma chapter seven.

Hank Smith: 07:31 Well, in fasting, we get the opportunity to be like Him, in that we put ourselves in the position of someone who does not have food, someone who is poor, cannot afford food to eat. And when we put ourselves in their position, we start to realize what it's like to be that way, and our soul wants to help. When I'm sitting there hungry on Fast Sunday, John, I think, oh, what about a child who feels this every day, because they don't have enough to eat? And I'm ready to go and give. I'm ready to sacrifice, because I put myself in that position where I don't think I would have that same desire had I not put myself there. Does that make sense?

John Bytheway: 08:09 Yeah, that's beautifully put because I think that most of us, and maybe most of our listeners, I don't want to paint everybody with the same brush, have never known a day of hunger unless they chose it by fasting. We have such a high standard of living. When we read the scriptures, we find we can go so quickly past the phrase, "And there was a famine in the land," and not realize what that means. Am I going to live? Can I find anything to eat today? Every day was how do I survive today? And so I like that you put it that way. I'm learning what it's like to really be hungry, and not know where my next meal is coming from.

Hank Smith: 08:51 And like the Savior in Alma 7, when you feel that, you'll want to run to the aid of someone else.

John Bytheway: 08:57 To succor, right.

Hank Smith: 08:58 Yeah. To succor them and help them. I'm impressed with Esther that she knows that this is a way for a mountain to move, right? For the impossible to become the possible. We can re-up our commitment to fasting and saying I want to have that same connection to God.

John Bytheway: 09:17 Yeah. Well put. I'm glad it's mentioned in there. She asked others to fast for her, it's an interesting way of not just denying our spirit, as we've talked about, but thinking of others in need.

Hank Smith: 09:30 Yeah.

John Bytheway: 09:31 And for Esther, we could direct it at her. And for us sometimes when we begin our fast, we can pray and say, "Lord, I'm not just going hungry. I have a reason for doing this. Here's who I'm thinking about and asking for help for them."

Hank Smith: 09:46 There's an element of unity there, too. We all want the same thing, and so we're all going to fast together for the same purpose.

John Bytheway: 09:53 Yeah. Hank, if you said to me, "John, you forgot your money. I'm going to buy you a hamburger," that would touch my heart. But if you said, "John, I fasted for you," I would be like, "Whoa, Hank. That's a lot."

Hank Smith: 10:06 That's a deeper level of friendship. Yeah.

John Bytheway: 10:09 Yeah. That's a sacrifice on your part.

Hank Smith: 10:13 We hope this helped you as you go forward and fast, and we also want you to come join us on our full podcast. It's called FollowHIM. You can get it wherever you get your podcasts, and come back next week and join us for another FollowHIM Favorites.